

### I) Intro

As a Youth Pastor, I was always challenging my students to be able to articulate what they believe and why. It's important to be able to clearly state what it is that shapes your perspective and determines your values, especially for a Christian. Otherwise, much of what a relationship with Christ brings to the table is never accessed due to an overly casual approach characterized by Biblical illiteracy and a secular mindset.

For me, I've got a collection of facts and truths that, taken together, form the basis of what compels me to embrace the cross and the efficacy of Scripture. And the more I study and the more I learn, the more compelling the substance of those Truths become.

Recently, it's gotten to the point where some things that I've learned about creation inspired me to put some additional thoughts down on paper. The result was a "dare," more or less, extended to those who either discount Christianity as an ornamental inconvenience or a system of myths that have somehow endured over the last 2,000 years.

It's broken down into three sections: Creation, the Resurrection and Ambition. Each segment brings to the surface a body of empirical evidence that makes it very hard to maintain the posture of a cynic. In short, I dare you to not believe...

### II) Creation

Romans 1:20 says, "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse."

While some want to view creation as a cosmic accident that just happened to land in a good place, science and mathematics testify to something very intentional.

In his book, "The Case For Creation," Lee Strobel interviews Dr. Robin Collins, who has degrees in both mathematics and physics from Washington State University as well as a doctorate in physics from the University of Texas in Austin. After serving as a postdoctoral fellow at Northwestern University, he has spent the last decade doing research, writing, and teaching at Messiah College where he is currently serving as an associate professor of philosophy. At one point in the interview, he says:

*Over the past thirty years or so, scientists have discovered that just about everything about the basic structure of the universe is balanced on a razor's edge for life to exist. The coincidences are far too fantastic to attribute this to mere chance or to claim that it needs no explanation. The dials are set too precisely to have been a random accident. Somebody, as Fred Hoyle quipped, has been monkeying with the physics.<sup>1</sup>*

The bottom line is that while some will theorize how life was initiated apart from an Intelligent Designer, they do so in a way that requires a certain precision to be in place that cannot be explained. While there are several examples of the “precision” that needs to be in place in order for life to exist, the cosmological constant is especially compelling.

### **A) Cosmological Constant**

The cosmological constant is a mathematical value assigned to what astronomers call “dark energy.”

When you look at the universe, you see things moving in a way that doesn’t make sense in that they’re things are being pushed and pulled around despite the fact that there is nothing around them. In other words, when you see a moon orbiting a planet, that makes sense because the planet has a gravitational pull that maintains that moon’s trajectory. But there are objects in space that are moving as though they’re being influenced by a gravitational force, yet there’s nothing visible to provide that force. Hence the term “dark energy” was coined to describe the obvious force being exerted upon these objects by seemingly invisible entities.

Fact is, this dark energy accounts for over 70% of our universe. And what makes that significant is that if this dark energy was characterized by a gravitational dynamic that was pulling everything in, then the universe would ultimately collapse on itself and life in general would cease to exist. If, on the other hand, this dark energy wielded a gravitational force that was too weak to temper the way in which our universe is expanding, then our solar system would unravel as would the entire cosmos.

This, then, is the cosmological constant: The value assigned to this force that continues to allow the universe to expand and therefore not collapse on itself, yet not spin out of control.

Initially, astronomers believed that the cosmological constant was very large. After all, you’re going to need a big broom to move planets around. But that is not the case. The cosmological constant is actually very small. How small? One part in a hundred million billion billion billion billion billion. That’s a ten followed by fifty three zeroes.

Contemplate the precision of that number. And if you move the dial or change the settings in even the most incremental way, the end result is something that no longer sustains life because of the way the universe would either collapse or unravel.

### **B) These Are Not Random Processes**

I’ve read several arguments proposed by people who want to eliminate the need for a Designer. They’ll argue that there are natural processes in place that allow for evolution. The problem with their argument is that they don’t attempt to explain the origin of those processes. They simply point to the way in which things could conceivably flow, without explaining how that flow was initiated.

Dr. Ian Musgrave is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Adelaide in Australia (<http://www.adelaide.edu.au/directory/ian.musgrave>). He has a website called talkorigins.org and his arguments are obviously very well thought out and substantially reinforced with his academic

credentials. In his article “Lies, Damned Lies, Statistics and Probability of Abiogenesis Calculations” he offers a very credible sounding rebuttal to the often quoted impossibility of an enzyme forming by chance.

He proposes that the theory of life being able to start by itself should not be based on the formation of enzymes; rather it should be analyzed according to the construction of much simpler life forms. He suggests that the attention should be focused on the manufacturing of monomers or polymers - something that can be arrived at in a way that doesn't involve the sort of mind numbing probability values associated with the fortuitous appearance of an enzyme.

At the beginning of his argument, he says “Firstly, the formation of biological polymers from monomers is a function of the laws of chemistry and biochemistry, and these are decidedly *not* random.” I would agree. These are not random processes. But the fact that it's not random necessitates structure and order – dynamics that do not and cannot appear apart from being intentionally established by a Designer. It's almost comical that he's so dogmatic about how a simple life form can develop as a result of the chemical and biochemical laws that naturally exist, yet he doesn't attempt to account for how those laws came about to begin with.

Stephen Hawking is a very well known physicist and mathematician who retired in 2009 from his position as the Lucasian Chair of Mathematics at Cambridge University after 30 years. The position was once held by Sir Isaac Newton. In his most recent book, “The Grand Design” he challenges Newton's belief that creation necessitates the work of God by saying, “Because there is a law such as gravity, the Universe can and will create itself from nothing. Spontaneous creation is the reason there is something rather than nothing, why the Universe exists, why we exist. It is not necessary to invoke God to ... set the Universe going.”<sup>2</sup>

While you can't help but be impressed with Hawking's credentials and accomplishment, his theory seems fundamentally flawed right from the beginning in that he's presuming the existence of gravity and from there builds his platform. But if there is no gravity, than he has no platform.

It seems to me that there are a great number of lettered individuals on both sides of the spectrum when it comes to explaining the origin of life. But the thing that tips the scales in favor of those who champion the idea of a Creator is that the individuals who passionately search for a plausible sounding explanation apart from God inevitably base their assumptions on complex processes that need to be present in order for their theories to work.

It would be like me standing in front of an ATM with a random debit card attempting to determine the correct PIN in order to access the accounts associated with that card. You could only speculate how long it would take me to figure out the correct sequence of digits, but let's suppose I did. Could I walk away with whatever cash I was able to withdrawal and say that all that was required were the four numbers I happened upon? No. The numbers are secondary to the technology necessary to process those numbers. Yet, in many instances, this is what some of these brilliant individuals will do when it comes to postulating their theories pertaining to the origin of life. They'll focus on the PIN and ignore the ATM. In other words, they'll speculate as to how certain elements came into being, but will base their models on

things that, while they are foundational to their theories, are either assumed without explanation or accounted for using a level of speculation that borders on something ridiculous.

My point is that if you start with nothing, you have no gravity, you have no chemical law, you have no physical property. Your starting point consists of absolutely nothing. Scientists who assert the possibility of any kind of life form appearing as a result of random processes require the presence of these processes which, according to Dr. Musgrave, are not random in and of themselves. Hence the need for an ordered structure even in the context of the mechanisms that produce these lucky accidents of creation.

### **C) Another Set of Rules**

Another example of this would be Dr. Martin Rees who is an amazingly accredited astronomer that became professor of astronomy at Cambridge when he was in his thirties and has since accumulated several prestigious honors in the fields of Cosmology, Astronomy and Astrophysics.

He wrote a book entitled “Just Six Numbers” that identify six mathematical values that underlie the fundamental physical properties of the universe. He describes these numbers as being intricately choreographed, to the point where if they were altered “even to the tiniest degree,” he said, “there would be no stars, no complex elements, no life.”<sup>3</sup>

One writer summarized what Rees was saying by explaining it this way:

For the universe to exist as it does requires that hydrogen be converted to helium in a precise by comparatively stately manner – specifically, in a way that converts seven one thousandths of its mass to energy. Lower that value very slightly – from 0.007 percent to 0.006 percent, say – and not transformation could take place: the universe would consist of hydrogen and nothing else. Raise the value very slightly – to 0.008 percent – and bonding would be so wildly prolific that the hydrogen would long since have been exhausted. In either case, with the slightest tweaking of the numbers the universe as we know and need it would not be here.<sup>4</sup>

Dr. Rees is a spiritual skeptic, so rather than allow the facts to point to the most obvious conclusion as far as they’re having been put in place by a Designer, instead he asserts that our universe is but one of many universes that have been generated through the ages, ours just happens to be the one where the settings are calibrated correctly.

But even if what Dr. Rees is suggesting is true, you still have to have a process that’s producing these universes. You cannot effectively refute the need for an Intelligent Designer to explain any aspect of creation by proposing theories that necessitate an impetus that is ordered in any way, shape or form.

Dr. Robin Collins elaborated on that kind of practice in Strobel’s book when he said, “...the skeptic needs to invent a whole new set of physical laws and a whole new set of mechanisms that are not a natural extrapolation from anything we know or have experienced.”<sup>5</sup>

## **D) Mathematical Elegance**

At the end of the day, when you make these kind of assertions that are inevitably contrary to everything we can observe in the physical universe, you no longer have science as much as you have metaphysics posing as a very weak brand of science. Yet it is not uncommon among those who would diminish those physical realities that showcase God's handiwork. Consider the words of George Sim Johnson:

Human DNA contains more than organized information that then Encyclopedia Britannica. If the full text of the encyclopedia were to arrive in computer code from outer space, most people would regard this as proof of the existence of extraterrestrial intelligence. But when seen in nature, it is explained as the workings of random science.<sup>6</sup>

The bottom line is that the universe is exquisitely and intricately engineered to the point where the mere notion of it all coming together by chance is utterly ridiculous. The beauty and mathematical elegance of creation is so compelling in terms of the way it points to God, that to dismiss Him with theories that require massive probability values in order for them to be plausible is simply not reasonable.

## **III) The Resurrection**

### **A) Show Us the Father**

In John 14, Jesus is briefing His disciples, preparing them for the task of taking the baton of the gospel to the masses. He's getting ready to be crucified and after His Resurrection. He'll be headed home and it will be up to His disciples to ensure that His Message continues to be proclaimed.

In verse 6, Jesus states that no one can come to the Father except through Him. For those who've been brought up in Sunday School, this is familiar territory. But for the disciples, these are still uncharted waters and you can see that in Philip's response to Jesus when he says, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us."

Philip articulates what we all want to see and know. While creation very eloquently proves the reality of a god, it doesn't provide a definitive picture of the face of God. We want to know God. We want to hear His Voice, we want to experience His Company, we want to feel His Power. But in order for that to happen, we have to have an address.

Jesus was an impressive figure. He didn't teach as a mere educator. Rather, He spoke as the One Who actually wrote the textbook He taught out of (Mk 1:22 [see also 2 Tim 3:16-17]). Throughout His ministry, He was constantly underlining Himself as God Incarnate. He was here to give God a specific address in history so that people could better understand the Nature and the Message of God.

As logical as that all sounds as far as a Divine strategy is concerned, it's still a stretch for anyone to embrace the idea that the Person you're sitting next to is the Creator of the Universe and the Redeemer of your soul.

Philip had been with Christ since the beginning of His earthly ministry. We find him first in John 1 and at the time, he's so confident that he has found the Messiah, he says as much to Nathanael in verse 45.

His confidence was probably bolstered in John 6 when Jesus asks him for his thoughts on how they should go about feeding a crowd that included 5,000 men plus whatever women and children were in the mix. Philip had to be inspired as he watched Jesus use two fish and five barley loaves to feed a group that Philip himself had said would require eight months wages to facilitate.

Philip is the one who some Greeks approached in John 12:20 with a request to interview Jesus which shows that Philip was recognized as one of Christ's cadre even to those who are on the outside looking in. Perhaps that's why Jesus expressed a little surprise at Philip's request in John 14:8 when he asked Jesus to show them the Father.

No doubt, Philip was thinking of something along the lines of God's appearance on Mount Sinai in Exodus 19:16-19 [see Ex 20:18-21] or Exodus 33:22 when God manifested Himself in the context of something obvious and dramatic.

By this point, Jesus had performed in a way that qualified as obvious and dramatic. Making the blind see, healing those who had been paralyzed and bringing Lazarus back to life were all significant indicators that Jesus was more than just a charismatic educator.

But miracles lose their luster after a while. It didn't take the Hebrews long for them to completely forget and / or rationalize away the obvious Reality of God even after they had been led through the Red Sea. Exodus 15 has Miriam celebrating the demise of the Egyptians. Three months later they're at the foot of Mount Sinai in Exodus 19:1. By this time, the miracle celebrated in Miriam's song isn't the only extraordinary thing that has occurred. The crossing of the Red Sea (Ex 14:21-22), the destruction of the world's most formidable military force (Ex 14:27-28), a miraculous provision of water, meat and bread (Ex 15:25; 16:13-36; 17:5-7) and a successful stand against the Amalekites (Ex 17:8-13) – all of these things now are etched into the minds of the Israelites as Moses heads up to the top of the mountain and stays there for 40 days and nights. But at some point while he's gone, the Israelites decide that the God Who has been leading them isn't God at all. Rather, their god is this cow made out of gold they decided to whip up using the jewelry they were wearing at the time (Ex 32:1-4).

Miracles are conclusive, but only for a season. At least that's the way human nature affects their significance over time. Still, Jesus responds to Philip's request by reminding him of the miracles that He had performed up to that point. Not only were they obvious indicators that a supernatural Someone was present, but those same miracles were fulfillments of specific prophecies that had been articulate centuries beforehand because that was all a part of the prophecy that pertained to Christ which He had fulfilled to the letter (Is 9:6; 29:18-21; 35:5-6; 61:1).

### **B) One Particular Miracle**

There was one miracle in particular, however, that Jesus had highlighted as being especially compelling and that was the miracle of His Resurrection which He spoke of in Matthew 12:39-40. He'll refer to it

again as He responds to Philip and the rest of the disciples now in the context of what is documented in John 14-17.

The Resurrection is huge! H.P. Liddon says: "Faith in the resurrection is the very keystone of the arch of Christian faith, and, when it is removed, all must inevitably crumble into ruin."<sup>7</sup> The Resurrection is what Jesus would have on His business card if He carried one at all because He is the only religious figure in human history to not only claim that He was God, but proved it by voluntarily dying and coming back to life. That was the one miracle He put on the table when He was pressed for some kind of definitive sign. You see that in Matthew 12:39-40 and Paul reiterates it in Romans 1:4.

So, in a way, this all becomes very easy in that Jesus' claims are very unique when compared to every other religious system. He does not claim to be a messenger, rather He claims to be God (John 8:58; 10:30), and then He proves it by His Resurrection. So if His Resurrection is an event that can be validated, then the platform of the cynic has just become very unstable.

### **C) He Really Did Die**

But how do you prove it? There's no film to refer to, all of the eyewitnesses are long gone so what's left as far as a credible source of information? And let's take this a step further. Let's assume for the sake of this discussion that the Bible is not admissible as evidence, apart from those things that can be regarded as historical events.

The approach that we take then is the same approach that is taken in academic circles when seeking to establish the historicity of a particular event or person. You assemble all those things that mention that person or event and then draw your conclusions based on the substance of their testimony.

First of all, the fact that Jesus died and that His body was never recovered is not a matter of conjecture or speculation.

*The resurrection of Christ is an event in history where in God acted in a definite time-space dimension. Concerning this, Wilbur Smith says, "The meaning of the resurrection is a theological matter, but the fact of the resurrection is a historical matter; the nature of the resurrection body of Jesus may be a mystery, but the fact that the body disappeared from the tomb is a matter to be decided upon by historical evidence."<sup>8</sup>*

Jesus did exist and He did die and His body was never definitively accounted for after He was laid to rest. That much can be determined from the wealth of literature, art and even the presence of the Christian church as an institution in that it is based on the historical as well as the theological reality of Christ.

What happened to Christ's body is the question. Critics have either been looking for a corpse or insisted that one did exist for over two thousand years. But they make that assertion in the face of an overwhelming amount of evidence that cannot be overlooked without the risk of being less than objective in your analysis.

## D) Josephus on the Resurrection

Josephus was a Jewish historian that lived from 37 to 100 A.D. He was employed by the Romans and he mentions this about Jesus in his "Antiquities of the Jews":

*At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus. And 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 condemned him to be crucified and to die. And 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.<sup>9</sup>*

In many ways, this one quote is a slam dunk. Here's a man who had access to people who were contemporaries of Christ. He was born only seven years after Jesus died and the fact that he mentions Jesus' resurrection in what would be considered a secular text is equivalent to Christ's Resurrection being reported in the news.

Some have very vehemently attempted to discount this quote as something that Josephus could not have written. However, this same passage written by Josephus was quoted by Eusebius in the fourth century and is included in the most recent Loeb edition of his works.<sup>10</sup> It is credible.

## E) Tertullian's Apology

Another example of a secular text that references Jesus' resurrection would be Tertullian's Apology. Tertullian lived from 160 – 220 AD. He was born in Carthage, Africa when it was a Roman province. By this point, Rome had become violently opposed to Christianity thanks to Nero who blamed the great fire that decimated most of Rome on the Christians in 64 AD. Subsequent Caesars followed suit and while much of the more heinous persecutions had faded by the time Tertullian was championing the Christian faith, local proconsuls still made it very hazardous to claim Christ as Savior.

It was in this cultural climate that Tertullian wrote his *Apology*. It was a letter written to the Roman government basically challenging them to consider the logic of their predisposition against Christianity. He crafts a very compelling defense and at one point when he is describing the Christian faith, he says:

The eclipse that happened around the time that Jesus was crucified was documented by the Romans and you can read more about it at <http://www.astronomytoday.com/eclipses/ancient-part3.html>. Greek historian Phlegon wrote: "*In the fourth year of the 202nd Olympiad, there was an eclipse of the Sun which was greater than any known before and in the sixth hour of the day it became night; so that stars appeared in the heaven; and a great Earthquake that broke out in Bithynia destroyed the greatest part of Nicaea.*"

*But the Jews were so exasperated by His teaching, by which their rulers and chiefs were convicted of the truth, chiefly because so many turned aside to Him, that at last they brought Him before Pontius Pilate, at the time Roman governor of Syria, and, by the violence of their outcries against Him, extorted a sentence giving Him up to them to be crucified...At his own free-will, He with a word dismissed from Him*

*His spirit, anticipating the executioner's work. In the same hour, too, the light of day was withdrawn, when the sun at the very time was in his meridian blaze. Those who were not aware that this had been predicted about Christ, no doubt thought it was an eclipse. You yourselves have the account of the world-portent still in your archives. Then, when His body was taken down from the cross and placed in a sepulcher, the Jews in their eager watchfulness surrounded it with a large military guard, lest, as He had predicted His resurrection from the dead on the third day, His disciples might remove by stealth His body, and deceive even the incredulous. But, lo, on the third day there was a sudden shock of earthquake, and the stone which sealed the sepulcher was rolled away, and the guard fled off in terror; without a single disciple near, the grave was found empty of all but the clothes of the buried One. But nevertheless, the leaders of the Jews, whom it nearly concerned both the spread abroad a lie, and keep back a people tributary and submissive to them from the faith, give it out that the body of Christ had been stolen by His followers. For the Lord, you see, did not go forth into the public gaze, lest the wicked by delivered from their error; that faith also, destined to a great reward, might hold its ground in difficulty. But He spent forty days with some of His disciples down in Galilee, a region of Judea, instructing them in the doctrines they were to teach others. Thereafter, having given them commission to preach the gospel through the word, He was encompassed with a cloud and taken up to heaven, - a fact more certain far than the assertions of your Proculi concerning Romulus.<sup>11</sup>*

Again, this is not "biblical." This isn't a Bible study. Rather, this is a concerned citizen appealing to the Roman decision makers on the basis of logic. In his explanation of the Christian faith, He refers to Jesus' death and resurrection as things that happened as opposed to things that are merely believed to have happened. The fact that he punctuates his account of Christ by referencing the eclipse that happened when Jesus was killed highlights how some of these things can be verified by referring to their own records. He is not laboring to convince his audience based on mere conjecture. Rather, he's providing an account of what happened and how those events provided the basis of the doctrine that Christians subscribe to.

#### **F) Ignatius' Last Words**

Another example that demonstrates the historical reality of Christ's resurrection that comes from a secular source would be the account of Ignatius who lived from 50-115 A.D. He was the Bishop of Antioch, a native of Syria and a pupil of the apostle John. Enroute to a martyr's death, he wrote his "Epistles," and this is what he said of Christ:

*He was crucified and died under Pontius Pilate. He really, nad not merely in appearance, was crucified, and died, in the sight of beings in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth. He also rose again in three days...<sup>12</sup>*

## G) The Martyrs Speak

Martyrdom is a significant piece of evidence at this point in the discussion because there have been many people who have voluntarily died because they refused to recant their belief that Christ rose from the grave.

While many religions have been harassed and persecuted, what makes the Christian dynamic so extraordinary and thus so credible is that the initial disciples were eyewitnesses to Christ having risen. This would be the thing that would embolden them to spend the rest of their lives not only promoting and publishing the Gospel Message, but to die a martyr's death because they refused to deny the centerpiece of their creed, that being that Jesus – God Incarnate - had arose.

Again, there have been many people throughout history who have voluntarily given their lives for something they believed to be true, but very few, if any, have forfeited their lives for something they knew to be false.

Chuck Colson's testimony and his experience during the Watergate trial demonstrates this dynamic. First of all, for those who are not familiar with Watergate, President Nixon was forced to resign his Presidency in 1974 due to what was revealed as a criminal act perpetrated by members of his team illegally breaking into the Democrat campaign headquarters at the Watergate hotel. Chuck Colson was Special Counsel to the President and he was the first member of Nixon's cabinet to serve time in prison for actions related to the Watergate scandal.

He later became a Christian and went on to accomplish some extraordinary things in the context of his "Prison Fellowship" ministry.<sup>13</sup> His steadfast confidence in the reality of Christ's resurrection was based in part on the reaction of His disciples in the aftermath of His being arrested. In a speech delivered to the National Religious Broadcasters Convention in 1984, he said:

*Ehrlichman, Haldeman, Mitchell, myself and the rest believed passionately in the President. We had at our fingertips every imaginable power and privilege. I could phone an aide's office and have a jet waiting at Andrews Air Force Base, order Cabinet members of generals around, change the budget.*

*Yet even at the prospect of jeopardizing the President, even in the face of all the privileges of the most powerful office in the world, the threat of embarrassment, perhaps jail, was so overpowering and the instinct for self-preservation so overwhelming, that one by one, those involved deserted their leader to save their own skin.*

*What has that got to do with the resurrection? Simply this: Watergate demonstrates human nature. No one can ever make me believe that 11 ordinary human beings would for 40 years endure persecution, beatings, prison, and death, without ever once renouncing that Jesus Christ was risen from the dead.*

*Only an encounter with the living God could have kept those men steadfast. Otherwise, the apostle Peter would have been just like John Dean, running to the prosecutors to save his own skin. He had already done it three times.*

*No, the evidence is overwhelming. Those men held to that testimony because they had seen Christ raised from the dead. And if indeed He was resurrected, that affirms His deity. As God, He cannot be mistaken in what He teaches and cannot lie. An infallible God cannot err. A holy God cannot deceive.<sup>14</sup>*

Human nature prohibits men from willingly sacrificing their lives for something they know not to be true. And yet, history is full of men and women who have sacrificed their well being and even their lives for the cause of Christ. Why? Because they knew Jesus rose from the grave. Beginning with the disciples who were eyewitnesses and continuing with the martyrs who based their certainty on the evidence that history and nature provides, believers have stood by their convictions even to the point of death.

And it's because of that certainty that the church has endured and it's the fact that it has endured - despite the death sentence that has so often been associated with being a believer – that provides significant substance to the claim that “He has risen, He has risen indeed!”

## **H) Nothing Else Matters**

Simon Greenleaf, famous Harvard professor of law, says: “All that Christianity ask of men...is, that they would treat its evidences as they treat the evidence of other things; and that they would try and judge its actors and witnesses, as they deal with their fellow men, when testifying to human affairs and actions, in human tribunals. Let the witnesses be compared with themselves, with each other, and with surrounding facts and circumstances; and let their testimony be sifted, as if it were being given in a court of justice, on the side of the adverse party, the witness being subjected to rigorous cross-examination. The result, it is confidently believed, will be an undoubting conviction of their integrity, ability and truth.”<sup>15</sup> Jesus really did live, He really did die and He really did come back to life. By doing so He proved His claim to Divinity and the moment that a person recognizes this fact as a historical truism, it changes everything.

The great Methodist preacher, author and missionary of the past generation, Dr. E. Stanley Jones, described how he was once addressing an Indian University on the verities of eternity. When he sat down the thoughtful Hindu president stood up and sonorously solemnized, "If what this man says is not true, then it doesn't matter. But if what he says is true, than nothing else matters."<sup>16</sup>

Jesus really did live and He really did die and He really did come back to life. Compared to Christ's Resurrection and the claims to Deity that were validated as a result, nothing else matters.

## **IV) Ambition**

### **A) Two Words**

My Dad loved to debate. Give him a topic that he could sink his teeth to and buckle up because it was like drinking from a fire hydrant – just a barrage of verbiage.

That's what made his response to a question I posed to him so significant and so memorable to me. I asked him, “How do you know Christianity is true?” His answer: “It works.”

Two words! And yet, within those two words you have the bottom line that characterizes any truism. Does it work? Does it make sense and does it resonate practically?

### **B) Yardage Versus Touchdowns**

Christianity does work and it makes a substantial difference at every level of the human experience. One area in particular is ambition – the desire to succeed and the fulfillment that comes from accomplishing something significant.

Left unchecked by something profound, ambition can consume a person and reduce them to something either pathologically selfish or utterly disillusioned to the point of despair.

Money and other apparent indicators of success is a lot like yardage. On September 13,th, 2009, the Denver Broncos squared off against the Cincinnati Bengals. When it was all said and done, the Bengals had gained a total of 307 yards, the Broncos, 302. Yet, the Broncos won.<sup>17</sup> While the Bengals had more in the way of total net yards, it was the Broncos that came out on top.

It's almost exasperating, isn't it? Sometimes it seems that no matter how hard you work, the prize you're pursuing seems perpetually out of reach and in those rare moments where you're able to achieve the thing that you've been working towards, by the following day another goal has taken its place.

### **C) Solomon's Essay – The Whole Duty of Man**

King Solomon was king of the Jews and reigned for approximately 40 years.<sup>18</sup> At one point he wrote an essay that elaborated on the plight of human beings as far as what it is that drives them and produces lasting fulfillment. What makes his writing so compelling is that he had the resources necessary to conduct the kind of experiments that he did. By virtue of his immense wealth and intelligence, he could test the empirical power of different stimuli to produce true satisfaction. He reflected on the allure of riches and accomplishment as well as the pursuit of knowledge, pleasure and power. In the end he concludes that the only thing that truly matters is your relationship with God and the sense of significance that you enjoy is directly related to the degree of obedience you render to your Heavenly Father:

**Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. (Ecc 12:13)**

To go back to our initial illustration, while yardage is an indicator of sorts, in the end the only thing that really counts is the scoreboard. And the scoreboard, in this instance, is what you're able to do that endures beyond today and echoes through all eternity. In other words, it's only your obedience to God that produces the lasting impact and fulfillment we desire.

In some ways, this might seem overly philosophical and not especially practical. But Solomon is not alone in his recognition of the mirage that is represented by believing that the acquisition of power and success will satisfy our need for fulfillment.

In June of 2005, Tom Brady was the quarterback for the New England Patriots. He was 27 at the time and had recently won his third Superbowl. Those victories combined with his other accomplishments represented what most would define as a legitimate reason to feel like they had arrived and were now basking in the light of a fulfilling and problem-free existence.

But that wasn't the case. At one point, Tom said: "Why do I have three Super Bowl rings, and still think there's something greater out there for me? I mean, maybe a lot of people would say, 'Hey man, this is what is.' I reached my goal, my dream, my life. Me, I think: God, it's gotta be more than this. I mean this can't be what it's all cracked up to be. I mean I've done it. I'm 27. And what else is there for me?"<sup>19</sup>

Compare that to some of the observations Solomon made:

**<sup>4</sup> I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. <sup>5</sup> I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. <sup>6</sup> I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. <sup>7</sup> I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. <sup>8</sup> I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers, and a harem as well—the delights of a man's heart. <sup>9</sup> I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me. <sup>10</sup> I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labor, and this was the reward for all my toil. <sup>11</sup> Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun. (Ecc 2:4-11)**

It's appropriate at this point to underscore the fact that Solomon wasn't some dark and depressed personality who was incapable of enjoying anything. At one point he says:

**I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly – my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives. (Ecc 2:3)**

Solomon is maintaining a sound perspective throughout all his experiments and observations. He's not melancholy, he's simply observing the hollowness of the human experience regardless of how embellished it may be with those things that supposedly provide a sense of worth and satisfaction,

In a similar way, Tom Brady is not clinically depressed when he takes a step back and observes the way in which material things and human accomplishments – regardless of their substance and significance – fail in providing true and enduring satisfaction.

The fact of the matter is the goal posts never stop moving. There is never a place where another level of accomplishment isn't apparent. And in the same way, there's no earthly prize that cannot either be taken away or stripped of its luster with the passage of time. Regardless of how you attempt to evaluate it, the very nature of our world is transient and it is therefore foolish to define ourselves according to a paradigm that is neither durable nor stable. To use Solomon's phrase, it is "meaningless."

## **D) All Your Might**

Still, this is not our cue to refrain from being excellent at what we do or less than aggressive in the marketplace. In the same Divinely inspired text authored by Solomon he says:

**Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might...(Ecc 9:10)**

In a similar vein, Colossians 3:17 says:

**And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Col 3:17 [see also Prov 22:29; 2 Thess 3:10])**

Cloaking a bad work ethic or veiling laziness by holding up a Bible and insisting that your being a slacker is justified in that you're refraining from being materialistic is a distortion of Scripture. You are commanded to work hard and strive for excellence in whatever you set your mind to do. But you don't do so in a way where your activity defines who you are. It's there where your identity and your overall perspective is dictated by your status in the marketplace that you consign yourself to a life of yardage rather than touchdowns.

## **E) The Validation of Obedience**

So here is yet another reason to recognize the Bible as being the Word of God and to accept it as True from cover to cover. The life that is characterized by a relentless pursuit of that which God would do through your obedience to Him produces a sense of purpose and fulfillment that is enduring. It's not just "noble," it's the most reasonable approach that one can take in light of the alternative being an existence founded on temporary plateaus and insatiable appetites.

## **F) Spiritual Commodities**

Another way to look at it is to consider that everything we pine for is a spiritual commodity. While we desire wealth, it's not the mere accumulation of money, it's the sense of peace that financial security provides. We want a particular thing because of the joy it produces when we have it in our possession. We seek to be accepted and loved by those we admire. It's not just a physical exchange, it's an emotional craving. At every turn, the "thing" we want is something intangible and therefore a spiritual article.

Now look at Galatians 5:22-23:

<sup>22</sup> **But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,**  
<sup>23</sup> **gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. (Gal 5:22-23)**

The “fruit” of the Spirit is the result of the Spirit’s activity within you. If you go down the list of the qualities that are produced as a result of Christ living in and through you, you recognize them as the very things that we as human beings desire to have and experience. Yet, if we attempt to realize those things through any means other than that which is founded upon one’s relationship with Christ, the end result is less than fulfilling.

If you want peace and you determine that its finances that will deliver that sense of well being you’re looking for, go back to Tom Brady’s interview and revisit his sense of disillusion when contemplating his achievements and resources. If you want something more authoritative, consider Solomon’s comments in Ecclesiastes 5:10:

**Whoever loves money, never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. (Ecc 5:10)**

If its joy you want and you’re determined that what you seek is best experienced in the context of the amusements and pleasures that lie before you, you’re obligated to an existence that is forever frustrated by the fact that you continually need more in order to enjoy the same level of fulfillment. There’s always a bigger flat screen to possess, a bigger boat, a faster car – there’s no one thrill that produces an enduring sense of satisfaction.

While we as human beings crave love, many will seek to satisfy that longing by defaulting to the self-absorbed facsimile of love otherwise known as lust. The difference being that love is all about giving and lust is all about getting. If your approach to romance and intimacy is based on a self serving premise, the level of fulfillment you’re destined to experience is extremely limited compared to the alternative where you’re consistently focused on the gratification of your sweetheart.

And it’s not just about sex and marriage. In Acts 20:35, it says:

**In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’ ” (Acts 20:35)**

With that as a backdrop, look at what Mental Health America’s “Live Your Life Well” website says about people who are focused on the well being of others rather than themselves:

*Research indicates that those who consistently help other people experience less depression, greater calm, fewer pains and better health. They may even live longer.<sup>20</sup>*

While there is a tendency to regulate Biblical admonishments to serve others as being noble but not always practical, the truth is it’s not only practical, it’s very healthy. So by approaching relationships using the Truth of Scripture as your guide, you’re not only experiencing the kind of enduring love you need, but you’re also healthier than what is yielded by a more secular approach.

## **G) Who He Is – Not What He Gives**

We are driven to quench our thirst for substance and significance. We long for success in our endeavors, but if we want to secure points and not just “yardage,” we need to focus on that which goes beyond the transient environment we exist in and instead concentrate on the eternal domain that we truly live in.

And when we determine to qualify our ambitions according to God’s Power and Direction working through us, we don’t do so for a particular result, as much as we surrender to Christ simply to gain Him. The blessings He provides are secondary to the Lord and Savior that He is. It’s not the trappings of life that we’re going for, it’s the definition of life – the Life that is only available in and through Him.

This can be a tough pill to swallow and it’s one of the reasons that so many opt for either a diluted form of Christianity or a perspective intentionally devoid of a Christian perspective altogether. But it’s only hard if you overlook the foundational realities of the world we live in.

While the Fruit of the Spirit is appealing and it makes sense to perceive it as the core of what we all as human beings desire, it is realized only through denying yourself as opposed to gratifying yourself.

This lands in a good place. Go with me, here...

## **I) The Inner Man**

Luke 9:23 says:

**<sup>23</sup> Then he said to them all: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. <sup>24</sup> For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. <sup>25</sup> What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self? (Lk 9:23-25)**

Some will interpret this passage to be a call to asceticism or an extreme form of self-denial. But here’s the thing: It’s not what you give or what you possess that defines you, your identity is defined according to what is in your heart.

Look at Proverbs 4:23:

**Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it. (Prov 4:23)**

...and also Luke 6:45:

**A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. (Lk 6:45)**

The heart, according to Scripture, is who you truly are and it’s the heart that is reviewed by God as He considers your thoughts, your words and your actions. While we as human beings might be overly impressed with what can be seen on the outside, God is able to see deeper and clearer by being able to peer into the inner man.

then hear from heaven, your dwelling place. Forgive, and deal with everyone according to all they do, since you know their hearts (for you alone know the human heart), (2 Chron 6:30)

**The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? <sup>10</sup>“I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward each person according to their conduct, according to what their deeds deserve.” (Jer 17:9-10)**

The heart is where we experience the tension that occurs when our desires are not being addressed the way we want them to be (see Ecc 2:20). It's here where it's determined how we will quench our thirst for fulfillment and significance (see Lk 12:34). And it's here that God needs to be positioned as the Supreme Manager over the entire process because it's when He's in charge that you're able to get beyond the kiddie rides and experience the big roller coasters. You're now into what is truly substantial as opposed to what is ultimately revealed as trivial. You're scoring points rather than accumulating yardage!

You can see this Ephesians 3:16-21. Take a look:

**“... that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, <sup>17</sup> that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, <sup>18</sup> may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height-- <sup>19</sup> to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. <sup>20</sup> Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, <sup>21</sup> to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen”(Eph 3:16-21 [NKJV]).**

## **J) The Fullness of God**

You don't want to gloss over this verse as nothing more than a collection of “churchy” sounding clichés that don't resonate with any meaning in the secular marketplace.

Throughout the entire book of Ephesians, Paul uses a phrase: “for this reason.” It's a continual progression of Truths that crescendo into a logical conclusion that is downright motivating. In chapter three, we're a little more than half way through His treatise. But even within the above five verses we have a motivating picture of what can result when Christ is given control over our inner man.

Picking up with verse 17, if Christ is occupying a position of Absolute Leadership in your heart as a result of your having accepted Him as your Lord and Savior, you're now able to “get” just how freakishly amazing His Love is. And it's a result of catching a glimpse of that Love that you're filled with the fullness of God.

It's that “fullness” that translates into the Fruits of the Spirit. The things that you and I want are all bound up in what we have access to when we're overwhelmed by the fullness of God.

The “fullness of God” is simply a term referring to the fact that you’re firing on all cylinders. All that God would offer, all that God would do in and through you, all that you would do, feel and experience as a result of God’s Presence dominating your existence – that is the fullness of God and friend, that’s what you and I want even when we think we want something else.

Remember, the “thing” we want is ultimately a spiritual commodity. The only True Source for love, joy, peace etc. is the Author of those things. If you’ve caught a glimpse of God’s Love for you, then:

- you’re perpetually amazed at what He’s done on your behalf (1 Jn 3:1)
- your disposition tends to be continually enthusiastic because you’re aware of His Power and Purpose animating your actions and future (Psalm 139:16; Phil 3:14; Col 1:29)
- you’re able to process both the triumphs and the trials that come your way from a position of strength (Ps 18:32, 40, 43-49; Phil 4:12-13; Col 1:10-11).

In short, you know who you are because you’re convinced of Whose you are. And with that as a foundation, your sense of self is no longer inextricably linked to your accomplishments as much as it is based on the Author of those accomplishments Who’s working in and through you (see Phil 2:13). You’re no longer gauging your worth according to the substance of your resume, nor are you dependent on the transient trophies offered by the marketplace for the sense of fulfillment that we all seek. Instead you commit to the Lord whatever it is you’re working towards and enjoy the fulfillment that comes from obedience rather than clinging to the temporary validation of a successful enterprise. Moreover, your gaze is constantly fixed on what’s next. Not because you’re dissatisfied with your current status, but because you’re constantly being beckoned forward by your Heavenly Father. Take a look at the way Paul describes it:

**Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Phil 3:13-14)**

So here’s the bottom line: Rather than settling for a sense of ambition that produces nothing more than an insatiable desire for more, the Biblical approach is to instead recognize that what you want is ultimately a spiritual commodity that is experienced only by engaging the Author of those commodities in the context of obedience. To remain perpetually overwhelmed by Who He is and to base your definition of success on the degree to which you do as He directs results in an energized disposition, an enthusiastic outlook and a confident regard for who you are and where you’re headed because your eyes are fixed on a prize that doesn’t deteriorate and never fails to satisfy.

That’s the kind of ambition that transforms the daily grind into something inspiring, that’s a life worth living and that’s one more reason to embrace the Gospel as the Absolute Truth because “it works.”

## **Conclusion**

It was a Sunday during the summer of 1981. I was at Parris Island benefiting from all the great training provided by the Drill Instructors. As was the case with every Sunday, you were given the opportunity to

attend church but I had chosen to remain behind this time simply because there was so many things that needed to get done. No sooner had the group departed that I felt bad about not having gone and I made my regrets known by saying so out loud.

A fellow recruit heard me and responded by saying that my remorse was based on having been “brainwashed” into thinking that church was important and I was clinging to a pointless tradition rather than a Truth that merited any real consideration.

I don’t recall my response being especially articulate, but I do remember reflecting on his accusation and deciding that he was as wrong as he could be because I had considered the substance of the Gospel Message and had determined that it was authentic. I was not brainwashed. I had measured the claims of Christ and found them to be credible. This was more than just a collection of colorful illustrations depicting charming little stories. God is real, His Son did live, die and come back to life and my existence is infused with a sense of purpose that goes beyond a holiday tradition or a weekend routine.

And as certain as I was back then, I’m even more convinced now. The ever increasing volume of evidence, logic and utility that validates and characterizes the Christian paradigm is as accessible as it is obvious and as my awareness of these things grows, so does my passion for alerting skeptics to things they may have overlooked as they consider Jesus Christ, the Lord of lords, the King of kings and the Savior of all mankind.

He is. It works. And I dare you not to believe...

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