

Message: “The Case for Christ Part One”, Week Three of “Is He Really Who He Says He Is? Series”, presented by Reverend Kristen Lowe on 03-19-2017 at Crossroads United Methodist Church, Waunakee, WI.

When we stand before God asking, “Is Jesus truly who he says he is...” we are reminded in the scripture by Paul that we indeed have met the Messiah - the Savior of the world - He who is God in the flesh. He took on human form so that he could walk with us and break the curse of sin and death forever through sacrificing himself for us. Then, after three days, he rose again and proved that he was indeed God, and that his plan for us was to inherit eternal life.

1 Corinthians 15:17-23

¹⁷If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. ¹⁹If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. ²⁰But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. ²¹For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; ²²for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. ²³But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells us plainly that he is indeed God. He is the one the prophets told about. He is the Messiah.

John 14:1-11

¹“Don’t be troubled. Trust in God and trust also in me. ²My Father’s house has room to spare. If that weren’t the case, would I have told you that I’m going to prepare a place for you? ³When I go to prepare a place for you, I will return and take you to be with me so that where I am you will be too. ⁴You know the way to the place I’m going.” ⁵Thomas asked, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

⁶Jesus answered, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you have really known me, you will also know the Father. From now on you know him and have seen him.” ⁸Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father; that will be enough for us.”

⁹Jesus replied, “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been with you all this time? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? ¹⁰Don’t you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words I have spoken to you I don’t speak on my own. The Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹Trust me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or at least believe on account of the works themselves.”

May God help us to believe where we have not seen. Amen.

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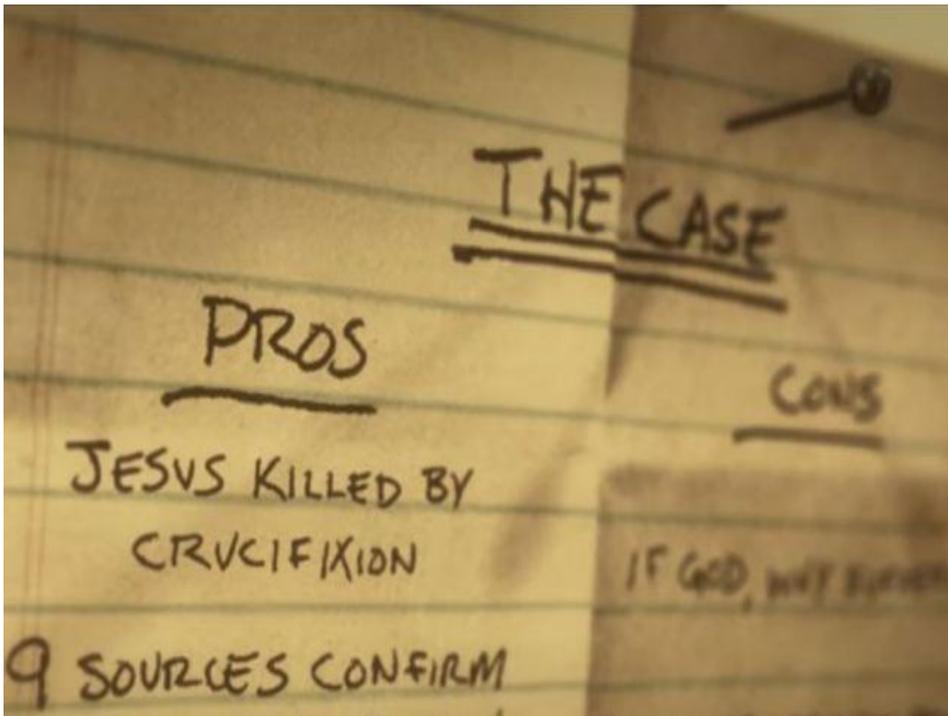


When I was a kid I could feel God around me. I could hear Jesus’ voice in my heart. I was so convinced that Jesus, and all that the Bible claimed was true, that it was as real as my own skin. It was probably when I was in my mid 20s that I started to encounter people who would challenge me. They were friends or people I worked with.

One of my favorite things to do when I was done with my shift was to go over to our IT department and visit with coworkers over there. We began deep discussions about my beliefs. These were very educated individuals who were used to putting formulas together to solve problems. They would say things like, “You’re an intelligent girl, how can you so deeply believe things you’ve been spoon-fed since you were little? The whole thing is farfetched and there’s no proof.”

At that time, all I had in my arsenal was the Bible (which they didn’t recognize as plausible). I could quote scripture and I could tell them about what I knew in my heart, but I couldn’t really articulate my beliefs other than saying things like, “How can you watch a sunrise and not believe in an intelligent creator.” Or, “When you look into the eyes of a newborn baby, how can you believe that we don’t have a soul?”

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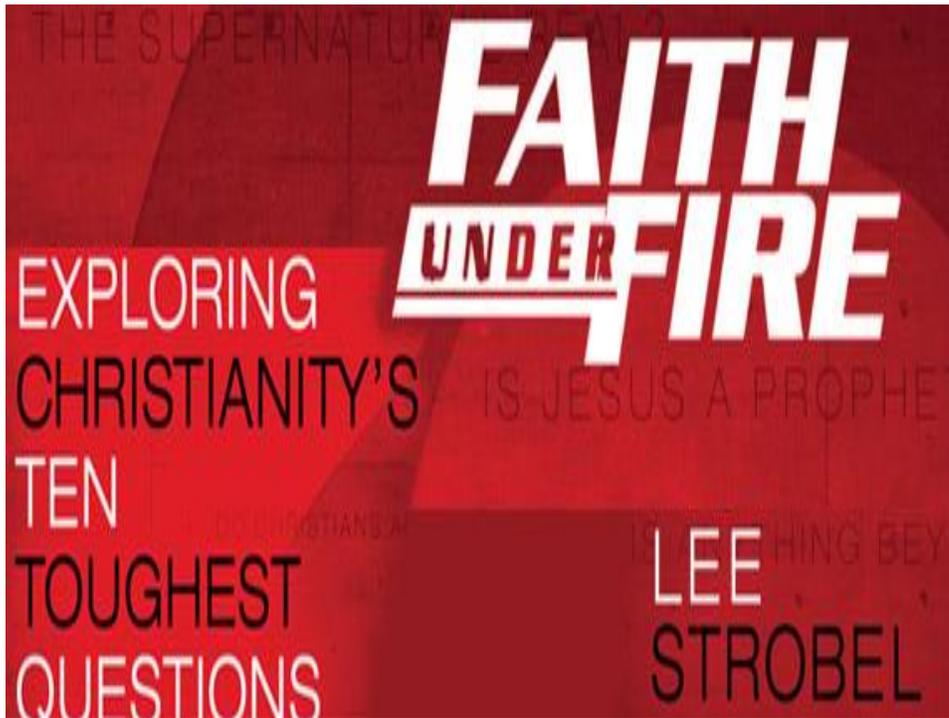


But, it goes much deeper than that, doesn't it? We've been following the spiritual journey of Lee Strobel, the award-winning journalist who went from being an ardent atheist, dead set on disproving Christianity, to becoming a confident follower of Christ.

In the true story of Strobel's life, his wife has become a new Christian, and Strobel is struggling with his intelligent wife believing what he considers a fairy tale. So he sets out to disprove her belief system. He's a journalist. He does what he does best. He uncovers the evidence.

A few years back, Strobel had his own TV show called Faith Under Fire.

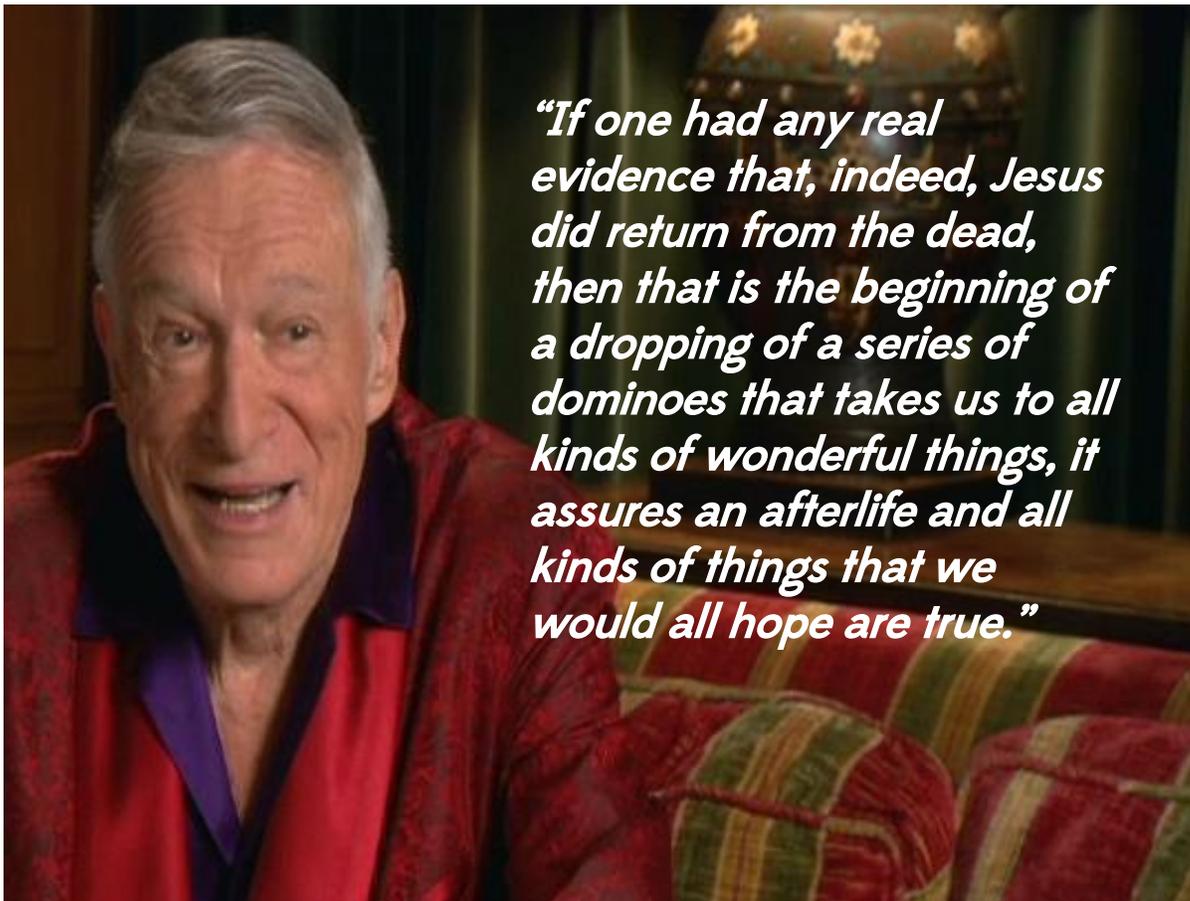
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Hosting that program led him into all kinds of interesting spiritual conversations, including—get this!—an interview with the publisher of Playboy magazine, Hugh Hefner. Strobel interviewed Hefner about his spiritual beliefs and then wrote about the experience in his book *The Case for the Real Jesus* [note: this book has recently been retitled as *In Defense of Jesus*].

So here's the story: Strobel sat with Hefner in the living room of Hefner's opulent Los Angeles mansion and asked him very direct questions about his spiritual beliefs. Hefner expressed a minimal belief in God, referring to him as “the beginning of it all” and the “great unknown,” but he said he did not believe in the God of Christianity.

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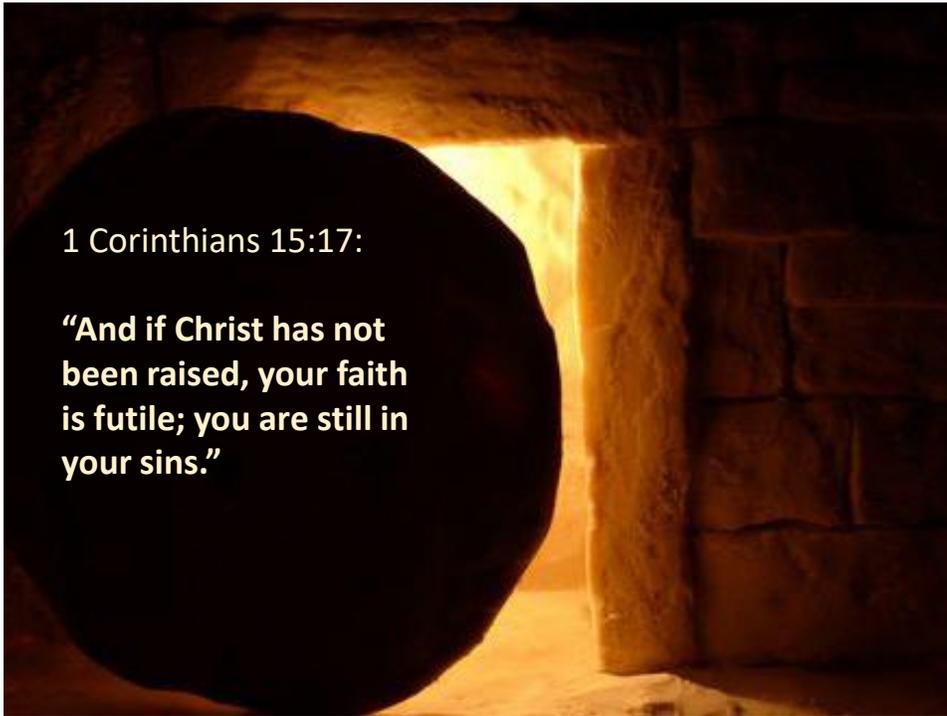


Interestingly, when Strobel brought up the resurrection of Jesus, Hefner instantly saw the supreme relevance of it. “If one had any real evidence that, indeed, Jesus did return from the dead, then that is the beginning of a dropping of a series of dominoes that takes us to all kinds of wonderful things,” he said. “It assures an afterlife and all kinds of things that we would all hope are true.”

But Hefner was a doubter. His rational side couldn’t accept it. He said, “I don’t think that Jesus is any more the Son of God than we are.” And despite the importance of the resurrection, he admitted he had never investigated the historical evidence for it.

Well, Hefner was right about one thing: If the resurrection is true, it changes everything. It confirms Jesus’ identity as the unique Son of God and opens the door to eternal life for anyone who will truly follow him. On the other hand, if Jesus’ resurrection is a legend or a lie, then Jesus is, at best, just another unfortunate crucifixion victim in a long line of failed revolutionaries and false messiahs.

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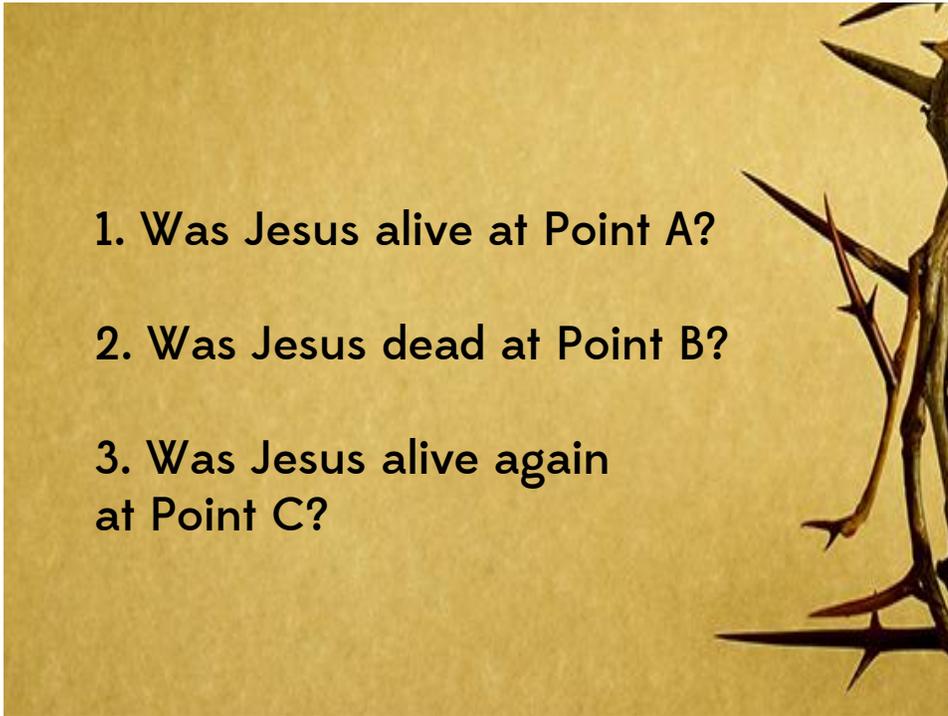


That’s why, in *The Case for Christ* movie, Strobel honed in with such a laser focus on the question of whether or not Jesus rose from the dead. He recognized that this issue is, as some have called it, the lynchpin of Christianity. If the evidence for the resurrection stands, then the Christian faith stands; but if the evidence falls, then so does Christianity—which is the outcome Strobel was hoping for.

The apostle Paul, by the way, acknowledged the pivotal nature of Jesus’ resurrection in the Bible. He said in 1 Corinthians 15:17, “And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.” In fact, he went on to explain that if Jesus didn’t rise from the dead, then we, as Jesus’ followers, are hopelessly lost and, as Paul put it in verse 19, “of all people most to be pitied.”

So this is a really big deal!

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But, as Lee Strobel asked in the movie, and as Hefner later asked Strobel, is there any real evidence that Jesus rose from the dead? That’s the question we’re going to explore today. According to Strobel, we have to look at three key points in Jesus life:

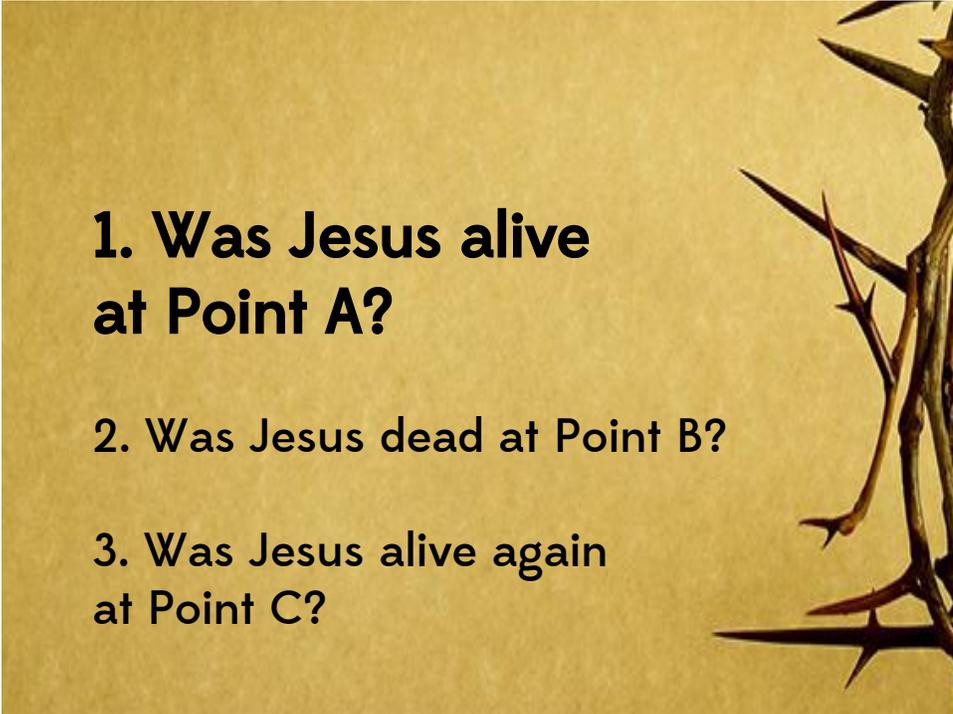
First, was Jesus alive at Point A?

Second, was Jesus dead at Point B?

And third, was Jesus alive again at Point C?

If the answer to these three questions is yes, then Jesus did rise from the dead, He is the Son of God, and Christianity is true! So first today, we are going to dip our toes into point A.

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1. Was Jesus alive at Point A?

2. Was Jesus dead at Point B?

3. Was Jesus alive again at Point C?

Jesus Was Alive at Point A

Virtually every scholar, secular and Christian, agrees Jesus actually lived in the first century. In fact, there are several opponents of Christianity who won't deny Jesus' existence. Bart Ehrman, the agnostic New Testament scholar says, “The claim that Jesus was simply made up falters on every ground.”

Historian Paul Maier is even more blunt: “The total evidence is so overpowering, so absolute that only the shallowest of intellects would dare to deny Jesus' existence.”

Historians and opponents to Christianity all concur that Jesus lived.

Jesus Was Dead at Point B

For the resurrection to be true, Jesus had to really die. The Bible and history tell us he was executed by crucifixion under Pontius Pilate. But some deny the death of Christ. There are theories that he left the region and was married. There are theories that he survived the crucifixion.

It's been said that we're lucky in the study of ancient history if we have one or two solid sources to confirm a fact. In the case of the execution of Jesus, however, we not only have reports in all four biographies of Jesus in the New Testament—the Gospels—each written within the lifetimes of his contemporaries,

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However, if you decide you still want non-Christian sources, we have plenty of those:

Josephus
Tacitus
Lucian
Mara Bar-Serapion
The Talmud

These five (non-Christian) sources all confirm the crucifixion of Jesus

But we also have five ancient sources outside the Bible: Josephus, Tacitus, Lucian, Mara Bar-Serapion, and the Talmud.

I hope your appetite has been whetted. Next week I want to get into the scientific and historical evidence for the death and resurrection of Jesus... The evidence that convinced an intelligent atheist, Lee Strobel, that Jesus is really who he says he is and brought him literally to his knees. Amen.