

*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone
who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.*

1 Peter 3:15

Why I Believe – by Matt Rhodes

When I wrote my Walking in Faith article (www.cranburypres.org/walk_faith/2006AprWIF.pdf) back in 2006, I had a lot to say, but my rough draft was too long for the newsletter. Even after editing it down, it was still huge. I split it into 2 articles. One described my faith journey as I changed from a skeptic to a believer. The other version gave more details on why I believe. The people who saw them liked the faith journey better, so that's what was published in the newsletter.

Not much changed in my faith journey since my original article (www.cranburypres.org/walk_faith/2006AprWIF.pdf). What has changed is that I've read more & it always bothered me that I left out so much about why I believe. The Great Commission says we should go forth baptizing all nations in the name of the Father, Son & Holy Spirit. It says nothing about forcing them to believe without giving them reasons why or answers for their doubts. When we talked about creating a Walking in Faith section on the website, a few people wanted to update their articles. I decided it was an opportunity to share that information on why I believe.

One of my favorite passages in the New Testament is Paul's discussion of the resurrection in 1 Cor. 15. Verses 14 & 17 echoed my thoughts in the early days:

¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised, *our preaching is useless and so is your faith.*

¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, *your faith is futile;*

That pretty much summed it up. In my original article I said I always wondered if 2000 years of worship by zillions of people was just one huge cosmic joke. What if Jesus just passed out on the cross & revived in the tomb? We'd be believing in a lie. Now I have an answer to that doubt & it no longer bothers me. Perhaps, the answer will interest you as well.

I've boiled the information down to a question or doubt & the answer that worked for me. Many of the questions here are things that bothered me for many years. Some I just wanted to know the answer to after I came across them. The answers are predominantly from the writings of Lee Strobel in his books *Case for Christ*, *Case for Faith*, *Case for a Creator* & *Case for the Real Jesus* with a few bible verses & some of my own comments sprinkled in. When I started reading Strobel, I just did not want to waste my time on *Case for Christ*, but it has changed my life. Without God's grace bringing Strobel's writings into my life, I would still be a hardened skeptic.

How do we know Jesus was a real person & not just a myth?

His crucifixion is attested to outside the Bible by Tacitus, Josephus & Pliny the Younger. All were non-Christians writing in the 1st & early 2nd centuries AD.

How do we know the resurrection story was not a borrowed myth?

The timing is wrong. Earlier religions didn't have a resurrection story. They had dying & rising stories to explain fall & spring & the yearly crop cycle. Religions that had really similar stories didn't appear till well after the crucifixion.

How can we trust the Bible after all that copying & translating over the years?

Modern bibles all go back to the earliest Greek & Hebrew text. Not the umpteenth previous translation. More than 5000 early copies of Greek New Testaments exist, many more than any other ancient document.

Comparisons can be made across copies & languages.

Most variations are minor changes in word order & grammatical mistakes like incorrect use of a vs. an. There are very few real variations across 5000+ copies & none that affect essential facts or beliefs.

How can we trust the resurrection stories after all these years?

1 Cor. 15:3-7 is thought by some to be a creed that dates to within 2-8 years of the crucifixion:

³ For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

It appeared too soon for a legend to appear. Legends take many years to develop, because the first & secondhand eyewitnesses have to die off first before the truth can be distorted.

The stories include embarrassing details for the disciples like Peter's denial of Christ. Story tellers don't lie to make themselves look bad.

Women find the empty tomb on Easter morning, but weren't allowed as legal witnesses in court at that point in time, so that's a major credibility problem.

You just wouldn't make up those kinds of embarrassing details.

How do we know Jesus wasn't just a really good man, a teacher?

Alternatively why do we think he thought he was somehow divine?

Jesus often referred to himself as the Son of Man which is a reference to the Messiah from Daniel 7:13:

"In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence.

Also called himself the Son of God in John 3:16-17 & in Luke 22:70 & as the Messiah in John 4:25-26.

Isaiah 7:14 says the Messiah will be called Immanuel which literally means God with us.

The other proof is the Resurrection assuming you can get to the point that you accept it as fact.

How do we know it was really Jesus on the cross?

How do we know they didn't just look for his body in the wrong tomb?

Enemy attestation. Jewish authorities wanted to suppress Christianity. They didn't argue it wasn't him or that the body was still in the tomb. They argued about what happened to the body, so the tomb was really empty. The Talmud doesn't deny what Jesus did. It proposes he was a magician or sorcerer to explain how he did it. If someone else had died in Jesus' place & then Jesus appeared alive to the disciples, Jesus wouldn't have had the wounds from his execution. Jesus asked Thomas & the others to examine those wounds.

How do we know the disciples weren't lying about the resurrection?

They died for their beliefs, for proclaiming the Resurrection of Jesus. Fanatics do sometimes die for their beliefs, but the disciples were in a unique position to really know whether or not they were telling the truth. They would not have died for a belief they knew was false. Many today would lie about what they believed to avoid death. The disciples didn't do that. They 100% believed they had seen Jesus alive after the crucifixion & that life after death was possible.

How do we know the disciples weren't hallucinating?

The resurrected Jesus appeared to groups of people several times. Hallucinations are an individual experience that cannot be shared among groups anymore than 2 people can go to sleep & share the same dream. Plus there would still have been a body in the tomb.

How do we know the disciples weren't hypnotized?

Mass hypnosis doesn't work well with large crowds due to some being skeptical & thus hard to hypnotize. Again Jesus appeared to large groups & also there would still have been a body in the tomb.

How do we know Jesus didn't pass out on the cross, revive in the tomb & inspire the disciples?

Passing out on the cross during crucifixion is like passing out underwater. When the victim is placed on a cross, the weight of the body dislocates the shoulders & the body is locked into an inhaled position. Only pushing up with the legs allows the victim to exhale & get another breath. Exhaustion leads to suffocation. Passing out just brings death more quickly. Jesus died first. He was speared to make sure he was dead. Guards broke the legs of the other 2 to prevent breathing & speed up their deaths. Guards died if the victim survived, so they waited till the other 2 suffocated before taking them & Jesus down. Jesus was long gone.

How can anyone seriously believe that the Resurrection really happened?

Boils down to the deaths of the disciples & the fact that suffocation ensured Jesus' death on the cross if he passed out. The disciples believed in his resurrection or they wouldn't have died for it. Jesus couldn't have passed out & survived. Even if he could have somehow survived, he would have suffered major blood loss from the flogging & the crucifixion & then laid in a tomb for 2 days with no medical attention, food or even water. It's hard to believe he could walk let alone inspire anyone to believe he had "conquered" death.

What's the simplest case for the Resurrection?

The 4 E's of Lee Strobel: Execution, Early Accounts, Empty Tomb, Eyewitnesses.

Execution of Jesus led to Early Accounts of his Empty Tomb & Eyewitnesses of the risen Jesus.

Execution — Christ was executed & died. 1st century historians Josephus & Tacitus confirm it.

Early Accounts — Date to within 2-8 years of the crucifixion ruling out legends developing over time.

Empty Tomb — Really empty. No one denied it, even though, many wanted to discredit Christianity. Instead they argued about why it was empty.

Eyewitnesses — Eyewitnesses such as the disciples, James the brother of Jesus & the apostle Paul went to their deaths for proclaiming that they had seen the risen Christ.

How can you prove that God exists?

Case for Christ says the Resurrection. No one could come back from the dead without divine help.

Another answer, my answer, is prayer. Prayers answered in unlikely coincidental ways will make you believe God's out there listening to you. Only those willing to try it can ever experience the truth of it, though.

Doesn't Science pretty much show that Religion is just a refuge for the old, the weak & the superstitious? You have to take everything on faith!

Scientists rely on faith all the time till they prove their hypotheses.

One of Einstein's theories wasn't proven till decades after his death.

Faith based on facts can stand up to testing.

The historical fact of the Resurrection was the central proclamation of the early Church.

Doesn't Science disprove God's existence?

On the contrary, many scientists believe that God's existence is supported by science.

Cosmologists say the universe started with the Big Bang due to an unknown Big Cause.

In Genesis God said let there be light, there was & it was good. More poetic with a cause, but not so different.

Biologists admit DNA is such a complex combination of amino acids that odds are against it forming from random chance & compare the complexity of the genetic code to that of computer programming.

Astronomers say the chances of forming a habitable planet like the Earth are actually incredibly small. Most stars are deadly to planets due to high radiation or gravitational forces. The planet can't be a gaseous giant & must be at the right distance to have a habitable temperature. Some think random chance is a poor explanation.

Physicists admit that slight deviations in the gravitational constant & other physical constants would have ruled out the formation of the universe & life as we know it. Again random chance seems to be a poor explanation.

What about Evolution? Didn't evolution prove we don't need God?

If God could create a universe with zillions of galaxies, stars & planets, why not evolution?

Evolution does explain why one species like poisonous tree frogs survive while another species goes extinct.

It can't explain how life got started from inert chemicals. You can't stir up a bunch of lifeless chemicals & form a human or even an amoeba.

Don't the bad things that happen in the world prove God doesn't exist?

No, if anything they'd prove the existence of evil or Satan.

Good coming from bad would be a sign of God's handiwork.

Sometimes too things that seem bad are really good in the fullness of time.

Sometimes the bad things are simply the result of our own inappropriate actions & we learn lessons.

Sometimes the things we do are just mean. We are given free will, but we don't always use it for good.

These questions & answers might not convince you to believe. In the beginning it was more like they caused me to doubt my doubts & made me want to learn more. With time that led to faith. I still can't claim that I've eliminated all doubt from my life. I don't think anyone can, but I can claim that some doubts have been totally eliminated by just finding the right answers. If you want to know more, I highly recommend Lee Strobel's *Case for Christ* or his newer *Case for the Real Jesus*. They are very interesting reading & that's coming from someone who started reading them as a hardened skeptic. If you have any questions or comments, you can email me at mattrhodes@cranburypres.org. I'm one of the people that helps with the church website.

May the Lord always bless you with help for your doubts.

*Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.
For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks the door will be opened.*

Matthew 7:7-8