

Why Three Brilliant Atheists Became Christians

/ RONALD CRAM



“Why would respected intellectuals with firm atheist convictions make a radical change, not just to vague belief in a mind behind the universe, but to costly Christian commitment? Ronald Cram’s account is fascinating, giving insight into the thought processes of two eminent scientists and a leading journalist. It seems to me accurate, even scholarly within the limits of a short booklet. I thoroughly recommend it.”

Dr. Peter Clarke

Neuroscience Dept. University of Lausanne, Switzerland

“In this interesting booklet, Ron Cram addresses the loss of faith in university students by presenting the personal witness and journey of a well-known geneticist, an astronomer and a noted author/journalist on their path of faith to Christ.”

Moorad Alexanian, Professor Physics

University of North Carolina, Wilmington

“Moving stories that contradict the idea that belief is a function of conditioning.”

Professor Sir Brian Heap

Cambridge University, UK

“I think Ron Cram’s overall story on Allan Sandage is fair to him and to his beliefs. While I am not a Christian, I sometimes open my public talks with a quote from Genesis: ‘In the beginning...’ due to the uncanny resemblance between modern cosmology and Genesis.”

Jeremiah Ostriker, Professor of Astrophysics

Princeton University, New Jersey

“What do a brilliant research astrophysicist, a world leading scientist and a globally famous investigative journalist have in common? Each of them was an atheist who critically examined the claims of Christianity. On researching the evidence about Jesus, each became convinced of the truth of Christianity and turned their lives 180 degrees. Read their amazing stories here and make up your own mind about their conclusions.”

Bob White, FRS, Professor of Geophysics

Cambridge University, UK and Director of the Faraday Institute for Science and Religion

“The different ways in which Francis Collins, Allan Sandage and Lee Strobel came to begin their spiritual journeys is described with great clarity and insight in this admirable wee booklet. I commend it with great enthusiasm to anyone who wants to ask with an open mind the big questions:

Does God exist? Is Jesus God? What is my purpose in life?”

Professor Eric Priest, FRS

Mathematics Institute University of St. Andrews, UK

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Introduction

The little booklet may change your life. It encourages you to ask the most important questions in life: “Does God exist?” “Did He come to earth in the person of Jesus Christ?” “Is Christianity true?”

This booklet tells the story of three famous men, all atheists, who asked these same questions in their spiritual quests.

My purpose is to encourage you to begin your own spiritual quest, to seek the truth. To be an honest seeker is a not easy, but it is a worthwhile challenge.

This booklet is also for a second group of people: Christians who doubt their faith, as often happens when attending university.

Would you agree the university campus is typically unfriendly toward Christianity? It is well known that the faith of students raised in Christian homes is challenged when they attend college. Some even become convinced Christianity is not intellectually viable and turn away from the faith.

One reason for this is a built-in bias. State governments run many universities and so course work is not intended to strengthen Christian faith. Christian professors are slow to draw attention to facts supporting Christianity because they may be accused of attempting to “establish religion” and it could draw a lawsuit. But atheist professors are very comfortable advocating their worldview. As a result, students get a one-sided and biased view of the evidence. The university is supposed to be an open marketplace of ideas, but that ideal has been lost.

In *The Case for Christ*, Lee Strobel wrote:

If you were selected for the jury in a real trial, you would be asked to affirm up front that you haven’t formed any preconceptions about the case. You would be required to vow that you would be open-minded and fair, drawing your conclusions based on the weight of the facts and not on your whims or prejudices. You would be urged to thoughtfully consider the credibility of the witnesses, carefully sift the testimony, and vigorously subject the evidence to your common sense and logic.

I ask the same as you read this booklet describing the conversion to Christ of three leading intellectuals: **Francis Collins, Allan Sandage and Lee Strobel**. I hope you enjoy reading them and check out the scientific, philosophical, and historical evidences for yourself.

Ronald Cram

Conversion of Francis Collins

“Doctor, what do you believe?”

That simple question changed the life of Dr. Francis Collins. It sent him on a spiritual quest to find the answer. The quest ended when he became a follower of Jesus Christ.

Francis Collins is a medical doctor and geneticist best known for leading the Human Genome Project that mapped the entire human genome. He is currently the Director of the National Institutes of Health.

Why did this simple question have such an impact on Francis Collins? What did he learn on his spiritual journey that caused him to follow Jesus Christ?

Education and Religious Training

Francis Collins’s childhood was somewhat unconventional. Born in 1950, his parents, both Yale University graduates, raised him on a ninety-five-acre dirt farm in Shenandoah Valley in Virginia. The family chose not to employ farm machinery. They had no running water. One might think that Collins grew up underprivileged, but he didn’t think so.

Francis’s mother homeschooled him and his older brother for several years. Rather than use a structured course of study like in a typical classroom, the boys’ parents created a remarkable and stimulating mix of experiences and opportunities. The boys learned for the love of learning. Collins grew to love mathematics.

His father taught drama at a local women’s college. He recruited local tradesmen to play the male roles. Francis’s father and mother founded a summer theater near the farmhouse. The Oak Grove Theater continues to produce plays today.

Religion was not important in the Collins home. Francis was vaguely aware of the concept of God. When he was nine years old, he made a bargain with God. He promised God that if the Saturday night theater performance and music party were not rained out, then he would never smoke cigarettes. The rains stayed away and Collins never picked up cigarettes.

At the age of ten, Collins attended public school. At the age of sixteen, he began studies at University of Virginia, majoring in chemistry and looking forward to a career in science. By this time, he had become an agnostic. Some people become agnostics after seriously studying the evidence, but some are agnostic because it is easier and more

comfortable not to think about the possibility of God, who may make demands on them. Collins was definitely in the second group. It was not so much that he didn't know if God existed; rather, he just didn't want to know.

By the age of twenty-two, Collins was married and a father to a bright young daughter. About to complete his PhD in physical chemistry from Yale University, a desire to contribute something to humanity awoke in him. He also questioned if he was fit for a life of independent research. He applied to medical school and attended the University of North Carolina.

Collins loved the intellectual stimulation of medical school. Here he was introduced to medical genetics. He learned how glitches in the mechanism for copying DNA could lead to rare diseases like sickle cell anemia and Down syndrome. At times the glitch was as subtle as a single wrong letter. This kindled his love for genetics.

The Turning Point

During his third year of medical school, Collins began treating patients. The intimate discussions and relationships that formed between doctor and patient—virtual strangers—somewhat overwhelmed Collins. At times he found it difficult to maintain the professional distance and lack of emotional involvement his teachers expected.

One thing stood out to Collins: the large number of people whose faith helped them deal with their severe illnesses. Though they experienced terrible suffering, they possessed a strong reassurance of ultimate peace. If faith was just a cultural tradition, why weren't these people shaking their fists at God? Blaming Him for their suffering? Instead, they sought Him and found comfort. Collins concluded that if faith were a psychological crutch, it must be a very powerful one.

An older woman in severe pain with untreatable angina had discussed many topics with Collins, including life, death, and her Christian beliefs. Then she asked the question that shook his world: "Doctor, what do you believe?"

It was a fair question. She had shared her beliefs. Why not ask about his? Yet the question stunned Collins. He felt his face flush as he stammered, "I'm not really sure."

Her obvious surprise made him realize he had been running from the question his entire life. He had never seriously considered the evidence for or against belief in God. The conversation haunted him. Did he not consider himself a scientist? Does a scientist draw conclusions without looking at the data? Could there be a more important question than "Is there a God?" He later wrote:

And yet there I found myself, with a combination of willful blindness and something that could only be properly described as arrogance, having avoided any serious consideration that God might be a real possibility. Suddenly all my arguments seemed very thin, and I had the sensation that the ice under my feet was cracking.¹

Collins comforted himself with the idea a full investigation would “reaffirm my atheism.”

The Quest for Truth

Collins found the sacred texts of world’s major religions to be too difficult to read, so he read the “Cliff’s Notes” versions. But this quick survey of major religions left him confused. He found no reason to be drawn to one religion over another until he visited a Methodist minister who advised him to read a small book titled *Mere Christianity*, by C. S. Lewis.

I realized that all of my own constructs against the plausibility of faith were those of a schoolboy. Clearly I would need to start with a clean slate to consider this most important of all human questions. Lewis seemed to know all of my objections, sometimes even before I had quite formulated them. He invariably addressed them within a page or two. When I learned subsequently that Lewis had himself been an atheist, who had set out to disprove faith on the basis of logical argument, I recognized how he could be so insightful about my path. It had been his path as well.²

The argument from the moral law captured Collins. The moral law includes altruism and selfless love, called by the Greek word *agape* (pronounced ah-GAH-pay).

Agape, or selfless altruism, presents a major challenge for the evolutionist. It is quite frankly a scandal to reductionist reasoning. It cannot be accounted for by the drive of individual selfish genes to perpetuate themselves. Quite the contrary: it may lead humans to make sacrifices that lead to great personal suffering, injury, or death, without any evidence of benefit. And yet, if we carefully examine that inner voice we sometimes call conscience, the motivation to practice this kind of love exists within all of us, despite our frequent efforts to ignore it.³

Collins points to one particular example of altruism, Wesley Autry. An African American construction worker, Autry was standing on the subway platform in New York City, when next to him a young graduate student went into an epileptic seizure and fell onto the tracks in front of an oncoming train. Amazingly, Wesley jumped down onto the tracks, pulled the young man, still having the seizure, into the small space between the

tracks and lay on top as the train rolled over both of them. Miraculously, they survived. This was radical altruism. These two had never met and had little in common.

Collins comments:

Evolution would say, “Wesley, what were you thinking? Talk about ruining your reproductive fitness opportunities!” This is a scandal, isn’t it? Think about that. Again, I’m not offering you a proof, but I do think when people try to argue that morality can be fully explained on evolutionary grounds, that’s a bit too easy. That’s a bit too much of a just so story. Perhaps indeed there is another answer.⁴

Encountering this argument at the age of twenty-six stunned Collins. He describes it as the bright white light of moral law shining into the recesses of his childish atheism. Is it proof of God’s existence? Perhaps not, but it is certainly strong evidence for it. Faith now seemed more reasonable than unbelief.

Collins began this intellectual exploration expecting to confirm his atheism. Instead, evidence of a moral God who demanded goodness in His creatures confronted Collins. He became aware of his own moral imperfections. He wrote in *The Language of God*:

The gradual dawning of my realization of God’s plausible existence brought conflicted feelings: comfort at the breadth and depth of the existence of such a Mind, and yet profound dismay at the realization of my own imperfections when viewed in His light.⁵

Collins wanted to build a bridge toward God, but he found it impossible.

I began to be increasingly aware of my own inability to do the right thing, even for a day. I could generate lots of excuses, but when I was really honest with myself, pride, apathy, and anger were regularly winning my internal battles. I had never really thought of applying the word “sinner” to myself before, but now it was painfully obvious that this old-fashioned word, one from which I had previously recoiled because it seemed coarse and judgmental, fit quite accurately.⁶

Collins Finds Jesus Christ

Into this gloom came the person of Jesus Christ. Collins recalled his days as a boy thinking of Jesus Christ as a myth, fairy tale, or bedtime story. As he read for the first time the accounts of Jesus’s life, the Gospels did not read like fairy tales. Here was a man who not only claimed to know God but claimed to be God. Collins was struck by the

Jesus described in the Gospels—humble and loving, wise and bold. Then he read the claim that Jesus rose from the dead, a difficult claim for a scientific mind. On the other hand, if he was the Son of God on earth as claimed, Jesus could suspend the laws of nature if necessary. Collins wrote:

So I became convinced that God’s arrival on earth in the person of Jesus Christ could serve a divine purpose. But did this mesh with history? The scientist in me refused to go any further along this path toward Christian belief, no matter how appealing, if the biblical writings about Christ turned out to be myth, or, worse yet, a hoax. But the more I read of biblical and non-biblical accounts of events in the first century Palestine, the more amazed I was at the historical evidence for the existence of Jesus Christ. . . . One scholar has written, “The historicity of Christ is as axiomatic for an unbiased historian as the historicity of Julius Caesar” [quoting F.F. Bruce].⁷

Jesus taught the Golden Rule saying “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” He raised ethical standards with his formulaic statements “You have heard it said... but I tell you...” And Jesus taught that men should obey God from the heart, not just outwardly. His teachings were new and revolutionary. Collins began to wonder if maybe Christ was a great spiritual teacher and nothing more? One paragraph by C. S. Lewis convinced Collins that was not true:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: “I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.” That is one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with a man who says He is a poached egg – or else He would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.⁸

Collins immediately realized that Lewis was right. He had been on this journey for two years, and a full year had passed since he had become convinced God existed. It was time for him to make a decision. One morning in the Cascade Mountains after enjoying the beauty of God’s creation the previous day, he surrendered to Jesus.

Dealing with Doubt

After deciding to follow Christ, the doubts did not disappear immediately. Collins wondered if perhaps humans have a deep-seated need to believe in something outside of themselves.

Humans experience moments of transcendent joy, awe, or wonder. Is this what causes people to seek after a god? The atheist view is that such longings are not to be trusted, and translating sensations of awe into belief in God is nothing more than wishful thinking.

C. S. Lewis again guided Collins on this question. Lewis essentially asked what kind of god would wishful thinking create? Would it not be a god who allows us to indulge our pleasures and seek our own gain? Indeed, such religions have existed in history—worship complete with temple prostitutes, feasts, and orgies. But this is not the God of the Bible—strong evidence that God and Jesus are not inventions of human imagination.

Another doubt that bothered Collins centered on the harm done in the name of religion. How could he join a group that had perpetuated evil?

Collins found two answers to this. First, the Christian church and other religions have done a great deal of good for mankind, too. Christian leaders like William Wilberforce opposed and finally abolished the slave trade in England. Christian abolitionists, including Abraham Lincoln, opposed and defeated slavery in the United States. Ultimately Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. led the movement to achieve full civil rights for all in the U.S. Protestants, Catholics and other religions founded many hospitals all over the world. Second, all human beings fall short of God's moral laws—even church leaders. Voltaire wrote, "Is it any wonder that there are atheists in the world, when the church behaves so abominably?" This is sad but humans are imperfect. When the church misbehaves, they stray from the teachings of Jesus just as followers of peaceful Hinduism and Buddhism occasionally engage in violence.

However, Collins realized the worst atrocities were committed by totalitarian and anti-religious governments, such as quasi-pagan Nazism and the atheistic Marxism of Lenin, Stalin and Mao.

Hitler and Lenin both hid their hatred of Christianity so they could gain and consolidate power. Nuremberg trial documents show the Nazi Master Plan to persecute Christians.⁹ Lenin and Stalin were even more brutal in their attempts to eradicate Christianity. The League of Militant Atheists dynamited thousands of churches and killed and imprisoned millions of Christians.

Pointers to God

In 2009, Collins delivered a speech at Veritas Forum at Caltech. In the speech, he outlined several “pointers to God,” summarized below:

1. **There is something instead of nothing.** There’s no reason that should be.
2. **The unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics.** This phrase is from Eugene Wigner, the Nobel laureate in physics. A theory that is correct often turns out to be simple and beautiful. But why should this be? Why should mathematics be so unreasonably effective in describing nature?
3. **The big bang.** This presents a difficulty because our science cannot look back beyond that point, and it seems that something came out of nothing. Nature isn’t supposed to allow something to come out of nothing. So if nature is not able to create itself, how did the universe get here? We can’t postulate that it was created by some natural force, because then we must ask, what created that natural force? We haven’t solved the problem. So it seems the only plausible explanation is that some supernatural force must have done the creating.
4. **The precise tuning of the physical constants of the universe.** Fifteen physical constants have values that current theory is unable to predict. They are givens: they simply have the value they have. This list includes the strength of the weak and strong nuclear forces, various parameters associated with electromagnetism, and the force of gravity. The chance all of these would take on the values necessary to result in a stable universe is infinitely small. If gravity were about one part per ten billion weaker or stronger than it actually is after the big bang, then our universe would have expanded too quickly to form stars and planets, or it would not have expanded quickly enough and would have collapsed on itself.
5. **Moral law.** A prime example of altruism is Wesley Autry, the African American construction worker who risked his life to save someone he didn’t know. This is not evolutionary behavior and points us to higher moral law.¹⁰

Collins is convinced a war between science and faith is unnecessary. He wrote:

Science is not threatened by God; it is enhanced. God is most certainly not threatened by science; He made it all possible. So let us seek to reclaim the solid ground of an intellectually and spiritually satisfying synthesis of all great truths.

Collins did not feel it necessary to reject evolutionary biology to become a Christian. He prefers the term “evolutionary creation” over the older term “theistic evolution.” Collins founded The BioLogos Foundation to support his views.

Questions to Consider and Discuss

1. Why did Francis Collins avoid the question of God existence? Was his attitude scientific?
2. How does altruism relate to the Moral Law?
3. Why did Collins find it impossible to build a bridge to God?
4. Is it necessary to reject evolutionary biology to become a Christian?
5. After becoming a follower of Jesus, how did Collins deal with doubt?

Allan Sandage's Discovery

So the big bang was supernatural, God's moment of creation . . . but which God?

This thought occurred to astronomer Allan Sandage because of a scientific discovery he made. And the thought compelled him on a spiritual journey resulting in his decision to follow Jesus.

This is a surprising story. One of the most famous astronomers of his day, Sandage is known as the father of observational cosmology. He is the author of more than 500 science papers, and the winner of numerous science awards, including the Gruber Prize in Cosmology.

What convinced Sandage the big bang was a supernatural event? Was Sandage's science sound? Did others confirm his discovery? What convinced Sandage that Jesus is the God of creation?

Family, Education, and Religious Training

Although Sandage's parents were members of the Reorganized Church of Latter Day Saints (RLDS, an offshoot of the Mormon church), religion never played a large role in Sandage's life. From a young age, he devoted his life to science. After looking through the telescope belonging to a friend, Allan knew he wanted to be an astronomer.

He started college at Miami University (Miami of Ohio) when his father was a professor there. World War II interrupted his education, and he spent eighteen months in the Navy, repairing radios and radar. After the war, Sandage resumed his education and graduated from the University of Illinois in 1948, with a dual major in physics and mathematics, and a minor in philosophy. He did it all while volunteering at the university observatory. By then Sandage was firmly convinced that science did not need God.

As a graduate student at California Institute of Technology (Caltech), where he received his PhD in astronomy in 1953, Sandage quickly gained recognition for his skills as an observer. In 1952 he became a graduate assistant to Edwin Hubble (the Hubble Space Telescope was named after him). Soon afterward, Hubble had a heart attack. At twenty-six years of age, Sandage became Hubble's successor. After dreaming of being an astronomer since he was eight years old, he now had "the best astronomical job in the world."

Before exploring Sandage's contributions to science and how they thrust him on a spiritual journey, it is important to understand some of the scientific models and discoveries that led to Sandage's important discovery.

The Science of Cosmology

Cosmology seeks to understand the origin, evolution, and fate of the universe. Several theories or models have been proposed.

At the start of the twentieth century, most astronomers believed the universe had always existed and was unchanging, called the static universe theory. This model became commonly accepted because of the nineteenth century concept of the conservation of energy (energy is neither created nor destroyed). If true, then one would expect the universe to be eternal and unchanging.

Albert Einstein published his theory of general relativity, a theory of cosmic gravity, in 1915. This new theory was very exciting, but all the implications of the theory were not readily apparent—not even to Einstein.

Years later, based on general relativity, physicists theorized that the universe was either contracting or expanding. In 1927, Georges Lemaître, a Catholic priest and professor of physics, wrote a paper on this subject. Lemaître theorized that the universe was not static but was actually expanding, that galaxies were moving away from one another. Albert Einstein did not like the notion. After hearing Lemaître present his theory, Einstein said, “Your math is good, but your physics is abominable.”

In 1929, while working at the Mt. Wilson observatory, Edwin Hubble measured the red shift of distant galaxies and confirmed Lemaître’s theory that galaxies were moving away from one another and the universe was expanding. This discovery, known as the Hubble Flow, made both Hubble and Lemaître famous.

In 1931, Lemaître wrote a new paper. In it he stated that if the universe is expanding now, then it had expanded in the past. So at some point, the universe must have had a starting point. Lemaître’s paper discussed the “primeval atom” as “the Cosmic egg that exploded at the moment of creation.” So space, time, matter, and energy all began at the big bang.

Science is the study of cause and effect. Every effect has a cause. It is the job of science to determine the cause. What cause was sufficient to bring the universe into existence?

The first sentence in the Bible is “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Finding scientific support for the Bible made scientists uncomfortable, and, therefore, many did not immediately accept this new theory.

NASA scientist Robert Jastrow, an agnostic astronomer and physicist, wrote the book *God and the Astronomers*, in which he quotes many scientists expressing their

discomfort with the big bang theory. British physicist Arthur Eddington wrote, “Philosophically, the notion of a beginning of the present order of Nature is repugnant to me. . . . I should like to find a genuine loophole.” German chemist Walter Nernst wrote, “To deny the infinite duration of time would be to betray the very foundations of science.” Jastrow even quoted Sandage when he was still an atheist: “It is such a strange conclusion... it cannot really be true.”

Jastrow seemed amused by the irritation of his fellow scientists. Jastrow wrote:

Theologians generally are delighted with the proof that the Universe had a beginning, but astronomers are curiously upset. Their reactions provide an increasing demonstration of the response of the scientific mind—supposedly a very objective mind—when evidence uncovered by science itself leads to a conflict with the articles of faith in our profession. It turns out the scientist behaves the way the rest of us do when our beliefs are in conflict with the evidence. We become irritated, we pretend the conflict does not exist, or we paper over it with meaningless phrases.¹

Jastrow explained that the main reason many scientists found the big bang distasteful was because it seemed too religious, to clearly imply the big bang was the moment of creation—an act of God. Scientists wanted to find a way to describe the universe without pointing to God. They wanted the universe to be, in some sense, eternal.

In 1948 a brilliant astrophysicist named Fred Hoyle and his fellow researchers came up with a new theory to attempt to explain how the universe can be expanding and still eternal. They called this the Steady State theory. Instead of one creation event, they theorized many creation events happening all the time within a “creation field.” As the galaxies moved away from one another, new galaxies formed, keeping the universe in a “steady state”—like a river—flowing but still unchanging. This theory garnered interest for a while, because early calculations for the big bang were not completely satisfying.

Years later, when asked about the Steady State Theory, Sandage replied:

It was clear to me from the beginning that steady state was wrong. There was never a question in my mind, because ... all galaxies were the same age in their oldest stellar content. And that could not be in a steady state universe.²

Researchers theorized that if the big bang were true, leftover background radiation from the big bang should still be observable throughout the universe. As they prepared to look for this radiation, two researchers for Bell Labs discovered it by accident. Arno Penzias and Robert Woodrow Wilson were working on a new microwave communication device. As they pointed the device to the sky in 1964, they detected static. At first they were disappointed and thought something was wrong with their instrument. This static

turned out to be the CMB radiation that confirmed the big bang theory. Penzias and Wilson became famous for the discovery, and in 1978 they were awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics.

After the discovery of the CMB radiation, even Hoyle expressed doubts about the Steady State theory (although he would trot out a modified version in 1993). Scientists began looking for another theory, a theory that would be compatible with the big bang but would also remove any need for God as Creator.

Another important question arose: How would the universe end? One theory is that eventually gravity will take over and stop the expansion of the universe. Like throwing a ball up in to the air, at some point gravity begins to win: the ball slows its ascent, stops, and begins to fall. If the same dynamics apply to the expansion of the universe, eventually gravity will take over: expansion will slow, reverse direction, then begin to contract on itself. If this theory were true, the universe would end in a “big crunch.”

At this point, scientists revived a theory from the 1930s. They hypothesized that perhaps the universe is eternal but always exists in either the expansion or contraction phase. The entire cycle is a big bang, followed by a big crunch, followed immediately by another big bang. Think of the big bang as an implosion. This Cyclic Model is sometimes called the big bounce. Researchers said this can go on forever; therefore, the universe really is eternal and does not need a First Cause or Creator God.

The Cyclic Model was first proposed in the 1920s. Richard Tolman wrote an influential book in which he stated that the Cyclic Model conflicts with the classical view of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, the law that says entropy can only increase, but Tolman said it might be possible under the Theory of Relativity if gravitational field energy was seen as an external and infinite source of energy.³ It is unclear how gravitational field energy could ever be considered external or infinite, but the Cyclic Model became a common view of cosmology from the 1930s to the 1980s. The model was very popular among scientists apparently because it did not require a Creator; the view was close to a theological position. Sandage fully embraced the Cyclic Model.

The Key Discovery

In 1974 Allan Sandage and James Gunn (another Caltech astronomer) working independently both announced in the same week that the universe was infinite, would not collapse on itself, and therefore the Cyclic Model was wrong. Time magazine reported:

Last week, after years of study and calculation, two respected California astronomers, Allan Sandage and James Gunn, made separate but similar announcements: the universe will continue to expand forever.⁴

The article mentions that theories of a closed universe that would cycle or oscillate are seriously undermined. Sandage is quoted saying “It’s a terrible surprise.” Gunn remarks that arguments for a closed universe that would collapse on itself were “almost theological in nature.” When Time magazine published the startling news, the scientific community initially resisted the conclusion, possibly because of the theological implications.

James Gunn and Beatrice Tinsley published a 1975 paper in Nature titled “An Accelerating Universe,” which claimed the expansion of the universe is not decelerating as everyone had assumed; rather, it is accelerating. In 1998, three scientists confirmed this viewpoint. These men, Saul Perlmutter, Brian Schmidt, Adam Riess, eventually won the 2011 Nobel Prize in Physics for demonstrating the expansion of the universe is accelerating and therefore will continue to expand forever. By 2011, Sandage’s shocking idea had become the majority opinion in cosmology.

In 1985 Sandage publicly discussed the theological implications of his findings at a conference on science and faith held in Dallas. He observed that a one-shot universe:

... comes close to saying that this universe was created. It is unique . . . Here is evidence for what can only be described as a supernatural event. There is no way to predict this in physics as we know it. It is truly supernatural, that is, outside our understanding of the natural order of things, and by this definition a miracle.⁵

Sandage asserted that the scientist cannot affirm religious belief. “Knowledge of the creation is not knowledge of the creator.” Also, “Astronomers may have found the first effect, but not necessarily thereby the first cause sought by [theologians] Anselm and Aquinas.”⁶

Sandage appeared to be saying that knowledge of creation does not mean we know much about the nature and identity of the creator. Said another way, the big bang tells us God exists but does not tell us which God.

Spiritual Journey

Whether he realized it or not, from 1974 to 1976, Allan Sandage was on a spiritual journey. His science had led him to the conclusion that the big bang was a singular event and therefore a supernatural event. What happened before the big bang is not a question science can answer. Science must stop at the point where reason cannot be applied. Sandage read many books during this spiritual journey, books by both Christian and non-Christian authors, works from modern and medieval times.

We find no evidence Sandage invested much time investigating the Reorganized Church of Latter Day Saints, his parents' church. He seemed to close the book on RLDS at a young age.

What really captured Sandage was the question of purpose: Why does the universe exist? He felt the question was outside the realm of science, but he still wanted to know. The question gnawed at Sandage's soul.

During this time, Sandage read widely. One of his favorite books was *The Outsider* by Colin Wilson, a book that argues that certain men who "see too much and too deep" and desire to live life abundantly are often alienated from the world.

Many of his fellow astronomers were not interested in questions such as Why does the universe exist? or What is life's purpose? *The Outsider* described men, one of whom was Friedrich Nietzsche, who asked these questions. Nietzsche was an atheist who founded the idea of nihilism, the philosophy that life is without meaning, purpose, or intrinsic value - the logical outcome of atheism. Sandage could not accept nihilism:

[T]o end up like Nietzsche, sitting by a window for seven years rocking, not talking to anybody because of his nihilism, is not the way—even if we don't know the path. Nihilism finally ends up in insanity, at least in Nietzsche's case in Basel. To avoid that I'm quite willing to believe there is a purpose. But it is a belief . . . I am not willing to be a Nietzsche nihilist, because I think that is much more pointless.⁷

Sandage also wrote, "If the world must simply be understood by a materialistic reductionist nihilism, it would make no sense at all." Sandage came to believe the covering theory for the whole of the mystery is much more easily explained by a miraculous God than by nothing.

Another major question is "How much proof is enough?" No one can be expected to believe the unreasonable. The big bang had made belief in God reasonable, but is it possible to get absolute proof? If Christianity is proven conclusively, where does faith come in?

The Choice to Believe

Sandage described his spiritual journey as "the abyss of reason," which led him to bow "before the mystery." The seventeenth-century mathematician, physicist, and Catholic philosopher Blaise Pascal particularly interested Sandage. As a mathematician, Pascal had done some early thinking on probability theory. Pascal explained his own choice to believe in God based on probability, later known as Pascal's Wager.

Pascal advised people who were struggling with doubt and held hostage by reason not to concentrate on multiplying proofs of God's existence. Absolute proof is probably not possible or even desirable. Instead, he recommended that because we all have to make some choice in this regard (to avoid thinking about God is a choice), we should weigh the potential gains and losses, and wager that God exists. There is everything to gain and nothing to lose. The act of choosing faith will open your eyes to see truth in a new light.

So if the answer is yes there is a miraculous God, which God? Sandage answered: "The nature of God is not to be found within any part of the findings of science. For that, one must turn to the Scriptures." In reading the Bible, Sandage found peace. Hebrews 11:1 was especially important in defining faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." This made sense to Sandage.

Sandage's reason for believing before all evidence was in was akin to accepting Euclid's geometric postulates. Sandage said, "The mathematician never asks for the reality of these postulates. He begins with them. He accepts the postulates and sees what follows from that."⁸

Sandage took the leap of faith in 1976 and became a follower of Jesus Christ.

Finding Purpose after Believing

Scientists are trained to be skeptical and not to jump to conclusions, so it is not surprising Sandage did not immediately go public with his decision to follow Christ. He struggled with doubt and wanted to be as certain as possible that Christianity was true and real before making any public statements about his faith.

Following Christ entailed a different mind-set for Sandage. The life of faith seemed to require living with mystery.

I don't know that God exists in the same way I know there are galaxies and planets out there; or in the same way I know what makes the sun shine. I'm still not as convinced as I am about the charge of the electron.⁹

Sandage followed Pascal's additional remedy for doubt: to learn from those who were once bound like you and who now wager all they have. Sandage joined a conservative, Bible-believing church. He met dedicated Christians he admired for their scientific contributions. Sandage found it confirming that it was possible to do serious science and be a Christian. These believing scientists helped Sandage understand purpose. "It was so simple. The answer struck home immediately. I just had to accept it. The answer is that the purpose of life is to glorify God."¹⁰

Sandage took his first public stand for Christ at a 1985 conference on science and religion in Dallas. Both theists and atheists attended. Sandage explained that the big bang was a singular and therefore supernatural event that cannot be explained by physics. He told the audience he had put his faith in Christ at the age of fifty.

Science and Faith

Some Bible-believing Christians Allan met struggled with certain claims of science, believing them to be at odds with the Bible. Sandage was concerned his fellow Christians sometimes saw a conflict between science and faith where he saw no conflict. In 2002 Sandage wrote an article available on the Leadership U website titled “A Scientist Reflects on Religious Belief.” Sandage praised Abelard’s twelfth-century dictum: “Truth cannot be contrary to truth. The findings of reason must agree with the truths of scripture, else the God who gave us both has deceived us with one or the other.”¹¹

Sandage also knew that his fellow scientists had their own biases that prevented them from seeing evidence that was obvious to him. Sandage and other scientists inferred design (and therefore a Designer) when studying the universe, while others refused. Sandage wrote:

But we must admit that those scientists that *want* to see design *will* see design. Those that are content in every part of their being to live as materialistic reductionalists (as we must all do as scientists in the laboratory, which is the place of the practice of our craft) will never admit to a mystery of the design they see, always putting off by one step at a time, awaiting a reductionalist explanation for the present unknown. But to take this reductionalist belief to the deepest level and to an indefinite time into the future (and it will always remain indefinite) when “science will know everything” is itself an act of faith which denies that there can be anything unknown to science, even in principle.¹²

Sandage argued that there “need be no conflict between science and religion if each appreciates its own boundaries and if each takes seriously the claims of the other.”

Sandage spoke publicly and wrote about his faith in Christ, but mostly he lived his life as a Christian and wrote about science.

Allan Sandage died in November 2010. An obituary published by the American Astronomical Society noted, “Though not formally religious early on, Sandage became deeply spiritual in his outlook on life and the universe, and on the practice of astronomy . . . he believed that astronomical discovery had theological significance.”¹³

Thanks to Allan Sandage, many scientists believe their science has theological significance.

Postscript

Allan Sandage concluded that the cosmology of his day pointed to an ultimate beginning and to God as the Creator. Has the advance of science since then disproved or confirmed his assessment? Several new theories proposed since 1973 seek to explain the universe without God. Among these are the following:

1. **Cycles of Time** - Roger Penrose published a book by that title discussing his theory of an eternal Cyclic Universe without gravitational collapse. Released in September 2010, the book initially received great fanfare--which quickly faded. In December 2010, Wehus and Eriksen published a scientific paper entitled "*A Search For Concentric Circles In The 7-Year WMAP Temperature Sky Maps.*"¹⁴ Predictions made by Penrose's theory were not observed in the data and the idea fell from favor.

2. **Aguirre-Gratton Cosmological Model** attempts to see the universe as past eternal (always existing without a beginning) by proposing a reversal of the arrow of time. This model was endorsed by Sean Carroll in his 2014 debate with William Lane Craig. However, Alan Guth discussed the Aguirre-Gratton model in his paper "Eternal inflation and its implications" and finds its assumptions to be unreasonable.¹⁵

3. **Vacuum Genesis Theory** - In 1973, Edward Tryon published "Is the Universe a Vacuum Fluctuation?"¹⁶ At the quantum level, vacuum fluctuations pop into and out of existence regularly. This paper was the first to propose the universe itself may be a vacuum fluctuation. Tryon wrote "the universe is simply one of those things that happens from time to time." However, if the universe can begin through a natural process such as a quantum fluctuation, then many universes exist. We will look at the multiverse issue more closely below.

4. **Ekpyrotic Universe** is another popular theory. String theory claims the fundamental components of matter are one-dimensional strings and two or three-dimensional branes (from membranes). A 2001 paper by Khoury et al, "The Ekpyrotic Universe: Colliding Branes and the Origin of the Hot Big Bang," speculates that a collision of branes could convert kinetic energy into thermal energy and ignite a hot, big bang creating a new universe.¹⁷ As with Vacuum Genesis, if this theory is true then nature must repeat itself and this results in a multiverse.

5. **Multiverse Theory** is the idea our universe is one of many. Possible mechanisms include vacuum fluctuation, the ekpyrotic model and inflation. Indeed any natural process that might cause the Big Bang must lead to a multiverse.

Many people assume the multiverse is eternal into the past, but BGV Theorem says this is unlikely. BGV Theorem was described in a 2003 paper by Borde, Guth and Vilenkin.¹⁸ According to this theorem, while inflation is eternal to the future it cannot be eternal into the past. The theorem applies to any universe that is on average expanding - even the multiverse (see page four). If the multiverse likely has a beginning, this implies a Creator God.

Jeffrey Zweerink, an astrophysicist researcher at UCLA and Christian apologist with Reasons to Believe, is the author of *Who's Afraid of the Multiverse?*¹⁹ He favors multiverse theory in part because he sees it as an ally in the argument for God. He believes the universe generator must be very finely-tuned to generate a multiverse. Zweerink admits that a large percentage of scientists do not support multiverse theories because the theory is not currently testable.

Scientists are working to develop such tests. Even if adequate tests are developed and if multiverse theory passes the tests, naturalists are still far from their goal of showing God is unneeded.

6. Quantum Theories - Recently researchers have speculated that a past eternal universe might be viable once a theory of quantum gravity is developed. Quantum gravity researcher Aron Wall disagrees. He studied a semiclassical spacetime and believes the singularity theorems, and therefore a beginning, will hold under a fully developed theory of quantum gravity.²⁰

Summary - Based on current science, an ultimate beginning seems highly likely.

Alexander Vilenkin wrote:

It is said that an argument is what convinces reasonable men and a proof is what it takes to convince even an unreasonable man. With the proof now in place, cosmologists can no longer hide behind the possibility of a past-eternal universe. There is no escape: they have to face the problem of a cosmic beginning.²¹

Cosmology has advanced and Sandage's conclusions about an ultimate beginning continue to hold.

Questions to Consider and Discuss

1. What was Sandage's scientific discovery that sent him on his spiritual journey?
2. What is Pascal's Wager?
3. Are science and Christianity compatible?
4. After believing, how did he deal with doubt?
5. Could the universe have begun without God?

Lee Strobel's Investigation

“What has gotten into you?”

Lee Strobel, the investigative reporter and legal editor, spewed the words at his wife, Leslie. She had always been a rational person. His mind reeled. What does she mean she has become a follower of Jesus Christ? How could she fall for that wishful thinking, make-believe mythology about Jesus? Doesn't everyone know mankind has evolved beyond any need for God? Doesn't everyone know the claims about Jesus are just legends with no basis in historical fact?

Upon reflection, Strobel hatched a plan. He was confident his investigative skill and legal background were just the tools needed for the task. He knew the types and quality of evidence needed to persuade a jury. He would launch a full and critical investigation into the claims of Christianity. He wouldn't stop until he'd marshaled all the evidence and Christianity lay in a heap of ruins. Then his wife would see the error of her ways and life would return to normal.

Education and Religious Training

Raised in a middle-class neighborhood outside Chicago, Strobel's first favorable thoughts toward atheism came as he was reading the *World Book Encyclopedia* on Darwinism. Strobel figured that if God was not needed to create life, then God is probably not necessary at all. Another factor that pushed him toward atheism was Strobel's trouble getting straight answers from religious folks when he asked tough questions.

Strobel earned a journalism degree from University of Missouri in 1974 and a Master of Studies in Law degree from Yale University in 1979.

A Working Journalist

The Chicago Tribune hired Strobel soon after he graduated from journalism school. Within a few months, he received an assignment to cover social unrest in West Virginia over textbooks that taught evolution. It shocked Strobel that people in the modern world did not know that science had already made Christianity irrelevant.

Strobel found it difficult to write a balanced story on the conflict. To Strobel, the uproar of the “evolution versus creation” debate was a final last gasp of a dying and outmoded belief system. To Strobel's mind, the ironclad evidence for evolution meant that God was out of a job.

The Turning Point

Just five years after the uproar in West Virginia, Strobel's wife, Leslie, announced that she had become a follower of Jesus Christ, which shocked, disappointed, and upset Strobel. After some reflection, he became confident his wife was rational enough to see the light once he presented her with all of the facts of the historical Jesus. Strobel's college professors had taught him that the claims of Christianity did not hold up when carefully examined. Lee's decision to disprove Christianity launched his spiritual journey.

Examining the Record

Strobel knew eyewitness testimony is often very persuasive in the courtroom but he also knew that eyewitness testimony can be proven false. Sometimes witnesses lie. His first step was to learn if there were any eyewitnesses to the life of Jesus and if so, would the eyewitness accounts hold up under cross-examination?

Strobel assembled questions similar to those he asked in his book *The Case for Christ*:

- Can the biographies of Jesus be trusted?
- Were the biographies reliably preserved?
- Do the biographies stand up to scrutiny?
- Is credible evidence available for Jesus outside his biographies?

Strobel learned that Christianity claims Jesus was crucified somewhere between AD 30 and 33. The apostle Paul converted two years after Jesus's death. Paul met Peter and the other church leaders in Jerusalem about three years after his conversion. Paul began to write his epistles in the late 40s, and his major letters appeared in the 50s. The first biographies of Jesus also appeared in the 50s.

Christians believe that the four biographies of Jesus are all carefully written and accurate histories of the life of Jesus the Messiah. Strobel learned that Christians claim eyewitnesses—disciples of Jesus who were present at all the major events they recorded—wrote two of the gospels, the books of Matthew and John.

Strobel also discovered that Christians claim Mark, a close friend of the disciple and eyewitness Peter, wrote the book of Mark. Mark was himself an eyewitness to many events. The last half of Mark's gospel (chapter 10 on) records the last week of Jesus's life and Mark could have seen most of the major events reported.

And Strobel found that Luke, a physician and co-worker of the apostle Paul, is credited as the author of the gospel of Luke. He claimed to have based his biography on

eyewitness testimony. If true, all the stories in these books were based on either direct or indirect eyewitness testimony.

Cross-Examining the Claims

Secular scholars generally claim the Gospel of Mark was written first, followed by the Gospel of Matthew, and both books were completed between AD 70-80. They also think the Gospel of Luke was completed between AD 80-85, and the Gospel of John between AD 90-95. These critics say the authors are unknown.

Strobel discovered that Christian scholars have a slightly different view. They consider Luke's gospel part one of a two-part series. Part two is the book of Acts. Luke addressed both books to a person named Theophilus. The book of Acts ends abruptly with the apostle Paul still in prison in Rome about AD 62. The story ends this way because Luke did not know the ending. Acts had to have been written about AD 62. Luke wrote his gospel before that, possibly in AD 61. Matthew and Mark wrote their books before Luke, so most Christian scholars put their writings between AD 55-59. Strobel read that Christian scholars accept the date of John's gospel at AD 90-95.

The dates of the biographies surprised Strobel. First, the arguments and dates the Christian scholars put forward were quite reasonable based on the evidence. Second, even if one accepted the view of the secular scholars, these eyewitnesses could have written the biographies. Legend and mythology typically grow out of an absence of facts. Strobel had expected the books to have been written hundreds of years later by people who were not alive at the time of Jesus.

Finding the biographies of Jesus were written within decades of his life and possibly by eyewitnesses was shocking to Strobel. Were the biographies of other ancient charismatic and religious leaders written so quickly?

No biography of a founder of religion was ever written as quickly as Jesus's. Professor Edwin Yamauchi of Miami of Ohio wrote:

The scriptures of Buddha, who lived in the sixth century B.C., were not put into writing until after the Christian era, and the first biography of Buddha was written in the first century A.D. Although we have the sayings of Muhammad, who lived from A.D. 570 to 632, in the Koran, his biography was not written until 767—more than a full century after his death.¹

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John wrote their gospels just decades after the events. Many people who knew Jesus were still alive when these biographers wrote their respective gospels and could have challenged any inaccuracy.

Consistency Is Key

What about consistency between the biographies? Strobel had heard major disagreements existed between the gospels. He knew from his courtroom experience that he could use inconsistencies among the biographies to prove them to be unreliable witnesses.

When Strobel examined these inconsistencies, he discovered they were minor and not problematic. The main points of the story were always in agreement. The claims about inconsistencies seemed to arise because people expected ancient writings to meet the same standards of precision as modern journalism. Historians know this is not the case. For example, quotation marks were not in use when the Bible was written; therefore, no distinction existed between direct and indirect quotes. The gospel writers simply translated Jesus's words into Greek slightly differently.

Strobel's experience in covering the courthouse taught him that it's a bad sign when witness testimony agrees too exactly. It indicates the witnesses got together beforehand to get their story straight. In other words, colluding. The minor inconsistencies in Jesus's biographies show each writer told the story in his own words and yet without major disagreements. Strobel was actually impressed with the consistency.

Documentary Evidence

Was the New Testament reliably preserved? Some people claim that not many ancient manuscripts exist. If true, it could call into question the reliability of the manuscripts that do exist. Strobel wanted to know the number of New Testament manuscripts and their ages. The earlier a manuscript was copied, the less likely it has errors.

Strobel found that numerous New Testament original manuscripts are in existence, including more than 5,000 Greek manuscripts or fragments of the New Testament, some of them dating from as early as AD 100 to 150; about 10,000 Latin Vulgate manuscripts; 8,000 Ethiopic, Slavic, and Armenian manuscripts. Taken altogether, we have about 24,000 handwritten manuscripts of the New Testament in various languages.

Strobel compared that with other ancient writings. Tacitus wrote *Annals of the Imperial Rome* in about AD 116. Only one manuscript of his first six books remains, and it dates from AD 850, more than 700 years after he wrote it. Original manuscripts of books seven through ten are lost. Only one manuscript remains for books eleven through sixteen, and it's from the 11th century.

Josephus wrote in the first century. We have only nine Greek manuscripts, dated from the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries, of his work *The Jewish War*. There remains a Latin translation from the fourth century and some Russian materials from the twelfth century.

Homer wrote the *Iliad* in 850 BC. Fewer than 650 Greek manuscripts remain today. Some of them are very fragmentary and date from AD second and third centuries—a thousand-year gap between when it was written and the earliest remaining manuscripts.

The documentary evidence for the New Testament is far earlier and far more abundant than any other ancient writing.

Is Jesus a Hoax?

Strobel read that some critics of Jesus claimed He never lived at all. Could it be that all the stories about Jesus were part of one big elaborate hoax? This is an extremely important question. Strobel determined to discover if other ancient historians wrote about Jesus. If no non-Christian historians wrote about Jesus, then perhaps He never lived and Christianity is a hoax.

Strobel learned that respected non-Christian historians such as Josephus and Tacitus mentioned Jesus in their writings. Jesus is even referred to in the Talmud, a central text for Rabbinic Judaism. But could it be that later Christian copyists inserted these comments about Jesus?

The Jewish historian Josephus finished his famous *Antiquities of the Jews* about AD 93 or 94. He referred to Jesus more than once. Certain comments about Jesus may have been inserted into his text by followers of Jesus. Here's an interesting but controversial passage:

About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was the Christ. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing among us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him. On the third day he appeared to them restored to life, for the prophets of God had prophesied these and countless other marvelous things about him. And the tribe of Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.²

Enlightenment scholars questioned the authenticity of this entire passage. Today, most scholars think the passage is generally authentic but with some later

interpolations—meaning that early Christian copyists inserted some phrases a Jewish writer would not have written.

For example, the first line “About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man.” Christians don’t usually talk about Jesus in those words; so, this is probably authentic Josephus. But the next phrase “if indeed one ought to call him a man” seems to have been added later by someone who believed Jesus is divine.

“For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks” uses vocabulary common in Josephus and is considered genuine. Then the phrase “He was the Christ” is quite out of character for Josephus and appears to be an interpolation.

“On the third day he appeared to them restored to life...” expresses faith in the resurrection of Jesus. It is doubtful Josephus was a believer or else he would have written in much greater detail about Jesus. Scholars generally consider this the third interpolation in this passage.

In a separate passage, Josephus told a story about the death of James, the half brother of Jesus. No textual critic has successfully proven an interpolation. In this passage, Josephus described how a high priest named Ananus took advantage of the political situation after the death of the Roman governor Festus—also mentioned in the New Testament—and before the new governor Lucceius Albinus came into office. Here’s the passage:

He [Ananus] convened a meeting of the Sanhedrin and brought before them a man named James, the brother of Jesus, who was called the Christ, and certain others. He accused them of having transgressed the law and delivered them up to be stoned.³

Textual critics have pointed out that if this passage had been a later Christian addition, it would have praised James more or said Jesus was the Christ. Josephus did not express faith in Jesus, but he wrote that Jesus was “called the Christ.” Josephus recorded what people were saying about Jesus at a very early date, about AD 62.

The Roman historian Tacitus is another important ancient historian who wrote about Jesus. Tacitus wrote about AD 115, regarding the burning of Rome and how Emperor Nero blamed the Christians for it. Some Romans hated Christians because they worshipped Jesus instead of the Roman gods. Tacitus wrote:

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 Pilate, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome . . . Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pled guilty: then upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much for the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind.⁴

Rome burned in AD 64. This passage provides clear evidence that Christianity was a well-known movement in Rome at an early date. Perhaps most important, it mentions Christ “suffered the extreme penalty,” referring to the crucifixion.

The passage raises another important question: What could have caused the religion to “break out again?” Strobel noted that if Jesus rose from the dead, as Christians claim, then that would certainly be adequate cause. The thought unnerved Strobel. He would have to look into the question of the resurrection soon.

The Talmud contains the oral teaching of Judaism and was exclusively copied by Jewish scribes. The Talmud mentions Jesus, calling him a heretic—not very flattering—an early confirmation that Jesus lived during the time and place the biographies say He lived. The completion of the Talmud took place around AD 500 and incorporates the Mishnah, which was compiled between AD 70-200. The Talmud does not give much detail on heretics, but it does mention that Jesus was a false prophet who practiced sorcery and was justly condemned to death. If Jesus did not live, there’s no reason for the Talmud to invent Him.

Professor M. Wilcox, in *Jesus in the Light of His Jewish Environment*, wrote:

The Jewish traditional literature, although it mentions Jesus quite sparingly (and must in any case be used with caution), supports the gospel claim that he was a healer and miracle-worker, even though it ascribes these activities to sorcery. In addition, it preserves the recollection that he was a teacher, and that he had disciples (five of them), and that at least in the earlier Rabbinic period not all of the sages had finally made up their minds he was a “heretic” or a “deceiver.”⁵

Strobel wanted to know: If we didn’t have the New Testament or other Christian writings, what could we know about Jesus, using only ancient non-Christian sources like Josephus, Tacitus, the Talmud, Pliny the Younger, and others?

Professor Yamauchi offered this answer:

We would know that first, Jesus was a Jewish teacher; second, many people believed that he performed healings and exorcisms; third, some people believed he was the Messiah; fourth, he was rejected by the Jewish leaders; fifth, he was

crucified under Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius; sixth, despite this shameful death, his followers, who believed he was still alive, spread beyond Palestine so that there were multitudes of them in Rome by A.D. 64; and seventh, all kinds of people from the cities and countryside—men and women, slave and free—worshipped him as God.⁶

Miracles of Jesus and the Talmud

The oral tradition written down in the Talmud had the perfect opportunity to deny Jesus ever performed miracles. Instead, the Talmud admits He performed miracles but claimed He used sorcery. The claim of sorcery matches Jesus's biographies quoting Jewish leaders saying Jesus did miracles "by Beelzebul, the prince of demons." (Luke 11:15 NIV)

Strobel knew that when both prosecution and defense witnesses agree on a particular point, the court sees the point as true and non-controversial. In this case eyewitnesses on both sides, for Jesus and against Jesus, agree that Jesus performed undeniable miracles such as giving sight to someone born blind. It is unique in history for opponents to confirm that miracles were authentic. So why don't historians accept the miracles of Jesus?

As the months passed, Strobel noticed a change in his wife. She became a more caring, loving, and authentic person. Strobel saw a real transformation in her character and values. Lee opened to the possibility that Christianity was not a bad thing. He resolved to finish his critical examination of Christianity, but became willing to go wherever the answers took him.

Resurrection of Jesus

Strobel pondered the biggest miracle of all, Jesus's resurrection from the dead. Isn't it possible ancient people exaggerated Jesus's deeds and power? Isn't it likely the story of the resurrection is pure fiction?

Strobel assumed the resurrection would be the easiest miracle to disprove. On the other hand, if Jesus had risen from the dead, any other miracle would be easy to accept.

Strobel assembled a list of questions:

- Was Jesus's death a sham and His resurrection a hoax?
- Was His body really absent from the tomb?
- Was Jesus seen alive after His crucifixion?
- Are there any supporting facts that point to the resurrection?

Some have suggested that Jesus did not die while on the cross but just passed out from loss of blood. Then while He lay in the tomb for three days, the burial spices had a healing effect and He eventually walked out. An interesting theory, but Strobel wanted to know if it was a viable theory.

In his book *The Case for Christ*, Strobel asked Dr. Alexander Metherell about this theory. Specifically, Strobel wanted the doctor to assume the theory was correct and Jesus had only passed out. If that were so, how would Jesus have looked to the disciples after the extreme beating, loss of blood, and painful crucifixion? Metherell replied:

Again, there is just no way he could have survived the cross. But if he had, how could he walk around after nails had been driven through his feet? How could he have appeared on the road to Emmaus just a short time later, strolling for long distances? How could he have used his arms after they were stretched and pulled from their joints? Remember, he had massive wounds on his back and a spear wound to his chest. Listen, a person in that kind of pathetic condition would never have inspired his disciples to go out and proclaim that he's the Lord of life who had triumphed over the grave.⁷

Strobel wanted to know if evidence existed that anyone saw Jesus alive after the burial. If so, how strong is the evidence and how early did it exist?

Professor Gary Habermas answered that the strongest early evidence is probably a creed recorded by the apostle Paul in I Corinthians 15:3–8. No critical scholar doubts that Paul is the author of this book or that he wrote it within twenty-five years of Jesus's life. Verse 5 uses the name Cephas, the Aramaic name for Peter. Using it is probably a good indication the creed is very early, because people were not yet in the habit of calling him Peter when the creed came into being. In verse 3, Paul introduced the section saying he "delivered" (or "passed on to you") what he had "received." These are technical rabbinic terms for passing down holy tradition.

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. 2By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. 3For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. 6After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. 7Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, 8and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. (1 Cor 15:1-8 NIV)

Paul wrote the First Letter to the Corinthians between AD 55-57. Paul indicated that he had taught this creed in Corinth when he was with them in AD 51, only about twenty years from the resurrection event. But Paul evidently had learned the creed even earlier.

Jesus appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus about two years after the crucifixion, sometime between AD 32 and 35. Paul visited James, the half brother of Jesus, and Peter in Jerusalem three years after his conversion. Paul probably learned this creed at that visit, between AD 35 and 38. During this visit, Paul also seems to have met a number of the 500 people mentioned in the creed. It is clear Paul knew them because in this passage he knows that some have died.

Resurrection stories are usually considered mythical, but Jesus's story is different. Prior to the resurrection, the disciples were hiding from authorities fearing they may be next. Jesus's half-brother, James, did not believe in him at all. But after the resurrection, James and the disciples—no matter how much they were persecuted—would not stop talking about Jesus rising from the dead. Never before, and never since, has a group of friends been so changed by a resurrection. This is absolutely unique in human history. Jewish and Roman authorities could have stopped this movement if they had produced Jesus's body, but they couldn't - the tomb was empty.

As his spiritual journey drew to a close, Strobel looked at all the evidence he had gathered over the previous twenty-one months and evaluated it.

I'll admit it: I was ambushed by the amount and quality of the evidence that Jesus is the unique Son of God. As I sat at my desk that Sunday afternoon, I shook my head in amazement. I had seen defendants carted off to the death chamber on much less convincing proof! The cumulative facts and data pointed unmistakably toward a conclusion that I wasn't entirely comfortable in reaching.

Frankly, I had wanted to believe that the deification of Jesus was the result of legendary development in which well-meaning but misguided people slowly turned a wise sage into the mythological Son of God. That seemed safe and reassuring; after all, a roving apocalyptic preacher from the first century could make no demands on me. But while I went into my investigation thinking that this legendary explanation was intuitively obvious, I emerged convinced it was totally without basis.⁸

Strobel did not have full resolution of the creation-versus-evolution issue at this point, but he did not need it. He knew enough to believe that God existed and came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ. Strobel placed his faith in Christ and became His follower.

Questions to Consider and Discuss

1. Do the biographies of Jesus stand up to critical examination?
2. Were the miracles of Jesus confirmed by both followers and opponents? Why is that important?
3. Is it possible Jesus did not die on the cross?
4. What caused Jesus's disciples to change from hiding in fear to publicly preaching Christ?
5. Are the main claims of Christianity true?

Reaching Your Own Verdict

Is Christianity true? What are the main claims of Christianity?

- Jesus, who was called the Christ, lived in Palestine 2,000 years ago.
- Jesus is the unique Son of God.
- Jesus was crucified and rose from the dead, an event that changed history.
- You can have a relationship with God by trusting Jesus.

This booklet condenses the journeys of three brilliant men who gave up their atheism and followed Jesus. The evidence that Jesus lived is as well an established fact as any fact of ancient history, but what you do with that evidence is up to you. Is the possibility that God sent Jesus to earth important enough to investigate fully? Do scientists make decisions without data?

Now is the time to begin your own spiritual journey. Pray this simple prayer:

Jesus, if You are real, reveal Yourself to me. Open my eyes to see truth. I want my life to be based on truth. Amen.

If you meant it, that simple prayer is enough to get you started on a life-changing journey.

If you want to share your story or have a question about your spiritual journey, email the author at ronald@factbridge.org.

Notes

Francis Collins

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7. Ibid., 223–24.
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9. “The Nazi Master Plan / Annex 4: The Persecution of the Christian Churches.” Cornell Law <http://bit.ly/1HWRVRc>
10. Willard, *A Place for Truth*, 79–84.

Allan Sandage

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2. Alan Lightman and Roberta Brawer, *Origins: The Lives and Worlds of Modern Cosmologists* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1990), 75.
3. Richard C. Tolman, *Relativity, Thermodynamics and Cosmology* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1934), 441.
4. “Science: The Infinite Universe,” *Time*, December 30, 1974, 48. <http://ti.me/15WgD24>.
5. Dr. Allan Sandage, “A Scientist Reflects on Religious Belief,” 1985, <http://bit.ly/15ZfPw1>.
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10. Durbin, 11.
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18. Borde, Guth and Vilenkin, “Inflationary spacetimes are incomplete in past directions,” <http://bit.ly/1DsOC6r>

19. Jeffrey Zweerink, *Who's Afraid of the Multiverse?* (Glendora, CA: Reasons to Believe, 2008), 48.
20. Wall, "The Generalized Second Law Implies a Quantum Singularity Theorem," <http://bit.ly/1GH4Rxs>
21. Alexander Vilenkin, *Many Worlds in One* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 176.

Lee Strobel

1. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 87.
2. *Ibid.*, 79.
3. *Ibid.*, 78.
4. Tacitus, *Annals*, Book 15, Chapter 44.
5. Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 86.
6. *Ibid.*, 87.
7. *Ibid.*, 202.
8. *Ibid.*, 264.

Resources for a Spiritual Journey

1. *God and the Astronomers* - Robert Jastrow
An outstanding story of the discovery of the big bang authored by an agnostic scientist.
2. *God's Universe* - Owen Gingerich
The famous Harvard astronomer explains how a scientist can believe in divine design.
3. *Why the Universe is the Way It Is* - Hugh Ross
Ross is an astronomer and one of the world's leading experts on the fine-tuned universe.
4. *Mere Christianity* - C.S. Lewis
An Oxford professor rejects divisions of Christianity and presents a powerful and rational case for the Christian faith.
5. *The Language of God* - Francis Collins
Presents the author's personal conversion story.
6. *The Case for Christ* - Lee Strobel
An investigative reporter tries to disprove Christianity on the basis of historical evidence and becomes a follower of Jesus.
7. *The Christ Files* - John Dickson
Available as book and as documentary on DVD. Describes what we can know for certain about the most important person in history.
8. *What On Earth Am I Here For?* - Rick Warren
A life-changing classic on the five purposes the Bible teaches for all Christians.
9. *Celebrate Recovery Bible* - ed. by John Baker
Shows the power of God to change lives.