



What I Would Say to an Atheist Part 4

How Do You Know There Is a God?

When I was in high school, I went with my English class to see a play in San Francisco. While we were getting to our seats, an older, distinguished woman came into the theater who looked awfully familiar. She was quickly surrounded by a number of theater guests, and I asked a friend who she thought it was. Someone behind us whispered that it was Agnes Moorhead, who played the grandmother on the tv show *Bewitched*. I was stunned. I thought it couldn't be. When she signed my program and I stared at the signature, I knew it had to be so. Sometimes, you cannot believe what you see or hear, even when it is true. Plenty of people either don't think it is possible that there is a God or do not want Him to exist. Even when the evidence clearly points to it, they reject the reality that not only does God exist, but He has come to the world in plain sight.

I have been asked how I know that Jesus was a real person since it is only the Bible that talks about Him. They insist that no one at His time, other than His followers, had anything to say about Jesus. Their belief is that perhaps Jesus did not actually exist. He is just a mythological figure invented by a collection of first century cult leaders. It is argued that if Jesus was real, contemporary historians would have discussed Him. What is forgotten is that many of the books of historians who wrote in the first century have been lost and very little of what they penned is known to us. Also, Jesus was not exactly living in the hotbed of culture and world-wide interest. His miracles and ministry took place in the far reaches of the Roman Empire in rural communities that went unnoticed by the rest of the world. No one cared what happened in Israel. In our age of media overload, we sometimes forget what it was like back when the vast majority of people could not read or write. Very few records were kept of anything, and the world was uninformed about what took place even a few miles away. And yet Jesus' life was in comparison to others of the time, astonishingly well documented.

Would anyone ever question the actual existence of Julius Caesar, the conqueror of France and parts of England and the first emperor of Rome? Of course not. It is astounding to discover however that there are only five sources of information about the conquests of Julius Caesar within 150 years of his life and one comes from Julius Caesar himself. That means we only have the record of four other writers to document the exploits of Julius Caesar. Did he exist? Of course he did. Tiberius Caesar, who was emperor when Jesus was ministering and then crucified was written about by only 10 different writers within 150 years of his life and one of them was Luke from the Bible. That means there were only 9 non-Bible sources for what we know of Tiberius the emperor and yet does anyone doubt he ruled in Rome. Certainly not! Now, we come to Jesus. Within 150 years of His life, we have 42 different writers describing Him. Of those, nine were secular historians who were not Christian at all. That is twice as many historians who weren't Christian writing about Jesus as did Julius Caesar and just as many secular writers spoke of Jesus as did Tiberius Caesar. If you don't think Jesus lived in the first century, you would have to admit that Julius Caesar is fictional and so was Tiberius Caesar based strictly on the hard cold facts of the historical record.

Perhaps, the most important event in history was the resurrection of Jesus. It is certainly the most critical evidence that the supernatural exists and that God is active in the world. It is not astounding to realize how many writers have attacked the resurrection, not just atheist, but critics from a wide range of religious backgrounds. It has been postulated that the witnesses to Christ raised from the dead suffered from

hallucinations. No credible historian or expert in human nature would still make that assertion. Hallucinations never work that way. It is like thinking that two or more people will have the same dream. That does not happen. More than 500 people witnessed Jesus resurrected and anyone in Jerusalem who doubted the truthfulness of the report could have located those people to check out their stories. Not just the women who met Him at the tomb, but the eleven remaining disciples all saw Jesus alive and well multiple times over a forty day period. What is more, those eleven disciples each died inhumane deaths maintaining in the midst of torture and then execution that they talked with, touched, and ate with Jesus after He died by crucifixion. Liars do not needlessly suffer death like that. If even one of the disciples recanted while being held for execution, he would have been paraded everywhere as a great celebrity and Christianity would have died on the vine before it even started. In contrast, six of the eleven so-called witnesses that were supposedly shown the golden tablets Joseph Smith claimed came from an angel left the Mormon church after a time. It is ludicrous to think those eleven disciples would have kept up the lie of having been with Christ raised from the dead given what they suffered and how they died for their testimony of Jesus.

Also consider the empty tomb. **On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.** (Luke 24:1-3 NIV) There was not a body in there. Jesus never was found, at least not dead Jesus and if there was a Jesus corpse anywhere, it would have ended the Christian movement. The Jews who plotted Jesus' execution as well as the Roman governor who had Him crucified had a tremendous stake in making sure the body of Jesus was not stolen from the tomb. It was guarded! How could it have been snatched from them? The empty tomb is a fact of history and even though it does not prove the resurrection, it is a great obstacle to those who want to claim Jesus just died and that is it. The empty tomb was a witness to the truthfulness of the message of the disciples and the five hundred other witnesses that Jesus in fact was no longer dead but rather alive. **For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. 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.** (1 Corinthians 15:3-6 NIV)

Let us consider a particular witness to the resurrection who should be given a great deal of reflection. James the brother of Jesus was no great fan of Jesus. He may have loved Him, even cared deeply for Him. But James did not think much of what Jesus was doing. In fact it is clear that James along with his siblings thought Jesus had gone insane and it was imperative that Jesus get help rather than continue preaching and teaching. John the Apostle had this to say of James and Jesus' other brothers. **For even his own brothers did not believe in him.** (John 7:5 NIV) Listen carefully to what the Gospel writer John Mark has to say about what Jesus' family, including his brother James thought of Jesus' condition. **Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind."** (Mark 3:20-21 NIV) Jesus Himself knew full-well that neither James nor His other brothers had any respect for Him. **Jesus said to them, "Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor."** (Mark 6:4 NIV)

Let us be clear now. James did not see Jesus as a prophet, let alone the Messiah. He would not have called Him Christ and certainly had no hope of Jesus coming up from the dead after He was crucified. Jesus was no Savior for James, no King of Kings. Yet something monumental turned James around in regard to his opinion of Jesus. It was something so dramatic and so life changing that not only did James become one of the most important leaders of the early Church, but He willingly died for his faith in Christ as risen Lord and Savior. Josephus, the Jewish historian, who had no love for Christians or the Church, had this to say of James and his demise. "...he (Ananus the high priest) assembled the Sanhedrin of Judges and brought before them the brother of Jesus who was called Christ; whose name was James, and some others; and when he had

formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned.” What we find here is the historical record of the martyrdom of James as a Christian in 62 AD.

How could such a dramatic transformation occur in Jesus’ brother James? What could have made such a complete skeptic believe completely in Jesus as risen Lord? Consider this. James encountered Jesus raised from the dead after He was crucified. Paul the Apostle gives us this report. **For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve...Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles,** (1 Corinthians 15:3-4, 7 NIV) That might turn a legitimate skeptic and critic into a true believer! We believe in God; we have our hope in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord because the historical record is clear. Jesus Christ supernaturally rose from the dead. What a great triumph it would have been for Jesus’ enemies if James would have pronounced judgment on Jesus, declared Him a crazy fool rather than the promised Savior of the world! He would have been a hero in Israel instead of the criminal he was declared by the ruling body of the Jews. He certainly would not have suffered such a horrific death as execution by stoning if he merely would have held up his hands and declared he was with the Jewish haters, Jesus was a dead crazy false prophet. He could not though because He knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus rose from the dead Easter Sunday and God thereby proved Him to be the Savior of the world.