



What I Would Say to an Atheist Part 5

Do You Know the Bible Has This in It?

This past week my favorite football team played. Almost none of the pundits thought they would win and sports bookmakers in Los Vegas picked them to lose. They were in fact behind half-way through the game and many of their fans had lost hope in them coming back. Yet, they won in surprising and exciting fashion. It may not have been a shocking win, but it certainly was not an expected one. We get caught off guard every once in a while by something that happens we had not seen coming. A promotion that comes out of nowhere, a compliment from someone who seems oblivious to us, an earthquake, a sudden thunderstorm, a stunning election result, meeting the most wonderful person at a party we did not want to attend, discovering a tumor has suddenly disappeared. At times, our lives take a sudden right turn we did not expect and without warning everything changes for us. Today we are going to look at two very shocking at the time, turn of events that tell us much about whether there is a God and who that God is.

At its peak, during the city of Babylon's glory, it was the biggest city in the world. Over 200,000 lived behind its massive walls. It was approximately 14 miles wide and about the same long. The outer wall was nearly 300 feet high and 80 feet wide. That is the size of a 30 story building that is 10 cars wide. It was surrounded by a moat that was nearly 30 feet wide. Babylon was the greatest military force and most powerful empire in the world. The gates of the city were made of solid brass and on the walls were 250 watchtowers that stood 100 feet above the walls. Babylon was impenetrable and undefeatable.

Here though is what was said of Babylon in the Bible by the prophet Isaiah about 100 years before the city reached its glory. He told everyone that God was who gave this prophecy to him. **Babylon, the jewel of kingdoms, the glory of the Babylonians' pride, will be overthrown by God like Sodom and Gomorrah. She will never be inhabited or lived in through all generations; no Arab will pitch his tent there; no shepherd will rest his flocks there. But desert creatures will lie there, jackals will fill her houses; there the owls will dwell, and there the wild goats will leap about.** (Isaiah 13:19-21 NIV) That would have been a laughable prediction at its time. It would have been like someone telling you when Julius Caesar was emperor that Rome would become nothing but farmland or today being informed that New York City would wind up as a desert wasteland. It would be incomprehensible and thoroughly unbelievable. Surely if you heard it, you would laugh at the thought. The prophet Jeremiah told everyone who would listen what it would be like for the city of Babylon in the future, just as the empire was coming to strike down Jerusalem. **No rock will be taken from you for a cornerstone, nor any stone for a foundation, for you will be desolate forever," declares the Lord.** (Jeremiah 51:26 NIV) He also declared this would be the case regarding Babylon. **Her towns will be desolate, a dry and desert land, a land where no one lives, through which no man travels.** (Jeremiah 51:43 NIV) Isaiah, speaking again for God added this about Babylon. **"I will turn her into a place for owls and into swampland; I will sweep her with the broom of destruction," declares the Lord Almighty.** (Isaiah 14:23 NIV)

Keep in mind that each of these statements about the future fate of Babylon were made somewhere between 600-700 years before Christ. Ancient Babylon was shockingly taken by the Persians without a fight in 539 BC. Some might argue that Jeremiah and Isaiah actually wrote at this later date and so had access to

information of the time. Yet remember that Babylon was taken but not destroyed by the Persians. It continued as a massive, bustling city for more than 200 years. By 275 BC, frequent fighting in the region led to Babylon being emptied of most of its citizens until it became more of a village than a great city. By the 13th century, an Arab historian of the time described Babylonia as a “small village”. Where Babylon once stood, a mighty city of commerce and magnificent architecture it is now a ruin. Most of it is covered in a swampy wetland created by the changing course of the Euphrates River. Of these prophecies all coming to pass, that it was destroyed, leveled, became uninhabited, its stones even abandoned to ruin, a home for wild animals of all sorts and a swamp, the odds are one in five trillion. Compare Babylon’s fate to that of Jerusalem which was prophesied by the spokesmen of God to be restored and given prominence after it was completely wrecked and leveled by the Babylonian armies in the early fifth century BC. God said Babylon would be destroyed and never rebuilt and that is what happened. He also promised Jerusalem would be restored and it has. Much to ponder there.

Now let’s turn to a well-known person of history, the famous Paul of Tarsus. Paul, who before he became Christian was Saul, was no friend of the church. In fact he was at the forefront of trying to eradicate Christianity. Saul had been a witness to the execution of the early church leader Stephen by the Jewish ruling body, the Sanhedrin. This would have been common knowledge to the Jewish authorities and the key players in the purge of Christianity. Soon thereafter, Saul became the chief player in the persecution of Christians that erupted. The book of Acts acknowledges this most disconcerting part of Saul, or Paul’s past. **On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.** (Acts 8:1-3 NIV)

This was a fact of history. Paul was a leader in the attempted wrecking of early Christianity. Soon enough, his fervor for the removal of the church from the planet took an extreme turn. He got permission from Jewish authorities to hunt down Christians beyond the borders of Israel. **Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.** (Acts 9:1-2 NIV) What is most fascinating about this account is the strangeness of where it is...right in the middle of the Bible. The most profound and erudite of all the proponents of Christian faith was its chief persecutor. This would not be found here if it were not true. Embarrassing as it was for the church, it was equally humiliating for its most outspoken and well-known advocate. Paul from the very beginning hated Christianity, despised the Church and that fact was well-known, something so established it could not be hidden away.

Something happened though to turn Saul around, enough to completely obliterate his disgust with Christianity. What could be so transformative, so profoundly life changing that his life purpose, his most cherished goal, the destruction of the Church could be shot full of holes and destroyed? Let us consider something that became a critical part of how Paul identified himself once he became Christian. He wrote to the Galatians this introductory statement of himself. **Paul, an apostle — sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—** (Galatians 1:1 NIV) Pay careful attention to this statement Paul made to the church at Thessalonica. **They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead — Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.** (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 NIV) Notice what he points out each time. He states without reservation that God raised Jesus from the dead!

Keep in mind that this was the most contested detail of the Christian message. Jesus was raised from the dead. If He was alive, then His claims were true that He was the Savior of the world, the Messiah. If He wasn’t, which was what Paul must have fiercely believed since He was so determined to destroy the Church and its Gospel message, then why did Paul have such a dramatic change of heart? Remember, that the tomb

of Jesus was of public knowledge. If His body was there, if it was clear that Jesus was still dead, the proof of this would have destroyed the church in the very beginning and Paul's single minded effort to kill off the church would never have taken place. The problem was, there was no body, and the tomb of Jesus was empty.

Here is what Paul says happened to turn him around. He told his friend Luke who reported what He was told in his account of the early history of the church. After Paul, or Saul got permission from the Jewish leaders to go to Damascus and arrest any Jewish Christians he found there, here is what Paul said happened. **As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus.** (Acts 9:3-7 NIV)

Is it even psychologically possible for someone, who so deeply hated Christianity and gave his life to exterminating the movement, to suddenly become its most vocal and effective leader? I will let you answer that question. Clearly something brought this complete reversal, something so profound and dramatic that Paul suffered horribly for the very cause he once hated. He was beaten, scourged, nearly stoned to death for following Christ. He was shipwrecked and imprisoned, whipped to within an inch of his life several times because he kept promoting Christ crucified and raised from the dead for the salvation and eternal life of all who believed. What could bring such a monumental change of course? He said exactly what it was. Jesus Christ, alive and victorious over death came personally to Paul and with proof beyond doubt made it clear that Christianity was true and that God is real. Two witnesses to consider. The prophecies about Babylon that came to pass and the changed life of Paul that was shocking to all who knew him.