

# Chapter 16

I still have my doubts

For many, the story so far might have been new, unbelievable, or possibly not thought about very deeply before. Some offer reasons for thinking differently, so let's take a closer look at these reasons and how they may be countered.

*'I don't believe in God anyway.'* This is an increasingly common statement in the West, although not all who profess atheism are as confident as they sound. Their beliefs are often poorly thought through, being influenced by a few authors who hit the headlines. Too many of those who dismiss the Bible's teaching have not always read it properly, offering very poor reasons for their disbelief in a Bible they have never studied.

*'I'm not religious.'* In the western world this is a very common excuse for thinking no further about spiritual things. In some other cultures, religion can be such a part of the national identity that to change it can even be seen as treason. Yet in the most materialistic cultures, people are still religious even if they don't realise it. The god that is worshipped can be a status symbol. Not far from me lived a man who, every Sunday morning, washed and polished his beautiful car and then sat in it to gaze at his equally beautiful house. Jesus offers a special relationship, not just a form of worship.

*'I'm too busy to think about that sort of thing.'* It is possible to make such a god of a profession or career that even the needs of the family are neglected and the possibility of an interested God ignored. Doctors, politicians, journalists or clergy can easily let unending work take over their lives, while others simply struggle to survive. It has probably not dawned on many of them that God is a God of love who longs to help them to know his presence and provision.

*'I've got where I am by my own efforts and nobody tells me what to do.'* People whose god is 'me, me, me' can be strong-minded bosses or

bullies who enjoy being feared. Some powerful people can be proud of what they see as self-made success, without ever thinking that personality and drive may be God's gifts to them.

*'I do the best I can.'* (Even if I don't always practise 'the best'). The results of any wrongdoing, especially if found out, are called mistakes (often those of other people) or just plain bad luck. It can be a game to break the rules and it never registers that there are God-given standards. These people rarely say, 'Sorry, my fault'.

*'We can clean up any mistakes by ourselves.'* This idea is as foolish as though a patient with advanced renal failure has the offer of a perfectly matching kidney but says, 'No thanks, I'm managing quite well on my own.' Similarly, the deadly disease of sin can never be cured by our own efforts. Our Saviour's costly gift of himself wipes out our sins as we repent and ask his forgiveness. As we confess, he forgives.<sup>1</sup>

*'I have different beliefs.'* Atheism and non-Christian religions give no satisfactory answer to the question of guilt. Wrongdoings cannot be cancelled out by doing good works, or paying money to a priest. Some expect failure to result in rebirth as a lower life form. Yet whatever the philosophy, sins will pile up without being washed away.

*'All we need is love.'* I recently met a young woman who claimed this as her belief. Of course, we do all need love, but not just as a sentimental feeling. Love needs a lover and a beloved, best expressed through a sometimes costly relationship. Thus: God (the lover) so loved the world (the beloved) that he gave his one and only Son (the cost).<sup>2</sup> Jesus taught the importance of love for God and neighbour as the two most important rules for life.<sup>3</sup> The love he spoke of and demonstrated was wholly self-giving, not the self-centred or self-seeking kind we often hear of in popular love songs.

*'I'm confused by the way Christians disagree.'* Not everyone who ticks the box 'Christian' as their religion understands what that really means. Different branches of the Christian church vary in tradition and practice, sometimes painfully. A Bible-believing Christian church

will teach that Jesus' death was a voluntary sacrifice to pay the price of sin on our behalf. To accept his forgiveness renews a loving relationship with God and, Jesus hoped, unity with other believers.<sup>4</sup> Sadly this is not always so.

Jesus was heard to say that he chose to lay down his life<sup>5</sup> and would die to pay the ransom price for sinners to be forgiven.<sup>6</sup> Yet there are some who claim to be Christians who say that to think in that way is to turn his sacrifice into a cruel act of a vengeful God. Never! It was an act of loving grace shared by Father and Son, who through it offer their shared free gift of forgiveness.<sup>7</sup> Others see Jesus simply as an example we should copy, but our tendency to sin will always stop us being like him on our own. We are assured that forgiven sinners are given the gift of his Holy Spirit to help and to guide them.<sup>8</sup>

*'I can't believe in the resurrection.'* This was such an amazing event that I sympathise with those of a scientific or sceptical outlook who find it difficult to believe something so unique and unlikely. For them, death is only reversible by resuscitation, not resurrection. However, we must not make liars of so many eyewitnesses. Some of them wrote their reports only a few years after the event and many of them were ready to die rather than to deny their story. The clear evidence of Jesus' risen presence in their completely transformed lives was not based on deceit.

For weeks after the discovery of Jesus' empty tomb, a chosen few spent time with him, walking, talking and eating together. During those weeks hundreds more saw him. Finally, a man named Saul had a vision of Jesus that knocked him sideways.<sup>9</sup> His story will be told in our next chapter. Ever afterwards he held an unshakeable belief in Jesus' resurrection and discusses this fully in 1 Corinthians 15 – a chapter to be studied by believers and unbelievers alike, for our faith stands or falls on the fact of Jesus' resurrection.

Years ago, a law graduate called Frank Morison set out to disprove the resurrection of Christ. But as he applied his well-trained powers of deduction to the biblical and contemporary records he became convinced that this unique event had really happened.

*'I've been impressed by a friend who believes, but am not sure it's for me.'* From the beginning, the most important evidence for the truth that Christ is alive, acting through his Spirit, is that of changed and unashamedly dedicated lives.

The final leap of faith often comes through seeing how believers cope with stress, disappointment or loss, or their readiness to explain and hold to their beliefs despite being teased or experiencing much stronger opposition.

*'I've tried it before and it didn't work.'* When people refer to a new baby as 'it', they give away that they do not really know the little boy or girl, who is a 'he' or 'she', not an 'it'! Similarly, when speaking of faith as 'it', people often mean religious observance alone, such as going to church or saying their prayers. True faith involves learning to know God – a matter of the heart and will, not just the head, and not only the repetition of a creed, but a real commitment. God knows us by name and loves every one of us, offering us a living relationship, not just a formal religion. Like all relationships, this one needs to be taken care of in order to grow and survive, but God will hold on to us more firmly than we can ever hold on to him.<sup>10</sup>

*'I've still got other questions.'* Perhaps by now some readers will want to know more and be ready to ask a believing friend, or find and read a Bible for themselves. How is it that Jesus of Nazareth came to be regarded as such a significant historical figure and why does his teaching still apply today? To discover more about him will answer some questions and make others seem less important.

We'll therefore turn next to two more expert witnesses who were convinced that Jesus' claims were true. Although they had not known the earthly Jesus, they had known of those ready to die because they had put their trust in him. Even today, there are many like the first martyr Stephen, who go to their death with a shining face. Like him, they are confident that they are passing from death into new life with their Lord, Jesus Christ.<sup>11</sup> Surely, that is a hope worth sharing – so read on!

## For further thought

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- Are you inclined to be proud of ‘doing it my way’? Does that work? Honestly?
- Remember that so-called reasons for not believing can just be excuses.

## Further resources

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- Carswell R. *Grill a Christian*. Leyland: 10Publishing, 2013
- Stott J. *Basic Christianity (2nd ed)*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1971
- Morison F. *Who moved the stone?* London: Faber and Faber, 2007

## References

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|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. 1 John 1:9         | 7. 2 Corinthians 5:17-19 |
| 2. John 3:16          | 8. Romans 8:9-11         |
| 3. Matthew 22:36-40   | 9. 1 Timothy 1:12-14     |
| 4. John 17:20-21      | 10. John 10:29-30        |
| 5. John 10:11, 15, 18 | 11. Acts 7:55-56, 59     |
| 6. Matthew 20:28      |                          |

