
CHRISTIANITY IS TRUE

THE BEGINNER'S CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS HANDBOOK



Introduction

How to Use This Handbook

“But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear.”

1 Peter 3:15

Why Any of This Matters

Nobody asked you whether you wanted to exist. One day you simply woke up inside a life already in progress, and sooner or later the question arrives: why am I here? Does my life actually mean anything? Those are not idle questions, and the honest answer is that everything depends on one prior question: does God exist?

Here is why. If there is no God, then the physical universe is all there is, and you and I are accidental byproducts of nature, not intended, not designed, here for no purpose at all. Many thoughtful atheists admit exactly this. The atheist Richard Dawkins has written that a universe of blind physical forces has, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no good, and no evil, nothing but pitiless indifference. The atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell concluded that we must build our lives on what he called the firm foundation of unyielding despair. These are not insults invented by Christians; they are conclusions drawn by atheists who followed their own worldview to the end.

Notice carefully what is and is not being claimed. The claim is not that atheists cannot be good people. Many live kind, generous, admirable lives. The claim is that atheism cannot supply an objective foundation for calling any action good or evil in the first place. If there is no God, then right and wrong are only accidents of evolution or shifting human conventions, and evolution rewards survival, not virtue. On that view, cruelty and racism are not truly wrong; they are merely unpopular. Some try to escape this by saying that whatever leads to human flourishing is good. But why should human flourishing count for more than the flourishing of rats or weeds, and who decides what flourishing even means? Tyrants throughout history have committed their worst crimes precisely because they were convinced they were improving the human race.

The same problem reaches all the way to the grave. If God does not exist, then death is simple extinction. The person who spends a lifetime in kindness and the person who spends it in cruelty arrive at the identical destination: nothing. And if the universe itself will eventually grow cold and lifeless, then in the end every human achievement is erased. This is why so many honest atheists face a hard choice between being happy and being consistent. A person can announce that there is no God, but almost no one can actually live as though kindness and cruelty are equal, as though their choices carry no real

weight. We all live as though our lives mean something, because deep down we cannot believe otherwise.

If Christianity is true, that instinct is not an illusion. You were known and loved and intentionally created, your life has real meaning, value, and purpose, and the story does not end at the grave. God Himself is the absolute standard of goodness, so right and wrong are not human inventions but reflections of His character. That does not yet prove Christianity is true; proving it is the work of the chapters ahead. The point here is only this: there is a great deal at stake in the question, and a life that is both happy and consistent is available to the Christian in a way it simply is not to the atheist. That is what makes the case worth examining with care, which is exactly what this handbook will help you do.

What Is Apologetics?

The word apologetics comes from the Greek word *apologia*, which simply means “a defense.” It is the same word a person in the ancient world would use for the case a defendant makes in a courtroom. To do apologetics is not to apologize for your faith in the modern sense of saying sorry. It is to give good reasons for what you believe and why.

Every Christian is called to this. In 1 Peter 3:15, the apostle Peter tells ordinary believers, not just scholars, to always be ready to give a reason for the hope they have. This handbook exists to help you get ready. It will not turn you into a professional philosopher overnight, but it will give you clear, tested arguments you can understand, remember, and share.

Notice that the same verse tells us how to do this: with meekness and fear, or as other translations put it, with gentleness and respect. The goal is never to win an argument and lose a person. The goal is to remove the obstacles that keep someone from seriously considering Jesus, and to do it in a way that honors Him.

Two Kinds of Arguments You Will Learn

This handbook is built around a simple two-step strategy that has been used by Christian thinkers for centuries.

- **Natural theology** works from reason and the world around us to show that God exists, before we ever open the Bible. These are the arguments in **Section 1**.
- **Christian evidence** then moves from “a God exists” to “the God of the Bible has actually acted in history,” especially in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. These are the arguments in **Section 2**.

Section 3 then answers the hardest objections a skeptic is likely to raise, such as the problem of evil. Together, the three sections move from God in general, to Jesus in particular, to the questions that hold people back.

How Each Chapter Is Organized

Every chapter follows the same pattern so you always know where you are. Work through them slowly, and do not skip the blanks. Writing an answer in your own words is how the argument moves from the page into your memory.

1. A memory verse to anchor the chapter in Scripture. Memorize it.
2. A short teaching section called “Why This Argument Matters,” which explains the main idea in plain language.
3. Key Terms boxes that define every technical word in everyday English.
4. The Argument in Plain Form, where the argument is laid out as numbered premises (the supporting claims) leading to a conclusion. You will restate each one in your own words.
5. Unpacking the Premises, which explains why each premise is true and asks you a question to check your understanding.
6. Answering the Objections, where the strongest challenges are stated honestly and then answered.
7. A Sample Dialogue between a Christian and a Skeptic, broken into sections by objection, so you can see exactly how a real conversation might go.

A Word Before You Begin

Before each study, PRAY. Ask God to open your mind to understand and your heart to love the people you will one day talk to. Arguments alone do not save anyone; the Holy Spirit does. Our job is to be faithful, clear, and kind, and to leave the results to God.

Do not feel you must master every chapter at once. Pick the arguments that fit the questions your friends and family are actually asking, and grow from there. A single argument understood well is worth more than ten memorized poorly.

PREMISE means “a supporting claim in an argument; one of the reasons given that, if true, leads to the conclusion.”

CONCLUSION means “the main point an argument is trying to prove; what follows if the premises are true.”

Table of Contents

Introduction: How to Use This Handbook	1
 Section 1: Natural Theology	
Chapter 1: The Kalam Cosmological Argument	7
Chapter 2: The Contingency Argument.....	12
Chapter 3: The Fine-Tuning Argument.....	17
Chapter 4: The Moral Argument.....	22
Chapter 5: The Modal Ontological Argument	27
 Section 2: Christian Evidences	
Chapter 6: The Gospels as Real History, Part 1	34
Chapter 7: The Gospels as Real History, Part 2	40
Chapter 8: The Resurrection: The A.L.I.V.E. Argument	46
Chapter 9: The Resurrection: The Minimal Facts Argument	52
Chapter 10: The Resurrection: Competing Hypotheses, Part 1	57
Chapter 11: The Resurrection: Competing Hypotheses, Part 2	63
Chapter 12: Harmonizing the Resurrection Accounts	68
 Section 3: Common Objections	
Chapter 13: The Problem of Evil: The Logical Version.....	74
Chapter 14: The Problem of Evil: The Probabilistic Version.....	80
Chapter 15: The Problem of Evil: The Emotional Version	86
Chapter 16: The Problem of Animal Suffering.....	92
Chapter 17: Did God Command Genocide?.....	98
Chapter 18: Does the Bible Condone Slavery?.....	104
Chapter 19: The Problem of Those Who Have Never Heard of Christ.....	110
 Conclusion	
If Christianity Is True, What Does This Mean for Me?	117
 Bonus	
Chapter 20: Understanding the Trinity.....	122
Chapter 21: Is Jesus Really the Only Way to God?	128

Appendix

Further Reading: Going Deeper 134
Bibliography 135

Section 1

Natural Theology

“For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse.”

Romans 1:20

Before we ever argue from the Bible, we can argue from the world. Natural theology is the study of what reason and the created order can show us about God on their own. Long before a skeptic accepts Scripture, he already lives in a universe that began to exist, that is finely balanced for life, that contains real right and wrong, and that he himself experiences as conscious and rational. Each of these points to something beyond nature.

The five chapters in this section take those clues one at a time. None of them, by itself, proves the full Christian God. Taken together, they build a powerful cumulative case that the most reasonable explanation of the world is a personal, powerful, and good Creator. This is exactly the kind of being the Bible then claims has spoken and acted in history, which is where Section 2 will pick up.

Chapters in This Section

- **Chapter 1:** The Kalam Cosmological Argument — the universe began to exist, so it had a cause.
- **Chapter 2:** The Contingency Argument — why is there anything at all rather than nothing?
- **Chapter 3:** The Fine-Tuning Argument — the universe is exquisitely set up for life.
- **Chapter 4:** The Moral Argument — real right and wrong require a moral lawgiver.
- **Chapter 5:** The Modal Ontological Argument — if God's existence is even possible, it is necessary.

Section 1 · Chapter 1

The Kalam Cosmological Argument

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”

Genesis 1:1

Why This Argument Matters

Of all the arguments for God, the Kalam Cosmological Argument may be the easiest to remember and one of the hardest to answer. The word cosmological simply means it reasons from the cosmos, the universe, back to its origin. The word Kalam comes from medieval Islamic philosophy, where this version of the argument was first sharpened, though its roots reach back to early Christian thinkers.

The argument makes a bold but simple claim: the universe has not always been here. It started. And anything that starts needs something to start it. A bonfire does not light itself, and a song does not play before someone presses play. If the entire universe came into being a finite time ago, then something beyond the universe must have brought it about. As this chapter will show, that something turns out to look a great deal like God.

The beauty of this argument is that it does not begin with the Bible. It begins with two claims most thoughtful people, including many atheists, already accept, and follows them to where they lead. That makes it a powerful starting point in any conversation about whether God exists.

Key Terms

CAUSE means “whatever brings something into existence or makes it happen.”

BEGINS TO EXIST means “comes into being after a time when it did not exist at all.”

CONTINGENT means “able to have been otherwise or not to have existed at all; not self-explaining.”

TRANSCENDENT means “existing beyond or outside something; here, a cause beyond space, time, and matter.”

The Argument in Plain Form

The Kalam is a deductive syllogism, which means that if the premises (the supporting claims) are true, the conclusion must be true. It has just three short steps.

(P1) Whatever begins to exist has a cause.

(P2) The universe began to exist.

(C) Therefore, the universe has a cause.

Once we reach that conclusion, a second step examines what kind of cause this must be. As you will see, the cause has to be outside of space, time, and matter, immensely powerful, and most likely a personal agent. That is what people have always meant by God.

Unpacking the Premises

Premise 1 says that things do not pop into existence from nothing, uncaused. To deny this is to embrace a kind of magic. If something could come from absolutely nothing, with no cause at all, then why don't pianos, elephants, and galaxies appear in your living room at random? Notice that nothing here means truly nothing: not empty space, not a vacuum, not energy, but the total absence of anything. From nothing, nothing comes. Every day of our lives confirms this, and all of science assumes it.

1. Why is it more reasonable to accept Premise 1 than to say things can begin uncaused from nothing?

Premise 2 says the universe had a beginning. We have two independent lines of support. The scientific line: the universe is expanding outward, which means run backward it converges to a beginning point; its usable energy is running down, which could not happen forever; and a well-known theorem in cosmology shows that any expanding universe must have a past boundary. Even scientists who are not believers acknowledge that all the evidence points to a beginning.

The philosophical line: an actual infinite number of past events cannot exist. Imagine a hotel with infinitely many rooms, all full, that can still take in infinitely more guests. Such results are absurd in the real world. And you can never finish counting to infinity by adding one event at a time, so if the past were infinite we could never have arrived at today. Yet here we are. The past must be finite.

2. Give one scientific reason and one philosophical reason that the universe began to exist.

What Kind of Cause? The Step Toward God

The argument does not stop at “the universe has a cause.” We can reason out what that cause must be like. The universe is contingent: it began to exist and could easily have been different or not existed at all, so it is not the kind of thing that explains its own existence. It needs a cause beyond itself. Space, time, and matter all began with the universe, so the cause cannot be made of any of them. Therefore the cause is timeless, spaceless, and immaterial. Bringing all of space, time, matter, and energy into being from nothing requires staggering power, so the cause is enormously powerful.

Most strikingly, the cause is plausibly personal, meaning an agent with a will, not a mindless mechanism. Here is why. A timeless, unchanging set of conditions would produce a timeless, unchanging effect, the way ice kept below freezing stays frozen. So why would an eternal cause produce an effect with a beginning? The best answer is free choice. A person can sit unchanged and then freely decide to stand. Only a personal agent can be an eternal cause that freely brings about a new effect in time. Abstract things like numbers cannot do this, because numbers cause nothing. The remaining candidate is an unembodied mind: a Creator.

3. List the attributes of the cause that the argument establishes, and explain why the cause is most likely personal.

Answering the Objections

Objection 1: *If everything needs a cause, then what caused God?*

This is the most common reply, and it rests on a misreading. Premise 1 does not say “everything has a cause.” It says “whatever begins to exist has a cause.” The two are very different. The premise only applies to things that come into being.

God, by definition, did not begin to exist. He is eternal, without beginning. So the premise simply does not apply to Him, any more than the rule “all bachelors are unmarried” applies to married men. Asking “what caused the uncaused cause?” is like asking “what is north of the North Pole?” The question contains a mistake. Every worldview, including atheism, must stop at something uncaused; the question is only what that something is.

Objection 2: *Quantum physics shows particles popping out of nothing, so things can begin uncaused.*

The so-called quantum vacuum is not nothing. It is a sea of energy and quantum fields, governed by physical laws, with real structure and properties. Particles arising there are like dice rolls: the outcome may be unpredictable, but the dice, the table, and the laws are all still there.

The Kalam asks a deeper question than what happens inside the universe. It asks where the whole physical system, including the vacuum, the fields, and the laws, came from in the first place. Even the cosmologists who build these quantum starting-point models

admit the laws of quantum mechanics had to already be in place. That is exactly what the argument is pointing at.

Objection 3: *At best this proves a cause. It does not prove God.*

The argument establishes far more than a bare cause. As shown above, the cause must be timeless, spaceless, immaterial, enormously powerful, and personal. That is not an arbitrary list; each attribute follows from what it would take to create the universe. To derive all of that and then say “but this isn't God” is like describing an unmarried man and denying you have described a bachelor.

The Kalam is also one piece of a larger cumulative case. It does not have to prove every attribute of God by itself, any more than a fingerprint has to reveal a suspect's hair color to be powerful evidence. Other arguments, such as fine-tuning and the moral argument, fill in the rest of the picture.

Scripture Connection

Look up each passage and write, in your own words, how it relates to this argument. Do not copy the verse; answer briefly.

1. How does this verse describe the beginning of the universe and who caused it?

Genesis 1:1

2. What does this passage say about whether anything came into being without God?

John 1:3

3. How does this verse describe God's relationship to time?

Psalms 90:2

4. What does this passage say was made out of things that are visible?

Hebrews 11:3

Putting It Into Practice: A Sample Dialogue

Below is a model conversation between a Christian and a Skeptic. Each section handles a different objection so you can see how to respond in real life. Read it aloud, then keep it in mind for your own conversations.

Opening the Conversation

Skeptic: I don't see any reason to believe in God. The universe is just here. Why bring God into it?

Christian: Fair question. Let me ask you something simple instead. Do you think things can just pop into existence out of absolutely nothing, with no cause at all?

Skeptic: Well, no, that sounds absurd.

Christian: I agree. So we both accept the first step: whatever begins to exist has a cause. Now, do you think the universe had a beginning, or has it always existed?

When the Skeptic Doubts the Universe Began

Skeptic: Maybe it's eternal. Maybe it always existed and never began.

Christian: That was a popular idea once, but the science moved the other way. The universe is expanding, which points back to a beginning, and its energy is running down, which could not go on forever. Even scientists who aren't believers admit all the evidence points to a beginning. On top of that, an infinite past leads to absurdities, like never being able to reach today by adding one day at a time.

Skeptic: Okay, suppose it did begin. So what?

Christian: Then by the first step, it had a cause. And that cause is where this gets interesting.

When the Skeptic Asks What Caused God

Skeptic: If the universe needs a cause, then your God needs one too. What caused God?

Christian: Good challenge, but notice what the first step actually says. Not "everything has a cause," but "whatever begins to exist has a cause." God never began. He is eternal, so the rule doesn't apply to Him. Asking what caused an eternal being is like asking what is north of the North Pole.

When the Skeptic Says This Isn't God

Skeptic: Even if there's a cause, that's a long way from the God of any religion.

Christian: True, it doesn't prove everything at once. But think about what the cause must be. It made space, time, and matter, so it is beyond all three: timeless, spaceless, immaterial. It is unimaginably powerful. And because an eternal cause freely produced a beginning, it is most likely a personal agent with a will. A timeless, spaceless, immaterial, powerful, personal Creator is exactly what people mean by God. The rest of the picture comes from other arguments.

Landing the Point

Christian: So we started with two things you already accepted, that beginnings have causes and that the universe began, and we followed them honestly to a personal Creator. That's worth sitting with. And it's only the first of several arguments that point the same direction.

Section 1 · Chapter 2

The Contingency Argument

“For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth... All things were created through Him and for Him.”

Colossians 1:16

Why This Argument Matters

The Kalam argument asked whether the universe had a beginning. The Contingency Argument asks a question that is even more basic, and in some ways more profound: why is there anything at all, rather than nothing? This version was sharpened by the philosopher Gottfried Leibniz, and it has a striking feature. It works even if the universe turned out to be eternal. Whether the universe is 13.8 billion years old or has somehow always existed, the question still stands: why does it exist instead of not existing?

The heart of the argument is a simple distinction. Some things exist but did not have to. You exist, but your parents might never have met; the Earth exists, but the solar system could have formed differently. These are contingent things. Other things, if they exist at all, could not have failed to exist; their existence is built into what they are. The argument says the physical universe falls in the first group, and that points to something in the second group standing behind it.

Like the Kalam, this argument does not start with the Bible. It starts with a principle nearly everyone uses every day, that things have explanations, and follows it to a necessary, personal Creator.

Key Terms

CONTINGENT means “able to have been otherwise or not to have existed at all; not self-explaining.”

NECESSARY means “unable to fail to exist; its explanation lies in its own nature.”

EXPLANATION means “a reason why something exists, found either in its own nature or in an outside cause.”

BRUTE FACT means “something said to exist for literally no reason at all, with no explanation of any kind.”

The Argument in Plain Form

This argument has a few more steps than the Kalam, but each one is short. Read them in order and you will see how they lock together.

(P1) Everything that exists has an explanation of its existence, either in the necessity of its own nature or in an external cause.

(P2) The universe is contingent; it does not exist by a necessity of its own nature.

(P3) If the universe has an explanation of its existence, that explanation is a necessary, eternal, immaterial, powerful, personal cause: God.

(P4) The universe exists.

(C) Therefore, the explanation of the universe is a necessary, eternal, immaterial, powerful, personal Creator: God.

Unpacking the Premises

Premise 1 says that existing things do not just sit there with no reason whatsoever. There are only two ways anything can be explained: either it exists because it had to (its own nature requires it, the way the number seven cannot fail to be what it is), or it exists because something outside it brought it about (the way a house exists because a builder made it). Notice this premise does not say everything has an outside cause. It leaves room for a being that explains itself. Imagine finding a glowing ball in the woods; you would naturally ask where it came from. Making the ball bigger, even as big as the universe, does not make that question go away.

1. What are the two kinds of explanation something can have, and give an example of each?

Premise 2 says the universe is contingent. We can coherently imagine there being no physical universe at all, or a universe with different laws and constants. Nothing about matter, space, or time announces “I must exist.” The universe also began to exist with very specific, finely set starting conditions, and a thing that begins and could have been different is the very picture of a contingent thing, not a necessary one.

2. Give one reason to think the universe is contingent rather than necessary.

Premises 3 and 4 finish the chain. The universe exists (P4), and it cannot explain itself, so its explanation lies outside it. That cause cannot be one more physical thing, because every physical thing is already part of the universe. It must be beyond space, time, and matter: timeless, spaceless, and immaterial. To avoid simply pushing the question back forever, the cause must be necessary, a being whose existence is explained by its own nature. And it must be personal, because only a free agent can explain why an eternal,

unchanging cause would produce a universe rather than sitting changeless forever. Numbers and other abstract things are immaterial and necessary, but they cause nothing. A mind is the one immaterial thing we know that actually acts.

3. Why must the explanation of the universe be something beyond the physical universe?

Answering the Objections

Objection 1: *Maybe the universe is just a brute fact. It exists with no explanation, and that's the end of it.*

In every other area of life we refuse to accept “it just exists for no reason.” If a new car appeared in your driveway overnight, “it's a brute fact” would not satisfy you. Making the object larger does not remove the need for an explanation; it makes the need stronger. The universe is the largest object of all, so calling it a brute fact gives up on explanation at the exact point it matters most.

Every worldview has to stop somewhere. The question is where it is reasonable to stop. Stopping at a contingent universe leaves the obvious question hanging: why does this exist rather than nothing? Stopping at a necessary being answers it, because a necessary being, by its very nature, could not have failed to exist. That is a better resting place for the chain of explanation.

Objection 2: *If everything needs an explanation, then God needs one too. Why is God an exception?*

Premise 1 does not say everything needs an outside cause. It says everything has an explanation, either in an outside cause or in its own nature. Those are two different routes. Contingent things take the first route; a necessary being takes the second.

God is proposed as a necessary being, one whose explanation lies in His own nature: He cannot fail to exist. So asking “what caused God?” misunderstands the claim, much like asking “what is north of the North Pole?” The universe, by contrast, is contingent, so it does need an outside explanation. The two are simply different kinds of being, and the argument treats each according to what it is.

Objection 3: *Perhaps the universe itself is the necessary being, so it needs no outside explanation.*

To be necessary is a very strong status: the thing must exist in every possible scenario and could not have been different in any way. The universe does not look like that. Its constants could have had other values, its laws could have been different, and we can coherently picture no universe at all. Physicists routinely model universes with different settings, which shows those settings are not forced.

On top of that, the universe began to exist and started in one highly specific, finely set condition out of countless possible ones. Necessary things do not begin, and they cannot be one option among many. Simply declaring the universe necessary to block the

argument is backwards; we should follow the evidence, and the evidence points to contingency.

Scripture Connection

Look up each passage and write, in your own words, how it relates to this argument. Do not copy the verse; answer briefly.

1. What does this passage say about why all things exist and who holds them together?

Colossians 1:16-17

2. How does this verse describe God as existing before and apart from creation?

Psalms 90:2

3. What reason does this passage give for why all things exist?

Revelation 4:11

4. How does this passage describe God as the source of all existence?

Acts 17:25

Putting It Into Practice: A Sample Dialogue

Below is a model conversation between a Christian and a Skeptic. Each section handles a different objection so you can see how to respond in real life. Read it aloud, then keep it in mind for your own conversations.

Opening the Conversation

Skeptic: Even if the universe began, maybe it just exists. I don't see why it needs God behind it.

Christian: Let me ask it a different way. Forget for a moment whether the universe began. Just ask: why is there a universe at all, rather than nothing? Do you think that's a fair question to ask?

Skeptic: I suppose so, but maybe there's no answer. Maybe it just is.

Christian: That's the thing I want to test. Do you accept that things which exist usually have some explanation, either in their own nature or in something outside them?

Skeptic: Sure, that's how we reason about everything else.

When the Skeptic Calls It a Brute Fact

Skeptic: But the universe could be the exception. It could just exist with no explanation, a brute fact.

Christian: We never accept that for anything else. If a mountain appeared overnight, “it’s just a brute fact” wouldn’t fly. Making the thing bigger doesn’t remove the question; it sharpens it. The universe is the biggest thing of all, so it’s the last place we should give up asking why.

When the Skeptic Asks Why God Is Different

Skeptic: Then your God needs an explanation too. You can’t just exempt Him.

Christian: I’m not exempting Him by special pleading. The principle says things are explained either by an outside cause or by their own nature. The universe is contingent, so it needs an outside cause. God is proposed as a necessary being, explained by His own nature. Asking what caused a necessary being is like asking what’s north of the North Pole.

When the Skeptic Says the Universe Is Necessary

Skeptic: Fine, but why not say the universe itself is the necessary thing?

Christian: Because the universe doesn’t act necessary. Its constants and laws could have been different, and we can picture no universe at all. Physicists model other possible universes all the time. A truly necessary thing couldn’t have been any other way. The universe could have been, so it’s contingent, and contingent things point beyond themselves.

Landing the Point

Christian: So starting from something you already accept, that things have explanations, we followed it to a necessary, immaterial, personal cause behind the whole universe. That’s a serious clue about what’s really there. And it lines up with the Creator the next arguments will fill in further.

Section 1 · Chapter 3

The Fine-Tuning Argument

“For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens, who is God, who formed the earth and made it... He did not create it in vain, who formed it to be inhabited.”

Isaiah 45:18

Why This Argument Matters

The first two arguments asked why there is a universe at all. The Fine-Tuning Argument asks a different question: why is the universe the kind of place where life is even possible? Modern physics has discovered something remarkable. The universe runs on a set of numbers, the strength of gravity, the force that holds atoms together, the rate the universe expands, and many more. Change almost any of them by a hair, and you get a dead universe: no stars, no atoms, no chemistry, nothing alive anywhere, ever.

The numbers we actually have sit inside an unbelievably narrow band that permits life. Picture a giant control panel with dozens of dials, each able to turn across a vast range. Almost every setting produces a lifeless cosmos. Yet every dial is set, all at once, exactly where it must be for life to exist. That precise setting is what scientists mean by fine-tuning. It is not a religious word; it is a description of the data.

The argument simply asks the obvious question. When we find dials set that precisely, there are only a few possible explanations, and this chapter walks through each one to see which best fits the facts.

Key Terms

FINE-TUNING means “the fact that the universe's constants and starting conditions fall in the narrow range that permits life.”

CONSTANTS means “the fixed numbers in the laws of physics, like the strength of gravity, that the equations do not set on their own.”

ANTHROPIC PRINCIPLE means “the point that observers can only find themselves in a universe that allows observers to exist.”

MULTIVERSE means “a proposed vast collection of other universes, each with different constants.”

The Argument in Plain Form

This argument works by elimination. It lists every possible explanation, rules out the ones that fail, and accepts what remains.

(P1) The fine-tuning of the universe is due to either physical necessity, chance, or design.

(P2) The fine-tuning is not due to physical necessity or chance.

(P3) If the fine-tuning is due neither to physical necessity nor to chance, then it is due to design.

(C) Therefore, the fine-tuning of the universe is due to design, which points to a transcendent, intelligent Designer of immense power: God.

Unpacking the Premises

Premise 1 simply lists the options. Either the constants had to be exactly what they are (physical necessity), or they landed in the life-permitting range by luck (chance), or someone set them on purpose (design). Physical necessity is the trickiest of the three, so here is what it means. To say something is true by physical necessity is to say the laws of nature force it to be that way, and it could not have been otherwise. For example, water freezing at zero degrees Celsius is fixed by the nature of water molecules; given the laws we have, it could not freeze at fifty degrees instead. So the question for the constants is: were they locked in like the freezing point of water, unable to be anything else? Or could they have taken other values? These three options, necessity, chance, and design, appear to cover the whole field. Unless someone can name a fourth option, one of these must be the answer.

1. What are the three possible explanations for fine-tuning?

Premise 2 rules out the first two. Physical necessity fails because the equations of physics work fine with other values plugged in. Think of the equations as a recipe and a constant like gravity as one of the ingredient amounts. The recipe does not break if you change the amount; you just get a different result. A physicist can take the equation for gravity, double the value of the gravitational constant, and the math runs perfectly, predicting a (lifeless) universe where stars burn out too fast. Nothing in the equations forces the life-permitting value; they accept many values without complaint, and our best theories actually allow a huge number of different possible universes. So unlike water, whose freezing point is locked in by its nature, the constants are not locked in at all. Chance fails for a different reason: the life-permitting range is so vanishingly small. Imagine a sheet of paper covered with dots, each a possible universe; you color the life-permitting ones red and the rest blue. You get an endless sea of blue with a few tiny red specks. Blind luck landing on red is not a serious explanation.

2. Why does the chance explanation fail to account for fine-tuning?

Premise 3 ties the first two together. If the values were not forced and were not luck, the only option left is design: an intelligent agent chose them. This is the same reasoning we use everywhere else. We detect design whenever we see something both highly unlikely and matching a meaningful pattern, what philosophers call specified complexity. A single arrowhead in a field tells an archaeologist a mind was at work. Fine-tuning has exactly that signature: wildly improbable, yet precisely fitted for life. So the conclusion follows: the Designer must be beyond the universe, immensely powerful, and intelligent enough to set the whole cosmos for a purpose. That is what people mean by God.

3. What two features make us recognize something as designed, and how does fine-tuning show both?

Answering the Objections

Objection 1: *We shouldn't be surprised the universe permits life. If it didn't, we wouldn't be here to notice. That's all the explanation we need.*

This point is true but it explains nothing. Picture a firing squad of a hundred expert marksmen. They all fire, and somehow they all miss. You survive. Now, would it satisfy you to say, "I shouldn't be surprised they missed, because if they hadn't, I wouldn't be here to wonder about it"? Of course not. It is still astonishing that they all missed, and it cries out for an explanation.

The same is true of the universe. Yes, we could only ever find ourselves in a life-permitting universe. But that does nothing to explain why a life-permitting universe exists at all. It answers the wrong question. To actually explain the data, you still need either countless other universes or a Designer.

Objection 2: *Maybe there are countless universes with different settings. We just happen to live in one that permits life, so no God is needed.*

There is no direct evidence for these other universes; by definition we cannot observe them. We are being asked to accept a near-infinite number of unseen worlds just to avoid a Designer, which is hardly the simpler explanation. And any machine that cranks out universes would itself need the right properties to do so, which just pushes the fine-tuning back a step rather than removing it.

There is also a deeper problem. If we really were a random member of a vast multiverse, the math says we should almost certainly be a tiny, short-lived fluctuation, not observers in a stable, 13.8-billion-year-old cosmos full of galaxies. Since that is not what we observe, our own existence actually counts against the multiverse, not for it.

Objection 3: *You're assuming life has to look like us. Maybe totally different life could exist with different constants.*

The argument is not about life like us. It is about any system complex enough to store information and sustain itself. The trouble is that most changes to the constants do not just rule out our kind of life; they wipe out the basics any conceivable life would need.

Small changes leave you with no elements beyond hydrogen, no chemistry at all, no stable stars for energy, or a universe that collapses before anything can form.

Imagining an exotic life form does not escape this. Whatever it was made of, it would still need stable structure, some way to store information, and enough time to develop, and each of those requires the constants to be finely set. The life-permitting range is already drawn as broadly as physics allows, and it is still tiny.

Scripture Connection

Look up each passage and write, in your own words, how it relates to this argument. Do not copy the verse; answer briefly.

1. What does this passage say about why God formed the earth?

Isaiah 45:18

2. How do the heavens reveal something about their Maker?

Psalms 19:1

3. What does this passage say God set in place and ordered?

Jeremiah 33:25

4. How does this passage describe God upholding and ordering creation?

Job 38:4-7

Putting It Into Practice: A Sample Dialogue

Below is a model conversation between a Christian and a Skeptic. Each section handles a different objection so you can see how to respond in real life. Read it aloud, then keep it in mind for your own conversations.

Opening the Conversation

Skeptic: I get that the universe exists, but I don't see why that means it was designed.

Christian: Set the question of design aside for a second. Did you know the universe runs on a set of fixed numbers, like the strength of gravity, and that if you nudge almost any of them even slightly, you get a dead universe with no stars or atoms at all?

Skeptic: I've heard something like that. So what?

Christian: So the numbers we actually have sit in an incredibly narrow life-permitting range. There are only three ways to explain that: the numbers had to be that way, they hit it by luck, or someone set them. Which do you find most likely?

When the Skeptic Appeals to the Anthropic Principle

Skeptic: Easy. We couldn't be here to ask the question unless the universe allowed life. So there's nothing to explain.

Christian: That's true, but it doesn't actually explain anything. Imagine a hundred marksmen fire at you and all miss. "I couldn't notice if I were dead" doesn't explain why they all missed. It's still astonishing, and it still needs a reason. Same with the universe.

When the Skeptic Appeals to the Multiverse

Skeptic: But maybe there are zillions of universes, and we're just in the lucky one.

Christian: Maybe, but we can't see any of them, so that's a huge assumption made just to avoid a Designer. And whatever produces all those universes would need fine-tuning of its own. Worse, if we were a random universe among countless others, we should expect to be a tiny short-lived fluke, not a stable cosmos full of galaxies. Our own existence argues against it.

When the Skeptic Says Life Could Be Different

Skeptic: You're assuming life has to be like us. Maybe weird life could exist with different settings.

Christian: The argument isn't about life like us. Change the constants and you usually lose chemistry itself, or stars, or any stability at all. Whatever exotic life you imagine still needs structure, information, and time, and all three require finely set constants. You can't dodge the tuning by changing the creature.

Landing the Point

Christian: So when we line up the options honestly, necessity and chance both fall short, which leaves design. A universe dialed in for life points to a mind behind it. That fits exactly with the powerful Creator the earlier arguments pointed to.

Section 1 · Chapter 4

The Moral Argument

“For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law... they show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness.”

Romans 2:14-15

Why This Argument Matters

The earlier arguments reasoned from the universe outside us. The Moral Argument reasons from something inside us: our deep, unshakable sense that some things are really right and others really wrong. Not just unfashionable or frowned upon, but genuinely wrong. Torturing a child for fun is not merely something most people dislike; it is evil, and it would still be evil even if every person on earth were brainwashed into approving it.

That conviction is so basic we rarely question it. But it raises a question that is hard to answer without God. If we are just rearranged stardust, accidental animals on a small planet in a vast and indifferent universe, where do real moral obligations come from? A herd of animals has habits and instincts, but no duties. The Moral Argument says that the existence of genuine right and wrong points beyond nature to a moral lawgiver.

This argument has a memorable shape. It is a clean three-step proof, and once you see how the steps connect, you can carry it anywhere. We will walk through each step, then handle the objections people raise most often.

Key Terms

OBJECTIVE means “true or binding no matter what anyone thinks or feels about it.”

MORAL VALUES means “what is good or bad; the worth of something.”

MORAL DUTIES means “what is right or wrong; what we are obligated to do.”

MODUS TOLLENS means “a valid argument form: if A then B; but not B; therefore not A.”

The Argument in Plain Form

This is one of the tidiest arguments in the book. It has just three steps, and the logic is airtight.

(P1) If God does not exist, objective moral values and duties do not exist.

(P2) Objective moral values and duties do exist.

(C) Therefore, God exists.

The logical form is called modus tollens. It works like this: if A is true then B is true; but B is false; therefore A is false. Here, if there is no God then there is no objective morality; but there is objective morality; therefore it is false that there is no God. In other words, God exists. The form is valid, so the only way to resist the conclusion is to deny one of the two premises.

Unpacking the Premises

Premise 1 claims that without God, there is no solid ground for objective morality. On a purely natural view, human beings are one more animal species thrown up by a blind process that was never aiming at us. On that picture, our moral feelings are just instincts that helped our ancestors survive, no more true or false than our taste for sugar. There is no one to whom a duty is owed and no lawgiver who issues it. Several leading atheist thinkers have honestly admitted this: that if nature is all there is, morality is ultimately a useful illusion, not a set of real obligations. The point of Premise 1 is not that atheists cannot be good people; it is that atheism gives no foundation for calling anything truly good in the first place.

1. Why does Premise 1 say that without God there is no foundation for objective morality?

Premise 2 claims that objective moral values and duties really do exist. The evidence is our own moral experience, which is as direct as our experience of the physical world. We do not infer that the Holocaust was wrong from some theory; we simply see it, the same way we see that a tree is in front of us. And notice that even people who say morality is just opinion do not live that way. They still get furious when treated unfairly, still praise heroes and condemn villains, still insist others ought to behave better. To deny Premise 2 you have to say there is nothing really wrong with genocide or cruelty, only that you happen to dislike them. That is far harder to believe than the premise itself.

2. What everyday evidence shows that we really do believe in objective morality?

Notice the difference between two things this argument keeps separate. Moral values are about what is good or bad, the worth of a thing. Moral duties are about what is right or wrong, what we are obligated to do. It would be good to become a doctor, but you have

no duty to; you could become a teacher instead and that is good too. Duties are the sharper category, because a duty is something owed, and something can only be owed to someone. That is a clue Premise 1 leans on: real obligations point to a personal source.

3. What is the difference between a moral value and a moral duty?

Answering the Objections

Objection 1: *Atheists can be good, kind people without believing in God. So God isn't needed for morality.*

This is true, but it answers a question the argument is not asking. There are two separate questions here. One is whether a person must believe in God to live a good life or to recognize that cruelty is wrong. The answer is plainly no. The other is what makes morality objectively real in the first place if God does not exist. That second question is the one the argument is about, and the objection never touches it.

Think of it this way: you do not need to believe in the Big Bang to see that the universe exists, but the universe still needs an explanation. In the same way, an atheist can clearly recognize that torture is wrong without believing in God, but the question remains what makes it actually wrong. In fact, Christianity predicts that everyone can recognize right and wrong, because the moral law is written on every human heart. An atheist living morally is exactly what the Christian view expects, not evidence against it.

Objection 2: *Is something good because God commands it, or does God command it because it's good? Either way, God isn't the foundation of morality.*

This famous puzzle is called the Euthyphro dilemma, and it offers two options that both seem bad for the believer. If things are good only because God says so, then morality looks arbitrary, as if God could have made cruelty good on a whim. But if God commands things because they are already good, then goodness seems to float above God, independent of Him.

The answer is that there is a third option the dilemma leaves out: God commands what is good because God Himself is good. Goodness is not a standard above God that He consults, and it is not an arbitrary decision He makes; it is rooted in His own unchanging nature. He is essentially loving, just, and faithful, so He cannot command cruelty any more than He could stop being Himself. Compare it to a standard ruler that defines what counts as an inch. The ruler is not accurate because it matches some other inch; it is the measure. In the same way, God's nature is not good because it matches an outside standard; it is the standard.

Objection 3: *Evolution and culture fully explain our morality. We don't need God to explain where it came from.*

Even if evolution explains how we came to have moral feelings, that is a different question from whether those feelings are true. Explaining where a belief came from does not tell you if it is correct. Evolution may have given us the feeling that cruelty is wrong, but the

argument is about whether cruelty is really wrong, and an account of our feelings cannot settle that.

There is a deeper problem too. Evolution selects for survival, not for truth. A moral instinct gets passed on because it helped our ancestors reproduce, whether or not it lines up with any real moral fact. So if blind evolution is the whole story, we have no reason to trust that our moral sense tracks genuine right and wrong at all; it only tracks what once helped us survive. The believer can happily say God used natural processes to shape creatures who perceive real moral truth. The naturalist is left explaining a feeling, never a genuine obligation.

Scripture Connection

Look up each passage and write, in your own words, how it relates to this argument. Do not copy the verse; answer briefly.

1. What does this passage say is written on the hearts of all people?

Romans 2:14-15

2. How does this passage describe God as the standard of what is good?

Psalms 19:7-9

3. What does this passage say about calling evil good and good evil?

Isaiah 5:20

4. How does this passage connect God's character to how we should live?

1 Peter 1:15-16

Putting It Into Practice: A Sample Dialogue

Below is a model conversation between a Christian and a Skeptic. Each section handles a different objection so you can see how to respond in real life. Read it aloud, then keep it in mind for your own conversations.

Opening the Conversation

Skeptic: I don't need God to be a good person. Plenty of atheists are kinder than plenty of religious people.

Christian: I completely agree with you, actually. The argument isn't that atheists can't be good. Let me ask a different question. Do you think some things are really wrong, like torturing a child for fun, wrong no matter what anyone thinks?

Skeptic: Of course. That's obviously wrong.

Christian: Good, so do I. The hard question is this: if we're just animals produced by a blind process, what makes it actually wrong, instead of just something we happen to dislike?

When the Skeptic Says Atheists Can Be Good

Skeptic: But I just told you, people can be good without God. Doesn't that settle it?

Christian: It settles a different question. Whether you can recognize right and wrong without believing in God, sure, you can. But that's about how we know morality. My question is what makes it real in the first place. You can see the universe exists without believing in the Big Bang, but the universe still needs an explanation. Same with morality.

When the Skeptic Raises the Euthyphro Dilemma

Skeptic: Here's the problem. Is something good because God commands it, or does God command it because it's good? Either way you lose.

Christian: There's a third option the dilemma skips. God commands what's good because He Himself is good. It's not an arbitrary decree, and it's not a standard floating above Him. His own nature is the standard, like a ruler that defines an inch. He can't command cruelty because that would go against who He is.

When the Skeptic Appeals to Evolution

Skeptic: But evolution explains all of this. We feel things are wrong because that helped our ancestors survive.

Christian: That might explain why we have the feeling. It doesn't tell us the feeling is true. And here's the catch: evolution rewards survival, not truth. So if that's the whole story, you have no reason to trust your moral sense actually tracks real right and wrong. It just tracks what kept your ancestors alive.

Landing the Point

Christian: So we both agree some things are really wrong. The question is what grounds that. A real obligation has to be owed to someone, and that points to a personal source: a moral lawgiver. That's the same God the earlier arguments pointed to, now showing up as the foundation of goodness itself.

Section 1 · Chapter 5

The Modal Ontological Argument

“God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ And He said, ‘Thus you shall say to the children of Israel: I AM has sent me to you.’”

Exodus 3:14

Why This Argument Matters

This is the strangest and most powerful argument in the section, and at first it can feel like a magic trick. It claims that if God's existence is even possible, then God must actually exist. No telescopes, no fossils, no physics, just careful thinking about what kind of being God would be. Many people's first reaction is suspicion, and that is fair. But the argument has been refined for over nine hundred years, and the modern version is taken seriously by top philosophers.

Here is the core idea in one breath. God, if He exists, is not the kind of being who just happens to exist, the way you or I happen to exist. He would be a necessary being, one that could not fail to exist under any circumstances. Now think about what that means. A being that cannot fail to exist either exists in every possible situation or in none at all. There is no middle ground where it exists “if things go well.” So the only way God could fail to exist is if God were flatly impossible. And if God is not impossible, if His existence is even coherent, then He exists. That is the whole engine of the argument.

This chapter goes slower than the others, because the ideas behind it are unfamiliar. Take the key terms below seriously; once they click, the argument falls into place.

Key Terms

POSSIBLE WORLD means “a complete, consistent way reality could have been; the actual world is one of them.”

NECESSARY BEING means “a being that cannot fail to exist; it exists in every possible world.”

MAXIMALLY GREAT BEING means “a being with the highest possible power, knowledge, and goodness, in every possible world.”

METAPHYSICALLY POSSIBLE means “genuinely able to be, with no hidden contradiction; not just ‘for all I know.’”

First, Two Ideas You Need

Before the steps, grasp two ideas. The first is a possible world. This is not a parallel universe in science fiction. It is simply a complete, consistent way reality could have been. A world where the dinosaurs never died out is a possible world. A world where you ordered tea instead of coffee this morning is a possible world. The reality we actually live in is also a possible world, the actual one. The only thing that does not count as a possible world is something with a contradiction in it, like a world containing a round square. In this language, to say something is possible just means it shows up in at least one possible world.

The second idea is necessary existence. Most things exist contingently: they happen to exist, but they could have failed to. You, this book, the moon, all could have not existed. A necessary being is different. It exists in every possible world, with no exceptions, because its non-existence is impossible. The argument's claim is that God, if He exists at all, is this second kind of being. And that single fact is what makes the argument work.

The Argument in Plain Form

The argument has several short steps. Do not let the number of steps worry you; most of them are tiny moves, and the only one that takes real thought is the first.

(P1) It is possible that a maximally great being exists.

(P2) So a maximally great being exists in some possible world.

(P3) If a maximally great being exists in some possible world, it exists in every possible world.

(P4) If it exists in every possible world, it exists in the actual world.

(C) Therefore, a maximally great being exists.

Unpacking the Premises

Premise 1 is where all the weight rests; the rest follow almost automatically. It claims only that a maximally great being is possible, that the idea contains no hidden contradiction. This is a modest-sounding claim, but it is the whole ballgame. Notice it is not enough to say “for all I know, God might not exist.” That is uncertainty in your head, not a fact about reality. Compare the number pi: before it was proven, someone might say “for all I know, pi could be a simple fraction,” but pi never could have been; its nature ruled it out. The question is whether God is genuinely possible, like a prime number, or secretly impossible, like a round square. After nine centuries of trying, no one has shown the idea of God contains a contradiction.

1. Why is Premise 1 the most important step, and what would someone have to prove to deny it?

Premises 2 through 4 are the easy part. Premise 2 just restates Premise 1 in the new vocabulary: if a maximally great being is possible, then it shows up in at least one possible world. Premise 3 is the heart of the engine: because a maximally great being would be a necessary being, existing in one possible world means existing in all of them; a being that cannot fail to exist cannot exist in just a few worlds. Premise 4 simply notes that the actual world is one of those worlds, so the being exists right here. It is like saying a law that holds in every country must hold in yours, since your country is one of them.

2. Why does existing in one possible world mean a maximally great being exists in all of them?

Step back and see the shape. The only escape from this conclusion is to deny Premise 1, to insist that a maximally great being is not even possible. But that is a bold claim. The denier is no longer saying “I’m not convinced God exists.” They are now committed to saying God is downright impossible, as impossible as a square circle, and they would have to point to the contradiction that makes it so. That is a far heavier burden than most skeptics realize they have taken on.

3. What strong claim must a person defend in order to reject this argument?

Answering the Objections

Objection 1: *You're just defining God into existence with clever wording. I could define anything into existence this way.*

The argument does not say “God exists by definition” and stop. It asks a real question: is the idea of a maximally great being coherent, or does it hide a contradiction? If the idea is coherent, then because such a being would exist necessarily, possibility leads to actual existence. The work is not done by a definition; it is done by the special nature of necessary existence. You cannot pull the same trick with ordinary things, because ordinary things do not exist necessarily.

This is why the argument shifts the conversation in a helpful way. It is no longer “does God probably exist?” but “is the very idea of God coherent?” Anyone who admits the idea of God is at least coherent has, perhaps without realizing it, conceded the step that makes the rest follow.

Objection 2: *Then I can prove a perfect island exists the same way: it's possible, so it must exist.*

This is the oldest objection to the argument, and it fails for a clear reason. An island has no built-in ceiling. You can always imagine one more palm tree, one more beach, a little more beauty, so there is no such thing as a greatest possible island; the idea never settles on a maximum. The same goes for a perfect pizza or a perfect car. These are contingent things whose good qualities can always be nudged higher.

A maximally great being is different because its properties have real ceilings. Knowing every truth cannot be topped; having all possible power cannot be topped; being perfectly good cannot be topped. More importantly, an island is not the kind of thing that could exist necessarily; islands depend on oceans, weather, and geology, so they exist in some worlds and not others. Necessary existence is built into the idea of a maximally great being, but it makes no sense for an island. The parody only sounds clever until you notice it is missing the one feature that drives the whole argument.

Objection 3: *Even if it works, this only gets you some abstract 'great being,' not the God of the Bible.*

That is correct, and it is exactly what the argument is meant to do. It is not designed to deliver the full God of Scripture in one stroke. It establishes that a necessary being with maximal power, knowledge, and goodness actually exists. That alone is no small thing: it rules out atheism, it rules out a finite or limited god, and it rules out many gods, since two beings cannot each have all the power.

From there, the other arguments fill in the portrait. The cosmological arguments show this being is the cause of everything else. The moral argument shows it is the ground of goodness. The fine-tuning argument shows it is a brilliant designer. And the historical case for Jesus addresses which faith describes this God truly. The ontological argument lays one solid stone in a much larger foundation.

Scripture Connection

Look up each passage and write, in your own words, how it relates to this argument. Do not copy the verse; answer briefly.

1. How does God describe His own existence here, and how does that relate to a necessary being?

Exodus 3:14

2. What does this passage say about God existing before and beyond all things?

Psalms 90:2

3. How does this passage describe God as the greatest, with none above Him?

Hebrews 6:13

4. What does this passage say about God upholding and sustaining all that exists?

Colossians 1:17

Putting It Into Practice: A Sample Dialogue

Below is a model conversation between a Christian and a Skeptic. Each section handles a different objection so you can see how to respond in real life. Read it aloud, then keep it in mind for your own conversations.

Opening the Conversation

Skeptic: I've heard there's an argument that claims God exists just from logic. That sounds like a word game.

Christian: I get the suspicion, but hear it out. Would you agree that God, if He exists, wouldn't just happen to exist like a rock or a person? He'd be the kind of being that couldn't fail to exist, a necessary being.

Skeptic: I suppose, if He existed at all, that's the idea of God.

Christian: Right. Now a being that can't fail to exist either exists in every possible situation or in none at all. There's no halfway. So the only way God could fail to exist is if He were actually impossible. Do you think the idea of God is impossible, like a square circle?

When the Skeptic Says It's a Word Trick

Skeptic: This still feels like defining God into being. I could define anything into existence.

Christian: Not really, because the work isn't done by the definition. It's done by one special feature: necessary existence. Ordinary things don't have it, so you can't run this on them. The real question the argument puts on the table is just whether the idea of God is coherent. If you grant it's even coherent, the rest follows.

When the Skeptic Raises the Perfect Island

Skeptic: Then I'll prove a perfect island exists. It's possible, so it must exist.

Christian: Nice try, but an island has no maximum. You can always add another palm tree, so there's no greatest possible island to begin with. And an island isn't the kind of thing that exists necessarily; it depends on oceans and weather. The argument only works for a being whose greatness has real ceilings and whose existence is necessary. An island has neither.

When the Skeptic Says This Isn't the Christian God

Skeptic: Even if it works, you've got some abstract great being, not the God you actually believe in.

Christian: Agreed, and I'm not claiming more than that. This shows a necessary, all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good being exists. That already rules out atheism and a limited god. Filling in the rest, that He's the Creator, the source of goodness, the God of Jesus, comes from the other arguments and the historical evidence. This is one stone in the foundation, not the whole building.

Landing the Point

Christian: So the whole thing comes down to one question: is God even possible? If you can't show He's impossible, and no one has in nine centuries of trying, then the most reasonable thing is to grant He's possible. And once you grant that, a necessary being follows all the way into the real world.

Section 2

Christian Evidences

“For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty.”

2 Peter 1:16

Section 1 argued, from reason and the world, that a powerful, personal Creator exists. That is a vital first step, but it is not yet the God of the Bible. A skeptic could accept every one of those arguments and still ask: even if some God exists, why think it is the God of Christianity, and why think He has done anything in history?

Section 2 answers that question. Here we move from “a God exists” to “this God has acted, in real time and real places, supremely in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.” The approach is no longer purely philosophical; it is historical. We will treat the Gospels as we would treat any ancient sources, weigh the evidence for what happened, and follow it where it leads. The central claim of Christianity is not a timeless idea but an event: that Jesus rose from the dead. If that event happened, everything changes.

Chapters in This Section

- **Chapter 6:** The Gospels as Real History, Part 1 — are the Gospels reliable historical sources?
- **Chapter 7:** The Gospels as Real History, Part 2 — are the Gospels reliable historical sources?
- **Chapter 8:** The Resurrection: The A.L.I.V.E. Argument — a memorable case for the resurrection.
- **Chapter 9:** The Resurrection: The Minimal Facts Argument — the facts even skeptics grant.
- **Chapter 10:** The Resurrection: Competing Hypotheses, Part 1 — weighing the natural explanations.
- **Chapter 11:** The Resurrection: Competing Hypotheses, Part 2 — weighing the natural explanations.
- **Chapter 12:** Harmonizing the Resurrection Accounts — do the Gospel reports contradict?

Section 2 · Chapter 6

The Gospels as Real History, Part 1

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled... we declare to you.”

1 John 1:1, 3

Why This Argument Matters

Everything in Section 2 depends on a single question: can we trust the Gospels? If they are reliable reports of what really happened, then their claims about Jesus, including his resurrection, deserve serious attention. If they are legends written long after the fact by people who did not know him, we can set them aside. So before we argue about the resurrection, we have to ask whether the documents reporting it are good history.

The test we will use is not a special religious test. It is the ordinary test historians and courts apply to any document claiming to record real events: does it show the marks of genuine eyewitness testimony? A real witness gets the small, hard-to-fake things right, the local geography, the customs, the names, the offhand details, in a way an inventor working long afterward cannot. This chapter and the next examine eight such marks. No single one settles the matter, but together they build a powerful cumulative case.

This is Part 1, covering the first four marks; Part 2 covers the rest. Like a detective building a case, each clue adds weight, until the pile is hard to explain unless the witnesses were really there.

Key Terms

EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY means “a report from someone who personally saw or heard the events described.”

CUMULATIVE CASE means “an argument whose strength comes from many independent pieces of evidence pointing the same way.”

UNDESIGNED COINCIDENCE means “a small, unplanned way two accounts fit together, each supplying what the other leaves out.”

SYNOPTIC GOSPELS means “Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which share much material; John stands apart.”

The Case in Plain Form

This is not a short syllogism but a cumulative historical case built from eight marks of eyewitness testimony. Here are all eight in brief; this chapter teaches the first four, and Part 2 teaches the rest.

1. **Accurate locations and rulers** — accurate geography, distances, and rulers.
2. **Correct customs and culture** — the customs, disputes, prejudices, and names of the time, exactly right.
3. **Undesigned coincidences** — accounts that interlock in small, unplanned ways.
4. **Unnecessary details** — vivid, pointless specifics that memory keeps and inventors drop.
5. **Unexplained allusions** — references the audience could not follow. (Part 2)
6. **Reconcilable variation** — differences in incidentals, agreement on substance. (Part 2)
7. **Unified personalities** — supporting characters with consistent personalities. (Part 2)
8. **The unmistakable Jesus** — the same distinctive Jesus across all four Gospels. (Part 2)

The full case concludes, in Part 2, that the Gospels are reliable historical records of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Mark 1: Accurate Locations and Rulers

In a world without maps, atlases, or search engines, getting the geography and politics of a distant time and place right was nearly impossible to fake. The Gospels do it constantly. Luke opens John the Baptist's ministry by naming seven different rulers all holding office at the same moment, a tight, specific snapshot of the political map that only someone who knew the period could produce. Outside historians and inscriptions confirm them.

One case is famous. Luke names a ruler called Lysanias over a region called Abilene. For years critics said Luke blundered, because the only Lysanias they knew of had died decades earlier. Then an inscription turned up naming a second, later Lysanias ruling that very region in exactly Luke's time frame. Luke was right; the critics were wrong. The same pattern holds for the Pool of Bethesda, which John says had five covered porches. Critics called it a made-up symbol, until archaeologists dug up the pool and found a twin pool with exactly five porches, just as John described.

1. Look up **Luke 3:1-2**. Which rulers does Luke name, and why would this kind of precise detail be hard for a later inventor to fake?
-
-

Mark 2: Correct Customs and Culture

Customs are even harder to fake than geography, because you cannot look them up; you have to live them. The Gospels casually get right the legal debates, religious rituals, regional prejudices, and even the naming habits of first-century Jewish life. They mention, without explaining, that Judeans looked down on Galileans for their accent, a prejudice confirmed in later Jewish writings. They show Jesus arguing about whether circumcision is allowed on the Sabbath, a real rabbinic dispute of the period.

One quiet detail is striking. Scholars have counted the most common Jewish names in first-century Palestine from tombstones and records. The names in the Gospels match those frequencies closely, and they match the Palestinian pattern specifically, not the different pattern Jews used in Egypt. The Gospels even add extra labels (“Simon the leper,” “Mary Magdalene”) exactly where the name was common and needed distinguishing, and drop them where the name was rare. That is not the work of a distant forger; that is how people who lived there actually talked.

2. Look up *Matthew 26:73*. What does the crowd's reaction to Peter reveal about Galilean speech, and why does that kind of detail point to real cultural knowledge?

Mark 3: Undesigned Coincidences

An undesigned coincidence is a small, unplanned way two accounts fit together, where each supplies a piece the other is missing. Real witnesses produce these constantly, because they are describing the same reality from different angles. Inventors do not, because they cannot coordinate details they never planned.

Here is the classic example. In John, before feeding the five thousand, Jesus turns to one particular disciple, Philip, and asks where to buy bread. John never says why Philip. But Luke, in a totally separate passage, mentions the feeding happened near the town of Bethsaida, and John elsewhere mentions, in unrelated contexts, that Philip was from Bethsaida. Put the pieces together and it clicks: Jesus asked the local. Neither writer planned this; each supplies half. That is the fingerprint of independent witnesses to a real event.

3. Look up *John 6:5*, *Luke 9:10*, and *John 1:44*. How does each supply a piece of the Philip-and-bread puzzle, and why can't an inventor easily fake this?

Mark 4: Unnecessary Details

When people tell true stories, they include little things that serve no purpose, the color of a coat, the time of day, where someone was sitting, because that is how memory works. The Gospels are full of these. Mark alone notes that Jesus was asleep on a cushion in the stern of the boat during the storm. John notes that the loaves were barley, the cheap grain, and that the disciples had rowed “about twenty-five or thirty stadia,” an uncertain

range rather than a tidy dramatic number. John even records that Peter, before swimming to the risen Jesus, put his outer garment on first, an odd, pointless, perfectly human detail.

Inventors avoid this kind of thing, because pointless details add nothing to the story they are trying to sell. And modern realistic fiction, which trains writers to add such touches, did not exist in the first century. The Gospels also distribute these details unevenly, vivid in some scenes, sparse in others, exactly the way real memory works rather than the smooth, even texture of crafted fiction.

4. Look up **Mark 4:38.** What small, unnecessary detail does it include, and why does memory keep such details while inventors drop them?

Answering the Objections

Objection 1: *Spiderman is set in real New York, but that doesn't make it true. A real setting doesn't make the Gospels history.*

The comparison breaks down on the kind of accuracy involved. Spiderman gets it right that New York exists; the Gospels get hundreds of small, hard-to-research, easily-falsified details right about a specific time and place, often confirmed only by archaeology centuries later. “Spiderman lives in Queens” is nothing like “the Pool of Bethesda had five porches,” a detail confirmed two thousand years later, after the pool itself was destroyed in AD 70.

There is also a genre difference. Spiderman is presented as fiction; everyone knows Peter Parker is invented. The Gospels present themselves as eyewitness reports, with Luke saying he carefully investigated and John saying he saw these things himself. The real question is whether the documents show the texture of genuine testimony, and the eight marks say they do. A real city in a comic is window dressing; the Gospels have the whole fabric of authentic memory.

Objection 2: *The Gospels were written decades later by anonymous authors. The writers were too far removed to know anything reliable.*

The timing is closer than it sounds. Jesus died around AD 30, and the Gospels are generally dated within about 35 to 65 years, inside the lifetime of eyewitnesses. By comparison, our earliest surviving biographies of Alexander the Great were written three to four centuries after he died, and historians use them with confidence. By ancient standards, the Gospels are remarkably close to the events.

And the marks of eyewitness testimony do not depend on knowing the author's name for certain. They depend on whether the texts show real knowledge of the time and place, and they do, including details that became impossible to verify after Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70. A late writer far from Palestine could not have known the layout of a pool demolished decades earlier. The accuracy itself points back to genuine, early, eyewitness sources.

Objection 3: *The Gospels contradict each other on basic facts, so they can't be reliable history.*

Differences among independent witnesses are actually a mark of authenticity, not a flaw. If four accounts matched word for word, a detective would suspect they had been coordinated. Real witnesses agree on the substance and vary on the incidentals, which is exactly what the Gospels do. This is the very pattern courts treat as more credible, not less.

And most of the famous “contradictions” dissolve on a careful look. If one Gospel mentions two blind men at Jericho and another mentions one, there is no contradiction; if there were two, there was certainly one. Notice too that critics cannot have it both ways: they cannot say the Gospels are mere copies of each other and also that they contradict each other. Real independent testimony varies, and that is what we see.

Putting It Into Practice: A Sample Dialogue

Below is a model conversation between a Christian and a Skeptic, with each section handling a different objection. Read it aloud, then keep it in mind for your own conversations.

Opening the Conversation

Skeptic: The Gospels are religious books. Why would I treat them as history?

Christian: I'm not asking you to treat them as sacred. I'm asking you to test them like any other ancient document. A real witness gets the small, hard-to-fake things right: the local geography, the customs, the names. Do the Gospels pass that test?

Skeptic: I doubt it. They were written to push a message.

Christian: Let's check. They name rulers confirmed by inscriptions, describe a pool archaeologists later dug up with exactly the five porches John mentioned, and use the right local names in the right proportions. That's not what invention looks like.

When the Skeptic Uses the Spiderman Objection

Skeptic: But Spiderman is set in real New York, and that's still fiction. A real setting proves nothing.

Christian: Right, but “New York exists” isn't the kind of accuracy I mean. It's the difference between that and getting an obscure pool's five porches right, a pool destroyed in AD 70 and confirmed only by digging it up two thousand years later. A comic writer looks things up; these writers knew the place firsthand.

When the Skeptic Says It Was Written Too Late

Skeptic: Still, these were written decades later by who-knows-who.

Christian: Decades, yes, but within the eyewitnesses' lifetimes, and far closer to the events than the Alexander the Great biographies historians trust. And the giveaway is the detail: they get right things that became impossible to check after Jerusalem fell in AD 70. You can't fake that from a distance years later.

When the Skeptic Points to Contradictions

Skeptic: But they contradict each other. One says one blind man, another says two.

Christian: If there were two, there was certainly one; that's a difference in detail, not a contradiction. And variation is what real independent witnesses produce. If all four matched perfectly, I'd suspect collusion. You also can't say they merely copied each other and that they contradict each other. Pick one.

Landing the Point

Christian: So far the Gospels are passing the same tests we'd use on any ancient source, and passing them well. That's just the first four marks. Four more come in Part 2, and together they build a case that's hard to explain unless these writers were really there.

Section 2 · Chapter 7

The Gospels as Real History, Part 2

“And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you may believe.”

John 19:35

Why This Argument Matters

Part 1 examined the first four marks of eyewitness testimony: accurate locations and rulers, correct customs, undesigned coincidences, and unnecessary details. Each one is the kind of thing genuine witnesses produce and inventors struggle to fake, and together they already built a strong case that the Gospel writers knew the world they described firsthand.

Part 2 completes the case with four more marks. The first three deal with how the accounts behave: the loose ends they leave dangling, the way they differ without contradicting, and the way the same characters keep their personalities across different stories. The fourth and most powerful is the figure of Jesus himself, who comes through all four Gospels as one unmistakable person. When all eight marks are laid side by side, the cumulative weight is hard to escape.

Remember the goal. We are not yet arguing that Jesus rose from the dead; we are establishing that the documents reporting it are trustworthy history. If they are, then their report of the resurrection has to be taken seriously, which is exactly where the next chapters go.

Key Terms

UNEXPLAINED ALLUSION means “a reference the writer drops without explaining, as if the reader already knows it.”

RECONCILABLE VARIATION means “differences between accounts that fit together rather than contradict.”

HARMONIZATION means “fitting differing accounts of the same event into one coherent picture.”

APOCRYPHAL GOSPELS means “later non-biblical writings about Jesus, written long after the eyewitnesses.”

The Case So Far

Recall the eight marks. Part 1 covered the first four; this chapter covers marks five through eight.

1. **Accurate locations and rulers** — accurate geography, distances, and rulers. (Part 1)
2. **Correct customs and culture** — the customs, disputes, prejudices, and names, exactly right. (Part 1)
3. **Undesigned coincidences** — accounts that interlock in small, unplanned ways. (Part 1)
4. **Unnecessary details** — vivid, pointless specifics that memory keeps. (Part 1)
5. **Unexplained allusions** — references dropped without explanation, the texture of memoir.
6. **Reconcilable variation** — differences in incidentals, agreement on substance.
7. **Unified personalities** — supporting characters with consistent personalities.
8. **The unmistakable Jesus** — the same distinctive Jesus across all four Gospels.

Mark 5: Unexplained Allusions

An unexplained allusion is a reference the writer drops without explaining, as if you already know what he means. This is different from an unnecessary detail. A vivid detail makes a scene easier to picture even for strangers; an unexplained allusion actually interrupts the story for anyone who does not share the background, raising a question the writer never answers. No careful author of fiction writes this way on purpose, because it confuses readers. But people recording real memories do it all the time, because the reference was obvious to them.

The Gospels are full of these. Mark says Jesus nicknamed James and John “Boanerges, sons of thunder,” and then never explains why. Luke mentions “the Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices” and “the eighteen on whom the tower of Siloam fell,” events found in no other source, dropped with no background. These dangling references are not the polished work of a storyteller crafting for an audience. They are the fingerprints of a witness simply reporting what he remembers.

1. Look up **Mark 3:17**. Why does Jesus give the nickname, and why does an unexplained reference like this point to memory rather than invention?

Mark 6: Reconcilable Variation

Where the Gospels seem to disagree on small details, a careful look usually shows the differences fit together rather than clash. A 19th-century legal scholar called this “substantial truth under circumstantial variety,” and it is exactly what courts expect from honest, independent witnesses. If four accounts matched word for word, a detective

would suspect they had been coordinated. Real witnesses agree on the substance and vary on the incidentals.

Take the famous example of the women at the empty tomb. One Gospel names two women, another names three, another lists several. These are not contradictions; none of them says “only these women came.” They simply name the ones their sources knew best. Likewise, one account mentions one angel, another mentions two; if there were two, there was certainly one. The variation actually proves the accounts are independent, which is exactly what gives them their weight as testimony.

2. Look up Matthew 28:1-5 and Luke 24:1-10. Compare how the two accounts describe the women and angels at the tomb. Why is this variation a mark of honest, independent testimony?

Mark 7: Unified Personalities

Across the four Gospels, the supporting characters keep the same recognizable personalities, even in stories that appear in only one Gospel. This is remarkably hard to fake. Modern television and film franchises need continuity teams to keep characters consistent across episodes; the Gospel writers had no such coordination, yet their characters hold together.

Peter is the clearest case: impulsive, warm, always speaking first and thinking later, the same man whether he is stepping out of the boat onto the water, blurting out a plan at the Transfiguration, or swimming to the risen Jesus. Mary and Martha are another: in Luke, Martha bustles and serves while Mary sits and listens, and in John, telling a completely different story, the same two personalities appear unchanged, Martha rushing out to meet Jesus while Mary stays home. The writers are not coordinating character sheets. They are remembering the same real people.

3. Look up Luke 10:38-42 and John 11:20-32. How are Martha and Mary each portrayed here, and why is this consistency hard to fake across different Gospels?

Mark 8: The Unmistakable Jesus

The most striking mark is Jesus himself. Across four documents that often tell different stories in different words, the same distinctive personality comes through: witty and sharp against hypocrisy, deeply compassionate toward the suffering, disconcerting in his ability to read people's hidden thoughts, given to vivid object lessons drawn from whatever is at hand, and quietly lonely, knowing his friends will fail him. If different writers were each inventing Jesus, their inventions would drift apart. Instead they converge.

Even the claims to deity, which critics often say John invented, run through all four Gospels. In the earliest Gospel Jesus forgives sins, which his hearers immediately

recognize as something only God can do; he identifies himself as the divine figure from the book of Daniel; he accepts worship. The Jesus who says “I and the Father are one” in John is recognizably the same Jesus making divine claims in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. One unmistakable person stands behind all four accounts, which is exactly what we expect if they are remembering rather than inventing.

4. Look up **Mark 2:5-12** and **John 10:30**. What does Jesus claim about himself here, and why would the same distinctive personality across four Gospels be hard to fabricate?

The Conclusion of the Case

Put all eight marks together and the cumulative force is enormous. Any single mark might be explained away in isolation, and skeptics have tried for two centuries. But the odds that all eight appear at once, by accident or by skilled forgery, in four separate documents, are vanishingly small. The Gospels know the geography, the customs, and the names; they interlock without planning; they keep the pointless details and the dangling references that only memory keeps; they vary like honest witnesses; and they preserve the same people and the same Jesus across every account. That is the signature of authentic eyewitness testimony.

So the conclusion follows: the Gospels are reliable historical records of the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This does not by itself prove the miracles, but it means the writers were not inventing or mythologizing. The same authors who get the small, testable things right are the ones reporting that Jesus rose from the dead, and that report now deserves the serious hearing the next chapters give it.

Answering the Objections

Objection 1: *The Gospels report miracles, and miracles don't happen, so they can't be reliable history.*

This assumes the very thing in question. “Miracles don't happen, therefore any document reporting them is false” treats the conclusion as already settled before looking at the evidence. Whether miracles can occur is part of what the evidence is meant to help us decide, so ruling them out in advance is not a neutral starting point but a hidden assumption.

And the reliability shown by the eight marks does not depend on the miracles at all. The same writers who get the porches of Bethesda, the Galilean accent, and Peter's personality right are the ones reporting the miracles. Their accuracy on everything testable gives us good reason to take seriously what they report on matters we cannot dig up with a shovel. Notice too that even ancient hostile sources did not deny Jesus did unusual things; they attributed them to sorcery, which concedes that something extraordinary was happening.

Objection 2: *Maybe Jesus never even existed and the whole thing is a myth.*

This view is held by almost no professional historian of the ancient world, including secular ones. The agnostic scholar who wrote the standard book against it treats Jesus's existence as one of the most secure facts in ancient history, comparable to the certainty Egyptologists have about the pharaohs.

The eight marks make mythicism even harder to hold. Mythical figures do not have hometowns whose accent gives their followers away, or friends whose personalities stay consistent across independent documents, or interactions with named rulers confirmed by inscriptions. On top of that, Jesus is mentioned not only in four Gospels but in Paul's letters within about twenty years of the events, and in non-Christian Roman and Jewish sources. For an obscure Galilean teacher, that is an extraordinary amount of evidence.

Objection 3: *John was written last and just made Jesus sound more divine than the earlier Gospels.*

If John were a late, distant invention, we would expect it to be vague about the real world. Instead John has the most precise local geography of any Gospel: the five porches of Bethesda, the Pool of Siloam, Solomon's Porch, the exact distance to Bethany, the elevation drop to Capernaum. Much of this became impossible to verify after Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70. That is the work of someone who knew the city firsthand, not a faraway latecomer.

And the "divine Jesus" is not unique to John. The earlier Gospels already show Jesus forgiving sins, accepting worship, and claiming to be the divine figure from Daniel. John states the same truth more directly, but it is the same Jesus, not a new one. The unified personality across all four Gospels is itself evidence that John did not invent a different figure.

Putting It Into Practice: A Sample Dialogue

Below is a model conversation between a Christian and a Skeptic, with each section handling a different objection. Read it aloud, then keep it in mind for your own conversations.

Opening the Conversation

Skeptic: Even if the Gospels get geography right, the big stuff is miracles. That's where I check out.

Christian: Fair, but notice the shape of that objection. You're saying miracles can't happen, so any report of them must be false. That decides the question before looking at the evidence. Can we at least agree the writers were careful reporters, then ask what they reported?

Skeptic: I guess, but careful reporters can still believe in nonsense.

Christian: True. But people who get a hundred small, checkable things right aren't usually inventing the big things. Even Jesus's ancient enemies didn't deny he did strange deeds; they blamed sorcery. Something real was happening.

When the Skeptic Doubts Jesus Existed

Skeptic: Honestly, maybe Jesus is just a myth like other ancient gods.

Christian: Almost no historian holds that, even secular ones. Myths don't have hometowns whose accent gives their followers away, or friends whose personalities stay consistent across independent books. And Jesus is named in Paul's letters within twenty years, plus Roman and Jewish sources. That's a lot of evidence for a supposed myth.

When the Skeptic Singles Out John

Skeptic: But John came last and just cranked up the divinity. That's clearly legend growing over time.

Christian: Then it's strange that John has the most exact Jerusalem geography of any Gospel, including things impossible to check after AD 70. That's a firsthand witness, not a latecomer. And the earlier Gospels already show Jesus forgiving sins and accepting worship. John says it plainer, but it's the same Jesus.

Landing the Point

Christian: So all eight marks line up: the geography, the customs, the interlocking details, the dangling references, the honest variation, the consistent people, and the one unmistakable Jesus. The simplest explanation is that these writers were really there. And if they're this reliable, their report that Jesus rose deserves a serious look. That's where we go next.

Section 2 · Chapter 8

The Resurrection: The A.L.I.V.E. Argument

“He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay.”

Matthew 28:6

Why This Argument Matters

We have shown that the Gospels are reliable history. Now we reach the heart of Christianity: the claim that Jesus rose bodily from the dead. Everything stands or falls here. As Paul himself said, if Christ has not been raised, the whole faith is worthless. So this is not one doctrine among many; it is the hinge on which everything turns.

The A.L.I.V.E. argument is a simple, memorable way to make the case. The five letters stand for five facts surrounding the first Easter that historians widely grant, and the word itself is the conclusion. The argument works by setting up a clear choice, called the Disciples' Trilemma. The first followers of Jesus said they saw him alive again. There are only three options: they were lying (deceivers), they were sincerely mistaken (deceived), or they were telling the truth. The five A.L.I.V.E. facts squeeze the first two options until only the third is left standing.

This chapter gives you the whole framework on one easy-to-remember word. Once you know what each letter stands for and how it pressures the alternatives, you can carry the entire case for the resurrection in your head.

Key Terms

RESURRECTION means “coming back to bodily life, not as a ghost or a vision, but truly alive again.”

THE TRILEMMA means “the three-way choice: the disciples were deceivers, deceived, or telling the truth.”

EMPTY TOMB means “the fact that Jesus' burial place was found empty on the third day.”

HALLUCINATION means “seeing something that is not really there; a private experience, not a shared event.”

The Argument in Plain Form

The argument starts from the trilemma, then uses the five A.L.I.V.E. facts to close off the wrong answers.

(P1) The first disciples publicly proclaimed that God raised Jesus from the dead. So they were either deceivers, deceived, or telling the truth.

(P2) Five well-supported historical facts, spelling A.L.I.V.E., rule out both deceivers and deceived.

(C) Therefore, the best explanation is that they were telling the truth: Jesus really rose.

Here are the five facts the letters stand for:

- A Appearances** — many people, in groups and over time, encountered Jesus alive, touching and eating with him, not a fleeting glimpse.
- L Low-status women** — women were the first witnesses of the empty tomb, the last people an inventor would choose in that culture.
- I Immediate proclamation** — the message was preached at once in Jerusalem, the very city where Jesus was killed and buried.
- V Voluntary sufferings** — the witnesses suffered and died for their testimony, which they were in a position to know was true or false.
- E Empty tomb** — the tomb was empty, even conceded by early opponents who claimed the body was stolen.

How the Five Facts Close the Trap

Think of the trilemma as a door with three exits. Two of them, deceivers and deceived, must be shut before we accept the third. The A.L.I.V.E. facts do the shutting. The deceivers exit is closed mainly by V and L. If the disciples invented the story, they knew it was a lie, yet they suffered and died for it, and people do not die for what they know is false. And no one fabricating a story for credibility would make women the first witnesses in a culture that discounted their testimony; that detail is so awkward it has the ring of truth.

1. Look up Acts 5:29-32. Why do the voluntary sufferings of the disciples make the “deceivers” option so hard to believe?

The deceived exit is closed mainly by A, E, and I. A grief-stricken person might imagine a loved one, but A describes repeated encounters with groups, including skeptics, who touched Jesus and watched him eat, which is not how hallucinations work; hallucinations are private, not shared. And even if everyone somehow imagined the appearances, that would not empty the tomb (E). If the body were still in the grave, the authorities had only to produce it to crush the movement, yet the message was preached immediately in that

same city (I) and could not be stopped. Sincere mistake cannot account for an empty tomb.

2. Look up 1 Corinthians 15:3-8. Why can't hallucinations explain the group appearances and the empty tomb together?

Notice how the facts interlock. Each alternative can perhaps explain one fact, but not all five at once without piling on extra guesses. A body theft might explain the empty tomb, but not the appearances. Hallucinations might explain the appearances, but not the empty tomb. Only one explanation accounts for everything at once, simply and without strain: Jesus really rose. That is the power of a cumulative case; the facts converge.

3. Look up Matthew 28:11-15. Why is “Jesus really rose” a simpler explanation than combining several natural theories?

Why the Trilemma Is Complete

A good argument should leave no escape hatch, so it is worth asking: are deceivers, deceived, and truth-tellers really the only three options? They are, and seeing why makes the argument airtight. Start with the claim itself. The disciples said something happened: a dead man was alive again, seen and touched. That is a statement about a real event in the world, not a feeling or an opinion. About any such statement, the speaker is in exactly one of three positions. Either the statement is false and they know it (deceivers), or the statement is false and they do not know it (deceived), or the statement is true (truth-tellers). There is no fourth slot; these three cover every logical possibility.

People sometimes try to slip between the cracks, but the attempts collapse back into one of the three. “They spoke in metaphor” means they did not really claim a bodily rising, which the immediate, physical proclamation rules out. “The story grew over time” is just the deceived or deceiver option spread across many people. “They were partly right” still means the core claim is either true or not. Every alternative you can name is a version of lying, being mistaken, or being right. So if the A.L.I.V.E. facts genuinely close off the first two, the third is not just likely; it is forced.

4. In your own words, explain why there is no fourth option beyond deceivers, deceived, and truth-tellers.

This Is an Inference to the Best Explanation

It helps to see what kind of argument this is. We are not claiming to have filmed the resurrection. We are reasoning the way a detective or a scientist does: we gather the facts, line up every possible explanation, and ask which one accounts for all the evidence

most simply and completely. That method is called inference to the best explanation, and we trust it constantly. No one watched the dinosaurs die, yet we confidently infer an asteroid from the evidence it left behind.

Applied here, the five A.L.I.V.E. facts are the evidence left behind by the first Easter. The natural theories each light up one corner and leave the rest dark. Resurrection lights up the whole room at once: it explains the appearances, the empty tomb, the immediate fearless preaching, the transformed witnesses, and even the embarrassing detail of the women, all with a single cause. The only reason to reject the best explanation here, rather than in the dinosaur case, is a prior assumption that God could not or would not act. But that assumption has to be argued, not smuggled in. If we follow the evidence the way we do everywhere else, it points to a risen Jesus.

5. How is reasoning to the resurrection similar to how scientists infer an event no one witnessed, like the dinosaur extinction?

Answering the Objections

Objection 1: *Couldn't there be some natural explanation you haven't thought of? Absence of an alternative isn't proof.*

This is a fair instinct, and the honest answer is that the argument does not rest on having imagined every possibility. It rests on the structure of the trilemma. Any natural explanation, known or not yet thought of, has to fall under “they lied” or “they were mistaken,” because those two cover every way the claim could be false. A brand-new theory does not escape the trilemma; it just lands somewhere inside the first two horns, where the A.L.I.V.E. facts are already waiting.

So the question is not whether someone might dream up a cleverer natural theory someday. It is whether any theory in those two categories can explain all five facts at once without piling on extra assumptions. The detailed natural theories that have actually been proposed, conspiracy, hallucination, a moved body, a faked death, a slowly growing legend, are examined one by one in Chapters 10 and 11. Each one, as we will see, accounts for a fact or two and stumbles on the rest.

Objection 2: *This relies on the Gospels being accurate. Why trust those reports in the first place?*

It is a reasonable thing to ask, and notice the argument does not assume the Gospels are perfect or inspired. It only needs them to be reliable historical sources for a handful of widely accepted facts, which is exactly what the previous two chapters established. The A.L.I.V.E. facts are not obscure claims; they are the points most historians of the period grant, including many who are not Christians.

There is also a built-in safeguard. Several of these facts are awkward for the early church, like women as the first witnesses, which is the kind of detail people do not invent to make themselves look credible. And the immediate, public proclamation happened in the one city where the claim could have been checked and crushed on the spot. We are not

leaning on blind trust in the texts; we are leaning on facts that are well-attested and, in some cases, embarrassing enough to be beyond reasonable doubt.

Objection 3: *Other religions have miracle claims too. Why is this one different?*

Most miracle claims in other traditions are very unlike this one. Many are set in the distant past or a mythic age, reported long after the supposed events, by anonymous sources, with no hostile witnesses able to check them. The resurrection is the opposite on every count: a public claim, made immediately, in a known city, by named witnesses, in front of opponents who had every reason and resource to refute it, and who could not.

It also rests on the kind of cumulative, interlocking evidence we have been tracing, not on a single story passed down. The right response to this objection is not to dismiss other claims rudely, but to invite the same test for all of them. Apply the A.L.I.V.E. standard, named witnesses, immediate public proclamation, the willingness to suffer, hostile concession, evidence that converges, and see which claims survive it. The resurrection is offered precisely because it does.

Putting It Into Practice: A Sample Dialogue

Below is a model conversation between a Christian and a Skeptic, with each section handling a different objection. Read it aloud, then keep it in mind for your own conversations.

Opening the Conversation

Skeptic: I can accept Jesus was a real person, but rising from the dead? Come on.

Christian: I get the hesitation. Let me lay it out simply. His first followers claimed they saw him alive again. There are only three possibilities: they were lying, they were mistaken, or they were telling the truth. Can we agree those are the options?

Skeptic: Sure. And I'd bet on lying or mistaken.

Christian: Fair. Let's test both against the facts. There's a memory aid: A.L.I.V.E. Five things historians widely accept, and together they close off both lying and mistaken.

When the Skeptic Says They Lied

Skeptic: Easiest answer is they made it up to start a movement.

Christian: But look at the V in A.L.I.V.E., voluntary suffering. These men were tortured and killed for the claim, and they were the ones who'd know if it was a hoax. People die for things they believe are true, not for what they know they faked. And the L, women as first witnesses, is the last thing a liar inventing a credible story would choose back then.

When the Skeptic Says They Hallucinated

Skeptic: Then they were grieving and imagined him. People see lost loved ones all the time.

Christian: One person, maybe. But the A is appearances to groups, even to a skeptic and an enemy, people touching him and watching him eat. Hallucinations are

private, like dreams; you can't all share the same one. And even if you could, the E, the empty tomb, is still sitting there. A vision doesn't empty a grave.

When the Skeptic Reaches for Another Theory

Skeptic: There's got to be some other explanation, even if I can't name it right now.

Christian: Maybe, but notice any new theory still has to fit one of the three boxes: they lied, they were mistaken, or it's true. A fresh idea doesn't escape that; it just lands in lying or mistaken, where the A.L.I.V.E. facts are already waiting. The specific theories people raise, a stolen body, a faked death, a legend, are worth going through one by one, and Chapters 10 and 11 do exactly that.

Landing the Point

Christian: That's the whole case in one word: A.L.I.V.E. The appearances, the women, the immediate preaching, the suffering, the empty tomb. Each one strains the natural theories, and together they break them. The simplest explanation that fits all five is the one the witnesses gave: he is risen.

Section 2 · Chapter 9

The Resurrection: The Minimal Facts Argument

“For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins... and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.”

1 Corinthians 15:3-4

Why This Argument Matters

The last chapter made the case for the resurrection using the A.L.I.V.E. framework. This chapter reaches the same conclusion by a different and powerful route, called the Minimal Facts argument. The two work together: A.L.I.V.E. is a memorable acronym you can recall on the spot, while Minimal Facts is built to be almost impossible for a skeptic to dodge. Having both means you can meet people wherever they are.

Here is the clever move at the center of this argument. Instead of asking a skeptic to trust the Bible, it builds its case using only facts that nearly all scholars accept, including skeptical and non-Christian ones. These are called the “minimal facts” because they are the small, hard core of historical data that survives even the most critical scrutiny. The argument then asks one question: what best explains this set of facts that even the critics grant? The answer, it turns out, is the resurrection.

This approach takes a favorite objection off the table before it is raised. No one can say “you’re just quoting the Bible at me,” because the facts being used are the ones the skeptics themselves admit. The whole fight then moves to where it belongs: which explanation fits the agreed facts best.

Key Terms

MINIMAL FACTS means “historical points so well-evidenced that nearly all scholars, even skeptics, accept them.”

SCHOLARLY CONSENSUS means “what the broad community of experts in a field generally agrees on.”

CREED means “a short, fixed statement of belief, often memorized and passed on word for word.”

BEST EXPLANATION means “the account that explains the most facts, most simply, with the fewest extra assumptions.”

The Argument in Plain Form

The argument lists six facts almost no scholar disputes, then draws the conclusion that resurrection explains them best.

(P1) Six historical facts about Jesus are accepted by nearly all scholars (the empty tomb by a strong majority), skeptics included.

(P2) No natural theory explains all six facts together simply and completely.

(C) Therefore, the best explanation of all six facts is that God raised Jesus from the dead.

Here are the six minimal facts:

Fact 1: Death by crucifixion. Jesus was really executed by Roman crucifixion and died.

Fact 2: Appearances. His followers had experiences they were convinced were the risen Jesus.

Fact 3: Empty tomb. His tomb was found empty shortly after his death.

Fact 4: Early proclamation. The resurrection was preached at once in Jerusalem, where he was killed.

Fact 5: James the skeptic. Jesus' own brother James, a doubter, became a believer and church leader.

Fact 6: Paul the enemy. Paul, a violent persecutor of Christians, suddenly converted and gave his life to the message.

Why These Facts Are So Strong

The force of this argument comes from where the facts are sourced. They are not chosen because they are convenient; they are chosen because the scholarly community, across the spectrum, grants them. Fact 1, the crucifixion, is considered one of the most certain events in all of ancient history, attested by Christian and non-Christian writers alike. Even scholars who deny the resurrection itself agree that the disciples sincerely believed they saw Jesus alive (Fact 2) and that the movement exploded out of Jerusalem within a few years (Fact 4). Fact 3, the empty tomb, deserves one honest note: it is accepted by a strong majority of scholars rather than by nearly all, with surveys of the literature putting agreement at roughly three-quarters. That is still powerful support, and it is more than enough for the argument, because even a critic who doubts the empty tomb must then explain the appearances and the immediate Jerusalem preaching some other way.

One source is especially powerful. In one of his letters, Paul quotes an early creed, a short, memorized summary, that lists the resurrection appearances. Scholars date this creed to within just a few years of the crucifixion, far too early to be a slowly grown legend. It is, in effect, a news bulletin from the first generation. That single piece of evidence anchors Facts 2 and 4 so firmly that even critics concede them.

1. Look up **1 Corinthians 15:3-8**. Why is it so significant that this creed can be dated to within a few years of the crucifixion?

Why James and Paul Are the Sharpest Facts

Facts 5 and 6 deserve special attention, because they are the hardest for any natural theory to handle. James and Paul were not eager followers primed to see visions. James was Jesus' own brother who did not believe in him during his ministry, and the Gospels even hint the family thought he had lost his mind. Paul was not a follower at all; he was the movement's most dangerous enemy, hunting down Christians to imprison them.

Yet both changed completely, and both said the same cause changed them: they met the risen Jesus. A grieving disciple might imagine a vision of a beloved teacher, but a skeptical brother and a hostile persecutor are the last people you would expect to conjure such an experience. Paul in particular had every earthly reason not to convert; he traded status and safety for beatings, prison, and execution. Their transformations are admitted by nearly all scholars, and they cry out for an explanation that grief or wishful thinking cannot supply.

2. Look up **Galatians 1:13-19**. Why are the conversions of a skeptic (James) and an enemy (Paul) harder to explain than the disciples' belief?

Resurrection as the Best Explanation

With the six facts in hand, the argument asks the natural question a historian asks: what single explanation accounts for all of them? The resurrection does it effortlessly. If God truly raised Jesus, then of course the tomb was empty, of course many different people and groups saw him alive, of course the message erupted immediately in Jerusalem, and of course even a skeptic and an enemy were won over by meeting him. One cause, all six facts.

The natural theories, by contrast, each grab one or two facts and drop the others. We are not going to work through them here one by one; the next two chapters do exactly that, examining conspiracy, hallucination, a moved body, a faked death, and legend in detail. The point for now is the shape of the argument: start from facts even your opponent accepts, then show that resurrection explains them better than anything else on offer. That is what makes Minimal Facts so hard to escape.

3. In your own words, how does resurrection explain all six facts at once, where natural theories explain only some?

Answering the Objections

Objection 1: *You're still using the Bible as your source, so this is circular.*

This is the objection the argument is specifically built to defeat. It does not ask you to assume the Bible is inspired or even mostly accurate. It uses only the handful of facts that the broad scholarly community, including skeptics, atheists, and non-Christians, already grants on ordinary historical grounds. The crucifixion, for example, is accepted because of non-Christian sources and the general rules historians use, not because a believer says so.

It is true that some of these facts appear in the New Testament, but appearing in the New Testament does not disqualify a fact any more than appearing in any other ancient document would. Historians treat the New Testament writings as historical sources to be weighed, and the minimal facts are precisely the points that survive that weighing. The argument meets the skeptic on neutral ground.

Objection 2: *Scholars agree on lots of things and are still wrong. Why does consensus matter?*

Consensus is not being used here as proof that the facts are true; it is being used to settle what counts as common ground. When even the scholars most hostile to Christianity concede a point, that point is about as secure as ancient history gets, because these are exactly the people motivated to deny it if they could. If the skeptics themselves grant Fact 2 and Fact 6, the believer and the skeptic can start the real conversation from there.

And the argument does not lean on consensus for its conclusion. The conclusion, that resurrection best explains the facts, is reached by ordinary best-explanation reasoning, the same method used in science and history everywhere. Consensus just guarantees we are arguing about real data rather than disputed claims. The heavy lifting is done by how well resurrection fits those facts.

Objection 3: *Even if all six facts are true, 'God raised him' is a huge leap. Why accept a miracle?*

It would be a leap if resurrection were dragged in from nowhere. But it is not; it is the explanation that actually fits the data, while every natural rival leaves most of the facts unexplained. Refusing the best explanation only because it involves God is not following the evidence; it is deciding the answer in advance. If we let the facts speak, they point where they point.

It is fair to hold a miracle to a high standard, and this argument meets it by ruling out the natural alternatives rather than ignoring them. That is the work of the next two chapters. If the natural explanations genuinely fail and resurrection genuinely fits, then accepting it is not gullibility; it is honesty. The only thing that should keep someone from it is a fixed rule that miracles cannot happen, and that rule has to be defended, not just assumed.

Putting It Into Practice: A Sample Dialogue

Below is a model conversation between a Christian and a Skeptic, with each section handling a different objection. Read it aloud, then keep it in mind for your own conversations.

Opening the Conversation

Skeptic: Any argument for the resurrection just comes down to believing the Bible, and I don't.

Christian: Then you'll like this one, because it doesn't ask you to. It uses only facts that nearly all scholars accept, including skeptics and atheists. Six of them. Want to test whether resurrection explains them better than anything else?

Skeptic: Facts even skeptics accept? Like what?

Christian: That Jesus was crucified and died. That his followers were convinced they saw him alive. That the tomb was empty, which a strong majority of scholars grant. That the preaching started immediately in Jerusalem. And that a skeptic, his brother James, and an enemy, Paul, both converted. Those aren't in dispute.

When the Skeptic Says It's Circular

Skeptic: But some of that comes from the New Testament, so you're still arguing in a circle.

Christian: Appearing in the New Testament doesn't disqualify a fact; historians weigh those writings like any ancient source. These six are the points that survive even hostile scrutiny. The crucifixion is backed by non-Christian writers too. We're standing on ground you already accept.

When the Skeptic Doubts the Conversions

Skeptic: Maybe the disciples just talked themselves into it out of grief.

Christian: Grief might explain a heartbroken follower. It doesn't explain James, Jesus' own skeptical brother, or Paul, who was violently hunting Christians down. Enemies and skeptics don't hallucinate a person they've rejected into their champion. Both said the same thing turned them: they met him alive.

When the Skeptic Resists the Miracle

Skeptic: Even granting the facts, jumping to a miracle feels like too much.

Christian: It would be, if resurrection were pulled from thin air. But it's the one explanation that fits all six facts, while the natural theories each cover only a piece. Refusing it just because it involves God isn't following the evidence; it's deciding ahead of time. The natural options get their full hearing in the next two chapters.

Landing the Point

Christian: So this argument starts where you already are, with facts your own side grants, and simply asks what explains them. One answer covers all six without strain. That's the strength of Minimal Facts: it doesn't need you to trust the Bible first. It only asks you to follow the agreed evidence to the best explanation.

Section 2 · Chapter 10

The Resurrection: Competing Hypotheses, Part 1

“To whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days.”

Acts 1:3

Why This Argument Matters

The last two chapters argued that the resurrection is the best explanation of the historical facts. A natural and fair response is: best compared to what? If a natural theory could explain the same facts, we should prefer it, since we do not reach for a miracle when an ordinary cause will do. So the honest thing is to put the natural theories on the table and test them, one by one, against the facts.

That is exactly what these two chapters do. Over the centuries, skeptics have proposed a handful of natural explanations for the empty tomb and the appearances. This chapter takes the four that a beginner meets most often: the disciples lied, Jesus never really died, someone moved the body, and the disciples hallucinated. The next chapter takes the more sophisticated theories. In each case we will see the same pattern: the theory grabs one fact and then breaks on the others.

This is not about scoring points. It is about following the evidence honestly. If a natural theory worked, a thoughtful Christian would want to know. The reason resurrection remains the best explanation is not stubbornness; it is that every natural rival, examined fairly, falls short.

Key Terms

HYPOTHESIS means “a proposed explanation that is then tested against the evidence.”

AD HOC means “adding extra assumptions just to rescue a theory, with no independent reason to believe them.”

SWOON THEORY means “the claim that Jesus did not die but only fainted, and later revived.”

EXPLANATORY SCOPE means “how many of the facts a theory can actually account for.”

The Four Theories at a Glance

Here are the four natural explanations this chapter tests. Notice that each one tries to account for the empty tomb or the appearances, but never both at once without help.

Conspiracy — the disciples stole the body and lied about seeing Jesus.

Apparent death (swoon) — Jesus never really died; he revived in the tomb and walked out.

Displaced body — someone quietly moved the body, and the empty tomb was a mistake.

Hallucination — the disciples sincerely imagined the appearances out of grief.

The test for each is simple. A good explanation should cover all the facts (its scope) without piling on assumptions we have no reason to accept (staying out of ad hoc territory). Watch how each theory fails one or both.

Theory 1: The Disciples Lied (Conspiracy)

This is the oldest theory; it appears in Matthew's Gospel itself, where the guards are paid to say the disciples stole the body. It founders on one fact above all: the disciples suffered and died for their claim. People will die for something they sincerely believe, but these men were in a position to know whether they had really seen Jesus. Liars do not keep paying with their lives for a story they know they made up, especially with no one ever cracking and exposing the plot.

It also gets the disciples backward. After the crucifixion they were frightened and hiding, not bold conspirators organizing a tomb robbery under guard. And as Jews, they had no expectation of a single Messiah rising in the middle of history, so they had no script to invent from. The embarrassing details, like women as first witnesses and Peter's denial, are the last things liars polishing a story would include. Conspiracy explains the empty tomb but collapses on the sincerity, the suffering, and the awkward honesty of the witnesses.

1. Look up **Matthew 28:11-15**. How do the disciples' sufferings and the embarrassing details count against the conspiracy theory?

Theory 2: Jesus Never Died (Swoon)

The swoon theory says Jesus only fainted on the cross, then revived in the cool tomb and slipped out. The problem starts with Roman executioners, who were professionals; their lives were forfeit if a victim survived. Jesus was scourged, crucified, and speared in the side. The odds that he merely passed out and survived all that, untreated, are vanishingly small, which is why almost no scholar defends this theory today.

But even granting the impossible, the theory still fails. A man who barely survived crucifixion would be a broken, bleeding wreck needing urgent care, not a figure who could

convince anyone he had conquered death. He would somehow have to unwrap himself, roll away a heavy stone from inside, get past any guards, and walk miles on pierced feet. And his followers, seeing a half-dead man, would have nursed him, not worshipped him as the risen Lord of life. The swoon theory cannot bridge the gap between a survivor and a conqueror of death.

2. Look up **John 19:31-37**. Why would a barely-surviving Jesus fail to produce belief in a victorious resurrection?

Theory 3: Someone Moved the Body

This theory grants the empty tomb but explains it naturally: Joseph of Arimathea, or the authorities, quietly relocated the corpse, and the confused disciples assumed a resurrection. The first problem is that it had an easy refutation built in. The resurrection was preached in Jerusalem within weeks. If anyone had moved the body, they had only to say where it was, or produce it, and the movement would have died on the spot. No one did, which strongly suggests no one could.

The deeper problem is scope. Even if the body were moved, that does nothing to explain the appearances. You would have to bolt on a second theory, hallucinations or invention, to cover them, and now you have a two-part explanation that has to be coordinated just right. A missing body by itself produces rumors and confusion, not a bold, unified proclamation that God raised Jesus. And the earliest hostile response was “the disciples stole it,” which already concedes the tomb was empty rather than the body simply relocated by officials.

3. Look up **Acts 2:29-32**. Why is “the authorities moved the body” so easy to refute, and what does it still leave unexplained?

Theory 4: The Disciples Hallucinated

This is the most popular natural theory today: the grieving disciples sincerely imagined Jesus, like people who report seeing a lost loved one. But hallucinations are private events, one mind at a time, like dreams. You cannot have a group hallucination where dozens of people see the same figure, talk with him, and watch him eat. Yet the appearances were to groups, even to five hundred at once, and to people not grieving at all, like the skeptic James and the enemy Paul.

Two more problems sink it. First, in the Jewish mind, seeing a dead person's spirit meant they were dead and with God, not bodily raised; a vision would not have produced the specific claim of resurrection. Second, and decisively, a hallucination is in someone's head; it does not empty a tomb. If the body were still in the grave, the appearances would have been quietly refuted. Hallucination might cover the appearances for a moment, but

it cannot touch the empty tomb, and it cannot explain why the message became bodily resurrection.

4. Look up 1 Corinthians 15:3-8. Why can't hallucinations explain the group appearances, the skeptics, and the empty tomb together?

The Common Thread

Step back and a pattern emerges. Each theory is built to explain one fact and quietly ignores the rest. Conspiracy and displacement aim at the empty tomb but cannot produce sincere appearances. Hallucination aims at the appearances but cannot empty the tomb. Swoon tries for both and fails on the medicine and the message. To make any of them cover everything, you have to combine them, stacking guesses on guesses, which is exactly what “ad hoc” means. The resurrection, by contrast, explains all the facts at once with a single cause. That is why it remains the best explanation: not because the alternatives are unthinkable, but because, examined honestly, every one of them breaks.

Answering the Objections

Objection 1: *You're just ruling out natural explanations because you want the miracle to win.*

The opposite is true: we are taking the natural theories seriously enough to test them carefully, one at a time, on their own terms. If any of them actually explained all the facts simply, that would be the explanation to prefer, and a thoughtful believer would accept it. The theories are set aside not by a rule that miracles must win, but because each one demonstrably fails to cover the evidence.

What would be unfair is the reverse: ruling out the resurrection in advance by insisting that whatever the facts are, the answer cannot involve God. That is not following the evidence; it is fixing the result beforehand. The honest method is to lay every explanation side by side, natural and supernatural, and ask which fits best. When you do that, resurrection wins on the merits.

Objection 2: *Couldn't you just combine a few of these theories to cover all the facts?*

You can, and skeptics often do, but every time you bolt one theory onto another you pay a price. Now you need the body moved and the disciples hallucinating and the story embellished, with each piece having to fall into place at the right time. Each addition is another assumption with no independent evidence behind it, which is the very definition of an ad hoc explanation.

Historians prefer the explanation that covers the most facts with the fewest assumptions. A patchwork of three half-theories, each carrying its own improbabilities, is not simpler than one explanation that accounts for everything at once. Resurrection is a single cause that fits the empty tomb, the appearances, the early bold preaching, and the transformed enemies together. The combined natural theory is more complicated, not less.

Objection 3: *These all sound unlikely, but a miracle is even more unlikely. Isn't any natural theory still better?*

That sounds reasonable until you ask why a miracle is being treated as automatically the least likely option. If God does not exist, then yes, resurrection is essentially impossible. But whether God exists is exactly the question on the table, and the earlier chapters gave strong reasons to think He does. If a Creator exists, then raising Jesus is not wildly improbable; it is the kind of thing such a God might well do, especially at the climax of Jesus' life and claims.

So the move “any natural theory beats a miracle” quietly assumes there is no God who could act, which is not a neutral starting point. Set that assumption aside and judge the explanations evenhandedly, and a badly failing natural theory does not beat a well-fitting supernatural one. The most improbable thing of all is a theory that contradicts the evidence, and that is where the natural rivals keep landing.

Putting It Into Practice: A Sample Dialogue

Below is a model conversation between a Christian and a Skeptic, with each section handling a different theory. Read it aloud, then keep it in mind for your own conversations.

Opening the Conversation

Skeptic: There has to be a normal explanation for the resurrection story. People don't rise from the dead.

Christian: I agree we shouldn't jump to a miracle if a natural theory works. So let's test them. Which one do you find most likely: they lied, he didn't really die, the body was moved, or they hallucinated?

Skeptic: Probably that they lied, or maybe hallucinated.

Christian: Good, let's take those seriously and see how far each one actually gets.

When the Skeptic Says They Lied

Skeptic: The simplest answer is the disciples stole the body and made it up.

Christian: But then they died for what they'd know was a hoax, and never one of them cracked. People die for what they believe is true, not for a lie they invented. And no con artist polishing a story puts women as the first witnesses or records his own cowardice. That's honesty, not propaganda.

When the Skeptic Says He Didn't Really Die

Skeptic: Maybe he just passed out on the cross and revived later.

Christian: Roman executioners would lose their own lives if a victim survived, and he was speared to be sure. But say he lived anyway: a shredded, bleeding man needing a doctor doesn't convince anyone he conquered death. They'd nurse him, not worship him. Survival can't explain the message.

When the Skeptic Says They Hallucinated

Skeptic: Then grief made them hallucinate him. That happens to people.

Christian: One grieving person, sure. But not whole groups at once, and not a hostile enemy like Paul who wasn't grieving at all. Hallucinations are private, like dreams; you can't share one. And even if you could, it wouldn't empty the tomb. The body would still be there to produce.

Landing the Point

Christian: Notice the pattern: each theory explains one fact and breaks on the others. To cover everything you'd have to stack them together, guess on guess. One explanation fits all the facts at once without that, and it's the one the witnesses gave. The tougher academic theories come next, but they run into the same wall.

Section 2 · Chapter 11

The Resurrection: Competing Hypotheses, Part 2

“We did not follow cunningly devised fables... but were eyewitnesses of His majesty.”

2 Peter 1:16

Why This Argument Matters

The last chapter handled the four natural theories most people reach for first. This chapter takes the more sophisticated ones, the kind put forward by serious scholars rather than casual skeptics. These are worth knowing because they sound more careful and less easily dismissed, and a thoughtful skeptic may raise them. The good news is that they all rest on a single idea, and once you see that idea and its weak point, you can answer all three.

Here is the shared engine. Instead of saying the disciples lied or hallucinated outright, these theories say resurrection belief grew gradually. Maybe the disciples had visions, or simply became convinced God had honored Jesus in heaven, and over time that conviction hardened into the bold claim that he had been bodily raised. The story, on this view, drifted from “Jesus is vindicated” to “Jesus is risen” without anything miraculous happening.

The whole approach has one fatal gap, which we will return to again and again: a vision, or a sense that Jesus is honored in heaven, does not naturally turn into the specific claim that his dead body was raised. In the Jewish world those were different ideas. Bridging that gap is the thing these theories cannot do.

Key Terms

LEGEND means “a story that grows and gets embellished over time, drifting from what actually happened.”

EXALTATION means “the idea that God honored Jesus by taking him up to heaven; about where he is, not his body.”

BODILY RESURRECTION means “the dead body itself being raised to new life; about what happened to his death.”

CREED means “a short, memorized statement of belief, passed on word for word.”

The Three Theories at a Glance

Here are the three theories this chapter tests. All three try to get from ordinary experiences to resurrection belief by a slow, natural process.

Legend — the resurrection stories grew and were embellished over decades, far from the events.

Ehrman's theory — the disciples decided God had exalted Jesus to heaven, and that language later drifted into “resurrection.”

Lüdemann's theory — grief gave Peter a vision, which spread by suggestion, and physical details were added later.

Two ideas defeat all three, so keep them in mind. First, the resurrection message is too early to be a slow legend; it is fixed in a creed within a few years. Second, exaltation and visions are the wrong shape to become bodily resurrection on their own.

Theory 1: It Grew as a Legend

The legend theory says the resurrection was not early testimony but a story that swelled over time, the way tall tales do. The decisive problem is the clock. Paul quotes a creed listing the resurrection appearances that scholars date to within a few years of the crucifixion, while eyewitnesses, friendly and hostile, were still alive to object. That is far too early for legend, which needs decades and distance to grow unchecked. A bulletin from the first few years is not a tall tale.

The content points the same way. Real legends get grander and smoother; the Gospel accounts stay sober and keep awkward details a legend-maker would polish away, like women as first witnesses and the disciples' doubt. They look nothing like the wild, embellished apocryphal gospels that actually were written later. And legend cannot explain why the bodily-resurrection message was already central and uniform across distant churches from the start. The legend theory mistakes early, restrained testimony for late, runaway storytelling.

1. Look up **1 Corinthians 15:3-8**. Why does the early creed make a slow legendary origin so hard to maintain?

Theory 2: Exaltation Drifted into Resurrection (Ehrman)

This more careful theory grants the disciples were sincere. It says they stayed convinced Jesus was the Messiah, decided God must have exalted him to heaven, and only later expressed this as “resurrection,” by which time the body had decayed and could not be checked. It is ingenious, but it stumbles on the very distinction in our key terms. In the Jewish world, “God exalted him to heaven” and “God raised his body” were not the same claim. The first is about where Jesus is; the second is about what happened to his corpse.

So the theory owes us a bridge it never builds: why would a community that believed Jesus was honored in heaven take the extra, unusual step of claiming his dead body had already been raised, something Jews expected only at the end of the world? Plenty of softer words were available, like “exalted” or “taken up,” that fit a heavenly vindication without that leap. And the “body had decayed, so no one could check” move does not help, since people could still dispute where he was buried, and the message was preached in Jerusalem within weeks, not years. The drift from exaltation to resurrection is asserted, not explained.

2. Look up Acts 2:29-32. Why is “God exalted Jesus to heaven” different from “God raised his body,” and why does that gap matter?

Theory 3: A Vision That Spread (Lüdemann)

This theory is psychological. It says grief, and perhaps guilt, gave Peter a vision of Jesus; that vision spread to others by suggestion, drew in James, and shaped Paul's conversion through inner conflict; and the empty tomb and physical details were added later. It leans on detailed guesses about people's inner lives that the sources simply do not give us, which makes it hard to test and easy to adjust to fit whatever we find.

It also runs into the same wall as the others. Even granting a vision, a vision does not empty a tomb, and in the Jewish mind it would suggest Jesus was dead and with God, not bodily raised. To match the many appearances it has to keep invoking rare “group visions” again and again, which is not how hallucinations work. And it struggles hardest with Paul, an enemy who was not grieving and had every reason to resist, yet who suddenly proclaimed the very message he had been trying to destroy. Stacking grief, suggestion, inner conflict, and later invention is not one explanation; it is a pile of them.

3. Look up Galatians 1:13-19. Why is it significant that Paul was a hostile enemy rather than a grieving follower?

The Common Thread

All three theories share the same hope: that ordinary causes, visions, grief, exaltation language, retelling over time, could slowly add up to the bold claim that God raised Jesus from the dead. And all three break at the same two points. They cannot beat the clock, because the bodily-resurrection message is fixed in an early creed within a few years, too soon for legend or drift. And they cannot bridge the gap, because visions and heavenly honor do not naturally become the specific, concrete claim that a dead body was raised. Each theory has to keep adding assumptions to cross that gap, which is the mark of a weak explanation. Resurrection crosses it in one step, because if God truly raised Jesus, the early, bodily, unified message is exactly what we would expect.

Answering the Objections

Objection 1: *These are respected scholars. Who are we to say they're wrong?*

Respecting scholars does not mean every theory they float succeeds; scholars disagree with each other constantly, and these very theories are answered by other equally serious scholars. The point is not to dismiss anyone but to weigh the arguments. A theory stands or falls on how well it fits the evidence, not on the credentials of the person proposing it.

It is also worth noticing what these scholars concede. To build their theories, they grant the core facts: that the disciples sincerely believed they saw Jesus, that the movement exploded early, that James and Paul converted. They are not denying the data; they are trying to explain it without a miracle. That is fair to attempt, but when the natural explanation needs assumption after assumption to work, the honest conclusion is that it is straining against the very facts its authors admit.

Objection 2: *Beliefs really do evolve over time. Why couldn't resurrection belief have evolved too?*

Beliefs do evolve, and if the resurrection message had appeared slowly, generations later, in distant places, legend would be a strong candidate. But that is not what we find. The bodily-resurrection claim is locked into a memorized creed within a few years of the events, in the same city, while hostile eyewitnesses were alive. Evolution of belief needs time and distance, and here there is neither.

There is also a direction problem. Beliefs usually evolve from concrete toward vague, getting more spiritual and symbolic over the years. These theories need the opposite: a movement that supposedly began with fuzzy visions or heavenly honor later growing more physical and concrete, insisting on a raised body. That reverse drift is not how legends normally move, and no one has given a good reason why it would happen here.

Objection 3: *Isn't 'the gap can't be bridged' just a gap in our knowledge? Maybe they had reasons we can't see.*

It is fair to admit we cannot read the first disciples' minds. But the burden of proof sits with the theory that needs the bridge, not with the people pointing out it is missing. If your explanation depends on a community making a surprising leap, from heavenly honor to a raised corpse, you owe an account of why they made it. Saying "maybe they had reasons" is not that account; it is a placeholder where the explanation should be.

And we are not arguing from pure ignorance. We know a good deal about how first-century Jews used these categories, and resurrection was a specific, end-of-the-world, bodily expectation, not a natural way to describe a vision or an exaltation. So the gap is not just "something we don't happen to know." It is a real difference the sources show us, which the natural theories have to explain away. The simplest account of why the message was bodily resurrection is that a bodily resurrection is what happened.

Putting It Into Practice: A Sample Dialogue

Below is a model conversation between a Christian and a Skeptic, with each section handling a different theory. Read it aloud, then keep it in mind for your own conversations.

Opening the Conversation

Skeptic: I've read actual scholars who explain the resurrection naturally, without lies or hallucinations. It grew over time.

Christian: I know the ones you mean, and they're worth taking seriously. They all share one idea: that visions or a sense Jesus was honored in heaven slowly turned into resurrection belief. Can I show you the one problem they all share?

Skeptic: Go ahead.

Christian: In the Jewish world, "Jesus is exalted in heaven" and "God raised his body" were different claims. None of these theories explains why the message became the second, bodily one. That gap is where they all break.

When the Skeptic Says It Was Legend

Skeptic: The resurrection stories just grew like legends over the decades.

Christian: Except the clock won't allow it. Paul quotes a creed listing the appearances dated to within a few years, while witnesses were alive to object. Legends need decades and distance. And the accounts stay sober and keep embarrassing details, the opposite of how legends grow.

When the Skeptic Cites the Exaltation Theory

Skeptic: Maybe they just believed God took Jesus up to heaven, and called that resurrection later.

Christian: But those are two different ideas. "Taken up to heaven" is about where he is; "raised from the dead" is about his body. Why make the leap to the stronger, stranger claim when softer words were available? And it was preached in Jerusalem within weeks, not after the body quietly decayed.

When the Skeptic Cites the Vision Theory

Skeptic: Grief gave Peter a vision, it spread, and the rest filled in.

Christian: A vision still doesn't empty a tomb, and to a first-century Jew it would mean Jesus was dead and with God, not raised. Hardest of all is Paul: an enemy, not grieving, who suddenly preached the message he was destroying. Grief and suggestion can't manufacture that.

Landing the Point

Christian: So the sophisticated theories run into the same wall as the simple ones: too early to be legend, and no bridge from a vision to a raised body. They keep adding assumptions to cross a gap that resurrection crosses in a single step. Across both chapters, every natural rival falls short, and the witnesses' own explanation stands.

Section 2 · Chapter 12

Harmonizing the Resurrection Accounts

“And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you may believe.”

John 19:35

Why This Argument Matters

This is the last chapter of Section 2, and it clears away the final obstacle. A skeptic who cannot refute the resurrection directly will often switch tactics: “The four Gospels can’t even agree on the details. One angel or two? Was it dark or light? Who got to the tomb first? If they contradict each other on Easter morning, why trust any of it?” It is a common move, and it can rattle a new believer who has never looked closely at the accounts.

The answer has two layers. First, the specific differences people raise are not contradictions at all; they harmonize naturally once you remember the accounts are selective snapshots of a busy morning, not frozen photographs. Second, and more importantly, the variations are a sign the accounts are telling the truth. Independent witnesses to the same event always differ on small details while agreeing on the core. If all four matched word for word, that would be the suspicious thing, evidence of collusion, not honesty.

So this chapter equips you to do two things: answer the famous “contradictions” one by one, and explain why the differences actually strengthen the case rather than weaken it.

Key Terms

HARMONIZATION means “fitting differing accounts of one event into a single coherent picture.”

SELECTIVITY means “a writer choosing which details to include; leaving something out is not denying it.”

PERIPHERAL DETAIL means “a minor point (a number, a time) as opposed to the core facts everyone agrees on.”

PRINCIPLE OF CHARITY means “giving a proven-reliable source the benefit of the doubt where details are hard to check.”

The Argument in Plain Form

The argument defends the accounts rather than building a new case. Its logic is straightforward.

(P1) The Gospels are proven reliable in countless checkable details, so they earn the benefit of the doubt where details are harder to verify.

(P2) The alleged contradictions in the resurrection accounts all harmonize plausibly as selective reports of one complex morning.

(C) Therefore the differences are the marks of honest, independent testimony, and they strengthen the case rather than weaken it.

The key move is in the first premise. We do not start from scratch with the Easter accounts; we have already shown, over the last several chapters, that these writers get the hard, checkable things right. A source with that track record has earned the same courtesy we extend to any reliable historian: where two of its reports seem to differ, we look for the natural fit before crying contradiction.

Why Differences Are a Mark of Truth

Before tackling specific cases, grasp the principle, because it does most of the work. Police, judges, and historians all know that truthful, independent witnesses never give identical accounts. Each person notices different things from a different vantage point and reports what struck them. Ask three people about a car accident and one mentions the red light, another the screech of brakes, another the color of the cars. They are not contradicting each other; they are each telling part of one true story.

Fabricated testimony looks different. Liars who have coordinated produce suspiciously matching stories; incompetent liars produce wild, unfixable clashes. What you almost never get from fabrication is the actual Gospel pattern: complete agreement on the core (Jesus crucified, buried, the tomb empty Sunday morning, women first to find it, Jesus appearing alive) with natural variation on the edges (how many angels, the exact hour). That pattern is the fingerprint of real, independent witnesses. So when a skeptic points to the differences as a weakness, they have it exactly backward; the differences are the signature of honesty.

1. Why would four perfectly identical resurrection accounts actually be more suspicious than four that differ in small details?

Working Through the Famous “Contradictions”

Here are the differences skeptics raise most often. Watch how each one resolves the moment you treat the accounts as selective snapshots of a sequence, not rival photographs of a single frozen instant.

One angel or two? *Matthew and Mark mention one angel; Luke and John mention two.*

Mentioning one does not deny a second. Matthew and Mark simply spotlight the angel who spoke, the principal actor, while Luke and John note both were present. Neither says “only one angel.” If a friend says “the manager talked to me” and another says “the manager and his assistant were there,” no one calls that a contradiction. The fuller account just adds detail the shorter one left out.

Sitting or standing? *Mark says the angel was sitting; Luke says the angels were standing.*

Angels can move during an encounter. Mark captures the first sight as the women enter, the angel seated; Luke captures a later moment, the angels standing to address them. “He was sitting at his desk” and “he stood up and spoke to me” are both true of the same meeting at different moments. Ancient accounts give snapshots, not frame-by-frame video.

Dark or daylight? *John says it was still dark; Mark says the sun had risen.*

They describe different moments of one journey. The women set out in the dark (John) and arrived as the first light broke (Mark); Luke’s “early dawn” names exactly that in-between time. Anyone who has watched a sunrise knows the shift from dark to light is gradual, so “still dark” when leaving and “sun rising” on arrival fit together perfectly.

Did Mary come alone? *John has Mary Magdalene at the tomb alone, while the others have a group of women.*

John focuses on Mary, but he gives the group away himself: when she runs to Peter she says “we do not know where they have laid him.” That “we” shows she was not alone. The natural picture is that Mary, seeing the stone moved, dashed off to fetch Peter and John before the others met the angels. John follows her; the rest follow the group.

2. Look up John 20:1-2. Look at how Mary speaks to Peter. What single word reveals she was not actually alone at the tomb?

Answering the Objections

Objection 1: *This is just apologetic special pleading. You're bending over backwards to force the accounts to fit.*

Harmonizing reliable sources is not special pleading; it is ordinary historical method, used on every ancient source. Historians routinely reconcile apparent differences between Josephus and the Roman writers, or among the various accounts of Alexander the Great, without anyone calling it bias. The Gospels get the same treatment any proven-reliable source gets. Refusing it only for the Bible would be the inconsistent move.

Notice also that these harmonizations are natural, not strained. Angels changing position, a gradual sunrise, Mary leaving the group early, none of these requires an exotic assumption; each is the kind of thing that happens on any busy morning. And the case for the Gospels’ reliability was already built independently, on archaeology, undesigned

coincidences, and the rest. The harmonizing follows from that established trust; it is not propping it up.

Objection 2: *Psychologists say eyewitness testimony is notoriously unreliable. Why trust these witnesses at all?*

The studies people cite usually involve a brief, shocking event glimpsed once by a stranger under stress, exactly the conditions where memory is weakest. The resurrection appearances were the opposite: repeated encounters, over weeks, with someone the witnesses knew intimately, often in groups, involving touch, conversation, and shared meals. Those are the conditions under which testimony is most reliable, not least.

And remember what kind of error is even on the table. Memory research might explain why a witness misremembers how many angels there were, which is precisely the sort of peripheral detail the Gospels vary on. It does not explain away an empty tomb, group appearances, or the conversion of enemies. The core facts do not rest on fragile memory of fine detail; they rest on events too public and too repeated to be a trick of recollection.

Objection 3: *If the accounts were really harmonizable, the early church would have just merged them into one.*

The early church valued having multiple independent witnesses more than it valued a single tidy story, which reflects a long tradition that a matter is established on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Four voices give a fuller picture than one, and preserving them separately, differences and all, shows a commitment to authentic testimony over artificial smoothness.

It is also not true that the church saw them as irreconcilable. Within the second century a Christian named Tatian wove the four into a single combined narrative, and many early writers harmonized them, so they plainly did not regard the accounts as clashing. The fact that the church kept the four distinct, rather than editing them to match, is itself a sign of honesty. Fabricators smooth out their stories; the church left the natural variations in place.

Putting It Into Practice: A Sample Dialogue

Below is a model conversation between a Christian and a Skeptic, with each section handling a different challenge. Read it aloud, then keep it in mind for your own conversations.

Opening the Conversation

Skeptic: The Gospels can't even agree on Easter morning. One angel or two? Dark or light? It's a mess of contradictions.

Christian: I used to think that too, until I looked closely. Most of those clear up fast once you remember each writer is giving a selective snapshot of a busy morning, not a frozen photo. Want to walk through the big ones?

Skeptic: Fine. Start with the angels, that one seems obvious.

Christian: Two accounts mention one angel, two mention both. But none says “only one.” They just spotlight the one who spoke. “The manager talked to me” doesn’t deny an assistant was there too.

When the Skeptic Presses on Timing

Skeptic: Okay, but one says it was dark and another says the sun was up. That’s a flat contradiction.

Christian: Only if it’s a single frozen instant. They left while it was dark and arrived as the sun broke; a third account literally says “early dawn,” the in-between. A sunrise is gradual. Both descriptions fit one journey.

When the Skeptic Calls It Special Pleading

Skeptic: This feels like you’re forcing the pieces together because you need them to fit.

Christian: It’s the same method historians use on Josephus or the lives of Alexander, reconcile reliable sources before assuming error. And these fits are natural, not forced. Honestly, if all four matched word for word, you’d suspect they copied each other.

Landing the Point

Christian: That’s the heart of it. Real, independent witnesses always differ on the small stuff and agree on the core, and that’s exactly what we see: crucified, buried, tomb empty, women first, Jesus alive. The differences aren’t a crack in the story; they’re the fingerprint of honest testimony. It’s what truth looks like.

Section 3

Common Objections

“Casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.”

2 Corinthians 10:5

The first two sections built the positive case: that a powerful, personal Creator exists, and that He acted in history by raising Jesus from the dead. But a case is rarely accepted on its strengths alone. Most people who resist Christianity do so because something about it troubles them, and that something is usually an objection, a reason they think the Christian God cannot be real or good.

Section 3 turns to meet those objections head-on. The hardest of them cluster around a single theme: suffering and the goodness of God. If God is all-powerful and all-loving, why is there evil at all? Why do animals suffer? And what about the troubling passages in the Bible itself, the conquests, the laws about slavery, the fate of those who never heard of Jesus? These are not questions to dodge. Handled honestly, they can be answered, and a believer who has worked through them stands on firmer ground. The goal is not to win arguments but to remove the obstacles that keep people from the God who is really there.

Chapters in This Section

- **Chapter 13:** The Problem of Evil: The Logical Version — does evil disprove God?
- **Chapter 14:** The Problem of Evil: The Probabilistic Version — does evil make God unlikely?
- **Chapter 15:** The Problem of Evil: The Emotional Version — trusting God in the face of pain.
- **Chapter 16:** The Problem of Animal Suffering — why would a good God allow creatures to suffer?
- **Chapter 17:** Did God Command Genocide? — how could a good God command such things?
- **Chapter 18:** Does the Bible Condone Slavery? — why does Scripture seem to permit it?
- **Chapter 19:** The Problem of Those Who Have Never Heard of Christ — what about people who never learned of Christ?

Section 3 · Chapter 13

The Problem of Evil: The Logical Version

“But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.”

Genesis 50:20

Why This Argument Matters

The problem of evil is the most famous objection to God's existence, and the one you are most likely to hear. It comes in three forms, and this section gives each its own chapter. The logical version (this chapter) claims that God and evil flatly contradict each other. The probabilistic version (Chapter 14) makes the softer claim that evil makes God unlikely. The emotional version (Chapter 15) is not really an argument at all but a cry of the heart, and it deserves a different kind of answer.

This chapter takes the logical version because it is the strongest claim the atheist can make. It says believing in God while evil exists is like believing in a square circle: the two ideas cannot both be true, in any possible situation, period. If that were right, Christianity would be irrational on its face and no further evidence could save it. So a great deal rides on whether the contradiction can actually be shown.

Here is the encouraging news up front: it cannot, and this is not just a Christian opinion. After decades of debate, the philosophical world, including most atheist philosophers, has conceded that no contradiction between God and evil has ever been demonstrated. This chapter shows you why the knockout punch fails, and equips you to explain it simply.

Key Terms

LOGICAL PROBLEM OF EVIL means “the claim that God and evil cannot both exist, like a square circle.”

MORALLY SUFFICIENT REASON means “a justification good enough for permitting an evil, as a vaccine's pain buys immunity.”

FREE WILL means “the power to choose without being forced; a forced choice is no longer free.”

DEFENSE means “showing a possible explanation exists, without claiming to know God's actual reasons.”

The Argument in Plain Form

The atheist's claim: "An all-powerful, all-good God exists" and "evil exists" cannot both be true, so since evil obviously exists, God does not. The Christian response can be put as a simple argument.

(P1) For the logical problem of evil to succeed, the atheist must prove that God and evil are strictly contradictory, true in no possible situation whatsoever.

(P2) To prove that, the atheist needs a hidden premise that holds with absolute necessity: either that an all-powerful God could create any world He wants, or that an all-good God would prefer any world without evil.

(P3) Neither hidden premise is necessarily true: God cannot force a free choice, and a good God can permit evil for a morally sufficient reason.

(C) Therefore, the logical problem of evil fails: no contradiction between God and evil has been shown.

Why the Atheist Needs Hidden Premises

Start by noticing that "God exists" and "evil exists" are not contradictory on their faces. "Bob is a bachelor" and "Bob is married" contradict directly, because the words rule each other out by definition. But "God" and "evil" are more like "Bob is wealthy" and "Bob is unhappy": surprising together, perhaps, but no contradiction unless you smuggle in an extra claim like "all wealthy people are happy." The atheist needs smuggled premises of exactly that kind.

And not just plausible ones. Because the logical version claims God and evil cannot coexist in any possible situation, the hidden premises must be necessarily true, true with no conceivable exception anywhere. That is a brutally high bar. It is the difference between "every swan I have seen is white" and "no swan could possibly be black." The moment a single exception is even possible, the contradiction evaporates and the whole logical version collapses. Keep that bar in mind; it decides everything that follows.

1. Why does the atheist's argument need hidden premises that are necessarily true rather than just plausible?

Hidden Premise 1: "God Could Create Any World He Wants"

The first hidden premise says an all-powerful God could bring about any world He desires, so He could have made a world with no evil. But omnipotence has never meant the power to do the logically impossible. God cannot make a square circle or a sound that is silent, not because His power runs out, but because those phrases describe nothing at all. And here is the key case: God cannot force someone to freely choose. "Forced" and "free" cancel each other out, just like "square" and "circle."

Picture a chess teacher who wants every student to win every game. He can do everything a teacher can do, but he cannot make a student's move for them and still call it the student's move. Likewise, if God gives creatures real freedom, then how they use it is genuinely up to them, and a world where everyone freely chooses good may simply not be available for God to create, however much He desires it. The limit is not on God's power; it is built into what freedom means. So the first hidden premise is not necessarily true, and the contradiction cannot run through it.

2. In your own words, why can't even an all-powerful God force a person to freely choose good?

Hidden Premise 2: “A Good God Would Prefer a World Without Evil”

The second hidden premise says a perfectly good God would always prefer a world with no evil in it. But goodness does not require preventing every evil; it requires not permitting evil without sufficient justification, and those are very different standards. A loving parent allows the needle's sting at the doctor's office. The parent could prevent the pain and would prefer the child never hurt, yet permits it anyway, because the greater good of immunity is worth the lesser evil of the sting. Permitting an evil for a greater good is not a failure of love; it is what love sometimes does.

So if it is even possible that God has morally sufficient reasons for the evil He permits, the second premise fails. And Christianity names the supreme candidate: a world that contains the fall, the cross, and redemption may be a far greater world than any sterile, evil-free world, because it contains the incommensurable good of God Himself entering suffering to save us. Joseph's words to his brothers capture the principle exactly: you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good. We do not need to prove this is God's actual reason. For the logical version, its mere possibility is enough, and it is clearly possible.

3. Look up **Genesis 50:15-21**. How did God bring good out of the evil done to Joseph, and what does that show about “morally sufficient reasons”?

The Verdict: Even Atheists Concede

Notice what the Christian needed to do here, and what she did not. She did not need to explain why God permits each particular evil; she is not in a position to read God's mind, any more than a spectator can grade a grandmaster's queen sacrifice five moves before it pays off. She only needed a defense: to show that some explanation is possible, because possibility alone breaks a claimed contradiction. The free-will point and the morally-sufficient-reason point each do that on their own.

That is why this debate, rare in philosophy, actually ended. The philosopher who pressed the logical version most forcefully in the twentieth century later conceded that no

inconsistency had been demonstrated, and today most atheist philosophers agree the logical version has failed. The serious discussion has moved to the probabilistic version, which asks whether evil makes God unlikely rather than impossible, and that is exactly where the next chapter goes. For now, hold the result: evil does not and cannot disprove God.

4. What is the difference between a “defense” and explaining God's actual reasons, and why is a defense all this chapter needs?

Answering the Objections

Objection 1: *If God can prevent evil and won't, He's not good. If He wants to and can't, He's not all-powerful. Either way, He's not the Christian God.*

This ancient dilemma sounds airtight, but it hides a third option behind the two it offers: that God can prevent evil, wants no evil for its own sake, and yet permits it for a morally sufficient reason. The vaccinating parent fits that description perfectly, and no one concludes the parent is either weak or wicked. The dilemma works only by quietly assuming no good reason for permitting evil could possibly exist, and that assumption is the very thing the atheist never proves.

This is also not a new puzzle that caught the church off guard. Christians answered it over sixteen hundred years ago with the free will response: a world of free creatures who can genuinely love is better than a world of puppets that cannot, and real freedom carries the real possibility of evil. The dilemma has been on the table since ancient Greece, and so has the answer.

Objection 2: *God could have just created free people who always freely choose what's right. Nothing impossible about that.*

There is a subtle confusion here between two senses of “could.” Is a world of free people who never sin possible in itself? Yes, nothing contradictory about describing it. But is it a world God can guarantee into existence? That is a different question, because in that world the right choices are made by the people, not by God. If God rigs every choice to come out right, the people are not free; if they are truly free, God cannot guarantee the outcome. The chess teacher cannot force a move and still call it the student's.

So the objection needs an enormously strong claim: that God could guarantee any possible world involving free creatures, no matter what those creatures would freely do. The Christian needs only a modest one: that possibly, any world of genuinely free creatures would include some who misuse their freedom. Modest possibility beats sweeping necessity, which is why even the philosopher who made this objection famous eventually backed away from it.

Objection 3: *Free will might explain murder, but it can't explain earthquakes, disease, and natural disasters. No human chose those.*

Remember what the logical version demands: a strict contradiction, defeated by any possible explanation. And several are possible for natural evil. A stable, law-governed

world may be necessary for free choices to mean anything, since actions need predictable consequences; the same plate tectonics behind earthquakes also makes the planet livable. Suffering can also build kinds of courage and compassion no painless world could produce. The Christian tradition has further held that creation itself was damaged by the fall, and even that some natural evil traces to the freedom of non-human agents. These need not be provable, or even likely, to break a claimed contradiction; they need only be possible.

What this objection really expresses is the feeling that so much natural suffering seems unlikely if God exists. That is a fair challenge, but notice it has changed arguments: “unlikely” is the probabilistic version, not the logical one, and it gets a full answer in the next chapter. As a claim of contradiction, the natural evil objection fails like the rest.

Putting It Into Practice: A Sample Dialogue

Below is a model conversation between a Christian and a Skeptic, with each section handling a different objection. Read it aloud, then keep it in mind for your own conversations.

Opening the Conversation

Skeptic: An all-good, all-powerful God and a world full of evil? Those flat-out contradict each other. Pick one.

Christian: That's the strongest way to put the objection, so let's test it. A real contradiction is like a square circle, impossible in any situation whatsoever. Where exactly is the contradiction between “God exists” and “evil exists”?

Skeptic: If He's all-powerful He could stop evil, and if He's all-good He would. Evil exists, so no God.

Christian: Notice the hidden assumption: that God couldn't have a good enough reason to permit evil. A parent permits the needle's sting for the sake of immunity. If it's even possible God permits evil for a greater good, the contradiction is gone.

When the Skeptic Says God Could Make Everyone Choose Good

Skeptic: Then God should've made free people who always freely choose right. Problem solved.

Christian: But “making someone freely choose” is the square circle. If God forces the choice, it isn't free; if it's free, He can't force it. A chess teacher can't make your move for you and still call it yours. Real freedom means God can't guarantee everyone uses it well.

When the Skeptic Raises Natural Evil

Skeptic: Fine, but earthquakes and cancer aren't anyone's free choice. Explain those.

Christian: For a contradiction claim, I only need possible explanations, and there are several: a stable law-governed world that free actions require, character that only hardship builds, a creation damaged by the fall. You'd have to rule out every possibility to keep the contradiction. What you're really saying is all this suffering

seems unlikely if God exists, and that's a different argument, worth its own conversation.

Landing the Point

Christian: Here's the bottom line, and it's not just my side saying it: after decades of debate, even most atheist philosophers concede that no contradiction between God and evil has ever been shown. Evil is a real and painful question, but it cannot disprove God. The honest debate is over whether evil makes God unlikely, and I'm glad to have that one too.

Section 3 · Chapter 14

The Problem of Evil: The Probabilistic Version

“For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.”

2 Corinthians 4:17

Why This Argument Matters

The last chapter showed that evil cannot disprove God; no contradiction between them has ever been demonstrated, and even most atheist philosophers agree. So the serious debate has moved here, to the probabilistic version. The atheist now concedes that God and evil could coexist, but argues that the sheer amount and horror of the evil we actually see makes God's existence unlikely. Not impossible, just improbable.

This version usually arrives carrying terrible specific cases: a fawn burned in a forest fire, dying slowly with no one to see; a child brutally murdered; the Holocaust. The argument runs: we cannot think of any good that would justify a loving God in permitting these things, so probably there is none, and so probably there is no God. This is the strongest form of the problem of evil still standing, and it deserves a careful answer.

The answer comes in three movements. First, probability is always judged against all the evidence, and the atheist weighs only one slice. Second, the step from “I can't see a reason” to “there is no reason” is a step our finite minds cannot support. Third, the argument attacks a God Christianity never believed in; real Christian teaching expects a world like this one.

Key Terms

PROBABILISTIC PROBLEM OF EVIL means “the claim that evil makes God's existence unlikely, rather than impossible.”

HORRENDOUS EVIL means “suffering so terrible it seems nothing could possibly outweigh it.”

NOSEEUM INFERENCE means “reasoning from ‘I can't see a reason’ to ‘there is no reason.’”

INCOMMENSURABLE GOOD means “a good too great to weigh against earthly pain.”

The Argument in Plain Form

The atheist's claim: given the horrendous evils we observe, God's existence is improbable. The Christian response can be put as a simple argument.

(P1) The probabilistic argument judges God unlikely on a single slice of evidence: the evil in the world, considered alone.

(P2) Judged properly, the argument fails three ways: the total evidence strongly favors God, our minds cannot support the verdict that any evil is truly pointless, and Christian teaching makes a suffering world unsurprising.

(C) Therefore, evil does not make God's existence improbable on the total evidence.

Response 1: Probability Depends on All the Evidence

Nothing is ever just “probable” or “improbable” in a vacuum; it is probable or improbable relative to a body of evidence. Here is a striking example: relative to the bare biology of reproduction, your own existence is astronomically improbable, the exact sperm, the exact egg, the exact moment, multiplied across every generation before you. Yet you are perfectly rational to believe you exist, because your total evidence (your memories, your reflection in the mirror, this very book in your hands) makes it certain. Improbable on a thin slice; certain on the whole.

The probabilistic argument makes exactly the thin-slice mistake. Suppose we grant, for the sake of argument, that evil considered all by itself counts against God. The question is never “is God likely given evil alone?” but “is God likely given everything?” And “everything” includes the entire case this handbook has built: a universe that began, a cosmos fine-tuned for life, a real moral law, a maximally great being, and a man risen from the dead in history. The atheist who brackets all of that and weighs only evil has not shown God is improbable; he has only shown what one slice looks like when you ignore the rest of the scale.

1. In your own words, why can't the probability of God be judged from the evidence of evil alone?

Response 2: We Are in No Position to Judge

The engine of the argument is the move from “we know of no good that justifies this evil” to “probably no such good exists.” Philosophers call this a noseum inference: I don't see 'um, so there ain't 'um. Noseum reasoning is fine when you would see the thing if it were there: no elephant in your refrigerator is a safe call. But it fails completely when the thing could easily be beyond your sight. Not seeing a flea in your yard from a window hardly proves the yard is flealess. So the question is: if God's reasons existed, should we expect to see them?

Clearly not. Tiny causes ripple into enormous effects across time; a butterfly's wings over Africa can feed into a hurricane over the Atlantic months later, and no observer on earth could trace the chain. God's reason for permitting an evil today might bear fruit in another country, another century, or in eternity. We are like a chess novice watching a grandmaster sacrifice his queen: the move looks like a blunder for five moves, then wins the game. Even critics concede this point in other contexts; it is a famous problem for secular ethics that no one can calculate the long-run consequences of any action. To declare an evil truly pointless requires a God's-eye view, which is the one thing the skeptic does not have. This was God's own answer to Job: where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?

2. Look up **Job 38:1-7**. What is God's point in this passage, and how does it relate to our ability to judge His reasons?

Response 3: Christianity Expects a World Like This

The argument quietly assumes that if God exists, His goal is to keep us comfortable and happy in this life, so widespread suffering counts against Him. But that is not the Christian God; that is a God Christianity never taught. On Christian teaching, the chief purpose of human life is not comfort but the knowledge of God, and a fallen, suffering world in rebellion against its Maker is exactly what the Bible describes. Suffering and the knowledge of God are not strangers; historically the church has often grown fastest in the places that suffered most.

Two more doctrines change the math entirely. Christianity teaches that this life is not the whole story: an eternity of joy awaits those who trust Christ, next to which the sufferings of this brief life shrink toward a vanishing point. The man who wrote that our affliction is "light" and "but for a moment" was beaten, imprisoned, shipwrecked, and finally executed; he was not naive about pain. And Christianity teaches that knowing God is an incommensurable good, a good of infinite worth that no finite suffering can be measured against. Judge the evil of this world against that God, the real Christian God of cross, redemption, and eternity, and a suffering world is no longer surprising at all. It is the very world the story describes.

3. Look up **2 Corinthians 4:16-18**. Why does Paul call his sufferings "light" and "momentary," and what is he comparing them to?

4. How does judging evil against real Christian teaching, rather than a comfort-giving God, change the argument?

Answering the Objections

Objection 1: *A fawn burning alive in a forest fire, a murdered child. Nothing could possibly justify a loving God permitting that.*

First, the horror is real, and Christianity has never minimized it. These evils grieve God Himself; Jesus wept at a tomb, and the center of the faith is God personally entering the worst of suffering on a cross. The skeptic who insists these evils are truly terrible is agreeing with Christianity, not refuting it.

But feel the difference between two statements: “I cannot see what good this could serve” and “therefore no good is served.” The first is an honest confession of finite perspective. The second is a sweeping verdict about every possible connection across all of history and eternity, a verdict only an all-knowing mind could deliver. The chess novice was certain the queen sacrifice was a catastrophe, and his certainty was a measure of his ignorance, not of the move. Our position before God's providence is the novice's, and honesty requires admitting it.

Objection 2: *If we can never tell whether an evil is pointless, then we can never call anything evil at all. Your defense destroys morality itself.*

This confuses two very different judgments. Whether an act is evil is a question about the act: the Holocaust was monstrous, its perpetrators guilty, its victims wronged, and we know all of that with full confidence. Whether God has a morally sufficient reason to permit an evil is a question about God's purposes within a providential plan spanning all of history. Confessing ignorance about the second does not touch our knowledge of the first.

Nor does it weaken our duties. We are commanded to fight evil and do good as far as we can see, and our roles differ from God's: a parent may permit the surgeon's knife for the child's good, while a stranger who cut the child would be a criminal. Permitting for sufficient reason and doing are not the same. And notice the skeptic faces the same limits: secular ethics already concedes no one can calculate the full long-run consequences of any act, yet no one concludes morality is destroyed. Finite knowledge is the human condition, not a special problem for the Christian.

Objection 3: *An evil God could use your same defense: “he has reasons beyond us for permitting good.” So your reasoning proves nothing.*

Look closely at what this clever objection concedes: that nobody can read off a supreme being's character just by inspecting the world's mix of goods and evils. But that is precisely the Christian's point against the probabilistic argument. If the inference fails in both directions, then the argument from evil fails, which is the conclusion we were defending. The parody does not rescue the argument; it buries it.

And the symmetry is an illusion anyway, because we never believed in God based only on inspecting the world's goods and evils. The cosmological, fine-tuning, moral, and ontological arguments point to a being that is the source of moral law, hence good, not evil; and the resurrection vindicates a God of self-giving love. There is no parallel evidence for an evil god. Deeper still, an evil supreme being is incoherent: calling him evil means he violates moral obligations, and obligations require a supremely good source. The evil-god idea secretly borrows the good God it tries to mock.

Putting It Into Practice: A Sample Dialogue

Below is a model conversation between a Christian and a Skeptic, with each section handling a different objection. Read it aloud, then keep it in mind for your own conversations.

Opening the Conversation

Skeptic: Fine, evil doesn't strictly disprove God. But look at the world. All this pointless suffering makes God incredibly unlikely.

Christian: That's the serious version, so let's weigh it carefully. One question first: unlikely relative to what evidence?

Skeptic: Relative to the suffering we see everywhere.

Christian: But probability is always judged on all the evidence. Your own existence is wildly improbable on bare biology alone, yet certain on your total evidence. Weigh God on everything, the universe's beginning, fine-tuning, the moral law, the resurrection, and the scale looks very different.

When the Skeptic Points to Horrendous Evils

Skeptic: Then explain a child's murder, or an animal burning in a wildfire. There's no possible reason for those.

Christian: I won't pretend they're not horrific; my faith says God Himself wept and bled over evil. But "I can't see a reason" and "there is no reason" are different claims. A chess novice can't see why the grandmaster gave up his queen, and his certainty it was a blunder just measured his ignorance. Tracing God's reasons would mean tracing every ripple through history and eternity. Neither of us can.

When the Skeptic Says This Destroys Morality

Skeptic: If no one can tell whether evil is pointless, you can't condemn anything. You've destroyed your own morality.

Christian: No, those are two different judgments. I know the Holocaust was monstrous; that's about the act, and I'd stake everything on it. Whether God had sufficient reason to permit it is about His purposes across all of history, which neither of us can survey. My duty to fight evil stands either way, just as a parent permits a surgeon's knife while a stranger never may.

When the Skeptic Tries the Evil-God Parody

Skeptic: An evil god's defenders could say the same: "he has hidden reasons for allowing good." Your logic cuts both ways.

Christian: Notice what that concedes: you can't read a supreme being's character off the world's mix of good and evil. That's my whole point, so the argument from evil fails. And the symmetry is fake anyway. The arguments for God point to the source of the moral law, which an evil being can't be; calling him evil already assumes a good standard he's breaking. The parody borrows my God to work.

Landing the Point

Christian: So the probabilistic argument fails three times over: it weighs one slice of evidence instead of all of it, it leaps from “can't see a reason” to “no reason exists,” and it aims at a comfort-dispensing God Christianity never preached. The real God's story is a fallen world, a cross in the middle of it, and an eternity that outweighs it all. Suffering fits that story. It was never evidence against it.

Section 3 · Chapter 15

The Problem of Evil: The Emotional Version

“Jesus wept.”

John 11:35

Why This Argument Matters

The last two chapters answered the problem of evil as an argument. But for most people it was never really an argument. They are hurting. A child has died, a diagnosis has come, a betrayal has cut deep, and they find they cannot love or trust a God who let it happen. Many would still turn away from God even if every intellectual argument were settled in His favor. This is the emotional problem of evil: not “is God's existence rational?” but “can I bear to love this God?”

A character in a famous Russian novel put it perfectly. Confronted with the suffering of children, he does not argue that God is unreal, or even that no final harmony could justify it all. He simply refuses: he would rather keep his unavenged suffering, he says, even if he is wrong. That is rejection, not refutation, a wound speaking, not a syllogism. And wounds are not healed by syllogisms.

So this chapter is different from every other chapter in this book. It will give you truth to share, but its first lesson is when and how to share it, because the wrong truth at the wrong moment can deepen a wound. And its deepest claim is this: honestly faced, the emotional problem of evil does not push a sufferer away from Christianity. It points them straight to the only God with scars.

Key Terms

EMOTIONAL PROBLEM OF EVIL means “the struggle to love and trust God in the midst of pain; a wound, not an argument.”

ATHEISM OF REJECTION means “turning from God out of hurt or anger rather than because of evidence.”

INCARNATION means “God the Son becoming truly human, able to hunger, weep, and suffer.”

REDEMPTION OF SUFFERING means “God turning pain into eternal good, so it does not have the last word.”

The Argument in Plain Form

Though this problem is a wound more than an argument, its answer still has a clear shape.

(P1) The emotional problem of evil is a problem of the heart; its first answer is presence, not philosophy.

(P2) Christianity alone offers a God who entered suffering, bore its worst on the cross, and will redeem it all in the resurrection.

(P3) Atheism removes every resource: it makes suffering pointless, hope impossible, and even the outrage groundless.

(C) Therefore the emotional problem, honestly faced, points toward Christ rather than away from Him.

First Lesson: Presence Before Answers

When someone is in fresh grief, the moment for arguments has not come. The Bible itself teaches this. When Job lost everything, his three friends did their best work in their first seven days, when they sat with him on the ground and said nothing at all; their failure began when they opened their mouths to explain. Scripture's command is not "correct those who weep" but "weep with those who weep." And when Jesus arrived at the tomb of His friend Lazarus, knowing He was minutes from raising him, He did not lecture the mourners. He wept with them. If the Lord Himself made room for tears He was about to wipe away, so must we.

So the first gift you bring a sufferer is yourself: your presence, your tears, your listening, your casseroles and errands and prayers. Eventually, gently, the deeper questions surface on their own: Is there hope? Does my pain mean anything? Will I see her again? Only then do the truths of this chapter come into play, and they come as comfort offered, never as a debate won.

1. Look up Job 2:11-13. What did Job's friends do for the first seven days, and why was that their wisest moment?

The God With Scars

When the questions do come, Christianity says something no other worldview on earth can say: God knows suffering from the inside. The incarnation means the eternal Son took on real humanity, with everything that includes. He was born poor, misunderstood by His family, betrayed by a friend, abandoned by the rest. He hungered. He wept. And at the cross He absorbed the worst that evil can do: injustice, torture, public shame, and death, even crying out the very question every sufferer asks, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" When a Christian says "God understands your pain," it is not a greeting-card sentiment. It is a claim about scars.

This transforms the sufferer's standing before God. The emotional problem imagines God in the dock, owing us an explanation. But the God we would prosecute has already stepped down into the prisoner's place and taken the sentence Himself, for us. We are not the prosecutors of a distant deity; we are the loved ones of a crucified one. That does not answer every question, but it changes the courtroom entirely. The sufferer is not asked to trust a God who watched from a safe distance. She is asked to trust a God who bled.

2. Look up **Matthew 27:45-46**. What does Jesus cry out from the cross, and why does it matter that God Himself has asked the sufferer's question?

The Hope That Outweighs

The cross is only half the answer; the resurrection is the other half. Because Christ rose, suffering and death do not get the last word. What was broken will be healed, what was lost will be restored, and God Himself will wipe away every tear. The man who wrote that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the coming glory was no stranger to pain; he was beaten, imprisoned, shipwrecked, and finally executed. He had done the math from inside the furnace, and glory won.

And the prize at the center of that glory is not merely relief but God Himself. Christianity teaches that knowing God is a good so vast that no finite suffering can be weighed against it, and that suffering is often the very soil where that knowledge grows deepest. This is why the church has so often been strongest where it suffered most. None of this makes pain less painful. It makes pain less final. The sufferer's story does not end in the grave; it ends at a wedding feast, with every tear accounted for.

3. Look up **Revelation 21:1-5**. List the things this passage promises will be “no more.” Which one means the most to you, and why?

What Walking Away Costs

Now consider the alternative honestly. The person who turns from God because of suffering walks into a worldview where suffering is the one thing that remains, stripped of every resource. On atheism, the child's death has no purpose, no answer, and no repair; it is the permanent erasure of that child from a universe that never noticed. There is no reunion coming, no justice the victim will ever see, no hand to wipe tears. One of atheism's most famous voices admitted that life must be built on “the firm foundation of unyielding despair.” Other philosophies offer techniques for enduring loss; only the gospel offers the undoing of loss.

Even the anger loses its footing. The cry “this should not be!” assumes a way things ought to be, a moral order the universe has violated. But if there is no God, there is no “ought,” only atoms doing what atoms do, and a child's death is no more wrong than a rock falling. The outrage that fuels the emotional problem is borrowed from the very God it rejects.

That is the final irony, and the final invitation: the wound that drives people from God is the wound only God can heal, and the protest itself is evidence that the heart already knows it.

4. Why does the protest “this should not be!” actually point toward God rather than away from Him?

Answering the Objections

Objection 1: *Even if Christianity is true, I refuse to accept a God who lets children suffer. No future glory can justify it.*

First, this deserves compassion, not combat, because it is usually spoken from real pain. But notice gently what it is: a refusal, not a reason. “Even if I am wrong, I will not accept it” does not claim Christianity is false; it declines reconciliation with the God it admits may be there. A wound is speaking, and the wound is real, but a refusal cannot be a reason for anyone else to disbelieve, and in the end it imprisons only the one who holds it.

And Christianity does not ask the protester to look away from suffering children. It points to a God who joined them, who entered the world as a child Himself, suffered innocently, and cried out the abandoned cry from the cross. The protest also quietly borrows God’s own moral law, for if there is no God, nothing is truly outrageous, and the protest dissolves into atoms. You can only return a ticket if Someone issued one. The very fury of the objection testifies that the heart knows there is Someone to be furious at, and He is the same One waiting with scarred hands.

Objection 2: *Telling a grieving person “God understands” or “it’s part of a plan” makes things worse, not better. Your comfort wounds people.*

There is real truth here, and the church should own it: Christians have often said true things at cruel moments, handing out doctrine like a pamphlet at a funeral. But that is a failure of timing, not of truth. Scripture itself models the order: Job’s friends sat silent for seven days, believers are told to weep with those who weep, and Jesus wept at a tomb He was about to empty. The medicine is not wrong because someone administered it badly.

It also misjudges what Christianity offers a sufferer. The gospel’s resource is not chiefly a sentence spoken in the worst hour but a community that shows up: the church that brings meals, sits in hospital waiting rooms, prays through the night, and built the world’s hospitals and orphanages in the first place. And when the grieving heart finally asks “will I see her again?”, silence is not the kinder answer. “We cannot know” is not more compassionate than “yes”; it is only more bleak. Compassion delivers hope with gentle timing; it does not withhold hope altogether.

Objection 3: *Of course Christianity is comforting. That’s exactly why people invented it. Comfort doesn’t make it true.*

Agreed, and notice the argument of this chapter never said “Christianity comforts, therefore it is true.” The truth question was settled on evidence in the earlier sections: the

universe's beginning, its fine-tuning, the moral law, and above all a tomb found empty in history. This chapter answers a different charge, that suffering should drive us from God, and shows the opposite: if there is an answer to suffering anywhere, it lives in Christianity alone. Comfort is not the proof; it is the prize the proof secures.

The wish-fulfillment suspicion also cuts both ways. If longing for meaning could explain belief in God, longing for autonomy and freedom from judgment just as easily explains disbelief; psychology disqualifies neither, so evidence must decide. And the fit between our deepest needs and the gospel may itself whisper something: hunger does not prove bread, but it strongly suggests bread exists, because creatures do not ache for what was never real. Our unhealable ache for justice, reunion, and meaning fits a world where Someone intends to satisfy it.

Putting It Into Practice: A Sample Dialogue

This dialogue is different from the others in this book. The person across from you is not a debating skeptic but a hurting friend, because that is who you will usually meet. Notice the pacing as much as the words.

When the Grief Is Fresh

Friend: The funeral was Tuesday. People keep telling me it was God's plan. If that's God's plan, I want nothing to do with Him.

Christian: I'm so sorry. I'm not going to explain anything to you right now. I'm just here. Can I sit with you a while, and bring you dinner this week?

Friend: ...Yeah. Thanks for not preaching at me.

Christian: Jesus didn't preach at the tomb of His friend either. He wept. I can do that with you.

When the Question Finally Comes

Friend: I keep asking where God was. Why didn't He stop it? Does He even care?

Christian: I won't pretend to know all His reasons; anyone who claims to is lying. But I know where He was, because I know what He's like. He was where He was at the cross: inside the suffering, not above it. He buried a friend. He was betrayed. He even cried out, "My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Whatever else is true, you are not trusting a God who watched from a distance. He has scars.

When the Friend Wants to Walk Away

Friend: Honestly, even if it's all true, I don't want a God who allowed this. I'd rather stay angry.

Christian: I understand, and your anger doesn't scare God; the Psalms are full of it. But can I say one gentle thing? Walking away doesn't bury the pain, it buries the hope. Without God, no one wipes the tears, no one rights the wrong, and you never see her again. Your anger says this should not be, and you're right, it shouldn't. That "should" is His voice in you. The only one who can answer it is the one you'd be leaving.

Landing the Point

Christian: I'm not asking you to feel better today, and I'm not going anywhere either way. I'm only asking you not to close the door on the one God who has been where you are, who hates this evil more than you do, and who promises a morning when death itself dies. Keep grieving. I'll keep showing up. And when you're ready, He'll still be there, scars and all.

Section 3 · Chapter 16

The Problem of Animal Suffering

“For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now.”

Romans 8:22

Why This Argument Matters

The last three chapters answered the problem of evil for human suffering, where free will, soul-making, and eternity carry real weight. But the skeptic has a follow-up: what about the animals? They have no free will to misuse and no soul to grow. They are innocent, they suffered for millions of years before any human existed, and nature seems built on their pain: predator and prey, parasite and host, tooth and claw.

This objection has pedigree. The father of evolutionary theory himself confessed in a famous letter that he could not believe a good God would have deliberately designed a wasp whose larvae eat caterpillars alive from the inside, or a cat that plays with mice. Nature documentaries press the same feeling on all of us: how can the God of love stand behind a world like this?

The answer has two parts, and both are surprising. First, the objection quietly inflates animal pain by projecting our kind of suffering onto creatures that do not have it; sorting out what animals actually experience changes the problem dramatically. Second, the animal pain that is real turns out to serve purposes a livable world cannot do without, and Scripture itself says creation's present groaning is not its final state.

Key Terms

ANTHROPOPATHISM means “projecting human thoughts and feelings onto animals or even objects.”

PAIN HIERARCHY means “the three levels of pain: reflex reaction, felt pain, and self-aware suffering.”

LEVEL III SUFFERING means “knowing you yourself are in pain: dreading it, recalling it, despairing over it.”

NATURAL ORDER THEODICY means “a world of stable natural laws is needed for life and free action, at a cost.”

The Argument in Plain Form

The skeptic's claim: the vast suffering of innocent animals makes a good God unlikely. The Christian response can be put simply.

(P1) The objection's force depends on animals suffering the way humans do, and on that pain serving no purpose.

(P2) But most animal pain is not suffering in the human, self-aware sense; the objection inflates it by projection.

(P3) And the animal pain that is real serves necessary goods: balanced ecosystems, a stable natural order, and God's purposes for creation.

(C) Therefore, animal suffering does not make God's existence unlikely.

Three Kinds of Pain

Everything turns on a distinction the objection never makes. "Pain" happens at three very different levels. Level I is a pure reflex: a signal triggers avoidance with no inner experience at all. A roach scurries from light, a Venus flytrap snaps shut, a robot vacuum steers around your couch; none of them feels anything. Level II is genuinely felt pain: the dog yelps when its tail is stepped on, the deer flees its wound. Level III is something more: the self-aware knowledge that I myself am in pain, the dread before it, the memory after it, the despair within it. That third level is what makes human suffering the horror it is. A patient's agony is not just the sensation; it is lying awake knowing what tomorrow's surgery means.

Level I — reflex reactions with no inner experience (insects, spiders, simple creatures).

Level II — real felt pain in the moment (dogs, deer, horses, and other vertebrates).

Level III — self-aware suffering: dread, memory, despair (human beings).

Now apply the levels to nature's "horrors." The wasp's caterpillar, the spider's fly, the billions of insects eaten daily: Level I. They squirm and react, as your thermostat reacts to cold, but the evidence indicates no one is home to suffer. And the vertebrates that truly feel pain appear, so far as the evidence shows, to live at Level II, not III: your dog does not lie awake dreading tomorrow's vet visit, and the deer does not contemplate its mortality. In mercy, God appears to have spared the animals the very thing that makes pain so terrible for us: the awareness of being its victim. Once the projection is stripped away, the mountain of "animal suffering" shrinks dramatically.

1. In your own words, explain the difference between Level II pain and Level III suffering. Why does the difference matter for this objection?

Why Nature Needs Predators

But real Level II pain remains, so does it serve any purpose? Yes, and we have run the experiment. When wolves vanished from Yellowstone, the elk multiplied unchecked, stripped the vegetation, collapsed the riverbanks, and began starving; restoring the wolves restored the whole ecosystem. Canadian wildlife authorities likewise had to reintroduce wolves for the caribou's own sake, because without predators removing the sick and aging, the herds overgrazed and starved. The prey actually need the predators. A predator-free world is not a kinder world; it trades a swift end for the slow misery of overpopulation, disease, and famine.

A nineteenth-century geologist saw this long before modern ecology: death by predator, he argued, is in its main results a mercy, because it shortens the lingering decay of disease and starvation and keeps the world filled with creatures whose lives are mostly pleasure until their sudden end. Strikingly, Scripture is comfortable with this picture. The Psalms describe the young lions seeking their prey as seeking “their food from God,” with all creatures looking to Him to feed them. The Bible never treats predation as a scandal; it treats it as provision within a world that works.

2. Look up Psalm 104:21, 27-28. How does this psalm describe the lions' hunting and God's role in feeding His creatures?

A Stable World, and a Groaning One

Step back further and ask what any world of living, acting creatures requires: stable natural laws. Fire must reliably burn, gravity must reliably pull, actions must have predictable consequences, or no creature could learn, plan, or choose, and free agents like us could not exist at all. But the same reliable laws that make life and freedom possible also make injury possible; the fire that warms can also burn. A world of stable natural order comes at a price, and a careful look suggests the price was worth paying. The long history of life, with its ecosystems, resources, and creatures, built the very stage on which beings made in God's image could live, choose, and be offered salvation.

And Christianity adds one more thing the objection forgets: this is not creation's final form. Scripture says the creation was subjected to futility and groans like a woman in labor, awaiting its own liberation when God's children are revealed. Labor pains point forward; they end in birth. The prophets even picture the destination: a renewed world where the wolf lies down with the lamb and nothing hurts or destroys. So the Christian does not claim nature today is exactly as God means it to be forever. The animals' groaning is real, and God has promised it an ending.

3. Look up Romans 8:18-22. What does Paul compare creation's groaning to, and why is that comparison full of hope?

Answering the Objections

Objection 1: *Dogs, deer, and whales really do feel pain. Your levels don't make their agony okay.*

Agreed, and the Christian should say so plainly: vertebrate pain at Level II is real, someone genuinely is home and feeling it, and cruelty to animals is genuinely wrong. The distinction is not that animal pain is fake but that it is a different kind of thing from human suffering. What makes suffering so dreadful for us is the self-aware dimension: the anticipation, the counting of days, the knowledge of what is being lost. Here the science actually supports the distinction rather than threatening it. The 2012 Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness, and the research that has followed it, affirms that many animals possess the neurological basis for conscious, felt experience, which is Level II; but neither the Declaration nor later work establishes that animals carry the self-aware, second-order suffering of Level III, the dread and despair of knowing oneself to be a victim. So the best evidence to date supports exactly the line this chapter draws. The fox feels the moment; so far as we can tell, it does not also carry yesterday's despair and tomorrow's dread. Real pain, yes; the existential horror we project onto it, not on the evidence we have.

And the Level II pain that remains is exactly the pain the rest of the chapter accounts for. In the wild it is typically brief and acute, the quick end that spares a lingering one, embedded in ecosystems where predation prevents the greater miseries of starvation and disease. A good God permitting brief, non-self-aware pain in service of a world that works is a very different picture from the torture chamber the objection paints.

Objection 2: *Hundreds of millions of years of animal pain before humans even existed. Whatever each animal felt, the total is monstrous.*

Notice the math this objection relies on: adding up pains as if the sum were itself a sufferer. But moral weight does not add that way. A million brief bee stings spread over a million bees do not equal one human's prolonged, self-aware agony, because there is no one who experiences the total. Once Level I reflexes are removed from the pile and Level II pain is recognized as brief and non-self-aware, the "monstrous aggregate" dissolves into countless mostly-pleasant lives with sudden endings, which is what the wild actually contains.

As for the long ages before us: the evolutionary past was not wasted time. It built the ecosystems, resources, and conditions human civilization runs on, and provided the stable arena where free creatures could come to exist and know God. Could God have done it some other way? Perhaps, but "some other way was possible" never shows the actual way was wrong, and judging the whole sweep of providence excessive requires exactly the God's-eye view the previous chapters showed we lack. He who watched every sparrow fall across those ages is in a better position to judge than we are.

Objection 3: *God could have just made a vegetarian world with no predators at all. He didn't, so He's responsible.*

Run the experiment mentally, because nature has run it for us. Remove the predators and you do not get a peaceable kingdom; you get Yellowstone without wolves: exploding

herds, stripped vegetation, collapsing rivers, and mass death by starvation, which is slower and crueler than any wolf. Herbivores still starve in droughts, still sicken, still fight viciously over dwindling food. A vegetarian world is not a painless world; it is a world that trades quick deaths for lingering ones. The objection assumes the alternative is better, and the evidence says otherwise.

To make the charge stick, the skeptic must show not merely that another world was possible but that it would have been better all things considered, for ecosystems, for embodied life, for God's purposes, and no one can show that. Interestingly, the Bible itself holds the picture the objector longs for, but as destiny rather than history: the wolf dwelling with the lamb in the world to come. The desire for a predator-free creation is not evidence against God. It is a homesickness He has promised to satisfy.

Putting It Into Practice: A Sample Dialogue

Below is a model conversation between a Christian and a Skeptic, with each section handling a different objection. Read it aloud, then keep it in mind for your own conversations.

Opening the Conversation

Skeptic: Forget human evil. Watch one nature documentary: parasites, predators, animals eaten alive. What loving God designs that?

Christian: I've winced at the same scenes. But one question first: when you watch the wasp larva and the caterpillar, who exactly is suffering?

Skeptic: The caterpillar, obviously.

Christian: Is it? A caterpillar squirms the way a thermostat clicks: reaction without experience. The evidence indicates nobody's home in there to suffer. Most of nature's "horrors" happen at that reflex level. We supply the agony by imagining ourselves inside the caterpillar.

When the Skeptic Points to Real Animal Pain

Skeptic: Fine, insects. But my dog feels real pain, and so does a deer brought down by wolves.

Christian: Real pain, yes, and I take it seriously. But your dog doesn't lie awake dreading tomorrow's vet appointment. Animals feel the moment without the dread, the memory, the despair, the self-awareness that makes our suffering so terrible. God seems to have mercifully spared them the worst part of pain: knowing you're its victim.

When the Skeptic Says God Should Have Skipped Predators

Skeptic: Then God should've made a world with no predators at all. Everyone eats plants, nobody gets eaten.

Christian: Nature ran that experiment. Yellowstone lost its wolves, and the elk exploded, stripped the land, and starved en masse. Putting the wolves back healed the whole ecosystem. The prey need the predators; a quick end beats a slow

famine. Even the Psalms call the lion's prey "food from God." The predator-free world you want is real, by the way. The Bible puts it at the end of the story: the wolf with the lamb.

Landing the Point

Christian: So here's the whole answer. Most of nature's "suffering" is reflex with no one inside to suffer; the real pain animals feel lacks the self-aware horror that makes ours so heavy; and what remains buys things a living world can't do without: working ecosystems, stable laws, a stage for free creatures. And Scripture says creation's groaning is labor pain, not a death rattle. It ends in birth.

Section 3 · Chapter 17

Did God Command Genocide?

“Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?”

Genesis 18:25

Why This Argument Matters

“Your God commanded genocide.” No accusation against the Old Testament hits harder, and skeptics love to quote Joshua's orders to “utterly destroy” the Canaanites and “leave nothing alive that breathes.” Let us be honest at the start: one respected theologian called this a ghastly business, something one shrinks from in horror. The Christian should never answer this question glibly. But honesty also demands we answer it accurately.

And accuracy changes everything. The charge of genocide turns out to rest on reading an ancient war account the way you would read this morning's news, ripping it from its language, its history, and its own surrounding verses. When you put the texts back into their world, a very different picture emerges: a judgment on a brutally corrupt culture after four centuries of patience, carried out mostly by driving people from a land, aimed at fortified strongholds, described in the standard exaggerated war rhetoric of the day, and offering mercy to anyone who turned, mercy that some Canaanites accepted.

This chapter walks through that evidence piece by piece. By the end you will be able to answer the hardest verses in the Bible without flinching and without spin, because the case is cumulative: many independent lines of evidence converging on one conclusion. God judged Canaan. He did not commit genocide.

Key Terms

GENOCIDE means “acting with intent to destroy a people group as such, because of who they are.”

HEREM (THE BAN) means “devoting something to God in judgment; it allowed exceptions for any who turned.”

HYPERBOLE means “deliberate exaggeration for effect, like ‘we crushed them,’ standard in ancient war accounts.”

CRUCIAL MORAL PRINCIPLE means “slaughtering innocent people is always wrong; Christians affirm this fully.”

The Argument in Plain Form

The skeptic's charge: God commanded genocide. The Christian response can be put simply.

(P1) Genocide means targeting a people for who they are, and the charge requires the texts to depict deliberate slaughter of innocents.

(P2) But the campaign was a judgment on documented wickedness after centuries of patience, and any Canaanite who turned to God was spared and welcomed.

(P3) And read by their own conventions, the texts describe hyperbolic war rhetoric, a people driven out of a land, and strikes on military strongholds, not the massacre of civilians.

(C) Therefore, God judged Canaan, but He did not command genocide.

Getting the Question Right

Start with a point of full agreement: deliberately and mercilessly slaughtering innocent men, women, and children is morally monstrous. Christians affirm this without qualification; Scripture itself condemns shedding innocent blood. So the debate is not over whether such an act would be wrong. It is over whether the text actually depicts such an act, which makes this a question of careful reading, not of defending a massacre.

Definitions matter too. Genocide means intending to destroy a people because of who they are, where no change of belief or behavior can save you. The Canaanite campaign fails that definition at its very first test: Canaanites who turned to Israel's God were spared and welcomed in. Rahab of Jericho and her whole family were rescued and absorbed into Israel, and she appears, stunningly, in the family tree of Jesus Himself. The Gibeonites made peace and lived among Israel for centuries. A campaign you can opt out of by changing allegiance is targeting what people do, not what people are, and that is the opposite of genocide. Israel itself was ethnically mixed and commanded to love the foreigner as itself; this was never about race.

1. Look up Joshua 2:8-13. What does Rahab confess about Israel's God, and what does her rescue prove about the nature of the campaign?

A Judgment Four Centuries in the Making

Why did judgment fall on Canaan at all? Not over a difference of religious opinion. Canaanite culture, documented by archaeology and by the Canaanites' own recovered religious texts, institutionalized horrors: children burned in sacrifice to the gods, temple prostitution as a public industry, ritual incest, and worship of deities celebrated for wading in blood. These were not occasional crimes but the religious operating system of the society, and its victims, above all the children, were endless.

God's response was not a thunderbolt of impatience. He told Abraham that his descendants would wait four hundred years before inheriting the land, "for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete." Four centuries of divine patience while a culture entrenched itself in atrocity. And the proof that this was justice rather than favoritism is what happened later: when Israel itself adopted Canaanite practices, the same God brought the same judgment on His own people, tearing them from the land by exile. The standard was moral, and it was applied to everyone, Israel included. This is the Judge of all the earth doing right, slowly, reluctantly, and impartially.

2. Look up **Genesis 15:13-16**. How long did God say He would wait, and what reason did He give? What does that patience tell you about this judgment?

How Ancient People Wrote About War

Now the language. "Utterly destroyed... left no survivor... all the land." To modern ears this is a body count; to ancient ears it was the standard victory rhetoric every nation used. Egyptian pharaohs boasted of annihilating armies that fought on for the next century. A Moabite king's monument declares "Israel has utterly perished forever," using Joshua's exact idiom about a nation that plainly persisted. We still talk this way: when the Lakers "crush" the Celtics, no one checks for casualties. Ancient readers recognized war hyperbole the way we recognize sports hyperbole.

The decisive proof is that Joshua itself rules out a literal reading. The book says Joshua "left no survivor," then in the same chapter mentions "the survivors who survived" fleeing to fortified cities. It says he "took the whole land," then says "very much of the land remains to be possessed," and lists Canaanites still living everywhere; the next book, Judges, is full of them. Most telling of all, Moses commands Israel to "utterly destroy" the Canaanites and in the very next breath forbids intermarrying with them, a command that would be meaningless if extermination were meant literally. The text is signaling its own genre. Sweeping victory talk and a surviving population sit side by side because the writers and their readers knew exactly how the convention worked.

3. Look up **Deuteronomy 7:2-3**. What command immediately follows "utterly destroy them," and why does that rule out reading the destruction language literally?

Driven Out, Not Wiped Out

What was actually commanded? Overwhelmingly, the Hebrew verbs are about driving out, dispossessing, and sending away, the same verbs used when Adam and Eve were driven from Eden and Cain into the wilderness; none of them were killed. God's stated plan was explicit: "I will drive them out before you little by little." Even the "destroy" verbs are used elsewhere of Israel's own exile, where the nation was removed, not erased. And

when armies approached in the ancient world, civilians fled; those who left were not pursued. Peace terms were available, and the text notes that only Gibeon took them.

Archaeology sharpens the picture further. The Canaanite “cities” of Joshua were not population centers but small fortified citadels, the kind housing a king, his soldiers, and the religious establishment, while ordinary families lived in the countryside. Jericho was compact enough for Israel to march around it seven times in a single day; estimates put its occupants at perhaps a hundred soldiers and officials. The famous “men and women, young and old” phrase was a stock idiom for “everyone in the place,” whoever that happened to be. So the battles fell on military strongholds and the machinery of a child-sacrificing religion. That is judgment on a corrupt establishment, not the hunting of a civilian population. And it happened once: Israel never extended this command to any other nation, the prophets never invoked it again, and Jesus shut the door forever, declaring that His kingdom is not of this world and that those who take the sword will perish by it.

4. In your own words, why do the “driving out” verbs and the citadel evidence undermine the genocide charge?

Answering the Objections

Objection 1: *Even granting all that, real people died, possibly including children. How is that defensible?*

It is right to feel the weight here, and the Christian should not pretend the cost was zero. But notice the charge has changed: from “God targeted a people for extermination” to “people died in a divinely ordered judgment,” and those are different questions. Combat deaths in a war against fortified strongholds defending a child-sacrificing establishment are tragic, but they are not the slaughter of the innocent; the soldiers and officials of that system were not innocent of serious wrongdoing, and civilians who fled or turned were spared.

As for any children caught in war's reach: Scripture never records the targeting of Canaanite children, and Christian theology holds that children who die before moral accountability are received by God into eternal life, suffering no final injustice; indeed they were rescued from being raised into, and sacrificed by, that very system. That truth gives no human being license to harm a child, because only the Author of life holds life's term in His hands. The Judge of all the earth, who waited four hundred years and spared every Rahab who turned, did right, even where doing right was terrible.

Objection 2: *“God commanded it” is what the Crusaders said, and what every religious extremist says today.*

The misuse of a text does not tell you what the text teaches; tyrants have waved every great document, from Scripture to declarations of human equality, and the fault lay with the wavers. The Canaanite command was explicitly unique: tied to one land, one moment, and one redemptive purpose, never extended by Israel to any other nation, and never

invoked by the prophets again. It was a one-time judicial act, not a standing policy anyone may claim.

Better still, Christianity contains the explicit rule that condemns the Crusaders: Jesus declared His kingdom is not of this world, that His servants therefore do not fight for it, and that those who take up the sword will die by it. Anyone killing in Christ's name violates Christ's command, which is precisely why we can identify the Crusades as a betrayal of Christianity rather than an expression of it. A modern extremist claiming God's sanction fails every Christian test: the closed canon, the unique setting, and above all the character and explicit teaching of Jesus.

Objection 3: *This “hyperbole” reading is just an apologetic escape hatch invented to dodge embarrassing verses.*

The hyperbole finding came from secular scholarship, not from apologetics: specialists comparing Egyptian, Hittite, Assyrian, and Moabite war records documented the exaggeration convention across the whole ancient Near East, in texts with no Christian interests at stake. The Bible's writers used the military rhetoric of their world, just as a modern writer uses ours. Calling that a dodge is like calling it a dodge to note that “the Lakers annihilated the Celtics” involves no deaths.

And the strongest evidence is the Bible's own text, visible to anyone: “left no survivor” beside “the survivors who survived,” “took the whole land” beside “much land remains,” “utterly destroy them” beside “do not intermarry with them.” A literal reading makes the book contradict itself within chapters and even sentences; the conventional reading makes it coherent. Note also what the strict literalist standard would do elsewhere: it would have Jesus commanding us to literally hate our parents and pluck out our eyes. Everyone reads ancient texts by their genre. The only question is whether we do it consistently.

Putting It Into Practice: A Sample Dialogue

Below is a model conversation between a Christian and a Skeptic, with each section handling a different objection. Read it aloud, then keep it in mind for your own conversations.

Opening the Conversation

Skeptic: Your Bible has God ordering genocide. “Kill everything that breathes.” How do you defend that?

Christian: Not glibly; it's the hardest text in Scripture and I won't pretend otherwise. But let's define the word. Genocide means destroying a people for who they are, where nothing they do can save them. Rahab the Canaanite turned to God, was spared with her whole family, and ended up in Jesus's own genealogy. A judgment you can escape by changing allegiance isn't genocide; it's targeting what a culture did.

Skeptic: And what could a whole culture do to deserve that?

Christian: Burning children alive to their gods, for one, as a public institution. And God still waited four hundred years, by His own statement, before judging. Then He

judged Israel the same way when it copied those practices. That's impartial justice, not ethnic hatred.

When the Skeptic Quotes the Destruction Verses

Skeptic: The text literally says “leave nothing alive that breathes.” You can't talk around that.

Christian: Then who are “the survivors who survived” in the same chapter? Why does Moses say “utterly destroy them” and immediately add “don't intermarry with them”? Why is the next book full of living Canaanites? Ancient war accounts everywhere used that totalizing rhetoric; a Moabite king carved “Israel has utterly perished forever” while Israel was very much alive. It's “the Lakers crushed the Celtics,” ancient edition, and the original readers knew it.

When the Skeptic Asks About the Children

Skeptic: But in real fighting, children die. A good God wouldn't allow even that.

Christian: I feel that too. Notice the battles fell on fortified citadels, military and religious headquarters, while civilians fled, as they always did before ancient armies, and anyone who turned was spared. The text never records children being hunted. And if any died in war's reach, Christian teaching says God received them; their story doesn't end in Canaan. The children we know that system killed, year after year, were the ones on its altars. The judgment stopped that.

Landing the Point

Christian: So put the pieces together: a documented culture of atrocity, four hundred years of patience, mercy for every Rahab, war language every ancient reader knew was rhetoric, a campaign of driving out aimed at strongholds, never repeated, and finally Jesus banning the sword for His kingdom forever. That's not genocide. That's the Judge of all the earth doing right, and doing it more patiently and mercifully than we would have.

Section 3 · Chapter 18

Does the Bible Condone Slavery?

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Galatians 3:28

Why This Argument Matters

“The Bible condones slavery.” When skeptics say this, they mean the slavery of the American South: human beings kidnapped because of their race, legally classified as property, owned for life, passed down to heirs, denied all rights, with no path to freedom. That institution was monstrous, and let this be said plainly: Scripture agrees. The question is whether the Bible actually authorizes any such thing, and the answer, examined carefully, is no, on every point.

In fact the story is far better than a defense. The Old Testament regulated a voluntary, time-limited safety net for the destitute, with protections found in no other ancient law code; three of its laws, if obeyed, would have made Southern slavery legally impossible. The New Testament then condemned slave traders by name, declared slave and free one in Christ, and planted the ideas that eventually abolished slavery altogether.

That last point deserves emphasis. Slavery existed in virtually every civilization in history, but it was abolished as a moral cause exactly once, and the people who did it were Christians wielding these very texts. By the end of this chapter you will be able to handle the hard verses and tell that larger story.

Key Terms

CHATTEL SLAVERY means “humans held as property: kidnapped, owned for life, without rights or exit.”

INDENTURED SERVITUDE means “a voluntary, time-limited labor contract to pay off debt or survive poverty.”

'EBED means “the Hebrew word behind ‘slave/servant,’ used even of royal officials and prophets.”

REDEMPTIVE MOVEMENT means “Scripture’s direction of travel: from regulation toward freedom.”

The Argument in Plain Form

The skeptic's charge: the Bible condones slavery. The Christian response can be put simply.

(P1) The charge assumes the Bible authorizes chattel slavery: people kidnapped and owned as property for life, without rights or exit.

(P2) But the institution Scripture regulated was voluntary, time-limited debt-servitude with mandatory release and protections found nowhere else in the ancient world.

(P3) And the Bible outlaws every pillar of chattel slavery, while the New Testament condemns slave traders and declares slave and free one in Christ.

(C) Therefore, the Bible does not condone slavery; rightly read, it became the engine of abolition.

Which “Slavery” Are We Talking About?

The English word “slavery” covers wildly different institutions, the way “marriage” covers everything from modern monogamy to ancient bride-purchase. So definitions come first. The Hebrew word 'ebed, usually translated “slave” or “servant,” had no built-in degradation: royal officials were the king's 'ebed, the prophets were God's 'avadim, Moses bore the title as an honor, and Paul proudly opened letters as a doulos, a slave, of Christ. Even the verbs mislead modern ears: the Hebrew word for “buy” or “acquire” is used of God “possessing” heaven and earth and of Boaz “acquiring” Ruth as his wife. When a ballplayer is “sold” to another team today, a contract moves, not a piece of property; ancient labor language worked the same way.

So every time you see “slave” in an English Old Testament, the antebellum picture imported by that word is doing work the Hebrew never did. The real question is what institution the law actually describes, and that is where we turn.

1. Why is it misleading to read the American plantation system into the word “slave” in an English Bible?

A Safety Net, Not a Plantation

Here is the institution the law of Moses regulated. In a subsistence farming world with no banks, no wage jobs, and no welfare, a family whose crops failed faced starvation. Their remedy was a contract: “if one of your countrymen becomes poor and sells himself,” he entered a household as a worker, receiving room, board, and credit against the debt. This was voluntary debt-relief, the same arrangement by which half to two-thirds of white immigrants later reached colonial America, working off the price of their passage. No one calls those immigrants plantation slaves.

And the contract had a clock. Every seventh year servants went free, and not empty-handed: the law commands the employer to load the departing servant generously with flocks, grain, and wine, startup capital for a new life, “remembering that you were a slave in Egypt.” Every fiftieth year, the Jubilee reset everything: debts canceled, land returned, families home. Permanent service existed only one way: the servant himself, loving the household, could publicly declare before judges that he wished to stay for life. Freedom was the default; staying required opting in, the exact reverse of chattel slavery. And when Israelites later re-enslaved servants they had freed, God sent a prophet to condemn them and named it among the sins that brought the exile. He meant these laws.

2. Look up **Deuteronomy 15:12-15**. What was the employer required to do when releasing a servant, and what reason does God give?

Three Laws Found Nowhere Else

Now the heart of the case. The law of Moses contains three provisions found in no other law code of the ancient world, and together they outlaw every pillar of chattel slavery.

No man-stealing — kidnapping a person to sell or keep was a capital crime (Exodus 21:16). This single law makes the entire Atlantic slave trade a death-penalty offense.

No abuse — a servant injured by a master went free on the spot, even for a knocked-out tooth (Exodus 21:26-27), and a master who killed a servant faced execution like any murderer.

No returning runaways — a servant who fled mistreatment was to be sheltered, never returned, and allowed to live wherever he chose (Deuteronomy 23:15-16).

Feel how radical that third law is. Babylon's most famous law code imposed the death penalty for sheltering a runaway; Moses imposed protection. And in 1850, the United States passed the Fugitive Slave Act requiring escaped slaves to be returned, the precise opposite of God's law, while the Christians running the Underground Railroad obeyed Deuteronomy by breaking Washington's statute. Here is the verdict: the slaveholders who waved Bibles were violating its three most distinctive labor laws, the very laws that strike at kidnapping, brutality, and fugitive-hunting. The Bible did not authorize their institution. It indicted it.

3. Look up **Deuteronomy 23:15-16**. What does this law command Israel to do with an escaped servant, and how does it compare with the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850?

From Regulation to Abolition

The New Testament met a different world: Rome, where perhaps a third of the population was enslaved as true property. The apostles did not call for revolt, which Rome would

have answered with mass crucifixions as it answered every slave rising. They did something more lethal to the institution: they dissolved its foundations. Slave traders, literally “man-stealers,” are condemned alongside murderers. Slave and free are declared one in Christ. Masters are told they share the same Master in heaven, who shows no favoritism, an idea Roman law, which classed slaves as things, could not survive. And in the letter to Philemon, Paul sends Onesimus home with the instruction that detonates the whole system: receive him “no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, a beloved brother.” You cannot own your brother.

History records the explosion in slow motion. As the gospel leavened Europe, slavery withered away; a fourth-century church father, preaching on Ecclesiastes, demanded of slaveholders, “Who is his buyer, tell me? Who is his seller?”, the first known denunciation of slavery as an institution in all of world literature. And when slavery returned in the colonial era, the abolitionists who killed it, from the evangelical parliamentarian who fought it for twenty years to the Quakers to the Underground Railroad, were Christians arguing from these texts. The most famous escaped slave in American history drew the line exactly right: he loved “the Christianity of Christ” and hated “the slaveholding religion of this land” as its corruption. Slavery has been abolished as a moral cause once in human history, and the Book the skeptics blame is the reason it happened.

4. Look up Philemon 15-16. How does Paul ask Philemon to receive Onesimus, and why does that request undermine slavery itself?

Answering the Objections

Objection 1: *Exodus 21 says if you beat your slave and he survives a day or two, you go unpunished because he is your “property.” That’s indefensible.*

Read the whole law. Its first clause says a master whose blow kills his servant “shall surely be punished,” a Hebrew expression that means capital punishment: the master dies for it, exactly as for killing a free person. No other ancient code did this; Babylon fined you the slave’s price, like property damage. The verse the skeptic cites as the Bible’s worst is actually the ancient world’s strongest legal protection of a servant’s life, treating him fully as a person.

The “day or two” clause is the ancient version of a distinction every modern court still makes: murder versus manslaughter. Immediate death implies a killing blow and intent; death days later, in a world where all household discipline was physical, implied a tragic accident rather than murder, and “he is his money” notes the master’s own stake that made intentional harm self-defeating. And remember the very next verses: any lasting injury, even a knocked-out tooth, set the servant free immediately. A master who struck a servant risked execution if the servant died and lost the entire contract if the servant was hurt. The law’s incentives all run against abuse, not toward it.

Objection 2: *Leviticus 25 lets Israel buy foreigners as “possessions” and bequeath them to their children forever. That’s chattel slavery in black and white.*

Start with the verb: “acquire” is the same flexible Hebrew word used of God possessing heaven and earth and of Boaz acquiring Ruth as a wife; it marks a contractual relationship, not ownership of a person as a thing. The foreigners in view were war captives and destitute immigrants in a land where, by God's design, soil could not be sold out of Israelite families, so long-term household service was the realistic way a landless foreigner survived; “bequeathing” passed those labor contracts to the next generation of the household.

Now test it against chattel slavery's marks, and every one fails. The anti-harm law and the runaway-refuge law protected foreigners too, so a mistreated foreign servant could simply leave, with all Israel forbidden to return him. He shared the weekly Sabbath rest and feasted at Israel's festivals. Three verses later the same chapter imagines a foreigner growing rich enough to hire Israelite servants himself, and Scripture records an Egyptian servant marrying his master's daughter and inheriting the family line. Mobility, protection, rest, exit, and intermarriage: chattel systems permit none of these. This was the ancient world's most humane arrangement for the landless poor, not a plantation.

Objection 3: *If God really opposed slavery, He would have simply banned it outright. Regulation is complicity.*

Picture the bare ban at Sinai: “all debt-servitude is hereby abolished,” announced to a subsistence farming economy with no banks, no wage market, and no welfare. The starving family that would have survived by contracting into a household now simply starves. The command the skeptic demands would have killed the very poor it imagines protecting. What God actually did was harder and better: He outlawed the kidnapping, abuse, and fugitive-return that make slavery slavery, mandated release with generous provision, built anti-poverty law to prevent the need, and declared every human being His own image.

Jesus Himself explained how to read Mosaic accommodations: some laws, like the divorce provision, were given “because of the hardness of your hearts,” regulating a fallen world while pointing back to the creation ideal. The slavery legislation works the same way: real-world regulation aimed in the direction of freedom, a trajectory that runs from the divine image in Genesis, through the safety-net laws, to “neither slave nor free” in Christ, to abolition itself. And the trajectory is no apologetic invention: it actually arrived. The one civilization that abolished slavery was the one reading this Book.

Putting It Into Practice: A Sample Dialogue

Below is a model conversation between a Christian and a Skeptic, with each section handling a different objection. Read it aloud, then keep it in mind for your own conversations.

Opening the Conversation

Skeptic: The Bible condones slavery. That alone disqualifies it as a moral guide.

Christian: Let's define the word first. If you mean what happened in the American South, kidnapping people, owning them for life, hunting runaways, then the Bible makes every pillar of that a crime: kidnapping a person carried the death penalty, an

injured servant went free on the spot, and returning a runaway was forbidden. Those three laws exist in no other ancient code.

Skeptic: Then what was all that “slave” legislation about?

Christian: Debt-servitude: a starving family voluntarily contracted into a household to survive, like the indentured servants who settled colonial America. Mandatory release every seventh year, sent off loaded with provisions, everything reset at Jubilee. It was a safety net with a clock, not a plantation.

When the Skeptic Quotes the Hard Verses

Skeptic: Exodus says you can beat your slave as long as he survives two days. Explain that.

Christian: Read clause one: a master whose servant dies under his hand is executed, like any murderer. Babylon charged a fine, property damage; Moses charged murder, because the servant is a person. The day-or-two clause is just murder versus manslaughter, a distinction our courts still make. And the next verses free any servant his master so much as injures. Every incentive in that law runs against abuse.

When the Skeptic Points to Christian Slaveholders

Skeptic: Slaveholders quoted that same Bible for centuries. It worked pretty well for them.

Christian: By ignoring its plainest laws. Their trade was man-stealing: a capital crime. Their discipline: grounds for freedom. Their Fugitive Slave Act: the exact opposite of Deuteronomy, which the Underground Railroad obeyed instead. The most famous escaped slave in American history said it best: he loved the Christianity of Christ and hated the slaveholding religion of this land as its corruption. And notice who ended slavery: Christians, arguing from this Book. Abolition happened once in human history, and this was its engine.

Landing the Point

Christian: So here's the whole picture. The Bible regulated a survival contract with release built in, outlawed everything that defines chattel slavery, declared every human God's image, and planted “neither slave nor free” in the world's conscience until slavery died of it. That's not complicity; that's a fuse. The skeptic's strongest charge against Scripture turns out to be one of the strongest evidences for it: this Book is where human freedom came from.

Section 3 · Chapter 19

The Problem of Those Who Have Never Heard of Christ

“And He made from one man every nation of mankind... having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him.”

Acts 17:26-27

Why This Argument Matters

Picture a shepherd living in central Asia eight hundred years ago. He is born, lives, and dies in a valley the gospel will not reach for another six centuries. No missionary could have come; no Bible could have arrived. He never had the smallest chance to hear the name of Jesus. What happens to a man like that?

This is one of the questions people feel before they can even put it into words, because it seems to make a person's entire eternity depend on something he never chose: the time and place of his birth. And the question has real weight for the Christian, because Scripture does teach that salvation comes through Christ alone. So the worry lands as a charge: a God who condemns people over a message they never heard cannot truly be loving.

Here is the encouraging news. Faithful Christians do not all answer this question the same way, and that is fine. Three serious answers are on offer, and this chapter lays out all three honestly before recommending the two that seem most probable. What every one of them shares is the conviction that the Judge of all the earth does right (Genesis 18:25), that no one is condemned for a message he never received, and that no one is lost by the mere accident of his birthplace. The disagreement is only over how God arranges that. Christianity has not one good answer here, but several.

Key Terms

GENERAL REVELATION means “what God shows everyone through nature and conscience, as opposed to special revelation in Scripture and in Christ.”

MIDDLE KNOWLEDGE means “God's knowledge of what every person would freely choose in any circumstances. The view that uses it is called Molinism.”

FURTHER REVELATION means “the view that when a person responds to the light he has, God gives him more light, and ultimately the gospel itself.”

The Argument in Plain Form

The skeptic's claim is that two statements cannot both be true: (1) God is all-powerful and all-loving, and (2) some people never hear the gospel and are lost. The Christian response can be put simply.

(P1) There is no open contradiction between (1) and (2); the skeptic must supply hidden assumptions to create one.

(P2) The needed assumptions, that God could create a world where everyone freely hears and is saved, and that He must prefer such a world, are not necessarily true once human freedom is taken seriously.

(P3) God judges every person by the light he actually has, and there are good biblical models on which everyone who would respond to Christ is given the opportunity to do so.

(C) Therefore, the unevangelized pose no contradiction to God's love or power, and no one is lost because of where or when he was born.

Notice that the conclusion does not depend on settling which model is correct. To defeat a charge of contradiction, the Christian needs only one workable model on which both statements are true together. This chapter will offer more than one.

The Objection in Its Strongest Form

Imagine a Native American man, call him Walking Bear, living centuries before any missionary arrived. He senses the Great Spirit behind the stars and the moral law in his heart, but ignores both and lives in selfishness. His condemnation is just. But suppose that if missionaries had only come, he would have believed and been saved. Then his damnation looks like bad luck: born at the wrong time, in the wrong place. Would a loving God let eternity hinge on geography?

The skeptic claims a contradiction between **(1)** God is all-powerful and all-loving and **(2)** some never hear and are lost. But those statements do not openly clash; hidden premises are needed: **(3)** an all-powerful God could create a world where everyone freely hears and is saved, and **(4)** an all-loving God must prefer such a world. Both must be necessarily true for the argument to work. Neither is. Against (3): God could make everyone hear, but hearing is not believing, and "freely forced to believe" is a contradiction like a square circle; possibly in **any** world of free creatures, **some** reject Him. Against (4): even if a world of universal free salvation were available, it might contain only a handful of people. Must a loving God prefer a near-empty heaven over a world where multitudes are freely saved, even though others freely refuse Him? Surely not.

So the skeptic's logical charge already fails. But Christians want to say something more constructive than "you haven't proven a contradiction." They want a picture of how God actually deals with Walking Bear. Here the church has offered three serious answers.

God Judges by the Light a Person Has

Before comparing the three views, we must lay a foundation all of them share, and it surprises many skeptics: the Bible does not teach that anyone is judged for a message he never received. God judges every person by the light he actually has, never by light he never got. Paul says it plainly in Romans 2:12: those who sinned apart from the written law are judged apart from that law, while those who had it are judged by it. No one is held to a standard he had no way of reaching.

So the real question is what light everyone does have, and Scripture names two truths God reveals to every person, everywhere. First, that He exists, seen in the natural world around us (Romans 1:20). Second, that there is a moral law, felt in the conscience within us (Romans 2:14-15). These are not faint hints; Paul says they are clear enough to leave everyone “without excuse.” Every person, then, already stands in real light, and every person suppresses it to some degree, which is why all are guilty and none can claim to have been judged unfairly.

One clarification matters here, and the Further Revelation view will press it hard. General revelation is enough to leave a person without excuse, but the New Testament gives no clear example of anyone being saved without hearing the gospel. People in Acts were saved after they heard the message, repented, and confessed Christ. So the question is not whether nature and conscience are a second road to God that bypasses Jesus. They are not. The question is what God does with a person who responds rightly to the light he has but lives where the gospel has not yet reached.

1. Look up Romans 1:20 and 2:14-15. What two channels of revelation does every person receive, and what does Paul say this leaves them without?

Three Christian Views

Each of the three holds firmly to particularism: salvation is through Christ alone. They differ over how God ensures that no one who would receive Christ is lost by accident.

View One: The Calvinist Answer

On this view, God has chosen, before the foundation of the world, those whom He will save, and He sees to it that every one of His elect actually hears the gospel and believes. So if a person dies without ever hearing, that is evidence he was not among the elect; God did not pass over anyone He intended to save. The strength of this view is that it takes God’s sovereignty in salvation with full seriousness and removes any worry that someone slipped through the cracks against God’s will. Its difficulty, for many Christians, is that it locates the reason some never hear in God’s hidden choice rather than in anything about the people themselves, which can make the fairness question feel unresolved rather than answered. It is a coherent and historic position, held by many faithful believers, and it is not refuted here; it simply leaves more inside God’s secret will than the next two views do.

View Two: The Molinist Answer (Middle Knowledge)

On this view, God knows not only what is and what will be, but what every possible person would freely do in any situation He might place him. Using that knowledge, picture humanity sorted into four boxes by two questions: does the person hear the gospel, and would he freely accept it?

- Box 1: Hear and accept. These people exist; they are the church.
- Box 2: Hear and reject. They exist too; their loss is their own free, informed choice.
- Box 3: Never hear, would have rejected it anyway. God owes no delivery of a message He knows would be refused; they are judged fairly by the light they spurned.
- Box 4: Never hear, but would have accepted it. This is where the whole objection lives: the Walking Bears.

The Molinist proposes something simple: **Box 4 is empty**. A God who knows how every person would freely respond can arrange history so that anyone who would believe the gospel is born where he will hear it; as the message spreads outward from first-century Palestine, God places in its path exactly the people He knew would respond. Then no one is ever lost by historical or geographical accident. No one could say on Judgment Day, “If only I had heard, I would have believed,” for God would answer, “I knew that you would not have.” This is more than a logical move; it is close to what Paul preached on Mars Hill, that God determined the times and places of every nation “that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him” (Acts 17:26-27).

View Three: The Further Revelation Answer

This view starts from a principle running through Scripture: God gives more light to those who respond to the light they already have. A person cannot be saved by general revelation alone, since the gospel must be heard. But when someone responds in humility and repentance to what God has shown him as Creator and Judge, God sees to it that the gospel reaches him. The clearest model is Cornelius. He was “devout and God-fearing” before he heard the gospel, responding to the light he had, yet he was not yet saved. God answered that response not by saving him on the spot but by sending further revelation, an angelic vision directing him to send for Peter, who then preached Christ; only after hearing and believing was Cornelius saved (Acts 10). The pattern is striking: God provided extra light precisely because the man had responded to the light he already had, and that extra light led to a human preacher and the gospel itself.

On this reading, Paul’s words that the messengers’ “voice has gone out into all the earth” (Romans 10:18) describe God’s commitment that the gospel will reach those who seek Him. And the model has modern fingerprints. There are well-documented accounts, especially from the Muslim world, of people who had never heard of Jesus receiving a dream or vision of a man who later turned out to be Christ, which prepared them to accept the gospel once a believer explained it. In every such case the person was not saved by the dream; the dream led them to someone who told them the good news. That is exactly what this view predicts: further revelation plays a preparatory role, guiding seekers to the gospel rather than replacing it.

2. Look up Acts 10. Was Cornelius saved by his devotion and prayers before Peter arrived, or only after he heard and believed the gospel? What does this show about how God treats a person who responds to the light he has?

Which Views Are Most Probable

All three are legitimate Christian options, and all three defeat the skeptic's charge of contradiction. But the Molinist and Further Revelation views seem the more probable solutions, for two reasons.

First, both keep the explanation tied to the person rather than to a hidden decree. On the Molinist view, the one who never hears is the one who would have refused anyway; on the Further Revelation view, the one who responds to the light he has is given more light until the gospel reaches him. In each case the outcome tracks how the person actually responds to God, which is what the fairness worry was really asking about. The Calvinist view answers the logical charge just as well, but it answers the emotional and moral worry by appeal to God's secret will, which satisfies fewer of the people who raise the objection.

Second, the two favored views fit a wide range of Scripture at once. Middle knowledge makes sense of Paul's claim that God fixed the times and places of the nations so that people would seek and perhaps find Him (Acts 17:26-27). Further revelation makes sense of the actual narratives in Acts, where seekers like Cornelius are guided to a preacher, and of Paul's insistence that faith comes by hearing (Romans 10:14-18). The two are not rivals so much as complementary: God, knowing who would respond, providentially gets the gospel to them, sometimes through ordinary missions and sometimes through a dream or some other method He chooses. Held together, they give the most complete and most biblically grounded answer to where Walking Bear stands.

A final note on tone. None of this lets us pry open God's secret files or announce who is saved. What we can say with confidence is that God is both perfectly just and perfectly loving, that He judges no one for light he never had, and that God has more than one good way of ensuring that everyone who would say yes to Christ gets the chance to.

Answering the Objections

Objection 1: *People overwhelmingly adopt the religion of their culture, so many of the unevangelized would surely have believed if raised in a Christian society. The Molinist model is wildly improbable.*

This objection pictures God shuffling billions of births and somehow, by luck, landing every future believer in the right time and place. Put that way, yes, it sounds impossibly unlikely. But luck is not the claim. The claim is that God planned it. And for a God who knows how every person would respond in any situation, arranging who is born where, is no harder than a host deciding where to seat guests at dinner. Once you remember we are talking about an all-knowing God and not a cosmic coin-flip, the "improbable" charge loses its force.

There is also a hidden mistake in the objection: it assumes that being raised Christian is the same as being saved. It isn't. A person raised in a Christian town might show up at church on Christmas and still have no real faith at all. Growing up around Christianity does not automatically produce a genuine believer, so we cannot assume the unevangelized "would have believed" simply by being born somewhere else.

Objection 2: *If God will get the gospel to everyone who would believe, missionaries are wasting their time.*

The opposite is true, and this is where the Further Revelation view is especially clarifying. Notice how God gets the gospel to the seeker in every biblical and modern case: through the verbal witness of believers. Cornelius needed Peter; the dreamer in the Muslim world needed someone to open a Bible. Paul asks, "How are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?" (Romans 10:14). On these models, missions become more urgent, not less: God has placed people in the gospel's path who He knew would believe it. The missionary is delivering mail God has already addressed.

Objection 3: *These models are pure speculation. You cannot prove any of them is actually true.*

They do not need proof, because the burden sits with the skeptic. He claimed a contradiction, and a contradiction claim is defeated by any possible scenario on which both statements are true together. We have offered three. This is the same move as the free will defense in Chapter 13, which offered a possible reason, not God's actual one, and that was enough. Moreover, the favored models have biblical fingerprints: God desires all to be saved (2 Peter 3:9), judges fairly by the light given (Romans 2), fixed the times and places of the nations so people would seek and perhaps find Him (Acts 17), and provides further light to those who respond, as He did with Cornelius (Acts 10). Possible models with that much scriptural support are far more than the objection can bear.

Objection 4: *If people can be saved by responding to general revelation, then Jesus is not really necessary.*

None of these views says anyone is saved by general revelation. Nature and conscience are enough to leave a person guilty, never enough to save him. On every model the person is saved only through Christ, and on the favored two he is saved only after the gospel actually reaches him. General revelation is the first step that God honors with further light; it is never a second road that bypasses the cross. Compassion for people in other religions therefore means bringing Christ to them, not pretending they are fine without Him.

Putting It Into Practice: A Sample Dialogue

Below is a model conversation between a Christian and a Skeptic, with each section handling a different objection. Read it aloud, then keep it in mind for your own conversations.

Opening the Conversation

Skeptic: So a tribesman in the Amazon who never heard of Jesus burns in hell forever? That alone proves your God isn't loving.

Christian: That's not the Christian picture. No one is judged for rejecting a message he never received. Paul says God judges people by the light they do have, creation around them and the moral law written on their hearts. God doesn't flunk anyone on a test he was never given.

Skeptic: Then what happens to the tribesman who responds to that light but never meets a missionary?

Christian: Christians actually answer that a few different ways, and they're all worth knowing. But the two I find most convincing both come down to this: God makes sure the gospel reaches the people who would receive it. Either He arranged history knowing who would say yes, or He gives more light to anyone who responds to the light he has, the way He did with Cornelius. Either way, nobody who would have believed gets lost by bad geography.

When the Skeptic Raises the Man Who Would Have Believed

Skeptic: Fine, but picture someone who ignored conscience, yet would have believed if a missionary had ever shown up. His eternity hinged on bad luck.

Christian: How do you know any such person exists? God knows how every person would freely respond in any circumstances. So it's entirely possible He arranged history so that everyone who would believe the gospel is born where he'll hear it, and anyone who never hears it would have rejected it anyway. And even where someone is seeking, the pattern in Acts is that God sends them further light until a believer brings the gospel. On either model, no one is lost by accident of geography.

Skeptic: That's convenient. You can't prove it.

Christian: I don't need to. You claimed a contradiction between a loving God and the unevangelized being lost, and a contradiction claim dies if there's even one possible way both can be true. I've given you two, and Paul preached the idea on Mars Hill: God fixed the times and places where every nation lives precisely so that people should seek and perhaps find Him.

Landing the Point

Christian: So put it together: no one is judged for a message he never heard, everyone receives real light through nature and conscience, and a God who knows every heart can ensure that everyone who would say yes to the gospel gets to hear it. Which leaves one last question, and it isn't about the tribesman in the Amazon. You have heard. Is it an accident, or has God placed this conversation in your path? The unreached man's case is in good hands. Yours is in yours.

Conclusion

If Christianity Is True, What Does This Mean for Me?

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

John 3:16

The End of the Argument Is a Person

You have come a long way. You have followed the universe back to its cause, weighed the fine-tuning of physics, traced the moral law to the Lawgiver, tested the Gospels as history, examined an empty tomb, and faced the hardest objections skeptics can raise. Step back and look at what the chapters add up to. Natural theology showed that a personal, powerful, good God exists. Christian evidence showed that this God has acted in history, raising Jesus of Nazareth from the dead and vindicating everything Jesus claimed about Himself. The objections, examined honestly, did not overturn that conclusion.

But here is the thing about a true conclusion: it does not stay on the page. If Christianity were merely interesting, you could close this handbook and shelve it next to the puzzle books. If it is true, then the God who fine-tuned the cosmos knows your name, the moral law you have broken is His, and the man who walked out of the tomb is alive right now and has a claim on your life. An argument can be admired from a distance. A risen Lord cannot. So this final chapter asks the only question left: what must you do about it?

Key Terms

REPENTANCE means “a change of mind that turns from sin toward God; not mere regret, but a turning around.”

FAITH means “moving from belief THAT to belief IN: an act of personal trust in Christ, publicly confessed in baptism.”

JUSTIFICATION means “God’s declaration that a sinner is righteous in His sight, on the basis of Christ’s death received by faith.”

BAPTISM means “the public act commanded by Christ by which a believer is received into the community of the Church.”

The Gospel in Plain Form: The Road Through Romans

Every chapter in this handbook laid out an argument in premises. The good news itself can be laid out the same way, and Paul's letter to the Romans supplies every step. Learn this one by heart; it is the most important argument in the book.

(P1) All humans have sinned and fall short of God's glory. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

(P2) The consequence of sin is death, but God offers the gift of eternal life. "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23).

(P3) God demonstrated His love for us through Christ's death for sinners. "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

(P4) Salvation comes through confessing Jesus as Lord and believing in His resurrection. "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9-10).

(P5) Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. "For, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved'" (Romans 10:13).

(P6) Baptism is the normative public response to the Gospel, commanded by Christ, the sign by which one is received into the Church. "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38; see Matthew 28:19).

(C) Therefore, becoming a Christian means turning from sin, trusting in Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, confessing Him as Lord, and being baptized into His Body, the Church.

The pattern repeats throughout the New Testament: hear the gospel, repent and believe, be baptized, and be added to the community of the Church. On the day the church was born, "those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day" (Acts 2:41). Christians across every tradition have always answered the question "what must I do?" together: repent, believe, and be baptized.

1. Without looking, try to write out the six steps of the Road Through Romans in your own words. Then check yourself against the references above.

From Belief THAT to Belief IN

Here is the most important distinction in this entire handbook. Every argument you have studied can produce belief that: belief that God exists, that the tomb was empty, that Jesus rose. That is real progress, and the demons themselves have it; James says they "believe that God is one, and shudder" (James 2:19). But the gospel calls for something more: belief in. The difference is the difference between believing that a surgeon is skilled

and lying down on his table. Between believing that a chair will hold you and sitting in it. Between admiring a bridge's engineering and walking across it. Faith in the biblical sense is not a leap in the dark against the evidence; it is an act of personal trust taken on the evidence, the moment when you stop evaluating the bridge and step onto it.

That is why the New Testament joins the inward act to an outward one. Trust in Christ is confessed publicly in baptism, the sign Christ Himself commanded and the doorway into the visible family of God. Christians differ on exactly how baptism relates to the Spirit's inner work; in Acts 2 Peter commands baptism for the forgiveness of sins, while in Acts 10 the Spirit falls on Cornelius before he is baptized, and Peter responds, "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people?" Both sequences point to the same Lord, the same Spirit, and the same baptism as the expected outward mark of belonging to Him. What no tradition teaches is private, invisible Christianity. The faith that saves goes public, and it joins a church.

2. In your own words, what is the difference between believing THAT Christ rose and believing IN the risen Christ? Which describes you right now?

What This Means If You Already Believe

Perhaps you worked through this handbook as a Christian wanting to be ready with answers. Then hear its closing charge. First, your faith is not a private comfort but a public truth claim, the best-supported worldview on offer, and you now hold the arguments to show it. Second, the knowledge is not for winning arguments but for winning people: "with meekness and fear," as the verse that opened this book commands. The goal was never to humiliate a skeptic; it is to remove the obstacles between a person and Jesus. Third, remember Chapter 19: God in His providence places the gospel in the path of those who would receive it, and His favorite delivery method is an ordinary believer who is ready. You are now that believer. The conversation you have been training for may be closer than you think, so pray for it, watch for it, and when it comes, speak with the gentleness and confidence of someone telling the truth.

Putting It Into Practice: Sharing the Gospel Itself

One final dialogue. This time the skeptic's objections have run out, and the conversation arrives where every conversation in this handbook was always heading. Notice how the Christian moves from argument to invitation using the Road Through Romans.

When the Questions Run Out

Skeptic: I have to admit, you've had better answers than I expected. I'm not saying you've convinced me of everything. But suppose, hypothetically, it's all true. What then? What would I actually have to do?

Christian: That's the best question you've asked all night, and the answer starts somewhere uncomfortable. The Bible says all of us have sinned and fall short of God's glory, and that includes both of us. Not just the big crimes; the pride, the

grudges, the things we'd be ashamed to have read aloud. Be honest: have you lived up even to your own standards?

Skeptic: No one's perfect.

Christian: Exactly, and that's the problem. The wages of sin is death, separation from the God who is the source of all life. If God simply gave us what we've earned, none of us would stand. That's the bad news, and the gospel makes no sense without it.

The Good News

Skeptic: So God just condemns everyone? That's grim.

Christian: No, here's the turn. The same verse says the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus. While we were still sinners, not after we cleaned ourselves up, Christ died for us. The Judge stepped down from the bench and paid the sentence Himself. That's what the cross was, and the resurrection you and I have been debating is God's public receipt that the payment was accepted.

Skeptic: And I just... accept that? It can't be that simple.

Christian: Simple, not cheap; it cost God His Son. Paul puts it plainly: if you declare with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Everyone. No exam, no waiting list, no background check.

Counting the Cost

Skeptic: But I believe a lot of things are true that don't change my life. Couldn't I just agree with you and go home?

Christian: You could, and it would save no one. There's a difference between believing that and believing in. You can believe that a bridge will hold you and still stand on the bank all night. Faith is stepping onto the bridge: turning from the old life, trusting Christ personally, saying "Jesus is Lord" out loud and meaning it. And it goes public: from the very first sermon, the response has been "repent and be baptized." Baptism is how you step into His family, the Church. Christianity was never a private opinion; it's a citizenship.

The Invitation

Skeptic: You realize you're asking for my whole life.

Christian: I am, because He's offering you His. Think back over everything we've talked about: a universe that began, a cosmos tuned for life, a moral law you didn't write, a tomb that couldn't stay shut. Every road has been pointing to one Person, and tonight He's not a conclusion at the end of an argument; He's knocking. Is it really an accident that you've heard all this? Or has God arranged for the message to reach you, just like Paul said He does? You can call on Him right here, in your own words: admit the sin, trust the Savior, confess Him as Lord. I'll pray with you, and Sunday I'll walk you through the church doors myself. The evidence has done its job. The decision is yours.

Footnote: Which Christian Church Should I Join?

If you have decided to follow Christ, a practical question comes close behind: which church? The options can be bewildering, and a new believer is right to wonder whether so many divisions mean Christians cannot agree on anything. They do not mean that.

C. S. Lewis gave the clearest picture of how to think about it. In *Mere Christianity* he compared the faith to a great house with a hall and many rooms opening off it. The hall is “mere” Christianity, the core that all true believers share. The rooms are the particular traditions, where there are fires and chairs and meals. No one is meant to live in the hall; in time you must choose a room. But the hall is what makes the whole house one house.

Across that house stand three great traditions: Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant. They differ, sometimes sharply, on real questions: which church holds rightful authority, how grace is given, how worship should be ordered, and which communion a believer ought to enter. Those differences are not trivial, and this book will not pretend to settle them for you. But step into the hall and notice what every one of these traditions confesses together. They agree on who Jesus Christ is: God in the flesh, crucified for sinners, raised from the dead, and coming again. They agree that salvation is found in Him, and that every person must place their faith in Him.

That shared core is not a modern compromise; it is ancient. In its early centuries the church summarized the apostolic faith in the Apostles’ Creed, and at its great councils in the Nicene Creed that Christians East and West still confess together. When you speak those words you are joining a confession nearly two thousand years old, recited in every room of the house. As Paul wrote, there is “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all” (Ephesians 4:5-6).

So how do you choose a room? Honesty requires me to tell you where I stand. I attend a Calvary Chapel, which falls within the Evangelical branch of Protestantism. I am there because it places the Bible as the ultimate authority and takes great care to preach and teach Scripture verse by verse. That is my room, and I commend it; but I will not tell you it is the only faithful one.

What matters most, wherever you land, is that you join a church that goes out of its way to make Christ known. Look for a fellowship that presents the gospel clearly, holds Scripture in high honor, and urges its members to read the Bible, to pray to God daily, and to grow closer to Him by serving the church and carrying the good news into the world. A church like that will help you become what these pages have been preparing you to be: a follower of Jesus who is ready. Do not attempt the Christian life alone. Find your room, step in, and give yourself to the people there; and as Lewis urged, be kind to those who have chosen different doors, for the house is one, and one Lord is its builder.

Bonus · Chapter 20

Understanding the Trinity

“...baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Matthew 28:19

Why This Doctrine Matters

The Trinity is the doctrine that most sets Christianity apart, and the one most often attacked. Muslims charge that Christians worship three gods. Skeptics call it a self-contradiction, one equals three. Others now claim it was a later invention the Bible never teaches. So why fight for it?

Because what is finally at stake is the deity of Christ, and with it the gospel itself. If Jesus was merely an extraordinary man, then His death on the cross was just the death of one more martyr; it could no more pay for the sins of the world than yours or mine could. The Trinity is not abstract trivia; it is the framework that holds the good news together.

One thing to settle at the outset: the word “Trinity” is not in the Bible, and that is no embarrassment. Neither is the word “monotheism.” “Trinity” is simply a summary word the church coined for what Scripture already reveals from cover to cover: the Father is God, the Son is God, the Spirit is God, and yet God is one. The doctrine did not create that data; it organizes it. This chapter will show that the doctrine is biblical, coherent rather than contradictory, and not merely possible but genuinely plausible.

Key Terms

TRINITY means “the doctrine that there is exactly one God who exists eternally as three distinct persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

BEING means “what something is; its substance or nature. God is one in being. Sometimes called substance or essence.”

PERSON means “a distinct center of self-awareness who can say ‘I’ and relate to others as ‘you.’ God is three in person.”

IDENTITY vs. PREDICATION: identity says two names are the same individual (“The Baby-Faced Assassin is Stephen Curry”); predication attributes a quality shared by many (“Curry is human,” “Jordan is human”).

TRITHEISM / MODALISM are the two errors to avoid: tritheism makes three gods; modalism makes one person in three modes.

The Doctrine in Plain Form

The doctrine of the Trinity, stripped to its essentials, is just two simple claims plus the move that keeps them from colliding.

(P1) There is exactly one God. This is the uncompromising monotheism of both the Old and New Testaments (Deuteronomy 6:4).

(P2) There are exactly three persons who are properly called God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. “Properly” means in truth and literally, not as a figure of speech.

(P3) The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are genuinely distinct; the Father is not the Son, and the Son is not the Spirit. The New Testament never collapses them into one another.

(P4) “The Father is God,” “the Son is God,” and “the Spirit is God” are predications, not identity statements. They attribute deity to each person; they do not say each person is one and the same individual.

(C) Therefore God is triune: one in being, three in person, with no contradiction. The oneness and the threeness are not claimed in the same respect, which is the only way a contradiction could arise.

The very word captures it. “Trinity” fuses “tri,” meaning three, with “unity,” meaning one, exactly as “university” joins the one institution to its many subjects. There is a threeness and a oneness, but they are not the same thing counted twice.

1. Why does it matter that “the Father is God” and “the Son is God” are predications rather than identity statements? What would go wrong if we read them as identity statements instead?

Is It Biblical? A Summary Word, Not a Late Invention

The most common modern charge is that the Trinity was invented centuries later, perhaps cooked up at a church council under political pressure. But notice that the doctrine is just the sum of things the Bible already says plainly, and the church merely gave that sum a name. Three biblical streams flow together.

First, there is exactly one God. This is not in dispute. Israel confessed it daily: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4), and the New Testament writers, every one of them a monotheist, never retreat from it. Second, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are each called God. The Father obviously so; the Son in passages like John 1:1, “the Word was God,” and John 20:28, where Thomas addresses the risen Jesus as “My Lord and my God”; the Spirit in Acts 5, where lying to the Holy Spirit is called lying to God. Third, the three are distinct: the Son prays to the Father, the Father speaks

from heaven over the Son, and the Spirit descends, all in a single scene at Jesus' baptism. Put the three streams together and you already have the doctrine, before any council ever met. The word came later; the teaching did not.

This is the same way the church handles other true doctrines. The word "monotheism" is not in the Bible either, nor is "incarnation," yet no one doubts Scripture teaches them. A summary word is a convenience, not a confession of guilt. The councils did not invent the Trinity any more than a dictionary invents the words it defines; they put a careful boundary around what the apostles had already handed down, precisely to fence out the errors creeping in.

2. Look up **Matthew 3:16-17**. At Jesus' baptism, where is each of the three persons, and how does this scene show they are distinct rather than one person?

Is It Coherent? The Most Important Distinction

Here is the single most useful thing in this chapter. The skeptic hears "the Father is God, the Son is God," assumes these are identity statements, and concludes that the Father and the Son must be the very same individual, or else there are two Gods. But these are not identity statements at all, and seeing why dissolves the supposed contradiction.

An identity statement says two names pick out one and the same thing, like "Air Jordan is Michael Jordan" or "the morning star is the evening star" (both turned out to be the planet Venus). Identity is transitive: if A is identical to B and B is identical to C, then A must be identical to C. So if "Jesus is God" and "the Father is God" were identity statements, then Jesus would have to be identical to the Father, which the New Testament flatly denies. That tells us these were never identity statements in the first place. They are predications: they attribute deity to each person, the way we attribute a property or an office.

An everyday example makes it click. In the ancient world two men could share a throne. To say "Belshazzar is king" and "Nabonidus is king" is not to say Belshazzar and Nabonidus are the same man; it is to say both hold the royal office, a co-regency, two persons sharing one kingship. In the same way, to say the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God is to predicate the same divine nature of three distinct persons. One "what," three "whos." A contradiction would only arise if Christians claimed one God and three gods, or one person and three persons. They claim neither. The oneness is in the being; the threeness is in the persons; different respects, no contradiction.

This also marks out the two ditches on either side of the road. Veer one way and you get tritheism, three separate gods, which denies the oneness of being. Veer the other and you get modalism, one person who merely wears three masks or plays three roles, which denies that the persons are really distinct. The peanut-and-shell or ice-water-steam illustrations children love almost always fall into one ditch or the other, usually modalism, which is why models must be handled with care. A model is meant to help us grasp how

the doctrine can be true; it is not the doctrine itself, and a clumsy one teaches heresy by accident.

Going Further: Is It Plausible?

We can aim higher than “not contradictory.” To call the doctrine possible is to say it is free of logical contradiction, which is a modest claim. To call it plausible is to say it is positively reasonable, the kind of thing a thoughtful person could believe. There is an argument that pushes us toward the stronger claim, and remarkably it can be sketched without even opening the Bible.

Start with the idea of God as the greatest possible being. A greatest possible being would be perfectly loving, and not just capable of love but loving by His very nature. Now, love by its nature gives itself away to another; it requires a beloved. So whom did God love before He created anything? It cannot essentially be creatures, because creatures might never have existed; there are possible scenarios in which God exists, perfectly loving, with no creation at all. So the beloved that God loves by nature must somehow be within God Himself. That alone gives us a plurality of persons in God, at least two, the lover and the beloved. And there is a further step: because this divine love is selfless, mutual, and non-possessive, the two persons would not hoard their love but would open it to share with a third. Self-giving love that stopped at two would be less than perfect. So we arrive, by reflection on the nature of love, at exactly three. This is the philosopher Richard Swinburne’s line of thought, sharpened by more recent work, and while reasonable people weigh it differently, it shows the Trinity is not an awkward burden Christians carry but may be just what we should expect of a God who is love.

Notice the bonus: this same reasoning is a direct challenge to every unitarian picture of God, whether in Islam, in deism, or in the newer unitarian movements drawing some Christians away online. A God who is a single solitary person could not have loved anyone before creation; He would have needed to create an object for His love, making love a later acquisition rather than part of who He eternally is. Only a God who is a fellowship of persons can be love in His very essence, from eternity, with no creation required. Far from being Christianity’s embarrassment, the Trinity is the only way the cherished claim “God is love” (1 John 4:8) can be true all the way down.

4. Look up **1 John 4:8**. If “God is love” was true before anything was created, why does that fit a triune God better than a single solitary one?

Answering the Objections

Objection 1: *This is just polytheism. Jesus is God, the Father is God, the Spirit is God, that is three gods.*

Only if “is God” means “is a separate god,” which is exactly what Christians deny. The three are not three beings who each happen to be divine; they are three persons sharing

one and the same divine being. Compare the co-regency: two kings on one throne are not two kingdoms. Polytheism multiplies gods; the Trinity does not. In fact, as we just saw, Christianity has a stronger basis for the oneness of God than unitarian faiths do, because it can explain how the one God is eternally loving without needing a created world to love.

Objection 2: *The word “Trinity” is not in the Bible, so the doctrine is unbiblical.*

A word can be absent while the teaching is everywhere present. “Monotheism,” “incarnation,” and “omniscience” are not in the Bible either, yet they name things the Bible clearly affirms. “Trinity” is shorthand for three claims Scripture makes plainly: one God, three distinct persons, each truly God. Reject the shorthand if you like, but you still have to deal with the verses, and they are the reason the word exists.

Objection 3: *The early church invented the Trinity at a council long after Jesus, under imperial politics.*

The councils did not invent the doctrine; they defended it. The raw materials, one God and three divine persons, are already in the first-century documents, in John’s Gospel, in Paul’s benedictions, in the baptismal command of Matthew 28:19. What the councils did was draw a precise line to keep out distortions that were gaining ground, much as this handbook states arguments carefully to keep out fallacies. Defining a truth more sharply is not the same as making it up. The believers being martyred for refusing to deny Christ’s deity, well before any council, did not get their conviction from a future emperor.

Objection 4: *Is it not simpler to say God is one person who just shows up in three different modes, as Father, then Son, then Spirit?*

That is the ancient error called modalism, and the Bible rules it out. The three persons interact with one another at the same time: the Son prays to the Father, the Father audibly declares His pleasure in the Son, and the Spirit descends, all in one moment at the baptism. A single person cannot pray to himself, send himself, and speak from heaven to himself simultaneously. The relationships of love between the persons, which run all through John’s Gospel, are real relationships between distinct persons, not one actor changing costumes.

Putting It Into Practice: A Sample Dialogue

Below is a model conversation between a Christian and a Skeptic, here a Muslim friend raising the most common challenges, with each section handling a different objection.

The Charge of Three Gods

Skeptic: You Christians say Jesus is God, the Father is God, the Spirit is God. That is three gods. We Muslims worship one.

Christian: So do we; one God is the first thing the doctrine affirms. The mistake is hearing “the Father is God” as if it meant “the Father is a separate god.” It does not. Think of two kings sharing one throne: “Belshazzar is king” and “Nabonidus is king” does not give you two kingdoms; it gives you two persons holding one royal office. In the same way, three persons share one divine nature. Three whos, one what.

Skeptic: But one equals three makes no sense. It is a contradiction.

Christian: It would be, if we said one God and three gods, or one person and three persons. We say neither. One in being, three in person, two different respects. There is no more contradiction there than in saying one university has three colleges.

How Can Jesus Be God and Not Be the Father?

Skeptic: Then how can Jesus be God and the Father be God, but Jesus is not the Father? That is nonsense.

Christian: This is the key. “Jesus is God” is not like “Mark Twain is Samuel Clemens,” where two names tag one identical person. If it were, then since the Father is God too, Jesus would have to be the Father, and we agree He is not. So these statements were never identity claims. They predicate deity, they attribute the divine nature, to each person. Saying the Father is divine and the Son is divine no more makes them the same person than saying two siblings are both human makes them the same human.

Was This Invented Later?

Skeptic: Honestly, did your church not just invent this at a council? The word is not even in your Bible.

Christian: The word came later, the way “monotheism” came later; your tradition uses summary words too. But the teaching is first-century. One God runs from Deuteronomy to the apostles. Jesus receives worship and is called God by Thomas. The Spirit is treated as God in Acts. And Jesus tells His followers to baptize in the single name of Father, Son, and Spirit. The council did not invent that; it protected it. People were dying rather than deny Christ’s deity long before any emperor was involved.

Landing the Point

Skeptic: Even so, why not keep it simple? One God, one person. Is that not cleaner?

Christian: Cleaner, but it costs you something precious. We both say God is love. But a single solitary person had no one to love before He made the world, so on that view love is something God took up later, not who He always was. A God who is three persons in one being has been loving, eternally, with no creation required. The Trinity is not the awkward part of my faith I have to excuse; it is the reason I can say God is love and mean it all the way down. That is worth understanding, and worth getting right.

Bonus · Chapter 21

Is Jesus Really the Only Way to God?

“There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

Acts 4:12

Why This Question Matters

In A.D. 203 the Roman government arrested a twenty-two-year-old Christian woman named Perpetua. The problem was not that she worshiped Jesus; Rome had room for one more god on the shelf. Her crime was that she worshiped Jesus only, and refused to bow to any other. For that she was convicted of treason and put to death. The claim that Christ alone is the way to God was a dangerous idea then, and it is still a scandalous one now.

Today the pressure comes not from an emperor but from a mood: the feeling that it is narrow, arrogant, even bigoted to say one religion is true and the rest are not. That mood has a name, religious pluralism, and it is the air we breathe. So the Christian needs to answer a fair question: why think Jesus is the only way, rather than one good way among many?

This chapter makes three moves. First, it shows that the world’s religions cannot all be true, because they flatly contradict one another. Second, it clears away the two most popular arguments for pluralism, both of which turn out to be simple logical mistakes. Third, it faces the one objection with real moral weight, the fate of those who never hear, and points you to where this handbook answers it in full.

Key Terms

PARTICULARISM means “the view that salvation comes only through one particular way, Jesus Christ; also called exclusivism.”

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM means “the view that all the world’s religions are equally valid, and Christ is just one way among many.”

AD HOMINEM means “the fallacy of attacking the character of the person making a claim instead of showing the claim itself is false.”

GENETIC FALLACY means “the fallacy of judging a belief true or false by how a person came to hold it, rather than by the evidence for it.”

The Argument in Plain Form

The pluralist says it is wrong to hold that only one religion is true. The Christian reply can be laid out simply.

(P1) The world religions make contradictory claims about God, the world, sin, and salvation. They cannot all be describing the same reality.

(P2) When statements contradict, they cannot all be true. So the religions cannot all be true.

(P3) The popular arguments that no religion can be true, or that it is arrogant to say one is, commit textbook logical fallacies. They give no reason to abandon Christian particularism.

(P4) The strongest remaining objection, the fate of those who never hear, has a coherent answer (Chapter 19): God judges each person fairly by the light he has, and ensures the gospel reaches everyone who would receive it.

(C) Therefore, it is reasonable to hold that Jesus is the only way to God, and the fact of many religions does nothing to overturn it.

1. In your own words, why does the simple fact that many religions exist not prove that no single religion can be true?

Do All Religions Teach the Same Thing?

The most common form of pluralism says all religions teach basically the same thing, so they are all true. This is not so much false as uninformed; it survives only at a distance. Up close, the major religions flatly contradict one another on the questions that matter most. Set Islam beside Buddhism. Muslims affirm a personal God who created the world, hold that human beings are sinful, expect an eternity in heaven or hell, and teach that salvation comes through faith and good works. Buddhism denies every one of these. In its classical form it holds that ultimate reality is not a person at all, that the world was not created, that there is no enduring self to be sinful, and that the goal of existence is not salvation but release into nothingness. These are not two accents on one melody; they are opposite songs.

The same holds across the board. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam disagree sharply over the identity of Jesus. Hinduism and Islam disagree over whether God is one or many. Every major religion contradicts every other one at central points, so they cannot possibly all be true. To say otherwise is to flatter the religions by ignoring what each actually teaches. Real respect takes their claims seriously enough to notice that they conflict.

Seeing this, some pluralists retreat to the opposite claim: that all religions are equally false, equally valid cultural expressions of mankind's search for a truth no one has found. But why believe that? It is simply asserted, not argued. Why could one particular religion

not be true? The pluralist has given no reason; he has only assumed at the outset the very thing in question.

2. Name one specific point on which two world religions clearly contradict each other. Why does that contradiction matter for the claim that “all religions are true”?

Two Fallacies That Prove Nothing

When you examine the actual arguments for pluralism, several turn out to be textbook logical fallacies. Two of them you will hear constantly, so it is worth learning to spot and answer both.

Fallacy 1: “Claiming your religion is the only true one is arrogant, so it must be false.”

Notice what this argument does. It says nothing about whether Christianity is true; it only criticizes the character of the person who believes it. That is the *ad hominem* fallacy, an attack on the man rather than the claim. The truth of a view is independent of the character of the one who holds it. If an insufferably proud researcher discovered the cure for cancer, you would not refuse the cure because he was conceited; his arrogance has nothing to do with whether his claim is true.

And the charge turns back on the one who makes it. The pluralist also believes his own view is right and that everyone in the particular religions is mistaken. If holding a view that many reject makes a person arrogant, then the pluralist stands convicted by his own rule. The honest course is to drop the word “arrogant” and ask the only question that matters: which view is actually true?

Fallacy 2: “You only believe your religion because of where you were born.”

The complaint is that, born in Pakistan, you would likely be a Muslim; born in Ireland, probably a Catholic; so no religious belief is objectively true. This is the genetic fallacy, judging a belief by its origin instead of by the evidence. How a person came to a belief has no bearing on whether it is true. Born in ancient Greece, you would have believed the sun circles the earth; that does nothing to make your present belief that the earth circles the sun false.

And once more the blade cuts both ways. Had the pluralist been born in that same Pakistan or Ireland, he would almost certainly be a religious particularist himself. By his own logic, his pluralism is just a product of being raised in modern Western society, and so is no more “objectively true” than anyone else’s faith. Where a belief comes from and whether it is true are simply two different questions.

Clearing away these fallacies does not by itself prove Christianity. It does something narrower but important: it removes the bluff. The popular reasons for thinking no religion can be true simply collapse, which leaves the field open for the actual evidence, the arguments of Sections 1 and 2 of this handbook, to be weighed on their merits.

3. Both pluralist arguments are “double-edged swords.” Explain in your own words how each one turns back on the pluralist who uses it.

The Real Question: Those Who Never Hear

Clearing away the fallacies exposes the one objection with real weight: if Jesus is the only way, what about those who never hear of Him? Is there no hope for them? Notice that this is no longer an argument that pluralism is true; it is a moral protest that particularism seems unfair. And it deserves a real answer, not a shrug.

The short answer is that there is hope for those who have never heard, and this handbook gives that answer in full in Chapter 19. Here is the heart of it. The God of the Bible loves all people and wants everyone to come to Him: “God desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). No one is judged for rejecting a message he never received; each person is judged justly by the light he actually has, through nature and conscience (Romans 1-2), and by how he responds to it. Christians give more than one account of how this works, but the two strongest both ensure that no one is lost by the accident of birth. On one, God provides further revelation to those who genuinely seek Him, as He did for Cornelius, guiding them to someone who can share the gospel. On the other, God’s knowledge of how every person would freely respond lets Him so order history that everyone who would receive the gospel is born where and when he will hear it.

Particularism, then, does not mean God is cruel to the unreached. It means salvation runs through Christ alone, while God works to bring that salvation within reach of all. That salvation comes through one mediator is exactly what Scripture says: “there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5).

4. Look up 1 Timothy 2:4-6. How do these verses hold together two truths at once: that God wants everyone saved, and that salvation comes through Christ alone?

Answering the Objections

Objection 1: *All roads lead up the same mountain; the religions are just different paths to the one God.*

It is a lovely image, but it assumes what it needs to prove, that the religions are headed for the same summit. They are not. They give contradictory descriptions of the mountain, the climb, and the top: a personal God or no God, one life or endless rebirths, salvation or annihilation. This is not different paths up one mountain; it is more like rival parties insisting on different mountains. One of them might be right, but they cannot all be, and pretending otherwise respects none of them.

Objection 2: *It is intolerant to say other people’s sincere religions are wrong.*

Tolerance is a virtue about how we treat people, not a rule that all claims are equally true. We can treat someone with complete respect, defend their freedom to believe, love them as a neighbor, and still think they are mistaken; we do exactly this in every other field without calling it intolerance. And note that the pluralist is making a truth claim of his own, that exclusivism is wrong, while telling everyone else not to make truth claims. The accusation of intolerance, pressed consistently, silences the pluralist first.

Objection 3: *People mostly just inherit the religion of their culture, so no one's religion is really true.*

This is the genetic fallacy in everyday dress. Where a belief comes from says nothing about whether it is true; you inherited your native language and your multiplication tables too, and they are not false for being inherited. People may generally adopt the faith they grew up in, but the question is never how someone arrived at a belief; it is whether the belief is true, which can only be settled by looking at the evidence, which is exactly what Sections 1 and 2 of this book invite the reader to do.

Objection 4: *A loving God would never send sincere people of other faiths to hell.*

The Bible agrees that God loves all people and desires all to be saved; He does not gleefully condemn the sincere. But sincerity is not the same as truth; a person can be sincerely wrong, sincerely drinking poison he believes is medicine. The issue is not how earnest someone is, but what is actually the case about God and salvation. And as Chapter 19 shows, no one is condemned for failing to believe a message he never heard; each is judged fairly by the light he has, and God ensures the gospel reaches everyone who would embrace it. The loving God and the exclusive Christ are the same God; His love is precisely why He provided the one way at such cost to Himself.

Putting It Into Practice: A Sample Dialogue

Below is a model conversation between a Christian and a Skeptic, with each section handling a different objection.

All Religions Are the Same

Skeptic: Honestly, all religions are basically the same underneath. It's arrogant to say yours is the only true one.

Christian: I used to assume that too, but the closer you look, the less it holds. Take Islam and Buddhism. Islam says there's a personal God who made the world and that we're sinners headed for heaven or hell. Buddhism says ultimate reality isn't even a person, the world wasn't created, there's no lasting self, and the goal is to be extinguished. Those aren't the same thing in different clothes; they're opposites. They might not all be right, but they can't all be right.

Skeptic: Fine, maybe they're all wrong then.

Christian: That's at least possible, unlike "all true." But now you owe a reason. Why think every one of them is false rather than that one of them got it right? That's a claim that needs evidence, which is exactly what I'd like to talk about.

The Charge of Arrogance

Skeptic: It still feels arrogant to claim everyone else is wrong.

Christian: Whether a claim is arrogant and whether it's true are two different questions. If a conceited scientist found the cure for cancer, you'd still take the cure; his ego wouldn't make it fake. So "you're arrogant" isn't actually a reason the claim is false. And consider: you believe pluralism is right and that I, along with most religious people in history, are wrong. By your own standard, wouldn't that make you arrogant too? I don't

think either of us is arrogant for believing what we think is true. So let's drop the word and look at the evidence.

Just an Accident of Birth

Skeptic: But you're only a Christian because of where you were born. Born in Pakistan, you'd be defending Islam.

Christian: Maybe so, but that tells us how I came to my belief, not whether it's true. Born in ancient Greece, you'd have believed the sun goes around the earth. Does that make your belief that the earth goes around the sun false? Of course not. And the same point boomerangs: born in Pakistan, you probably wouldn't be a pluralist. If birthplace settled truth, your pluralism would be just as much an accident as my faith. It doesn't settle truth either way, so we're back to the evidence.

Landing the Point

Skeptic: All right, but the part that really bothers me is the people who never even heard of Jesus. That seems cruel.

Christian: That's the objection worth taking seriously, and it has an answer. No one is judged for rejecting a message he never heard; God judges each person fairly by the light he actually has and how he responds to it. It may be that God gives more revelation to those genuinely seeking Him, or that, knowing how everyone would respond, He arranges history so that anyone who would say yes to the gospel is born where he'll hear it. Either way, nobody is lost on a technicality of geography. The God who insists on one way is the same God who moved heaven and earth, literally, to put that way within reach of all. The question He leaves with you isn't about the tribesman who never heard. It's about you, who just did.

Appendix

Further Reading: Going Deeper

This handbook was written to get you ready, not to say the last word. Every argument in these pages has a much deeper history behind it: careful defenses, serious objections, and replies that reach back centuries and continue among scholars today. If a chapter sparked your curiosity, that is a good sign. The next step is to follow the arguments further than a beginner's handbook can take you.

For a deeper academic dive into these arguments, the sources behind them, and many more than this book had room to cover, visit:

j-t-b.org

There you will find fuller treatments of the case for God's existence, the reliability of the Gospels, and the resurrection, along with responses to the objections raised by professional philosophers and historians. The material is laid out in the same premise-and-conclusion style you have practiced here, so the move from this handbook to that site should feel natural rather than jarring.

Use it the way you used this book. Pick the questions your friends and family are actually asking, study one argument until you can explain it in your own words, and keep the goal in view. The point was never to win debates but to remove the obstacles between a person and Jesus, and to do it with gentleness and respect.

And if you would like to share these same arguments with a friend, a skeptic, or even a stranger, the YouTube playlist below presents them in short, sharable videos that make a fitting introduction for someone not yet ready to open the book.



Keep learning, keep praying, and keep being ready.

"But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear."

1 Peter 3:15

Appendix
Bibliography

The works below are the sources consulted in crafting each thorough argument on j-t-b.org and as a byproduct this handbook, listed alphabetically by author. They range from accessible introductions to advanced scholarly treatments, and together they represent the deeper conversation behind every argument in these pages.

Adams, Marilyn McCord. *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Adams, Marilyn McCord. *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999.

Adams, Robert. *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Albright, William F. *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968.

Almeida, Michael. Critical notice of *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, by James P. Sterba. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 87, no. 3 (2020): 245–249.

Alston, William P. “The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition.” *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991): 29–67.

Alston, William P. “What Euthyphro Should Have Said.” In *Philosophy of Religion: A Reader and Guide*, edited by William Lane Craig. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002.

Anselm of Canterbury. *Proslogion*. Translated by M. J. Charlesworth. In *St. Anselm’s Proslogion*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965.

Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation*. Translated by John Behr. Popular Patristics Series 44. Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2011.

Augustine of Hippo. *Confessions*. Translated by Henry Chadwick. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Augustine of Hippo. *On Free Choice of the Will*. Translated by Thomas Williams. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993.

Avalos, Hector. *Slavery, Abolitionism, and the Ethics of Biblical Scholarship*. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011.

Ayala, Francisco J. *Darwin’s Gift to Science and Religion*. Washington, DC: Joseph Henry Press, 2007.

Ayala, Francisco J. “Evolution Beyond Biology: Comments and Responses.” *Theology and Science* 7, no. 4 (2009): 379–389.

- Baker, David L. *Tight Fists or Open Hands? Wealth and Poverty in Old Testament Law*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009.
- Baldwin, Thomas. "There Might Be Nothing." *Analysis* 56 (1996): 231–238.
- Barnes, Luke A. "The Fine-Tuning of the Universe for Intelligent Life." *Publications of the Astronomical Society of Australia* 29 (2012): 529–564.
- Barrow, John, and Frank Tipler. *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986.
- Bauckham, Richard. *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017.
- Bennett, Jonathan. *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1984.
- Bergmann, Michael. "Might Counterfactuals, Transworld Untrustworthiness, and Plantinga's Free Will Defense." *Faith and Philosophy* 16, no. 3 (1999): 336–351.
- Bergmann, Michael. "Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil." *Noûs* 35, no. 2 (2001): 278–296.
- Birch, Jonathan. "The Search for Invertebrate Consciousness." *Noûs* 56, no. 1 (2022): 133–153.
- Birch, Jonathan, Alexandra K. Schnell, and Nicola S. Clayton. "Dimensions of Animal Consciousness." *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 24, no. 10 (2020): 789–801.
- Blaiklock, E. M. *The Compact Handbook of New Testament Life*. Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1979.
- Blomberg, Craig L. *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*. 2nd ed. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007.
- Blunt, J. J. *Undesigned Coincidences in the Writings Both of the Old and New Testaments*. London: John Murray, 1847.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Edited by Eberhard Bethge. Enlarged ed. New York: Macmillan, 1971.
- Borde, A., A. H. Guth, and A. Vilenkin. "Inflationary Spacetimes Are Not Past-Complete." *Physical Review Letters* 90, no. 15 (2003): 151301.
- Boyd, Richard. "How to Be a Moral Realist." In *Essays on Moral Realism*, edited by Geoffrey Sayre-McCord. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988.
- Brink, David. *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Buckland, William. *Geology and Mineralogy Considered with Reference to Natural Theology*. 2 vols. Bridgewater Treatises 6. London: William Pickering, 1836.
- Burtchaell, James Tunstead. *Philemon's Problem: A Theology of Grace*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.
- Chirichigno, Gregory C. *Debt-Slavery in Israel and the Ancient Near East*. JSOT Supplement Series 141. Sheffield: University of Sheffield Press, 1993.

- Chrysostom, John. "Homily 22 on Ephesians." Late 4th century.
- Collins, Robin. "The Teleological Argument: An Exploration of the Fine-Tuning of the Universe." In *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, edited by William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
- Copan, Paul. "God, Naturalism, and the Foundations of Morality." In *The Future of Atheism: Alister McGrath and Daniel Dennett in Dialogue*, edited by Robert Stewart. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008.
- Copan, Paul. *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011.
- Copan, Paul. "Is Yahweh a Moral Monster? The New Atheists and Old Testament Ethics." *Philosophia Christi*, n.s., 10, no. 1 (2008): 7–37.
- Copan, Paul, and Matthew Flannagan. *Did God Really Command Genocide? Coming to Terms with the Justice of God*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014.
- Craig, William Lane. "Animal Suffering." Reasonable Faith Q&A #903, September 1, 2024.
- Craig, William Lane. *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus*. Rev. ed. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2024.
- Craig, William Lane. *The Kalam Cosmological Argument*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2000.
- Craig, William Lane. *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*. 3rd ed. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008.
- Craig, William Lane. *Systematic Philosophical Theology, Volume IIb: On God: Excursus on Natural Theology, On the Trinity*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2026.
- Craig, William Lane. "What Should One Say to Darwin about Animal Suffering?" Reasonable Faith Q&A #940, May 18, 2025.
- Craig, William Lane, and J. P. Moreland, eds. *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
- Craig, William Lane, and Quentin Smith. *Theism, Atheism, and Big Bang Cosmology*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.
- Craig, William Lane, and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong. *God? A Debate between a Christian and an Atheist*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Craig, William Lane. Reasonable Faith. "Leibniz's Cosmological Argument and the PSR." Accessed at reasonablefaith.org.
- Cuneo, Terence. *The Normative Web: An Argument for Moral Realism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Dandamayev, Muhammed A. "Slavery (ANE)." In *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6.
- Darwin, Charles. "Letter to Asa Gray, 22 May 1860." In *The Correspondence of Charles Darwin*, vol. 8, edited by Frederick Burkhardt et al. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

- Davidson, Richard M. *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007.
- Davies, Paul. *The Goldilocks Enigma: Why Is the Universe Just Right for Life?* New York: Mariner Books, 2008.
- Dawkins, Richard. *The God Delusion*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.
- Dawkins, Richard. *The Greatest Show on Earth: The Evidence for Evolution*. New York: Free Press, 2009.
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The Brothers Karamazov*. Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990.
- Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Various editions.
- Draper, Paul. "Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists." *Noûs* 23, no. 3 (1989): 331–350.
- Eddington, Arthur S. *The Expanding Universe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933.
- Ehrman, Bart D. *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth*. New York: HarperOne, 2012.
- Eichrodt, Walther. *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 1. Translated by J. A. Baker. London: SCM Press, 1961.
- Eugene IV, Pope. *Sicut Dudum*. 1435.
- Fouts, Daniel M. "A Defense of the Hyperbolic Interpretation of Numbers in the Old Testament." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40, no. 3 (1997): 377–387.
- Frymer-Kensky, Tikva. "Anatolia and the Levant: Israel." In *A History of Ancient Near East Law*, vol. 2, edited by Raymond Westbrook. Leiden: Brill, 2003.
- Galenson, David W. "Indentured Servitude." In *The Oxford Companion to American History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Gane, Roy. *Leviticus, Numbers*. NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004.
- Garnsey, Peter. *Ideas of Slavery from Aristotle to Augustine*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Goldingay, John. *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Life*, vol. 3. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009.
- Gould, Stephen Jay. "Nonmoral Nature." In *Hen's Teeth and Horse's Toes*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1983.
- Gregory of Nyssa. "Fourth Homily on Ecclesiastes." In *Gregory of Nyssa, Homilies on Ecclesiastes: An English Version with Supporting Studies*, edited by Stuart George Hall. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1993.

- Grunbaum, Adolf. "The Poverty of Theistic Cosmology." *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 55, no. 4 (2004): 561–614.
- Habermas, Gary R. "Explaining Away Jesus' Resurrection: The Recent Revival of Hallucination Theories." *Christian Research Journal* 23, no. 4 (2001).
- Habermas, Gary R. "Resurrection Research from 1975 to the Present: What Are Critical Scholars Saying?" *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 3, no. 2 (2005): 135–153.
- Habermas, Gary R. *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.
- Habermas, Gary R., and Michael R. Licona. *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004.
- Hacking, Ian. "The Inverse Gambler's Fallacy: The Argument from Design. The Anthropic Principle Applied to Wheeler Universes." *Mind* 96 (1987): 331–340.
- Hare, John. "Is Moral Goodness without Belief in God Rationally Stable?" In *Is Goodness without God Good Enough?*, edited by Nathan King and Robert Garcia. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008.
- Harper, Kyle. *Slavery in the Late Roman World, AD 275–425*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Harris, Sam. *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2004.
- Harris, Sam. *Letter to a Christian Nation*. New York: Knopf, 2006.
- Harris, Sam. *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*. New York: Free Press, 2010.
- Hart, David Bentley. "The 'Whole Humanity': Gregory of Nyssa's Critique of Slavery in Light of His Eschatology." *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54, no. 1 (2001): 51–69.
- Hartshorne, Charles. *The Logic of Perfection and Other Essays in Neoclassical Metaphysics*. La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1962.
- Hasker, William. "The Open Theist View." In *God and the Problem of Evil: Five Views*, edited by Chad Meister and James K. Dew Jr. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017.
- Hemer, Colin J. *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990.
- Hess, Richard S. "The Jericho and Ai of the Book of Joshua." In *Critical Issues in Early Israelite History*, edited by Richard S. Hess, Gerald A. Klingbeil, and Paul J. Ray Jr. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008.
- Hess, Richard S. *Joshua*. Tyndale Old Testament Commentary 6. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996.

- Hess, Richard S. "War in the Hebrew Bible: An Overview." In *War in the Bible and Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Richard S. Hess and Elmer A. Martens. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008.
- Hill, Jonathan. *What Has Christianity Ever Done for Us?* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005.
- Hitchens, Christopher. *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. New York: Hachette Book Group, 2007.
- Hoffmeier, James K. *Ancient Israel in Sinai: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Hoffmeier, James K. *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Hoffner, Harry A., Jr. "Slavery and Slave Laws in Ancient Hatti and Israel." In *Israel: Ancient Kingdom or Late Invention?*, edited by Daniel I. Block. Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008.
- Holland, Tom. *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*. New York: Basic Books, 2019.
- Howard, David M., Jr. *Joshua*. New American Commentary 5. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998.
- Howard-Snyder, Daniel. "Theism, the Hypothesis of Indifference, and the Biological Role of Pain and Pleasure." *Faith and Philosophy* 11, no. 3 (1994): 452–466.
- Howard-Snyder, Daniel, and John O'Leary-Hawthorne. "Transworld Sanctity and Plantinga's Free Will Defense." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 44, no. 1 (1998): 1–21.
- Howard-Snyder, Daniel, ed. *The Evidential Argument from Evil*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996.
- Howson, J. S. *Horae Petrinae, or Studies in the Life of St. Peter*. London: The Religious Tract Society, 1883.
- Hume, David. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Edited by Norman Kemp Smith. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1980.
- Ignatius of Antioch. *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1. Edited and translated by Bart D. Ehrman. Loeb Classical Library 24. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003.
- InspiringPhilosophy. "4. The Resurrection of Jesus (Advanced Theories)." YouTube.
- Jobes, Karen H. *1 Peter*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005.
- Jones, Clay. "Why We Don't Hate Sin so We Don't Understand What Happened to the Canaanites: An Addendum to 'Divine Genocide' Arguments." *Philosophia Christi*, n.s., 11 (2009): 53–72.
- Josephus, Flavius. *Jewish Antiquities* and *Jewish War*. Loeb Classical Library editions.

- Kaiser, Walter. "Exodus." In *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, edited by Tremper Longman III and Frank C. Gaebelein. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788). Translated by Mary Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). Translated by Norman Kemp Smith. London: Macmillan, 1929.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785). Translated by Mary Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Kitchen, K. A. *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.
- Law, Stephen. "The Evil-God Challenge." *Religious Studies* 46, no. 3 (2010): 353–373.
- Leftow, Brian. "The Ontological Argument." In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, edited by William J. Wainwright, 80–115. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm. "On the Ultimate Origination of Things." In *Philosophical Essays*, translated by Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989.
- Lewis, Bernard. *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror*. New York: Modern Library, 2003.
- Lewis, C. S. *The Abolition of Man*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1943.
- Lewis, C. S. *A Grief Observed*. London: Faber and Faber, 1961.
- Lewis, C. S. *Mere Christianity*. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1952.
- Lewis, C. S. *The Problem of Pain*. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1940.
- Lightfoot, Joseph B. *Biblical Essays*. London: Macmillan, 1893.
- Linville, Mark. "The Moral Argument." In *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, edited by William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
- Lloyd-Jones, Martyn. *From Fear to Faith: Rejoicing in the Lord in Turbulent Times*. Rev. ed. Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2011.
- Lüdemann, Gerd. *The Unholy in Holy Scripture: The Dark Side of the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997.
- Mackie, J. L. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. London: Penguin, 1977.
- Mackie, J. L. "Evil and Omnipotence." *Mind* 64, no. 254 (1955): 200–212.
- Mackie, J. L. *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments For and Against the Existence of God*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982.
- Magyarosi, Barna. "Holy War and Cosmic Conflict in the Old Testament." PhD diss., Andrews University.
- Malcolm, Norman. "Anselm's Ontological Arguments." *Philosophical Review* 69 (1960): 41–62.
- Mandryk, Jason. *Operation World*. 7th ed. Colorado Springs: Biblica, 2010.

- Mangalwadi, Vishal. *The Book That Made Your World: How the Bible Created the Soul of Western Civilization*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011.
- Marshall, David. *Jesus Is No Myth: The Fingerprints of God on the Gospels*. Kuai Mu Press, 2016.
- Marshall, I. Howard. *1 Peter*. IVP New Testament Commentary. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991.
- Martin, Dale B. *Slavery as Salvation: The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.
- Maydole, Robert. "The Ontological Argument." In *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, edited by William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland, 553–592. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
- McConville, Gordon. "Joshua." In *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, edited by John Barton and John Muddiman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- McGrew, Lydia. *The Eye of the Beholder: The Gospel of John as Historical Reportage*. Tampa, FL: DeWard Publishing, 2021.
- McGrew, Lydia. *Hidden in Plain View: Undesigned Coincidences in the Gospels and Acts*. Chillicothe, OH: DeWard Publishing, 2017.
- McGrew, Lydia. *The Mirror or the Mask: Liberating the Gospels from Literary Devices*. Chillicothe, OH: DeWard Publishing, 2019.
- McGrew, Lydia. *Testimonies to the Truth: Why You Can Trust the Gospels*. Tampa, FL: DeWard Publishing, 2023.
- McGrew, Tim, and Lydia McGrew. "The Argument from Miracles: A Cumulative Case for the Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth." In *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, edited by William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
- McGrew, Tim, and Lydia McGrew. "Probabilities and the Fine-Tuning Argument: A Skeptical View." *Mind* 114 (2005): 1063–1074.
- McGrew, Tim. Apologetics. "06 - The Resurrection of Jesus by Tim McGrew." YouTube.
- McLatchie, Jonathan. "Responding to Dan McClellan on the Resurrection Accounts." JonathanMcLatchie.com, May 19, 2025.
- Metaxas, Eric. *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery*. New York: HarperOne, 2007.
- Millican, Peter. "The Devil's Advocate." *Cogito* 3, no. 3 (1989): 193–207.
- Moberly, R. W. L. "Is Monotheism Bad for You? Some Reflections on God, the Bible, and Life in the Light of Regina Schwartz's *The Curse of Cain*." In *The God of Israel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Moore, G. E. *Principia Ethica*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903.
- Moreland, J. P. *The Recalcitrant Imago Dei: Human Persons and the Failure of Naturalism*. London: SCM Press, 2009.

- Morrison, Wes. "Must the Beginning of the Universe Have a Personal Cause?" *Faith and Philosophy* 17, no. 2 (2000): 149–169.
- Morrison, Wes. "Omnipotence and Necessary Moral Perfection: Are They Compatible?" *Religious Studies* 37 (2001): 143–160.
- Murray, Michael J. *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw: Theism and the Problem of Animal Suffering*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Oppy, Graham. *Arguing about Gods*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- O'Brien, P. T. *The Letter to the Ephesians*. Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.
- O'Connor, Timothy. *Theism and Ultimate Explanation: The Necessary Shape of Contingency*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.
- Paley, William. *Horae Paulinae* (1790) and *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* (1794).
- Patrick, St. "Letter to Coroticus." 5th century.
- Paul III, Pope. *Sublimis Deus*. 1537.
- Penrose, Roger. *The Road to Reality*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005.
- Pike, Nelson. "Hume on Evil." *Philosophical Review* 72, no. 2 (1963): 180–197.
- Plantinga, Alvin. *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967.
- Plantinga, Alvin. *God, Freedom, and Evil*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977.
- Plantinga, Alvin. *The Nature of Necessity*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974.
- Plantinga, Alvin. "The Probabilistic Argument from Evil." *Philosophical Studies* 35, no. 1 (1979): 1–53.
- Plantinga, Alvin. "Self-Profile." In *Alvin Plantinga, Profiles 5*, edited by James E. Tomberlin and Peter van Inwagen. Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985.
- Plantinga, Alvin. "Supralapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa.'" In *Christian Faith and the Problem of Evil*, edited by Peter van Inwagen. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004.
- Plantinga, Alvin. "Tooley and Evil: A Reply." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 60, no. 1 (1981): 66–75.
- Plantinga, Alvin, ed. *The Ontological Argument: From St. Anselm to Contemporary Philosophers*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965.
- Provan, Iain, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III. *A Biblical History of Israel*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003.
- Pruss, Alexander. "The Leibnizian Cosmological Argument." In *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, edited by William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

- Pruss, Alexander. *The Principle of Sufficient Reason: A Reassessment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Rowe, William L. "The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look." In *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, edited by Daniel Howard-Snyder. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996.
- Rowe, William L. "Evil and Theodicy." *Philosophical Topics* 16, no. 2 (1988): 119–132.
- Rowe, William L. "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (1979): 335–341.
- Ruprecht, A. A. "Slave, Slavery." In *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, edited by Gerald Hawthorne et al. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993.
- Ruse, Michael. *Darwinism Defended*. London: Addison-Wesley, 1982.
- Ruse, Michael, and E. O. Wilson. "The Evolution of Ethics." *New Scientist* 108, no. 1478 (1985): 50–52.
- Sarna, Nahum M. *Exodus*. JPS Torah Commentary. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991.
- Schwartz, Regina. *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.
- Sobel, Jordan Howard. *Logic and Theism: Arguments for and against Beliefs in God*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Sober, Elliott. "The Design Argument." In *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Religion*, edited by William Mann. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004.
- Spinoza, Baruch. *Ethics* (1677). Translated by Edwin Curley. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.
- Stark, Rodney. *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.
- Starkie, Thomas. *A Practical Treatise of the Law of Evidence*. Philadelphia: T. and W. Johnson, 1876.
- Sterba, James P. *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.
- Street, Sharon. "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value." *Philosophical Studies* 127, no. 1 (2006): 109–166.
- Stuart, Douglas K. *Exodus*. New American Commentary 2. Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2008.
- Stump, Eleonore. *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010.
- Sunshine, Glenn S. *Why You Think the Way You Do: The Story of Western Worldviews from Rome to Home*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009.
- Taylor, Richard. *Ethics, Faith, and Reason*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1985.
- Testify. "Historical Evidence Jesus Is ALIVE." YouTube.

- Van Inwagen, Peter. "The Argument from Evil." In *Christian Faith and the Problem of Evil*, edited by Peter van Inwagen. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004.
- Van Inwagen, Peter. *Metaphysics*. 4th ed. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2015.
- Van Inwagen, Peter. "Ontological Arguments." *Noûs* 11 (1977): 375–395.
- Van Inwagen, Peter. *The Problem of Evil*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Vilenkin, Alexander. *Many Worlds in One: The Search for Other Universes*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2006.
- Volf, Miroslav. "Christianity and Violence." In *War in the Bible and Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Richard S. Hess and Elmer A. Martens. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008.
- Wallace, J. Warner. *Cold-Case Christianity: A Homicide Detective Investigates the Claims of the Gospels*. Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2013.
- Waltke, Bruce K. *An Old Testament Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007.
- Walton, John H. *The Lost World of the Israelite Conquest: Covenant, Retribution, and the Fate of the Canaanites*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2017.
- Webb, William J. *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001.
- Wenham, Gordon J. *Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Pentateuch*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003.
- Wenham, John. *Easter Enigma: Are the Resurrection Accounts in Conflict?* Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005.
- Wenham, John. *Redating Matthew, Mark, and Luke: A Fresh Assault on the Synoptic Problem*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992.
- White, Ronald C. A. *Lincoln: A Biography*. New York: Random House, 2009.
- Wielenberg, Erik. *Robust Ethics: The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Godless Normative Realism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Williams, Peter J. *Can We Trust the Gospels?* Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018.
- Witherington, Ben, III. *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995.
- Wolterstorff, Nicholas. "Reading Joshua." Paper presented at the "My Ways Are Not Your Ways" conference, University of Notre Dame, September 2009.
- Wright, Christopher J. H. *The God I Don't Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008.
- Wright, Christopher J. H. *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004.
- Wright, N. T. *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003.

Wykstra, Stephen J. "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance.'" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16, no. 2 (1984): 73–93.

Younger, K. Lawson, Jr. *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990.