

“The Case for Christ: Reaching Your Verdict”

Date: June 10, 2018

Place: Lakewood UMC

Occasion: Case for Christ, series **Theme:** apologetics, decision for Christ

Scripture: John 1:12 Corinthians 5:14-21

Today we reach the conclusion of our study, *The Case for Christ*. At the end, I'll be asking you to make a decision. If the evidence points, in a convincing way, to the truth that Jesus is the Messiah: Are you willing to give your life to Him?

Lee Strobel began his search as an atheist, or at the very least, a strongly doubting agnostic. By the time he finished his investigation, he was thoroughly convinced the evidence was over-whelming. So he gave his life to Christ. He had all his questions answered, all of his reservations resolved. He observed that many people were convicted of crimes with less evidence than there was for the case for Christ. He found he could do no other. It has changed his life forever, for the good. So, let's review the evidence.

First, can the biographies of Jesus be trusted, or are they merely religious propaganda, tainted by the overactive imaginations of the disciples? Strobel was convinced after talking to experts in the field that the four gospels reflect a direct and indirect eye-witness testimony. They bear the unmistakable earmarks of accuracy. So early were they written, that they avoid the danger of being legendary inventions.

But do the biographies of Jesus stand up to scrutiny? Experts showed how the gospel writers included honest and even unflattering testimony about themselves that bear the mark of accuracy. The harmony on essential facts, with some minor divergence on details lends historical credibility to the accounts. What's more, they were written so early, there

were still people alive at the time - who could dispute the facts if they were in error. In short, the gospels pass the evidential tests.

Ah, but were they biographies reliably preserved for us? Scholars have shown, that compared with other ancient documents, there is an unprecedented number of New Testament manuscripts, and they can be dated extremely close to the original writings. While there are some variations in the texts, they tend to be minor spelling and grammatical differences; none of the major Christian doctrines are in doubt.

But is there anything outside of the Christian Bible that corroborates the New Testament? We have better historical documentation for Jesus than for the founder of any other ancient religion. One expert documented 39 ancient sources that verify more than 100 facts concerning Jesus' life, teachings, crucifixion and resurrection. We have other testimony from objective and sometimes even hostile witnesses, Jesus was real.

Strobel talked to experts that demonstrated how **archaeology confirms the biographies of Jesus**. He was able to determine that Jesus truly believed he was the Son of God, and that expert psychologists could find no indications he had any known mental illness that would have made him delusional in such a way. Furthermore, Jesus' teachings, attitudes and behavior were all in agreement. He was a man of sound mind and integrity.

One of the most convincing parts of the evidence was **the number of Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah, and how Jesus' life, death and resurrection fulfilled them**. The odds that anyone else in history could have fulfilled them are astronomically large. Jesus, and Jesus alone, matches the criteria of the Messiah.

Evidence for the resurrection was examined. It was clearly determined that Jesus' death could not have been faked, nor was it a sham. Jesus had been seen by eyewitnesses who could verify, at the time of the writing of the New Testament, the truth of what they had seen. Furthermore, Jesus' disciples were willing to die rather than deny their faith in the risen Jesus. His body was never recovered, for it was no longer to be found in the empty tomb.

The very fact that **the church began to grow exponentially** in a very short time bears witness to the truth of his resurrection: For there had been other false messiahs, prophets who claimed to be the Promised One of Israel. They too had been martyred, but none of them came back to life, and their followers quickly dispersed. But not so with the Christian community – founded on the truth of the risen Christ. They multiplied.

Lee Strobel sat in a motel room, surrounded by books and papers, and a yellow legal pad on which he had been making notes. He was so thoroughly convinced by the evidence that he felt compelled to surrender his life to Jesus. He said it would have taken more faith to remain an atheist than to deny the truth of the Gospel.

A particular verse had been given to him that spelled out with mathematical precision what it takes to go beyond mere assent to Jesus' deity, and to enter into an ongoing relationship with him, by being adopted in God's family. That verse was our first lesson today:

“Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” *There* is the formula: ‘Believe plus receive equals become.’ My friends, I believe the evidence is conclusive, that the gospels are to be trusted, that Jesus is who He claims to be – the Son of God, and that there is salvation in His name.

Perhaps you have heard the evidence, and you nod your head in agreement. *That's good and that's nice.* But mere intellectual agreement is not the same as giving yourself to Jesus. I think an analogy might help:

How many of you have ever had a boyfriend or girlfriend? How many of you are married? When you first met your beloved, you might have said to yourself, "He's kind of cute; she's kind of interesting." After time you learn a little bit more about the person. You know them a little better.

Knowing about a person is not the same as *giving* yourself to the person. There still comes a moment when one of the lovers says to the other, "Will you be mine? Will you marry me?" It's a moment of decision.

It's a moment that goes beyond mere head knowledge, to totally giving yourself to the other. It's one thing for the mountain climber to believe that his/her ropes will hold them when they throw themselves off the cliff. But it's a totally different thing to actually do it. It's one thing to know *about* this cute boy or that interesting girl. And it's a totally other thing to say "Yes, I will spend my whole life with you." And so it is with evidence for Jesus. It's one thing to say, "I believe the evidence is true." That's important. I hope we have convinced you that the evidence is clear and compelling and convicting. But what are you going to do with that evidence?

Scripture tells us the next step is to receive. It's as simple as a short prayer. It's a matter of accepting, for yourself, the claim that Jesus died for you, rose from the dead as the first born of the new creation, and that he gives new and eternal life to all who receive him. It's nothing that we do to earn it; Jesus already did it all for us. We simply receive the gift.

And then, Scripture tells us we become children of God, newly adopted children into the family of God. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says,

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. The old has gone, the new is here.” Friends, we become a new creation in Christ. Jesus begins to transform our lives.

After Lee Strobel gave his life to Christ, his life began to change, slowly but quite visibly to those around him. After several months, his five year old daughter said to her Sunday school teacher, “I want Jesus to do to me what he did to my Daddy.” So profound was the change in him.

Friends, people can sit in church for years, even for decades and hear the message. They can nod their head in agreement and go home, totally unchanged. But the power of the Gospel is in changed lives, lives that have been turned around in the name of Jesus.

It doesn't mean you've been a particularly bad or evil person. Many good people live their entire lives without the life-changing power of Christ transforming their lives. But they're missing out on a peace, a joy, and a hope that others have experienced.

Maybe you're one of those people. If the evidence has led you to the conclusion that Jesus is who he says he is, and you'd like to invite him into your heart today, would you pray with me now?

“Dear Jesus: I believe the things they say about you are true. I believe you are the Son of God, the Savior of the World. Jesus, I still have questions, but I need you in my life. I fall short of who God expects me to be. I know I have separated myself from Him. Forgive me of my sin. Wash away my uncleanness, and make me whole again. Come into my life and make me a child of God once more. In your name I pray. Amen.”

Let us stand and sing hymn number 73, “Majesty.”

This sermon borrows heavily from the book *The Case for Christ*, by Lee Strobel, Grand Rapids Michigan: Zondervan, 1998, 2016; pp. 381-399; and the study guide by the same name and author, pp. 87-102.