

Session 6



REACHING YOUR VERDICT

Having already considered the persuasive evidence for the empty tomb, and eyewitness accounts of the risen Jesus, it was time for me to seek out any circumstantial evidence that might bolster the case for the resurrection. I knew that if an event as extraordinary as the resurrection of Jesus had really occurred, history would be littered with indirect evidence backing it up.

Lee Strobel

READ THIS!

If possible, read the following content in preparation for your group meeting. Otherwise, read it as follow-up.

The Case for Christ, conclusion: The Verdict of History

WATCH THIS!

DVD Teaching Segment #1

For every DVD clip, space is provided to take notes on anything that stands out to you.



Fast Fact

Circumstantial Evidence

“Eyewitness testimony is called direct evidence because people describe under oath how they personally saw the defendant commit the crime. While this is often compelling, it can sometimes be subject to faded memories, prejudices, and even outright fabrication. In contrast, circumstantial evidence is made up of indirect facts from which inferences can be rationally drawn. Its cumulative effect can be every bit as strong – and in many instances even more potent – than eyewitness accounts.... Circumstantial evidence is plural rather than singular. In other words, it’s built brick by brick until there’s a sturdy foundation on which conclusions can be confidently based.”

Lee Strobel



Think About This!

The Disciples Were Willing to Suffer and Die for Their Beliefs

“When Jesus was crucified his followers were discouraged and depressed. They no longer had confidence that Jesus had been sent by God, because they believed anyone crucified was accursed by God. They also had been taught that God would not let his Messiah suffer death. So they dispersed. The Jesus movement was all but stopped in its tracks. Then, after a short period of time, we see them abandoning their occupations, regathering, and committing themselves to spreading a very specific message—that Jesus Christ was the Messiah of God who died on a cross, returned to life, and was seen alive by them. And they were willing to spend the rest of their lives proclaiming this, without any payoff from a human point of view. It’s not as though there were a mansion awaiting them on the Mediterranean. They faced a life of hardship. They often went without food, slept exposed to the elements, were ridiculed, beaten, imprisoned. And finally, most of them were executed in torturous ways....”

“However, the apostles were willing to die for something they had seen with their own eyes and touched with their own hands. They were in a unique position not to just believe Jesus rose from the dead but to know for sure. And when you’ve got eleven credible people with no ulterior motives, with nothing to gain and a lot to lose, who all agree they observed something with their own eyes—now you’ve got some difficulty explaining that away.”

J. P. Moreland, PhD

Five times I [Paul] received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own people, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.

2 Corinthians 11:24–27

5. The disciples were in the unique position of knowing for certain whether Jesus had returned from the dead, and they were willing to die for their conviction that he had. Can you think of anyone in history who has knowingly and willingly died for a lie? What degree of certainty would you need before you would be willing to lay down your life for a belief? How thoroughly would you investigate a matter if you were going to base your life on it? Elaborate.

"I say unequivocally that the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ is so overwhelming that it compels acceptance by proof which leaves absolutely no room for doubt."

Sir Lionel Luckhoo, called the world's most successful lawyer by *The Guinness Book of World Records*



Think About This!

"It had been put to me this way: People will die for their religious beliefs if they sincerely believe they're true, but people won't die for their religious beliefs if they know their beliefs are false. While most people can only have faith that their beliefs are true, the disciples were in a position to know without a doubt whether or not Jesus had risen from the dead. They claimed that they saw him, talked with him, and ate with him. If they weren't absolutely certain, they wouldn't have allowed themselves to be tortured to death for proclaiming that the resurrection had happened."

Lee Strobel

6. Do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? Give reasons for your responses.
- People are sometimes willing to die for something they believe is true.
 - People are not willing to die for something they *know* to be untrue.
 - The disciples were in a unique position in history to *know* the truth about the resurrection.
 - The disciples would not willingly die for a hoax or conspiracy regarding the resurrection. (Eleven of twelve disciples were martyred for their faith.)



Think About This!

More Circumstantial Evidence

The Conversion of Skeptics

“Another piece of circumstantial evidence is that there were hardened skeptics who didn’t believe in Jesus before his crucifixion—and were to some degree dead-set against Christianity— who turned around and adopted the Christian faith after Jesus’ death. There’s no good reason for this apart from them having experienced the resurrected Christ.”

J. P. Moreland, PhD

The Emergence of the Church

“The resurrection was undoubtedly the central proclamation of the early church from the very beginning. The earliest Christians didn’t just endorse Jesus’ teachings; they were convinced they had seen him alive after his crucifixion. That’s what changed their lives and started the church. Certainly, since this was their centermost conviction, they would have made absolutely sure that it was true.”

Gary Habermas, PhD

Ongoing Encounters with Christ

“There’s one other category of evidence.... It’s the ongoing encounter with the resurrected Christ that happens all over the world, in every culture, people from all kinds of backgrounds and personalities – well educated and not, rich and poor, thinkers and feelers, men and women. They all will testify that more than any single thing in their lives, Jesus Christ has changed them. To me, this provides the final evidence – not the only evidence but the final confirming proof – that the message of Jesus can open the door to a direct encounter with the risen Christ.”

J. P. Moreland

Optional Discussion Questions

- Did you have the opportunity to read the content in *The Case for Christ* that corresponds to this session? Based on the circumstantial evidence for the resurrection you’ve examined so far, what conclusions, if any, can you draw about its validity?
- J. P. Moreland suggests that it is very difficult to explain away the radical transformation of people who were originally skeptical about Jesus and then believed in him after the resurrection. Do you agree with this reasoning? Why or why not? What might have led to the radical transformation of such skeptics as James, the brother of Jesus, and Paul, formerly known as Saul?
- If Jesus had *not* risen from the grave, what did the disciples have to gain — money, power, or status — by falsely professing that he had?

- Besides the resurrection, what might account for the rapid spread of Christianity in spite of the shameful death of its founder and the dispersion of the disciples?
- What is the difference between dying for something you wrongly believe is true and dying for something that you know is untrue? Would anyone sane willingly die for something they knew wasn't true? Why or why not? Do you think the disciples would willingly die for the cause of Jesus if they knew his resurrection were a hoax? What's the possibility that the disciples truly believed, but were really deceived?
- What is the difference between the early disciples who were tortured and/or killed for refusing to renounce their beliefs and suicide bombers today who take their own lives in an attempt to kill others based on their beliefs?
- How do the claims of people worldwide who say they've had a personal experience with the risen Christ influence your opinion of the circumstantial evidence of the case for Christ? Have you ever personally observed someone transform in behavior and character after coming to believe in Jesus Christ? What is your view of people who make such claims?
- J. P. Moreland remarks: "First, I'm not saying, 'Just trust your experience.' I'm saying, 'Use your mind calmly and weigh the evidence, and then let experience be a confirming piece of evidence.' Second, if what this evidence points to is true—that is, if all these lines of evidence really do point to the resurrection of Jesus—the evidence itself begs for an experiential test." What would it take before you would be willing to put Jesus to the test and take the step of inviting him into your life?

WATCH THIS!

DVD Teaching Segment #2



Think About This!

Lee's Story, Part 1

"I'll admit it: I was ambushed by the amount and quality of the evidence that Jesus is the unique Son of God. As I sat at my desk that Sunday afternoon, I shook my head in amazement. I had seen defendants carted off to the death chamber on much less convincing proof! The cumulative facts and data pointed unmistakably toward a conclusion that I wasn't entirely comfortable in reaching. Frankly, I had wanted to believe that the deification of Jesus was the result of legendary development in which well-meaning but misguided people slowly turned a wise sage into the mythological Son of God. That seemed safe and reassuring; after all, a roving apocalyptic preacher from the first century could make no demands on me. But while I went into my investigation thinking that this legendary explanation was intuitively obvious, I emerged convinced it was totally without basis.

"On November 8, 1981, I realized that my biggest objection to Jesus also had been quieted by the evidence of history. I found myself chuckling at how the tables had been turned. In light of the convincing facts I had learned during my investigation, in the face of this overwhelming avalanche of evidence in the case for Christ, the great irony was this: it would require much more faith for me to maintain my atheism than to trust in Jesus of Nazareth!"

DISCUSS THIS!

7. How well do you feel you've been able to investigate the identity of Jesus and the claims of Christianity with an open mind? Do you agree with Lee's observation (see "Think About This!" box on page 104) that there is an avalanche of evidence pointing toward the truth of Christianity? Why or why not? Name some of the most convincing pieces of evidence you have discovered. What questions remain for you?

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. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

John 3:16-18



Think About This!

Lee's Story, Part 2

"By November 8, 1981, my legend thesis, to which I had doggedly clung for so many years, had been thoroughly dismantled. What's more, my journalistic skep-

ticism toward the supernatural had melted in light of the breathtaking historical evidence that the resurrection of Jesus was a real, historical event. In fact, my mind could not conjure up a single explanation that fit the evidence of history nearly as well as the conclusion that Jesus was who he claimed to be: the one and only Son of God. The atheism I had embraced for so long buckled under the weight of historical truth. It was a stunning and radical outcome, certainly not what I had anticipated when I embarked on this investigative process. But it was, in my opinion, a decision compelled by the facts. All of which led me to the 'So what?' question. If this is true, what difference does it make? There were several obvious implications."

8. Lee identifies the following list of implications to the "So what?" question concerning the true identity of Jesus. How do these statements strike you? What questions do they raise for you? Which of these statements, if true, would make the greatest impact on your life and why?
- If Jesus is the Son of God, his teachings are more than just good ideas from a wise teacher; they are divine insights on which I can confidently build my life.
 - If Jesus sets the standard for morality, I can now have an unwavering foundation for my choices and decisions, rather than basing them on the ever-shifting sands of expediency and self-centeredness.
 - If Jesus did rise from the dead, he's still alive today and available for me to encounter on a personal basis.
 - If Jesus conquered death, he can open the door of eternal life for me, too.
 - If Jesus has divine power, he has the supernatural ability to guide me and help me and transform me as I follow him.
 - If Jesus personally knows the pain of loss and suffering, he can comfort and encourage me in the midst of the turbulence that he himself warned is inevitable in a world corrupted by sin.
 - If Jesus loves me as he says, he has my best interests at heart. That means I have nothing to lose and everything to gain by committing myself to him and his purposes.

- If Jesus is who he claims to be (and remember, no leader of any other major religion has even pretended to be God), as my Creator he rightfully deserves my allegiance, obedience, and worship.



Think About This!

Lee's Story, Part 3

"After a personal investigation that spanned more than six hundred days and countless hours, my own verdict in the case for Christ was clear. However, as I sat at my desk, I realized that I needed more than an intellectual decision. I wanted to take the experiential step that J. P. Moreland had described in my interview with him. Looking for a way to bring that about, I reached over to a Bible and opened it to John 1:12, a verse I had encountered during my investigation: 'Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.' The key verbs in that verse spell out with mathematical precision what it takes to go beyond mere mental assent to Jesus' deity and enter into an ongoing relationship with him by becoming adopted into God's family: believe + receive = become."

9. According to John 1:12 (see box above), what does it take to become a child of God? What does it mean to *believe* in Jesus Christ? What do you think it means to *receive* Jesus into your life? What does it mean to *become* a child of God?



Think About This!

Lee's Story, Part 4

"When I read in the Bible that my sins separated me from God, who is holy and morally pure, this resonated as being true. Certainly God, whose existence I had denied for years, seemed extremely distant, and it became obvious to me that I needed the cross of Jesus to bridge that gulf. Said the apostle Peter, 'For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God' (1 Peter 3:18 NIV).

"Every other faith system I studied during my investigation was based on the 'do' plan. In other words, it was necessary for people to do something—for example, use a Tibetan prayer wheel, pay alms, go on pilgrimages, undergo re-incarnations, work off karma from past misdeeds, reform their character—to try to somehow earn their way back to God. Despite their best efforts, lots of sincere people just wouldn't make it. Christianity is unique. It's based on the 'done' plan—Jesus has done for us on the cross what we cannot do for ourselves: he has paid the death penalty that we deserve for our rebellion and wrongdoing, so we can become reconciled with God."

10. To what extent can you relate to Lee's sense of being separated from God because of sin? Lee explains that every other faith system is based on the "do" plan, but Christianity alone is based on what has already been "done." Read his comments again and summarize his points in your own words. What is it that Jesus did on the cross that we cannot do for ourselves?

*For the wages of sin is death,
but the gift of God is eternal
life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Romans 6:23



Think About This!

Lee's Story, Part 5

"Once the 'believe' part of John 1:12 is firmly in place, all that's left is to 'receive' Jesus' grace, and then you'll become his son or daughter, engaged in a spiritual adventure that can flourish for the rest of your life and into eternity.

"So on November 8, 1981, I talked with God in a heartfelt and unedited prayer, admitting and turning from my wrongdoing, and receiving the gift of forgiveness and eternal life through Jesus. I told him that with his help I wanted to follow him and his ways from here on out. There were no lightning bolts, no audible replies, no tingly sensations. I know that some people feel a rush of emotion at such a moment; as for me, however, there was something else that was equally exhilarating: there was the rush of reason.

"Looking back nearly two decades, I can see with clarity that the day I personally made a decision in the case for Christ was nothing less than the pivotal event of my entire life. After taking that step, I knew from John 1:12 that I had crossed the threshold into a new experience. I had 'become' something different: a child of God, forever adopted into his family through the historical, risen Jesus. Said the apostle Paul, 'Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come' (2 Corinthians 5:17 NIV)."

11. What is your verdict in the case for Christ? To what extent has the evidence presented in these sessions (and the book *The Case for Christ*) been sufficient for you to draw a final conclusion? Are you willing to take a step in the direction the evidence is pointing and place your faith and trust in Jesus Christ, receiving him into your life? If not, what obstacles or barriers are most holding you back? What kinds of questions remain for you?

12. In what ways, either positively or negatively, might your life change if you were to follow Jesus? What do you think would be the most difficult part about it? What would be the most thrilling part for you?

WATCH THIS!

DVD Wrap-up/Lee's Perspective

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.

Ephesians 2:8–9

IN THE COMING DAYS

Personal Reflection

Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

John 1:12

BELIEVE + RECEIVE = BECOME

- To what extent have you been able to set aside your biases and preconceived notions and approach the evidence in these discussions as a fair and impartial juror in the case for Christ? In the end, the verdict is yours and yours alone. Nobody else can cast the ballot for you.
- After examining the experts, considering the arguments, and discussing your concerns, maybe you have the “believe” part of the above equation down, and all that’s left for you is to “receive” the forgiveness, grace, and leadership of Jesus Christ in your life. What does it mean for you to receive Jesus? How might this impact your life? How does the idea of becoming a “son” or “daughter” of God make you feel? Does it seem a little mystical or does it fill you with hope and wonder? Are you willing to take that step in a simple, unrehearsed prayer to God right now?
- Or, on the other hand, do you still have lingering questions, doubts, or concerns? Perhaps the case isn’t conclusive and you have unresolved issues that haven’t been addressed. If so, are you willing to continue on in your investigative journey by checking out some of the related resources suggested in the book? Or if you’ve benefited from this format, your next step might be to consider a discussion on *The Case for Faith* or *The Case for a Creator*.
- Whatever your conclusion, are you willing to make this a front-burner issue in your life? If Jesus really is who he claimed to be, your eternal life hinges on it, for as he himself said, “If you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in you sins” (John 8:24 NIV). These are sobering words, but they were offered by Jesus out of an authentic and loving concern for each one of us. So we urge you to carefully and seriously consider all of the evidence presented and ultimately answer this final question: *What is your verdict in the case for Christ?*

Jesus [said], “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

John 14:6

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

2 Corinthians 5:17 NIV