

Investigating the Case for Christ
Acts 8:26-39

This morning is the first week of our four week series on “The Case for Christ”. You may have seen the movie or read the book, in which we see a young atheist named Lee Strobel, investigating the claims of Christianity – but not with the desire to find or follow Christ.

Rather, he wanted to establish the case against Christ, with the hope of rescuing his wife, Leslie, from her newfound faith in Jesus. In the process he read, researched, and talked to numerous experts, this is all done before the internet. So this turned into an almost two-year spiritual journey for Strobel, with lots of setbacks and challenges along the way.

Today we’re going to talk about the question of how we, too can investigate the evidence for Christ. How do we know what we believe? What is the evidence that enables us to believe Jesus is the Son of God?

Before we move forward, let’s watch a short clip from the movie. It shows a very frustrated Lee Strobel sitting in the newsroom of the Chicago Tribune, trying to figure out what to do with all the evidence he has uncovered that is consistently pointing toward truth of the Christian faith.

Then, in the middle of his contemplative moment, Strobel’s coworker Kenny London, the Tribune’s religion editor, walks in and senses the situation and how he might help. Let’s watch. (NOTE: The video is found on the church website in the Sermon Archives).

Have you ever been in a conversation like that? Have you ever had a friend or family member who has some questions concerning their faith in Christ, and they are hung up on a spiritual sticking point? Or maybe you’re at a place in your own life where you’re dealing with you own sticking point.

What do I mean by a spiritual sticking point? For a biblical example, let’s look at the passage that Kyle read earlier from Acts chapter 8. God speaks through an angel and tells Philip to take the road that goes south out of Jerusalem and headed out to Gaza. Go out to the desert.

So Philip starts out of town and sees a chariot coming down the road towards him. In the chariot was an Ethiopian official, basically the equivalent of the secretary of the treasury, for the queen of Ethiopia. He had been to Jerusalem to worship and he is now returning home and he is reading aloud from the Old Testament, from the book of Isaiah.

How many of you do that? Read the Bible aloud while driving? How many of you pray while driving? Keep your eyes open if you do.

The Holy Spirit tells Philip to go over to that chariot and stay near it. So Philip runs up alongside the chariot and hears this guy reading aloud from his Bible. Philip asks him, “Do you understand what you are reading?” The man replied, “How can I unless someone explains it to me?”

In other words, the man from Ethiopia had hit a spiritual sticking point. He was on a journey, literally, traveling on the road from Jerusalem. So he’s on a physical journey, but he was also on a spiritual journey, trying to understand the scriptures. But he has reached a sticking point; he can’t understand it without someone helping him along.

Have you ever felt that way? You hunger for a deep, authentic, personal relationship with Christ, but something stunts your spiritual progress. There’s an issue, an objection, a question, a concern that blocks your spiritual growth. If that’s true for you, you’re not alone.

Today we are going to talk about four of the most common spiritual sticking points that hinder our spiritual growth.

The first sticking point is when we say, “I can’t believe”. This struggle is often expressed by people with intellectual issues blocking their spiritual path. They have a question or an objection that is stopping them in their journey toward Christ.

A scientist might say, “I can’t believe the Bible because it conflicts with science.” The mother of a sick child may say, “I can’t believe in a God who permits a little girl to suffer”. Or a lawyer might say, “I’m used to dealing with evidence, facts and logic; I can’t accept something on faith along”. A businessman might explain,

"I prayed to God that my business would succeed, but it's going down the tubes. I can't believe in a God who ignores my prayers."

Remember, Jesus' disciple, Thomas, sticking point? He said, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

So how can we get past this spiritual sticking point? We can learn from the Ethiopian man that Philip met on the road. Look what he was doing. He was actively seeking God. He went to the temple in Jerusalem to worship. He is searching the scriptures, even as he is driving. When we do these things, God promises to meet us. Jeremiah 29:13 promises "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart."

In Lee Strobel's book, "The Case for Faith" he quotes a scientist named James Tour, head of Nanoscience of Rice University, who said, "I build molecules for a living. I can't begin to tell you how difficult that job is. I stand in awe of God because of what he has done through his creation. Only a novice who knows nothing about science would say science takes away from faith. If you really study science it will bring you closer to God."

Sir Lionel Luckhoo is said to be the greatest lawyer to have ever lived. He is in the Guinness Book of World Records for winning more murder trials than anyone in history. He had a brilliant legal mind, but he was also a skeptic. But he took his monumental legal knowledge and applied it to investigating the historical record of Jesus' resurrection. In summary of his conclusion, Luckhoo stated, "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."

It was both scientific and historical evidence that led medical doctors, Viggo Olsen and his wife to become Christians and to pray an unusual prayer, asking God to send them to a place where there were no doctors and not Christians. Can you imagine praying a prayer like that? God answered their prayer and they moved to Bangladesh as medical missionaries. During their 33 years of service they founded a hospital where countless people found healing and hope. They also helped start 120 churches in Bangladesh. Olsen writes in his autobiography, "finding the purpose for which God made you, whatever it may be, and then fully pursuing it, is simply the very best way to live."

Friends, when you find Jesus Christ; it is in Him that you discover your purpose in life. God doesn't play hide-and-seek with us. The Bible states that the very fact that you are able to seek God is because he is drawing you to himself. God seeks you first.

It was no accident that Philip ended up on that road with the Ethiopian man; God sent Philip. I believe it is no accident that you and I are here today.

A second sticking point that keeps people from believing in God is "I don't want to believe." Few people would admit to it, but most non-believers would fall in this category. They don't believe in God because moral issues get in the way of their spiritual journey.

They may be involved in an adulterous relationship, unethical business practice, drug abuse, or some other sin. Becoming a Christian would mean a radical life change that they're not open to. In other words, sometimes we love our sin more than we love the truth. "Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil." John 3:19

For people who struggle with this issue of not wanting to believe their true spiritual sticking point is not a knowledge problem, it is a life style problem. But if they would just put God to the test and compare the costs and benefits of their current lifestyle with that of following Christ. He offers so much more; forgiveness, adventure, a clear conscience, security, guidance, hope, fulfillment, relationship, comfort, peace of mind, love, release from guilt, the power to overcome-self-destructive impulse, and the promise of eternity.

Jesus said, "I came that you would have abundant life." John 10:10. Anything short of having Christ in your life, you are just cheating yourself of the true fulfilment that God created for you.

So, we've seen that some people say, "I can't believe". For others the real issue is "I don't want to believe". Then a third sticking point is "I don't know what to believe."

Let's go back to our scripture reading in Acts about the Ethiopian man. He's riding along in his chariot, reading out loud from Isaiah chapter 53, and Philip comes alongside him and asks him if he understands what he is reading. The Ethiopian man says, "No, I don't, I need some help with this passage." Philip climbs up into the chariot with him and they have a Bible study. It says Philip began with the very passage the man was reading and told him the good news about Jesus.

So Philip helped him clarify what the Bible was saying. (Story – 12:00 curfew) Do we live in a world of confusion today? Sure we do. All the different issues concerning race, marriage, family, political, addictions, you name it. Everybody thinks they have the answers. In the end it's hard to know what to believe.

If we believe the Bible is God's Word and we believe it to be true, there is no substitute to spending time reading it. Then, at times, we may say what the Ethiopian man said, "I'm not sure what it says". So we study it together and help each other.

"I don't know what to believe" is a legitimate sticking point today, but God's Word has the answers to life's issues.

That brings us to the fourth spiritual sticking point – "I do believe, isn't that enough?" A lot of people would say I understand the gospel, believe what the Bible says, but it doesn't seem like I am connected to God. Why does God seem to be distant from me?

That's because merely agreeing with the gospel is not enough. It's not enough to just understand. James 2:19 says, "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that."

It's not enough to nod our heads in intellectual agreement. John 1:12 tells us "As many as received him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name."

Believing is the first step, but we must also receive. Romans 6:23 says, "Eternal life is a free gift" – but think about a Christmas gift. It doesn't become yours until you reach out and receive it.

There's a simple spiritual equation that flows out of John 3:12. Believe +Receive=Become. We can't become true children of God without both elements—we must believe in Him intellectually, and we must receive His forgiveness and leadership personally.

That's what the Ethiopian man did. He learned the meaning of the scripture passage he was reading—he believed. But then he received the free gift of salvation by trusting in the promised Messiah, as demonstrated by his being baptized. The result? He became a child of God and was swept up in the joy of forgiveness and new life in Christ. It says "He went on his way rejoicing."

Where are you on the journey of investigating The Case for Christ? What sticking points stand in your way? Do you have the joy of His forgiveness in your heart? Believe it, receive Him, and become a child of God.