

# Finding Confident Faith in Science

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## **Abstract**

*We live in a scientific world, one that looks to science as the only reliable path to public truth. In this world, where do people of faith look for confidence? In this moment, many look to scientific arguments for God, and scientific arguments against evolution. We hope these arguments will guard our faith and convince the skeptic. But is this confidence proper? Is it really secure? In the centuries preceding modern science, and to this day, Christians found confident faith another way, outside of science, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. There is an opportunity, even in science, to take find confidence in this same way. We find that nothing in science diminishes Jesus; nothing here threatens Him. Here, we can find a proper confidence.*

## **Introduction**

How should followers of Jesus think about science? Often, this question collapses into a debate about our origins. But this debate is not just about the esoteric details of our distant past. No, the debate strikes much deeper, much more personally. We are searching for a confident faith.

Well-meaning efforts often assert that faith and science occupy different, non-interacting domains.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps science adjudicates facts, while religion instructs our values. Or maybe science is the

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Stephen Jay Gould famously advocated the notion of non-overlapping magisteria (NOMA). For various approaches to faith-science dialogue, see chapter 1 of John Polkinghorne's *Science and the Trinity: The Christian Encounter with Reality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

authority on the physical world, but religion is the authority on the spiritual world.

These well-meaning efforts, however, are misguided. The problem is that our faith makes unavoidable and important factual claims about what has happened in the physical world. We find that God reveals himself in history. According to Scripture, Jesus died and was buried. Three days later he rose again, and was seen by many. The Gospel is rooted here, in the Resurrection, a physical event in the material world that science does not and cannot affirm. We cannot, therefore, accept that science is the final authority of all things in the physical world. While we affirm the importance of science, we cannot accept it as a final authority.

Our entire faith hinges on the Gospel, which is rooted in a factual claim about this historical event in the physical world. This is the Gospel that began the Christian faith and sustained it through thousands of years of history. When we respond in trust to Jesus, the Gospel continues in us, and we too join the many who see him.

If Jesus truly rose from the dead, this rightly reorders how we see the entire world, including science. Our world looks to science, but we find our Truth in Jesus. So, at the center of the origins debate is a struggle for confident faith in a scientific world. Some look to scientific arguments for God and against evolution. These arguments attempt to affirm Christian faith using science, the authority of this world. This affirmation builds our confidence.

But should we trust science for our confidence? Is this even proper? Modern science itself has not been around until very recently. It arose just over a few hundred years ago. Yet even without science, Christians for over a thousand years maintained confident faith in Jesus. Why would our faith need science today?

Christians want to build their confidence on a solid foundation. In our scientific world, we are tempted to think this foundation should be formed from scientific arguments. The problem, however, is that scientific arguments are shifting sand; they are not solid ground. Even the strongest truth claims in science are only provisional, approximate, temporary, and always open to revision. The details are in constant flux and dispute. Scientists may one day agree that an argument for God or against evolution is compelling. Even then, scientists' acceptance of this argument would only be provisional,

and could evaporate with new evidence, a clever experiment, or a more appealing explanation. Still, in this world, science is the final authority, threatening our confidence, causing doubt, and tempting us from the Gospel.

As Christians, we should doubt that any human effort could bring us to God. Science does not speak of God, but only of physical things. Modern science is a human effort, using a set of very restrictive rules,<sup>2</sup> to explain the natural causes of physical things in the material world. Scientific discovery is strongly shaped by our biases, preconceptions, and technological barriers. It is restrained by a host of inescapable human limitations. Science is a human enterprise. It cannot bring us to God. Rather, it is the saving work of Jesus on the cross and the illuminating work of the Spirit in our lives that bring us into a right relationship with Christ and make it possible for us to know him. We cannot find Jesus on our own; Jesus reveals himself to us.

I am a practicing scientist at a leading university in Saint Louis and have been immersed in science from my youth. Science captured me with its beauty, mystery, and power. Even in science, I find that Jesus is my solid Rock; all other ground is sinking sand. This article tells my journey to proper confidence.<sup>3</sup>

### **Other Ground is Sinking Sand**

I was born and raised in southern California by a Christian family of Indian immigrants. I chose to trust in Jesus very young, as a toddler, with a simple unquestioning faith.

As the story goes, I had a fever. I asked my mom, “What happens when we die?” My mother panicked. She thought I asked because death itself approached. Convinced this could be our last conversation, she fervently shared the Gospel story of Jesus, the Cross, and the Resurrection. I responded with trust. This belief was simple and genuine. I believed because my mother believed.

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2 For example, modern science does not ever consider God’s action; this is often referred to as “methodological naturalism.” Therefore, even clear evidence of creation cannot be identified as such within mainstream science.

3 In using the phrase ‘proper confidence’ I am alluding to Lesslie Newbigin’s book, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

As I grew older, questions formed and grew alongside my simple faith. Even at a young age, I was drawn to science. I watched the Discovery Channel to learn about dinosaurs and sharks. The offhand remarks about the age of the earth and evolution in these shows were immediately recognizable as a challenge to my faith. They were inconsistent with the creation story I had learned from church. In a search for confidence, I settled on some simple arguments about the impossibility of evolution that I heard at church. These arguments were a safe place to which I could retreat when I encountered evolution in my exploration of science. I could cleverly reject these offhand comments about evolution as misinformed and wrong.

One afternoon, when I was about 10 years old, I was sitting at home at the kitchen table. A middle-aged man, a guest in our home, sat down across from me and struck up a conversation. Somehow, the topic drifted to evolution. The man was a Christian, and said that he thought evolution was scientifically possible but did not actually happen. I pressed him on this, and he calmly argued why the science behind evolutionary change made sense to him. At the same time, the Bible's account left him confident that life did not come about this way. Still, evolutionary mechanisms were feasible. This man did not even believe that evolution had happened, just that it was possible.

Into tears I burst.

This poor man was shaken, scrambling to comfort this suddenly incoherent and sobbing child. I recall him frantically trying to explain what had transpired to my confused parents. I cried at the kitchen table. My tears were uncontrollable and unexpected. Why?

When this man explained how evolution made scientific sense to him, he was not just expressing a harmless opinion. In my world, he was ripping to shreds a protective barrier between my insulated Christian world and the science that seemed to contradict my faith. How would I be a Christian now, without this security? As a child, I did not have the vocabulary to express my fear and confusion. I did not have the intellectual strength to harden my arguments, only tears.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I am aware that this article itself would have probably provoked this response in me as a child. I imagine that some are threatened by my message, on a deeply emotional level, even now. I understand. This is hard, but follow me a bit longer and we will see Jesus.

I was experiencing the consequences of building my faith on the sinking ground of scientific arguments. This sort of faith would always be at risk of encountering someone smarter, more informed, or more articulate than me. It would always be threatened by the progress of scientific understanding. This sort of faith is insecure, and does not have proper confidence.

For now, an unstable faith was my fate. I was a child, after all, surrounded by Christians building confidence from science in our scientific world.

### **Encountering Jesus and Junior High**

In junior high, someone asked me why I was a Christian. I responded that I believed that Christianity was true. He suggested that the only reason I thought this was because my parents told me so. Would I follow Jesus if my parents were not Christians?

This question haunted me for years. Certainly, I could not have trusted Jesus as a toddler had my family not been Christian. In this hypothetical world, perhaps with Hindu parents, would I have the wherewithal and courage to find and follow Jesus? Who could know? I turned the question around. If I found that my faith was senseless, would I be willing to part ways with my family and leave it? I resolved the answer had to be “yes,” and that I needed to know for myself if Jesus was worth following. Yes, my parents believed, but that was not enough for me. Not anymore.

In many ways, my Christian faith was senseless at the time. I was surrounded by Christians at a private school, but was very lonely. I was the only Indian kid in my classes, and none of us understood the cultural conflicts that constantly arose. I was awkward and did not have many friends. Church was no better. Knowing most of the facts in the Bible already, Sunday school was mind-numbingly boring; I knew all the stories. I did know Jesus too, and felt his presence when I prayed at night. Still, I was lost, sad and alone.

I was silent with my doubts, unsure of how my family would respond. My doubts drove me inward and I read voraciously. My search continued for over a year. Somehow, a turning point came when I picked up *More than a Carpenter* by Josh McDowell. In this book, McDowell starts with his personal story. In college, he met a curious group of Christians.

They challenged me to make a rigorous, intellectual examination of the claims of Jesus Christ—that he is God’s Son; that he inhabited a human body and lived among real men and women; that he died on the cross for the sins of humanity; that he was buried and was resurrected three days later; and that he is still alive and can change a person’s life even today.<sup>5</sup>

This challenge sent him down a path of study, so much like my own. It consumed him for months. In this study, McDowell encountered Jesus, finding him to be more than a carpenter. Jesus was all he claimed to be. As McDowell puts it:

I want to share with you the core of what I learned in my months of research so that you, too, may see that Christianity is not a myth, not the fantasy of wishful dreamers, not a hoax played on the simpleminded. It is rock-solid truth.<sup>6</sup>

McDowell learned that the Gospel story makes sense through the lens of history. Jesus inhabits a singular, unique moment. After his execution, belief in Jesus should have died for good. Instead, the Resurrection inspired and sustained his previously terrified and scattered followers. This moment is confirmed by prophecy from centuries before. It is confirmed by the testimony of all believers over thousands of years and across many cultures. And it is confirmed in McDowell’s search, when he discovered Jesus’ presence in his life. Here, I saw and trusted Jesus too.

As a timid, lonely eighth-grader, I responded again to the Gospel, thus marking the beginning of my independent faith in Jesus. My faith was not rooted in scientific arguments against evolution. It was not rooted in clever philosophy or worldly intelligence. And it was not rooted in my family. Instead, with proper confidence, my faith was rooted in the real person and work of Jesus.

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<sup>5</sup> Josh McDowell, *More Than a Carpenter* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2009), 5.

<sup>6</sup> McDowell, *More Than a Carpenter*, 7.

That summer I went to a weeklong camp. Arriving in the mountains, I was dismayed to discover that the program was full of Bible studies and church services. I expected to be bored out of my mind. I was wrong.

A “short, fat, bald man” (as he introduced himself) took the stage in an outdoor amphitheater. He opened with a ridiculous story about a defecating cow, and then set in to explaining from Jeremiah how God shapes us as a potter shapes clay. My eyes were opened. I saw God’s hand at work in specific details of my dark loneliness. I saw him hold my past and my present. I saw hope in my future, as he held my life to mold and use me. The moment was anointed, channeling something otherworldly. Words are inadequate to describe this moment. It was worshipful. I had gone to church before. I had sung the songs. I had prayed. I had read the Bible. Somehow, up in the mountains at this camp, God opened the heavens and revealed Himself to me.

I struggle to understand my experience to this day. Though not illogical, it was not driven by logic. I cannot scientifically prove it. I do not fully understand it. Something mysterious is here. Nonetheless, Jesus encountered me; he silenced my doubts.

### **The Gospel’s Sameness**

The Gospel story is haunted by a mysterious power that reaches people from all times, cultures, statuses, and personalities. I understand this as evidence of a living God, continuing his infallible work in history. The Gospel is an ancient story through which a living God reveals himself. The unflinching sameness of the Gospel through millennia should encourage confidence.

This same Gospel echoes through thousands of years of Jewish and Christian thought and experience. It is found in prophecy, centuries before Jesus’ birth. This is the same Gospel of which Isaiah writes around 700 BC (Isa. 52:13-53:12). I would read his songs in junior high, about a suffering servant that bears the sins of the world. Jesus is this servant. This is the same Gospel of which Daniel spoke around 600 BC. In high school, I would read his 70-weeks prophecy that foretold the year an anointed prince would come to bring everlasting righteousness. Jesus is this prince (Dan. 9:24-26).

In Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, this same Gospel turns the course of history. Tearing in two, from top to bottom, the dividing curtain that separates us from God (Heb. 10:20; Mt. 27:51), he reorders our world and becomes our cornerstone.

In the early church, this is the same Gospel of which Paul writes in his letters. He declares that Jesus died for our sins according to the Scriptures; he was buried, but then arose three days later, and was seen by many (1 Cor. 15:4-5). This is the same Gospel that, without political power, spread with unreasonable success in the first few generations across the globe. This is the same Gospel that St. Augustine wrote about in his *Confessions* in 400 AD. I read his witness of Jesus during my first year of college and recognized my own faith to be one with his.

In our modern world, this is the same Gospel of which the great scientist Pascal wrote in the 1650s. In high school, I read Pascal's *Thoughts*, his version of *More than a Carpenter*, and saw my future as a Scientist-Christian. This is the same Gospel of which C. S. Lewis wrote in 1950. In elementary school, I read *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, recognizing the great lion Aslan as Jesus incarnate, working out Narnia's redemption. This is the same Gospel of which Lesslie Newbigin wrote in 1995. As a professor, I would read his *Proper Confidence* and see again that Jesus is our only path to confident faith. This is the same Gospel of which Dr. Francis Collins wrote in 2006. I would read his story, *The Language of God*, in graduate school and recognize his path to Jesus as the same as mine. This is the same Gospel that my mother recounted to toddler me, so many years ago. And yes, this is the same Gospel that continues to be compelling in our scientific world.<sup>7</sup>

Seen clearly in history, the mystery of the Gospel's sameness is a prophetic wonder, inviting us to rest and trust. It does not seek approval from this world's shifting authorities. This sameness, too,

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<sup>7</sup> The works to which I refer include: Blaise Pascal, *Thoughts*, ed. W. F. Trotter, Mary L. Booth, and O. W. Wight (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1910); C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994); Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995); and Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2006).



we doubt. Threatened by a world that trusts in science, will the same Gospel be enough, or should we make it new?

### **Arguments and High School**

I entered public high school the next fall. In a secular school for the first time, I wanted to support my faith with scientific evidence and scientific proof. I started reading scientific books about creation. The allure is obvious. There is scientific evidence demonstrating that the Bible explains the world better than science? (Let's pause for a second to let that irony sink in.) If such evidence existed, I needed to find it and use it among my classmates. These books delivered exactly what they advertised. They convinced me that the science I was learning in biology was wrong.

There was only one problem. My friends did not find this evidence convincing. One of my friends was an atheist. I will be always thankful for his patience with me. He listened to all of my arguments and looked at all the evidence I found, and then methodically explained why he remained unconvinced. I would study more, come back, and try again. The same pattern would play out: he would listen, then explain reasonable reasons why he remained unconvinced. He was calm and unthreatened by my arguments. He thought about them and offered nothing but reasonable, logical resistance.

I was stumped. Honestly, I was threatened. Perhaps these arguments were correct; perhaps the evidence did point to God. Yet, none of the arguments and evidence were definitive. They could not convince a reasonable skeptic.

The two best arguments were the origin of life and the fine-tuning of cosmological constants.

Science is quite far from understanding how the first living cell arose on earth. Professor Walter Bradley's *The Mystery of Life's Origins* is a study of this point. It is entirely possible that science will never understand how life began by natural processes; it may very well be impossible. This suggests a point in our history that God might have intervened directly.

Similarly, many cosmological constants are "fine-tuned," set precisely so life is possible. No mechanism that could have tuned these constants has been proven. This might suggest that a transcen-

dent God ensured the universe would be hospitable for us. Or, as alternative solutions, scientists offer either the multiverse theory or an unknown “unified theory” of everything. Theoretically, if correct, these solutions might solve the fine-tuning problem. However, neither of them has been proven scientifically.

As a Christian, I understand these arguments to be the most intractable parts of the scientific account of our origins that might require the direct, supernatural work of God. As an atheist, my friend understood them as wondrous mysteries that science might someday understand. There is, unfortunately, no scientific way to determine whether or not these puzzles required God’s intervention. Science has an amazing track record of explaining things that initially seemed to be impossible. So, neither the argument from fine-tuning nor the origin of life is inescapable. The most to hope for is that these arguments might stimulate curiosity, but they cannot box the atheist into belief. Besides, belief in God is not trust in Jesus.

Even in the rare case that our arguments convince an informed skeptic, they do not usually lead to belief in Jesus. For example, the philosopher and prominent atheist Antony Flew found some of these arguments compelling in his final years. In 2001, he came to believe that God created the universe but is no longer involved. Essentially, Flew became a Deist. He died in 2010, and by all accounts he did not ever come to faith in Jesus.<sup>8</sup> His story is not singular, but very rare. Even if stories like his were common, belief in God is not trust in Jesus.

Our debate was so far from the Gospel. To this day, I still regret that I did not share more about my experience with Jesus. Sure, my friend might still walk away a skeptic, but Jesus is more compelling than any scientific argument I found. To be sure, we were just two high school kids arguing about things much greater than us. We were not well-trained gladiators in a sophisticated battle of logic and

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<sup>8</sup> Flew was a famous atheist who came to believe that God existed. He was convinced by the fine-tuning, the origin of life, and the existence of natural laws for science to discover. Of note, none of the arguments against biological evolution were helpful. Encouragingly, Flew’s inclusion of an appendix written by N. T. Wright on the historicity of the Resurrection indicates he was considering Jesus, but he never publicly acknowledged him. Antony Flew, *There Is a God: How the World’s Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (New York: HarperOne, 2007).

rhetoric. Though, even among the gladiators, these arguments are not decisive.

Scientific arguments that appeal easily to Christians are not nearly as convincing to reasonable skeptics and even many seekers. What good is scientific proof for God that only satisfies Christians? Why not start with the story and person of Jesus, and his work on the cross?

### **All Creation Declares His Glory**

Our world looks to science, so we want God to be revealed there. Some look to science to prove God and affirm the Bible. We find this proof in scientific arguments that logically use scientific evidence to point to God. We justify this effort from Paul's 'natural theology,' citing for example his words from Romans 1:20: "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse."

We should know from Scripture, it would seem, that there is strong, scientific evidence of God's design, even before we actually find that evidence in the world. Now, from the outset, we engage science certain that strong, clear evidence for God exists that science can demonstrate. We only have to find it. Now, faced with science's silence about God and creation, we wonder if a dedicated conspiracy of scientists has hidden and confused the message in nature (Rom. 1:18), and thereby suppressed the Gospel in our world.

Let us remember that this same passage teaches that human wickedness successfully "suppresses the truth" that God reveals to us through nature. However, the Gospel of Jesus cannot be overcome by darkness (Jn. 1:5). Unlike nature, no human conspiracy can stand against the Gospel, and it is through Jesus that we turn from idolatry to see him correctly in our world.

Let us also remember that modern science did not exist when Paul wrote: "since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities have been clearly seen." Science as we know it did not arise for at least another 1500 years. Paul was writing something that made sense within the context of his own time, when belief in God or gods was pervasive. What Paul refers to as "clearly seen" is not the fine-tuning or the origin of life arguments as explained by Christians

in our scientific world. He cannot be speaking of irreducible complexity either. Whatever these arguments are, they are not “clearly seen” by all people from the “beginning of creation.”

No, Paul is not speaking of scientific arguments. Rather, he writes of the awe and wonder we all experience in nature’s beauty, mystery, power, and vastness, and how this declares an encounter with something transcendent: the grand, the invisible, and the eternal. Nothing in science dampens nature’s declaration of these immortal qualities. It is so startling that we invented deities to explain its origin. It is so clear that it does not require scientific arguments to amplify its voice. Poets and artists from all times and cultures sing of it. It is so startling that it can, and should, and does guide us into worship.

Is there a clear, strong, and convincing evidence or argument *in science* that will convince skeptics that God exists? Maybe, but the Bible itself does not tell us that this evidence exists. Academic efforts to argue for God can continue, but even if we found strong evidence for God, would this even draw us to him? Paul explains that, even seeing God in nature, we still turn to idols. Just after writing of nature’s declaration, Paul goes on to say:

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles. (Rom. 1:21-23)

Even recognizing God in nature, we all still turn to idols. Our world sees the beauty and power that science uncovers in nature, declaring an immortal Glory. Nothing in science dampens this declaration. Now, in response, our world trusts instead in human science. We exchange the immortal God—who put nature’s laws into place—for a science idol. Without the Gospel reordering how we think about all things, we cannot respond rightly to the God we find in nature. No, Paul’s ‘natural theology’ is not a path to God. In context, it is an

explanation of why we all are held responsible for idolatry, why we are left “without excuse.”

I am not alone in making this point. In 1660, at the dawn of modern science, Francis Bacon wrote of misguided attempts to understand God from nature: “this unwholesome mixture of things human and divine there arises not only a fantastic philosophy but also an heretical religion.”<sup>9</sup> More recently, the theologically trained scientist, George L. Murphy argued, “What Paul says is that the natural world offers material from which God’s ‘eternal power and divine nature’ could be known, but that people uniformly refuse to know God and instead construct idols.”<sup>10</sup>

This pattern of idolatry explains why scientific arguments for God easily convince Christians and many seekers, but do not convince most skeptics. According to Paul, the problem is not evidence or logic, but idolatry. Our arguments are not convincing because nothing in nature, nothing in science, shines light on the darkness of idolatry. For Christians, scientific arguments for God work because we already want to worship. The arguments place us in view of nature’s beauty and mystery to worship in awe and wonder. We encounter God. Seekers also sometimes meet us here. Our arguments, for them, can be an invitation to worship with us, and they want to worship too. Our arguments enlighten those that already want to worship, but nothing in our arguments, nothing in nature, overcomes the tendency to idolatry.

This pattern of idolatry also explains why Christians are so drawn to scientific arguments for God, even when they are not convincing. Even faulty, illogical arguments can encounter us correctly with the Creator. Even in bad arguments, we can encounter nature and rightly worship God. This is an authentic, life-altering experience with the immortal God. He is capable of meeting us even when our knowledge is misguided and our arguments are faulty. Sometimes we then wrongly build our confidence in the arguments themselves, expecting them to convince the skeptic and guard our faith.

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9 Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum*, trans. R. Ellis and James Spedding (George Routledge & Sons, 1920), 2, 65.

10 George Murphy, “Reading God’s Two Books,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 58, no. 1 (March 2006), 65.

We resist leaving bad arguments too, especially when they played a role in bringing us to Jesus.

This can be a type of idolatry. Of course, God can use anything, including both good and bad scientific arguments. We should continue to let nature guide us into worship, but build our confidence in the One to whom our arguments point, the One who actively and personally reveals himself, the One who is greater than all arguments.

Taking the full meaning of Paul's 'natural theology' seriously (Rom:18-23), I doubt that any scientific argument could be a "sign" to skeptics. Instead of signs, our arguments are better understood as explanations of how we, as Christians, see and understand nature in light of Jesus. As explanations, rather than signs, they do not need, necessarily, to disprove or debunk other accounts of nature. Rather, they only need to explain why belief in God is sensible and warranted. As explanations 'in light of Jesus,' they direct attention to the real reason we have confidence that God exists, is good, and wants to be known. Perhaps the hallmark of Christian thought in science could be a loose commitment to scientific arguments. With our confidence in God's work to reveal himself through Jesus, we do not expect science to reliably bring us to God. We do not find our confidence in science.

And to our unbelieving and scientific generation, what sign does Jesus offer? When they ask for proof of God and his work in this world, how does God respond? Even now he offers the "one sign" as proof of his authenticity. According to Scripture, Jesus died, was buried, then rose again on the third day, and was seen by many, including us.

### **Curiosity and College**

In 1996, I entered the University of California, Irvine, to study biology as an undergraduate student. Following in my mother's footsteps, I wanted to be a physician. I liked science and wanted to help people, so medical school made sense to me. I liked math and computers too, but this was just a distraction from my studies. Organic chemistry, molecular biology, and physics—these are what I thought should occupy my mind.

I studied for medical school, but time, and time again, science

would grab me, gripping my attention with awe and wonder. These experiences were startling and unexpected, jolting even. I would be studying for a class, with clear expectations of what was needed for my test. Then a detail from a book would grab me with its beauty, and seduce me from my study. The more I learned of science, the more I encountered beauty, and the more I experienced awe.

At the time, growing excitement about the sequencing of the human genome inspired everyone. The year I graduated, in 2000, the draft genome would be published. The story told and retold was that of Watson, Crick, and *The Double Helix*. These unlikely, sometimes unethical, scientists elucidated DNA's role and structure in 1953. In a very human adventure, driven by competition and curiosity, they encountered the double helix. Elegant and beautiful, the double helix is poetry in atoms. It inspires tearful awe, and we still wonder how it came to be. This structure solved some of biology's deepest mysteries. How are traits inherited? What is a gene? How is biological information stored, copied, and transmitted? The double helix's structure immediately answered these questions, and guided us into even deeper mystery. This beauty guides me, still, into worship.

Immersed in science's beauty and mystery, my scientific arguments against evolution became less necessary for my confidence. These arguments all centered on open questions in science. However, these open questions also point toward mystery. Maybe the fine-tuning argument and the origin of life are scientifically unsolvable. The scientist in me, though, grew a curious desire to explore, test, and see. If science solved the mystery, a new beauty would emerge, and unveil new mysteries too. Scientific arguments became invitations to join in and to discover more. As I slowly left my arguments, my confidence stayed strong. Science constantly guided me into worship. Here, I encountered God, and so grew my confidence. This was inspired by evidence, but transcended it. It was found in nature, but pointed beyond it.

Eventually, in 2000, I did go on to medical school, but also to get a Ph.D. in computational biology. I decided to become a scientist in order to see, firsthand, the beauty of the human genome, and how it might be used in medicine. Like all great discoveries in science, this beauty leads to greater mysteries and greater beauty. Science

brings us into close, deep contact with God's natural world. To those who want to worship, this world makes known his invisible and eternal nature.

### **Proper Confidence**

In 2005, five years later, I was studying to be a computational biologist. I was halfway through a Ph.D. program in Information and Computer Sciences at the University of California, Irvine. Science education at this stage is an apprenticeship. I worked closely with my advisor, a scientist and an atheist, on our scientific projects, and when we could we would write papers together to publish our results.

This was a dark time in science. In 2005, efforts to challenge evolution in public school curricula escalated. Local boards of education in Kansas and Dover, Pennsylvania, drew on the Intelligent Design movement to challenge the teaching of evolution in public schools. Ultimately, this ended up in federal court in Dover, where the court ruled that Intelligent Design was outside the scope of mainstream science. It was a difficult time to be a scientist and a Christian. As a consequence of the conflict, it was impossible to identify as a Christian without inviting the scorn of everyone.

In this moment, a leading scientist from another university came to share his work on the origin of life, trying to understand how life might have arisen on earth. Both my advisor and I attended. I was skeptical. We are still so far from understanding a natural mechanism for this monumental milestone in history. My advisor, on the other hand, was animated and excited about the possibility of making a contribution to this fundamental question.

As we walked back to our offices around the campus' ring road, my advisor quickly shot off several ideas concerning how we might try to make progress in understanding the origin of life. We were using machine learning and computational methods to understand chemistry. Perhaps there was a way to use our work to gain insight into this larger problem. Suddenly, my advisor stopped walking and looked at me. He smirked, "Can I really put you on this project? You are a Christian. Are you going to try to sabotage this?"

I paused fearfully, "Of course you can put me on this project. Christians are about Truth. So as a Christian, I want to know what



really happened.” My advisor sniffed, chuckled, and we walked the rest of the way to our office and back to work. I do not know for sure, but I think that he found this expression of faith compelling, that he found my confidence real.

I admit, I was bracing at the risk that this cherished ‘proof’ of God would fall. At the same time, I rested in confidence that even if science could someday explain the origin of life, my faith would remain unchanged. My confidence no longer rested on this scientific question. Perhaps the origin of life required God’s intervention. But my confidence was in Jesus—his death and resurrection—and my experience of him.

If science one day offers a credible explanation of how life arose, it will draw on information gleaned from hundreds if not thousands of experiments, in a highly technical undertaking. It will make headlines and earn someone a Nobel Prize. Some Christians might defensively fear that their arguments against science here would evaporate, taking their confidence with it. But not much will change for my faith. Identifying such natural mechanisms would simply indicate to me the way that God could have created life. The beauty and mystery of this first life would remain a proper place of worship, a place to stand in awe and wonder of his work. I would invite seekers here to see and join in. I would continue to worship. I would still be confident.

Oh how far I have come from the sobbing child, so many years ago, building his faith on sinking sand. As goes the hymn, “in Christ alone my hope is found. He is my light, my strength, my song; this cornerstone, this solid ground.”

### **A Professor’s Confidence**

I am frequently asked why I follow Jesus. I answer with the story of my search for a faith independent of my parents. I recommend *More than a Carpenter* or *Mere Christianity* and retell the historical arguments for the Resurrection. For the more academic, I point to N. T. Wright’s masterpiece, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*.<sup>11</sup> I explain the prophecies that Jesus fulfilled, which confirm that he

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11 N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003).

was truly the Messiah. I explain that Jesus, in this way, comes to us through history, not through science.

All this is true, but there is more. I still struggle to explain this. Somehow, there is this presence that pervades my life. My awareness of it developed slowly over the decades. It is not unique to me and it is not controlled by me. I cannot scientifically prove it. I do not understand it. Some may write this off as unverifiable and unscientific babble. I understand that this all may seem simple minded, and not nearly sophisticated enough to explain a professor's faith. I do not have an intellectual argument to offer that might compare with Jesus. I agree, this is not science, but it is an invitation to come, taste, and see. I myself do see him.<sup>12</sup> I see his hand, shaping me as a potter shapes clay, in my past, my present, and my future. I follow Jesus because He is alive. He is real. He is good.

Here, the Gospel's prophetic voice in science is most clear. Our world sees science as the most trusted source of truth. In this scientific world, scientific arguments are esteemed above all others. But what can science say about the Resurrection? What can science say about God? What can science say of the darkness in this world? What can science say of our destiny? No experiment can guide us here. Science is silent on these most important questions. All my scientific training is meaningless. All my scientific arguments are shifting. All my scientific evidence is fading. All my wise and persuasive words are inadequate. Thus, at the cross, my idolatry of science comes to die. As science fades away, I am left with an effortless, proper confidence. I am brought back to the same Gospel that my mother shared with me as a toddler. I see Jesus, and he silences my doubt.

Still, my younger self puzzles me. An insecure faith, building on science's shifting sand, puzzles me. An impoverished Gospel in want of scientific assurance puzzles me. A threatened Gospel needing our

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12 For those that want a philosophical defense of personal experience as an important source of knowledge, I point to the philosophy of science expressed by Michael Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958) and Alvin Plantinga's trilogy: *Warrant: The Current Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); and *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

defense puzzles me. Even deeply embedded in science as a professor, I do not need scientific arguments to follow Jesus.

The seeker asks, “What is the reason for the hope that lies within you?” In our scientific world, we are tempted to answer with misdirection by offering scientific arguments. I meet advocates of these scientific arguments for God all the time. I ask them why they themselves follow Jesus. Usually, I find that they had somehow experienced Jesus and came to trust him. Then, he reordered their world, and they came see him clearly in nature too.<sup>13</sup> Their argument turns out not to be a scientific argument, *per se*, but an explanation of how they now see the world in light of Jesus. Correctly, if their argument were to fall, their faith would go on unencumbered. And so it should. Proper confidence does not rest upon scientific arguments. The arguments are the consequence of certain faith, not the cause. So how do they come to think that scientific arguments are the reason for “the hope that lies within us?”

As for scientist me, the reason for my hope is Jesus, the solid Rock. I stand on the Resurrection. In this witness, I am joined by many others today, by the prophetic witness of the Old Testament, by the testimony of the Apostles and the early followers of Jesus, and by a great “cloud of witnesses” throughout the church’s long history. As goes the hymn, “All other ground is sinking sand.”

### **Jesus Completes Science**

Despite our doubts, Jesus can still be compelling in science. Proper confidence in Jesus is not rooted in scientific arguments. This is clear in my own faith, and also in the way scientists, seekers, and skeptics come to follow Jesus in the scientific world. They are usually driven by curiosity, not personal or scientific deficiency. They do not usually come to Jesus by rejecting or doubting evolution. Instead,

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<sup>13</sup> There are some examples where people first experience God in nature, and scientific arguments were important to their journey. In my view, they are still responding to encountering Jesus here. The attention should to turn to him, rather than the arguments themselves. This is particularly clear in cases where the arguments are flawed and wrong. We can encounter God correctly in bad arguments, and our correct response to Him does not justify or validate bad arguments. Rather it testifies to God’s grace in our weakness.

they come to follow Jesus for the same reasons as the rest of us. They encounter Jesus, he illuminates their world, and they trust him.

They encounter Jesus in the Bible, seeing his life, teachings, death and resurrection. They encounter him in great Christian classics like C. S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*, Josh McDowell's *More than a Carpenter*, and Augustine's *Confessions*. They encounter him in surprising moments with Christians, as he seeps through from deep within. They encounter him in loneliness and pain, when he meets them in their storms. They encounter him at home and on holidays, when families share their unvarnished journeys to faith. They encounter him in colleagues and students, those who follow Jesus in the scientific world. They find that Jesus is compelling. He is beautiful. He is unique. Nothing in science compares with him. Nothing in science diminishes him.

I like to tell the story of how Dr. Francis Collins came to faith. Collins is now the head of the National Institute of Health, one of the most influential and significant positions in science. Scientists know him as one of their own, and they trust him. Collins is also a Christian. He tells his colleagues this story in his book *The Language of God*. Like me, he spent nearly a decade in graduate school in a combined MD and Ph.D. program. This included four years in medical school and an extended apprenticeship in science. He was an atheist and believed in evolution. He was in his late twenties, doing well, and in his last years of medical school. He was entirely unimpressed by scientific arguments for God. Most would assume he was entirely beyond the Gospel's grasp.

Then, in a rotation in medical school, he encountered a patient. She had cancer and was dying. But in her Collins encountered an otherworldly peace. She explained her faith in Jesus and asked Collins, "What do you believe?" He did not know, and from that moment Jesus haunted him.<sup>14</sup> Collins was confused and struggled to understand. A Methodist minister he met smiled and said to him,

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<sup>14</sup> I use the word "haunt" in a way that echoes James K. A. Smith in *How (Not) to Be Secular* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014). Our secular age is "haunted" with awareness of the spiritual that is not often understood or named. There are "thin places" where we are more aware that there is more to our world than secularism acknowledges.

“I think you’d learn a lot if you’d read this book on my shelf. It was written by somebody who has traveled the same path—a scholar who was an atheist at Oxford and tried to figure out whether there was truth or not to religion.” The minister pointed Collins to C. S. Lewis’ classic *Mere Christianity*.

In *Mere Christianity*, Collins was struck by two specific truths. First, even if science turns out to be correct about evolution, Lewis explains that a scientific description of the world would still be incomplete. For example, we all know that ethics is important and speaks to a type of truth; racism, genocide, and eugenics are all morally wrong. But nothing in science can reliably derive moral statements and principles, or even make sense of why these things are wrong. Science, therefore, is not a complete understanding of the world. This argument from morality is not a scientific argument against evolution, but a clear explanation of why the science-only worldview of “evolutionism” is incomplete.

Lewis also explains the Gospel. Jesus is the embodied message of an immortal God from beyond our understanding, beyond our science. God proves Jesus is his messenger by raising him from the dead. God offers his sign through this act in our world, and not through science. The Gospel resonated with Collins, and explained the cancer patient’s hope. Jesus completed his view of the world. Soon after, immersed in nature’s beauty, Collins also responded with trust. Now in him the Gospel continues.

Scientists hear Collins’ story and puzzle over it. His path follows no scientific logic. It makes no scientific sense. His story is like a movie missing its key scene. It is like seeing an answer without knowing the question. How could one interaction with a dying patient be so significant? We, as Christians, understand. This was an encounter with the infinite, a transcendent thing, when eyes were opened. Collins encountered Jesus.

Nonetheless, Christians hear Collins’ story and they too puzzle over it, because Collins continues to believe in evolution. Yet Jesus is undiminished by his belief in evolution. For Collins to come to faith, no scientific arguments were needed. We do not understand, but we should. We trust Jesus because the Resurrection reveals an unimag-

inably good God, not because evolution is right or wrong. Nothing in science can overcome the light of Jesus.

Collins is not unique. Science is secular in the sense that it does not consider spiritual things, but it still is ‘haunted.’ A living God is here; he is found by those who seek him.

One of my colleagues, an atheist professor, recently came to trust in Jesus. While she is not a scientist, she lives in a scientific world and believes in evolution. Reading about the faith of others, she was curious. She started reading the Bible, and there encountered Jesus.<sup>15</sup> As she puts it, Jesus was so clearly real and a person of his own time, but he also spoke from outside of it. He could not be only a product of first century Palestine. He was attractive. He was “gripping.” In this person, she put her trust. Of course, she believes he died and rose again, but not because she could find no better explanation. Rather, knowing Jesus made easy her belief.

I asked, “Do you believe the Bible because of Jesus, or Jesus because of the Bible?” After some careful thought, she explained that she did not start reading the Bible believing it was true. It is not as if she read “Jesus was God,” and then therefore believed “he is God.” No, she encountered Jesus in the Bible, and came to trust in Jesus. Her trust in the Bible followed, because this is where she found him. Just as the true, infallible, useful, and authoritative Bible teaches, the Bible itself is not the foundation of the Gospel; only Jesus is the cornerstone (Eph. 2:20; 1 Cor. 15:14; Acts 17:31).

In both of these stories, two atheists trusted in Jesus, without first believing in God. Of course, they believe in God now, but they do so because they trusted Jesus and he made easy their belief. The most that scientific arguments can do is encourage theism, but belief in God is not trust in Jesus. The Gospel is different and stands alone. It does not depend on arguments for God; Jesus Himself unsettles atheism. He Himself is proof enough that God exists. As the great scientist Pascal writes,

We know God only by Jesus Christ...All those who

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<sup>15</sup> She read the Gospels, the four books in the Bible that tell the story of Jesus’ life, including Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

have claimed to know God, and to prove him without Jesus Christ, have had only weak proofs. But in proof of Jesus Christ we have the prophecies, which are solid and palpable proofs. In him, then, and through him, we know God...through Jesus Christ, and in Jesus Christ, we prove God, and teach morality and doctrine.<sup>16</sup>

The light of Jesus overcomes the darkness in our scientific world. Even evolution, even atheism cannot dim it. He is our proper confidence.

### **The Skeptic's Sign**

The skeptic, from his perch in science, taunts us, "Show me a sign, a proof for the hope that lies within you. Show me science." This challenges our confidence. We are tempted to doubt the power and relevance of the Gospel that began and sustained our faith. Our scientific world trusts scientists and believes scientific explanations, and we begin to place our confidence in science too.

The skeptic taunts, "Show me a sign!" Jesus answers,

A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here.

The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and

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16 Blaise Pascal, *Thoughts*, Section 7, ed. W. F. Trotter, Mary L. Booth, and O. W. Wight (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1910), 547.

now something greater than Solomon is here. (Matt. 12:39-42)

The skeptic wants science. Jesus offers only Himself. The skeptic is haunted. In the current moment, this answer haunts us too, and beckons us to proper confidence. The seeker knows that something greater than our arguments is here.

Now, we face a choice. We tried arguing science. The skeptic is not convinced. The scientist is angry. Our faith is unstable. Do we still look to scientific arguments over Jesus? Jesus waits; will he again be enough, with the Resurrection, his one true sign?

Jesus is our confidence in science. He waits. Like the first disciples with their nets, let us leave our arguments and follow him.