

Skeptic

Study Guide

By John S. Dickerson and Alison R. Emery

Jesus Skeptic Study Guide by John S. Dickerson and Alison Emery © 2020

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Table of Contents

Leader Guide	1
Intro: Skeptics Welcome	6
Week 1: Keystone Species	8
Week 2: Discovering Jesus in Science	11
Week 3: Seeds and Trees	15
Week 4: Universities	18
Week 5: Hospitals & Modern Medicine	21
Week 6: Ending Slavery	25
Week 7: Literacy & Education	30
Week 8: Did Jesus Actually Exist?	34
Week 9: Jesus, The Most Influential Person	39
Week 10: What Does Jesus's Influence Mean for Me?	42
Conclusion: Light of the World	45

Thank you for diving deeper into “Jesus Skeptic.” We pray that your study time will be enlightening and challenging as you discover more about Jesus and how He inspired social good throughout history.

This Study Guide is a companion to the book “Jesus Skeptic: A Journalist Explores the Credibility and Impact of Christianity.” It will reference chapters and page numbers from the book.

We’ve set up this Study Guide so you can use it on your own, or you can use the Study Guide as a small group, discussing answers to the questions aloud. The following pages offer tips for either use.

Whether alone with God or gathered in a group, this Study Guide asks questions that will help you process, internalize, and apply the teachings of Jesus that sparked a global movement. We pray that you will experience inspiration and transformation as you consider how Jesus has changed humanity for good.

How to use this Study Guide as an individual, for personal reflection:

If you’re using this Study Guide for personal reflection, we recommend that you write out your answers to the questions to get maximum growth out of this study. You might consider printing the pages or creating a note on your phone or computer so that you can write and revisit your answers.

How to use this Study Guide for a small group study:

A small group could be you and a friend, or it can be as many as a dozen or more. Most small groups find it helpful to meet on a weekly basis, at the same time, every week. You could have a small group at your workplace, a coffee shop, a living room, or just about anywhere.

Besides the “Intro” and “Conclusion” sections, each weekly lesson in this Study Guide contains: (1) a brief summary of the chapter or chapters for that week and additional insights to dig deeper into God’s Word; (2) a list of discussion questions; and (3) a challenge or action step (called “Be a Fruit Bearer!”). Most of the lessons also include a brief profile of a change-maker mentioned in the book.

Group members should read that week’s lesson ahead of time and come prepared to answer the discussion questions. We recommend allowing 30-45 minutes for discussion, plus additional time to fellowship and pray together before and after your session. Thus ideally your group time should be around one hour.

Before answering the discussion questions together, you can summarize that week’s topic and highlight any interesting points from the review. The group leader may need to offer examples or suggestions for some of the discussion questions to get the conversation started. Typically each list of questions starts more general and concludes with more thought-provoking, personal-reflection topics to allow group members to “warm up” before going deeper. Where Bible passages are embedded in the question, we recommend having a group member read the verses before discussing your answers.

The “Be a Fruit Bearer!” section of each lesson is intended to guide group members into deeper reflection and action on their own. During your group study time, welcome any thoughts, insights, or actions that anyone wants to share with the group from that week’s challenge. Encourage group members to complete the action step or challenge on their own if they haven’t already done so (or if it calls for a group activity, plan with your group how you can meet the challenge together!).

Here are some tips and suggested ground rules to help guide your group time:

- The topics in this study may elicit strong opinions or even disagreement at times. Encourage group members to be respectful of each other. Emphasize that seeking Jesus's truth is your goal and that healthy discussion can point others toward that truth.
- It helps to decide as a group if things shared in the group should be confidential.
- Commit within the group that you will listen attentively to each other and provide time for each person to talk.
- Encourage authenticity and vulnerability by being vulnerable yourself. Be honest in sharing what God is teaching you through this study. Answer the questions with an open heart and a desire to encourage and learn from one another on this faith journey.
- Keep in mind that skeptics are welcome in this study! If someone in your group isn't a believer, is a new believer, or is struggling with their faith, point them to opportunities for further discipleship at a Bible-believing church.
- Most importantly, cover your group time with prayer. Make time to pray for each group member before you meet that week. Open and close each group study with prayer, asking God to continue giving your group new insights and a willingness to be vulnerable in sharing together.

Recommended schedule:

This Study Guide is set up for a 10-week study. Some weeks in the Study Guide may cover more than one chapter in the book. To help guide your group, here is a recommended schedule with the chapters to read each week before you meet as a group and the Study Guide questions for that week:

Week 1: Read Preface, Introduction, and Chapters 1, 2, & 3; discuss Introduction and Week 1 questions from Study Guide

Week 2: Read Chapter 4; discuss Week 2 questions from Study Guide

Week 3: Read Chapters 5 & 6; discuss Week 3 questions from Study Guide

Week 4: Read Chapter 7; discuss Week 4 questions from Study Guide

Week 5: Read Chapter 8; discuss Week 5 questions from Study Guide

Week 6: Read Chapters 9 & 10; discuss Week 6 questions from Study Guide

Week 7: Read Chapters 11 & 12; discuss Week 7 questions from Study Guide

Week 8: Read Chapter 13; discuss Week 8 questions from Study Guide

Week 9: Read Chapters 14 & 15; discuss Week 9 questions from Study Guide

Week 10: Read Chapters 16, 17, & Conclusion; discuss Week 10 questions and Conclusion from Study Guide

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Intro: Skeptics Welcome

In navigating life, we all hunger to answer these questions:

- Who am I? (Identity)
- What am I worth? (Value)
- Where will I belong and be safe? (Belonging)
- Why do I exist? (Purpose)

Brilliant minds and world-changing revolutionaries throughout history asked these same questions. Like scientists who unlocked the secrets of the universe (some as teenagers!). Former slaves who freed hundreds of people, leading national movements to end open slavery. Doctors and nurses who founded world-renowned hospitals to care for the poor and sick. Jesus-followers who left their home country to import literacy and free public education to America so that everyone could read and study the Bible.

These world changers personally discovered the answers to these questions through Jesus as God. Millions more today, from all walks of life, continue to find answers through Jesus and his teachings.

Jesus started a global movement for good. However, cultural blinders and biases often prevent us from receiving the whole truth of the Christian record. Instead we're only exposed to the negative moments in Christian history. As a result, many remain unsure whether Jesus's way of life leads to freedom, peace, and significance for themselves and our world.

The Jesus story is either one of the greatest scams ever perpetrated or among the greatest news ever told. Let's be curious together about the truth.

For Further Discussion

Have you ever been one of the types of skeptics mentioned on page 17 (don't believe in God; raised as a Christian but no longer believe; like Jesus but not the church; tired of Christianity being defined by bigots and political parties)? Why or why not?

Week 1: Keystone Species

California sea otters are a “keystone species” because ocean life thrives when sea otters exist in an ecosystem. Conversely, life deteriorates for all species without sea otters. Massive areas of the ocean become lifeless and stagnant.

Like sea otters sustaining an ecosystem by their mere presence, sincere Christ-followers create a pattern of social improvement wherever they saturate cultures. We become a “keystone species” for humanity when we model Jesus’s life and obey His teachings.

The pioneers we’ll examine in this study did just that. These activists launched the Scientific Revolution, formed our modern education system, founded modern hospitals and medicine, authored civil rights, and abolished slavery because Jesus was the foundation of their lives. Often at considerable personal sacrifice, they carried forth His vision of speaking truth with grace, loving others, freeing captives, and caring for the outcasts in society.

In Psalm 118:22, the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ, was described in this way: *“The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.”* Jesus Himself confirms to the religious authorities that He had fulfilled this prophecy. *(See Matthew 21:42, Mark 12:10, and Luke 20:17.)*

In the ancient world, the cornerstone was the most important, carefully-crafted stone in a building. It formed the foundation upon which the building was constructed. Once in place, the cornerstone set the level, angles, and size of the rest of the building. If the cornerstone was not level, the walls would lean, and if it was removed entirely, the building would collapse.

In the same way, Jesus is the foundation of the Church and our own lives as His followers. When we surrender our lives to Him, He empowers us to obediently live out His teachings so that we can influence our friends, families, and neighbors with His light, life, and freedom. Jesus is the Pioneer and Perfecter of our faith (*Hebrews 12:2 (NIV)*). He will transform us into a “keystone species” for the good of others when we keep our eyes fixed on Him.

For Further Discussion

- (1) What are some specific ways that Christians today are a “keystone species” in influencing or changing culture, worldview, nations, and humanity generally?
- (2) In what ways is our world “lifeless and stagnant” without Jesus?
- (3) *Read Matthew 5:13-16.* How does the “keystone species” concept relate to Jesus’s commandment to be “salt and light” in our world? What result does Jesus give in verse 16 when people witness our good works?
- (4) Just like fish don’t know what “water” is because water is all the fish have ever known, we are influenced by Christian assumptions and values more than we realize (page 40). Besides those listed in this chapter, what are some additional Christian assumptions or values that influence us? How have these truths shaped your personal faith journey?
- (5) Hebrews 12:2 says that Jesus is “the champion who initiates and perfects our faith.” As you fix your eyes on Jesus, what would it look like to be a champion of your faith in your workplace, family, neighborhood, and community?

Be a Fruit Bearer!

Much like an ocean's ecosystem, we navigate daily life within interconnected circles of family, marriage, work, free time, etc. Examine whether you are putting Jesus first in each of these circles. For example, is Jesus the cornerstone of your marriage, work, and free time? Or are you elevating other people or things above Jesus (like career, finances, security, comfort, children, etc.). Write a brief prayer thanking Jesus for taking first place in your heart and asking Him to show you any areas that you may need to surrender more fully to Him. Write down some steps that you can start taking today to make Him first in those areas of your life.

Week 2: Discovering Jesus in Science

The technologies, conveniences, and life-saving tools that we enjoy today didn't just happen by accident. They resulted from a season of scientific breakthrough known as the Scientific Revolution. During the Scientific Revolution (16th and 17th centuries), specific scientists unlocked the mysteries of the universe in a way never before achieved.

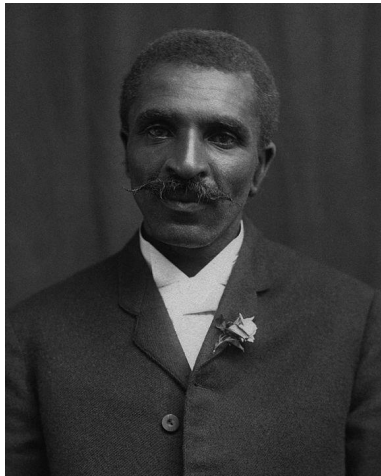
Three of these scientific founders were Isaac Newton, Johannes Kepler, and Blaise Pascal. Although their scientific fields differed, they all had one thing in common: they were devout followers of Jesus and His teachings. These great scientists weren't incidentally or accidentally Christians. Rather, they viewed the entire universe through the lens of Jesus as God. They believed that God created a predictable and orderly universe through natural laws that could be observed, measured, and even manipulated for our benefit. They studied creation as a way to study God, who they worshipped as a real being.

Newton was so captivated by his relationship with God that he wrote more about God than science! Kepler discovered an imprint of the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) in the solar system. Pascal's devotion to Jesus compelled him to write a poem about his faith that he copied multiple times so that he would always have it with him. One line from that poem says, "This is eternal life, that they know you, the one true God, and the one that you sent, Jesus Christ." (John 17:3) When Pascal died, a copy of that poem was found inside his coat pocket.

Christians and non-Christians agree that these intellectual giants are among the greatest scientists of all time. Newton discovered the laws of motion and gravity. Kepler discovered the three laws of planetary motion and invented eyeglasses. Pascal was a brilliant mathematician, creating a new theory of geometry at age 16.

According to their own writings, their belief in Jesus as God helped them map out the universe and unlock scientific secrets previously hidden. And they weren't alone. In fact, more than 90 percent of the founders of the Scientific Revolution were committed Christians (as documented by a secular PhD sociologist).

If we remove Christian influence from world history, then we lose the Scientific Revolution. It's clear from the evidence that sincere followers of Jesus played an irrefutable and inextricable role in changing science as we know it, in turn unleashing the technology of our modern world.



George Washington Carver invented more than 300 products from peanuts, including milk, plastics, and ink. (Contrary to popular myth, Carver did not invent peanut butter!) He also taught new farming techniques to generations of African-American scientists. Carver was a devout follower of Jesus from childhood. Writing about God as the “Great Creator,” he viewed God and science as impossible to separate. In a letter to a friend, Carver wrote, “I love to think of Nature as unlimited broadcasting stations, through which God speaks to us every day, every hour, and every moment of our lives, if we will only tune in and remain so.”

For Further Discussion

- (1) Have you ever been told that science and Christianity aren't compatible? How did you respond to these arguments? Have you ever personally thought that you can't have faith and believe in science also? Explain why you thought this way and what changed your mind.

(2) After reading Chapter 4, what would you say to someone who asserts that faith in Christ is uninformed, anti-intellectual, or stupid?

(3) *Read John 14:6 and 8:12.* Jesus taught that He is the way, the truth, and the life. He also proclaimed that He is the light of the world. How might these statements relate to an intense period of discovery like the Scientific Revolution?

(4) The Bible contains numerous passages about God as the Author of creation and the world He created. (*Here are some you can read for yourself: Genesis 1 and 2; Job 12:7-10; Psalm 8:3-8; Psalm 19:1; Psalm 96:11-12; Psalm 95:4-5; Psalm 104:24; Isaiah 42:5; Isaiah 43:20; Nehemiah 9:6; Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 11:3; and Revelation 4:11.*) The world-renowned scientists discussed in this chapter believed that they could know God better by studying His creation. Similarly, Dr. Francis Collins, who read our DNA through the Human Genome Project, said, “By investigating God’s majestic and awesome creation, science can actually be a means of worship.”

In His Word, God talks about this divine revelation through creation. Romans 1:20 says, “For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God.”

Describe a time when God revealed Himself to you through His creation. What new attribute or quality of God did He teach you through that experience?

(5) How do the examples of faith cited in this chapter inspire you personally? What's one take-away that you will remember about these pioneers and their devotion to Jesus and His teachings?

Be a Fruit Bearer!

Many of the scientists we studied in this chapter “wrote about Jesus with a passion that today is reserved for musicians writing love songs” (page 48). Write a love letter to the Creator of the universe. Incorporate specific Bible verses (from the list above or others you find) to express your adoration and worship to Him. Ask God to reveal Himself to you in a new way this week and share your insight with a friend who may be a skeptic.

Week 3: Seeds & Trees

Most modern-day innovations and movements started as seeds of an idea. Someone planted those seeds and nurtured them to take root so that the idea could eventually grow into countless positive benefits for our society. Our modern hospitals and university system are just two examples. Like the citrus trees in John's backyard, we enjoy the fruits of others who long ago planted and cultivated the entire orchard of our society and culture.

Jesus started this germination process. John 1:1-4 puts it this way: "In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him. The Word gave life to everything that was created...."

Long before we started measuring years, centuries, and eras, God planted Jesus, the Word, in the world. God planned for Jesus to be the seed of salvation and redemption for all of creation. (*For example, read Isaiah 62:11.*) Through Jesus, life flourishes.

Before Jesus's influence, seeds of life-giving change lay dormant. Slavery and human sacrifice were global norms. Preventable diseases killed millions of people. A lack of proper medical care drastically lowered life expectancy. Women were treated like property. People could not read or write, limiting their ability to obtain knowledge. Food was scarce. War was prevalent, and government leaders killed their own people on a whim.

Where Jesus-followers put His words into work, seedlings of truth, freedom, and compassion broke through the topsoil of ignorance, captivity, infirmity, and poverty. We became the beneficiaries.

For Further Discussion

(1) Much of what we assume is “normal” in our everyday lives, like mobile phones, toilets, electricity, medicine, education, freedom, individual rights, and leisure time, has only ever applied to 1-2 percent of people who have ever lived. What modern-day necessity, ideal, or convenience would be difficult for you to give up and why? Have you ever experienced a situation where these things were absent or lacking (for example, visiting a developing country)? What was that experience like for you? If you haven’t experienced this, what do you think it would be like (for example, going on a mission trip and visiting a slum in India)? Describe the things you think you would see, hear, smell, and feel.

(2) Planting seeds of change and nurturing their growth requires sacrifice. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a “social sacrifice” as “an act of giving up something valued for the sake of something else regarded as more important or worthy.” The Jesus followers who we are studying in this book gave their lives and careers to freeing captives, educating children, advancing healthcare, discovering God in the universe, and much more as they emulated the One who sacrificed His life for us. Have you ever made a social sacrifice for Jesus in your personal or professional life? If so, explain and share what it meant to you. If not, what is holding you back from making this type of sacrifice?

(3) John 1 tells us that Jesus is the Life Source *and* the Light Source for everything in existence. John 1:4-5 says that Jesus’s life “brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.” What’s one area of “darkness” in our world where you want Jesus to shine His light and bring new life?

(4) What seed of good has Jesus entrusted you to plant through your everyday life, personally or in the world (for example, training up your children in the Lord (*Proverbs 22:6*), mentoring your spouse or a friend, financially supporting a missionary, etc.)?

Be a Fruit Bearer!

Read John 15:1-17. Reflect on the Source of all fruit and what it means for you to be pruned by and bear fruit for Jesus.

Week 4: Universities

Almost 2,000 years ago, Jesus claimed that His truth would set people free. (*John 8:32*) This claim birthed our modern university system after sincere Jesus-followers created monastic schools, then cathedral schools, and then the first universities so that they could train others in this truth and freedom.

These first universities (called “universita”) were a dramatic fork in the road for humanity. Unlike most ancient learning centers, where rote memorization and conformity were expected, the Christian-founded universita encouraged independent thinking. Early universities taught that everything in the universe could be explored, tested, and dissected because God is good, predictable, truthful, and orderly. This freedom of thought mirrored a central belief of Christianity that God allows us to either choose His way, which leads to truth and freedom, or reject His way, which leads to death.

This ability to question everything launched major movements to better humanity, like the Scientific Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, modern healthcare, ending slavery, inventing the first vaccine, identifying and harnessing electricity, and beginning the fight for women’s rights. Universitas like Oxford and its educational offspring trained the people who would write laws for Western democracy, universal education, and literacy. These universities ushered in our modern era of technology, human rights, worldview, and social change.

It’s nearly impossible to measure the impact that universities have had on the world. Remarkably, God’s Word was the seed that started it all! Consistent with John 8:32, Christian pioneers founded the first universities to teach the Bible (the “truth”) and train ministers. Eight out of the top 10 universities in the world were started for this

purpose. For example, teaching God's Word was the express purpose of universities like Oxford, Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Columbia.

Although these historical facts may not be widely known today, the record remains clear. Christians started the first universities as a way to know God's truth and teach it to the next generation. Pursuing this truth indeed led to freedom, not just spiritually, but also intellectually. Consequently, this freedom altered our world for good as brave new ideas shaped society for centuries to come.



Harvard University's original crest includes Latin words that mean "Truth for Christ and the Church." The crest shows the Latin word for truth, "Veritas," spread across three Bibles. These Bibles represent God the Father, God the Son (Jesus), and God the Holy Spirit. The Latin words "Christo Et Ecclesiae" ("For Christ and the Church") unravel in a scroll surrounding this crest.

For Further Discussion

- (1) What evidence from this chapter about the roots of our modern university system most surprised you? Why?
- (2) On average 59% of people in America today have completed some level of college or university education.¹ As we learned in this chapter, we can thank Christian pioneers who wanted to spread the knowledge of Jesus for giving us access to higher education. If you have ever attended college, university, or other advanced education, in what ways did that experience shape who you are today?

¹ "Educational Attainment in the United States," 2015 U.S. Census.

(3) Oxford University's motto is "The Lord is my light." This is a quote from Psalm 27:1, which says, "The Lord is my light and salvation." Scholars and historians today still refer to education as the "light of learning," a nod to Jesus's claim that "whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (*John 8:12 (ESV)*) Describe a time in your own life when Jesus enlightened you spiritually or intellectually to understand His truth.

(4) Jesus's claim that His truth leads to freedom seems countercultural in an age when many people reject absolute truth and Christianity as being too constraining or restrictive. What would you share with someone to explain how Jesus's truth sets us free? How has your life been affected by this teaching? What would it look like for Jesus's truth to set you free today?

Be a Fruit Bearer!

Connect with your church's young adult ministry to discover ways you can disciple or mentor college-aged students within your church family. If you already know a student within your sphere of influence, invite him or her to lunch or coffee to offer encouragement (and perhaps share the Jesus Skeptic book!). Or contact a local college or university to host an international student for a weeknight meal with your family. Many schools offer specific programs to support international students as they navigate living in a new country and culture.

Week 5: Hospitals & Modern Medicine

Imagine a world where there are no hospitals; where you can't afford to see a doctor when you're sick; where unwanted babies are thrown into the river to drown; and where no charitable organizations exist to care for under-served populations.

This is an accurate picture of the ancient world. Modern charity did not exist, only the wealthy could be treated by a doctor, and the upper classes of society generally had no desire to care for the poor, sick, unwanted, and outcasts.

When Jesus came on the scene, He modeled and taught a much different way of life. He interacted with and healed people from many different socio-economic classes. At Jesus's healing touch, "the blind see, the lame walk, those with leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is being preached to the poor." (*Matthew 11:5*)

Jesus recognized and dignified "the least of these." Jesus taught His followers that caring for the weak, poor, sick, and hurting was actually equal to loving and serving God and, consequently, inheriting His Kingdom. (Conversely, He characterized refusing to help them as refusing to help Jesus and facing eternal separation from Him.) (*See Matthew 25:31-46.*)

In defining His own mission, Jesus said that He came to serve, not to be served. (*Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45*) He taught His disciples that serving others is the pathway to a greater life, that those who want to be first must become a servant like Himself. (*Matthew 20:25-27; Mark 10:42-44*)

Jesus cast a revolutionary vision, and His Church began to live it out. In ancient times and for hundreds of years after, Christ-followers sacrificed their lives to care for the poor and sick. They adopted unwanted children and set up houses to care for widows and orphans. Instead of running away from fires and natural disasters, Christians ran into areas of distress to care for the injured and sick. A new social pact was created as more and more people followed the example of Christians to care for the poor and sick.

Modern medicine sprouted up from these seeds of compassion. Christian women like Florence Nightingale transformed nursing into a skilled profession of compassionate, committed patient care. The Scientific Revolution (also launched by Christians) and people trained in Christian-founded universities moved healthcare from houses of compassion and charity to world-class institutions of scientific learning and advancement. Christians began building hospitals where the poor could receive medical care on an even larger scale. Christian pastors cast the vision for these hospitals, Christian donors built them, and Christian universities provided the first doctors to staff them.

The top three hospitals in the world were founded by Christians. These seed hospitals carried innovation in healthcare around the globe. Moreover, all of the top 20 hospitals today have Christian roots.

Christ-followers took the lead in implementing and multiplying Jesus's vision to meet the needs of the "least of these." His example of a compassionate servant transformed our modern healthcare system and charities worldwide.



In the late 19th century, Johns Hopkins, an entrepreneur and philanthropist, founded Johns Hopkins Hospital and University. Johns Hopkins Hospital has ranked #1 in the world for the past 20 years. Hopkins was a devout Quaker who bequeathed millions of dollars to carry out his vision for the first-ever research hospital that would work with a university to do research in science and medicine, even as it cared for the hurting and sick. Hopkins was more concerned about promoting the next generation than his own legacy. Hopkins once said, “[L]ike the man in the parable [from the Bible], I have had many talents given to me and I feel they are in trust. I shall not bury them but give them to the lads who long for a wider education.”

For Further Discussion

(1) *Read John 10:10.* Jesus promised to give His followers “a rich and satisfying life.” As we’ve studied in this chapter (and throughout this book), God continues to connect the dots to bring life to people (from education to charity to nursing and houses of care to scientific advances to hospitals to modern healthcare, which has doubled our life expectancy).

Describe a time when God moved through people and situations around you to bring about a life-giving result.

(2) *Read Luke 4:18-19.* Jesus’s self-proclaimed mission statement includes bringing Good News to the poor and giving sight to the blind. In what ways are the spiritual and the physical intertwined in this mission? How did Jesus live out this mission to minister to the whole person?

(3) Give three examples of who the “least of these” are in our modern world. What are some practical ways you can care for them like Jesus?

(4) *Read John 13:14.* Jesus washed His disciples’ feet to demonstrate how to serve others. Have you ever participated in a foot-washing service (for example, during Easter week at your church)? Describe your experience and how you felt both giving and receiving in that situation.

(5) Is it easy or difficult for you to serve others and why? Describe a time when someone else served you. What did you learn from that experience?

(6) How do the examples of faith cited in this chapter inspire you personally? What’s one take-away that you will remember about these pioneers in medicine and their devotion to Jesus and his teachings?

Be a Fruit Bearer!

List some ways that you can serve someone in need in your community, and invite a few friends to serve with you (like your small group at church). For example, you could serve a meal at a local homeless shelter, volunteer at a children’s hospital, or visit residents at a skilled nursing facility.

Week 6: Ending Slavery

On an ordinary day in the synagogue, Jesus stood up, unrolled a scroll, and read these words to the congregation: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the Lord’s favor has come.” With all eyes fixed on Him, Jesus then rolled up the scroll, sat down, and proclaimed, “The Scripture you’ve just heard has been fulfilled this very day!” (*Luke 4:16-21*)

Jesus’s words must have been like a spark igniting a fuse. In quoting from ancient prophecy, Jesus was declaring Himself Messiah, God’s servant who will bring justice to the nations. (*See Isaiah 42:1, 58:6*) Jesus also declared that He would release the captives and free the oppressed. At a time when 40% of the world’s population was physically enslaved (and slavery had been the global norm for centuries), Jesus’s listeners undoubtedly found this claim to be laughably impossible.

With this seed of liberty, Jesus started a cultural revolution that His followers carried out, spreading freedom to all corners of the globe as they modeled His example. Freedom fighters in Britain and America rallied for the end of slavery at the cost of their own lives. Christian pastors, politicians, newspaper editors, authors, and former slaves partnered to convince people that slavery is evil and a sin against God, relying on the authority of God’s Word. Christians like Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, William Wilberforce, and Thomas Clarkson passionately and consistently shared the message that a true follower of Christ cannot be a slaveowner and that anyone who sits by while others are enslaved are not following Jesus’s commands.

Given the horrific track record of global slavery in nearly every century, the permanent and definitive overthrow of slavery in America was not inevitable. This unique shift of conscience primarily happened because Christians chose to give their lives for the law of love that Jesus taught as our highest calling: to love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. (*Matthew 22:37; Mark 12:30; and Luke 10:27*)

Christians also catalyzed the movement for racial equality once legal and open slavery was abolished. Civil rights leaders like Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. changed national laws and public opinion to reflect dignity and equality for all, based on Jesus's teachings about freedom, life, and love.

Christians around the world today continue to lead the charge for freedom wherever people remain physically or spiritually enslaved. Jesus's claim to release the captives and free the oppressed rings true every day as we serve Jesus by serving others. We too can mobilize behind a Leader and Lord who willingly laid down His life to free us from all forms of bondage so that we may teach others this same freedom, for this life and the one to come.



American author Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” a fiction novel that realistically portrayed the horrors of slave life in the American South. With its initial publication in 1852, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” sold 300,000 copies in less than a year, an astounding amount for that time period. It became the best-seller of the century, second only to the Bible. The book radically changed public opinion about slavery and fueled the movement to end it.

A devout Jesus-follower, Stowe said that she was inspired to write “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” because of a vision she had in church. She envisioned a slave being beaten to death, which she equated with Jesus’s sacrifice on the cross in suffering with dignity and asking forgiveness for his tormentors. This scene of a dying slave revealing Christ became central to her novel. When slavery was abolished in America, Stowe wrote in a letter to a friend, “If my faith in God’s presence and real, living power ever grows dim, this [the end of slavery] makes it impossible to doubt.”

For Further Discussion

(1) In this chapter we learned that for thousands of years among many civilizations around the world, slavery was the horrific norm, not the exception. At any given time in history, 10% to 70% of the population of most societies was enslaved.

Was the scope of slavery around the world surprising to you? How does this historical context about physical slavery affect the way you view Jesus's mission statement about releasing captives and freeing the oppressed?

(2) This chapter notes that nearly all of the influential abolitionists who tirelessly fought to end slavery in America were sincere Jesus-followers. Yet there were also slaveowners who claimed to be Christians. Even in Jesus's day, bondservants were common. The term "bondservant" in the ancient world referred to all types of laborers, but most typically, a bondservant was a slave, a person who belonged to another without being free to leave his employment. The New Testament notes that Jews owned bondservants.

Rather than ignoring this cultural reality, the Apostle Paul confronts it head-on in his letters to the early churches. When read collectively, Paul's letters do not condone slavery (as some American slaveowners claimed). Instead, Paul prescribes a new way of interacting with one another based on freedom in Christ. A note-worthy example is found in Philemon 1:8-22, where Paul wrote a letter to a slaveowner, Philemon, about his former slave, Onesimus, who was imprisoned with Paul. In the letter, Paul wrote this to Philemon about Onesimus: "He is no longer like a slave to you. He is more than a slave, for he is a beloved brother, especially to me. Now he will mean much more to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord."

(Philemon 1:16)

In other letters, Paul instructs the early believers about identity and freedom in Christ. Read the following scriptures and summarize the key concepts that Paul teaches about slaves, masters, and belonging to Christ: 1 Corinthians 7:22-23; 1 Corinthians 12:12-13; Galatians 3:28; Galatians 4:3-7; Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:10-11; Colossians 3: 22-24; Colossians 4:1.

(3) Like open and legal slavery, which existed for thousands of years without being successfully challenged, what's one continuing issue of injustice today that God has addressed through His Word? How do you see Christians changing society on this issue to better reflect God's heart?

(4) Early church leaders like Paul, Peter, and James used the term "bondservant" (slave) to describe their commitment to Christ as Master of their lives. (*For example, read Romans 1:1, Galatians 1:10, Titus 1:1, James 1:1, and 2 Peter 1:1*) These faithful servants believed and taught that the gospel is a proclamation of liberty. When we entrust our lives to Jesus, to be ruled by Him alone, He frees us from spiritual bondage.

Jesus said that "everyone who sins is a slave of sin," but He also promised that "if the Son sets you free, you are truly free." (*John 8:34-36*) God's Word teaches that we can choose to walk in this freedom or remain enslaved by disobedience and sin. As Paul puts it, we become a slave to whatever we choose to obey, so we can be a slave to sin, which leads to death, or to God, which leads to right living. (*Romans 6:16-18*) Paul warns against becoming a slave to anything, even things we think are good for us. (*1 Corinthians 6:12*)

Give a few examples of things that can enslave us spiritually (whether viewed as “good” or “bad”). As believers, what are some ways that we can instead choose to walk in freedom in these areas (being ruled by Jesus alone)?

(5) “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.” (*Galatians 5:1 (NIV)*) Anti-trafficking advocates like Stephanie Garman Freed of Rapha House (who we read about on pages 157-160 of this chapter) channel their spiritual freedom into fighting for the holistic freedom of others. Like Stephanie said, “We were slaves in a junkyard, and Christ walks us into freedom, to live out his destiny and his calling.”

What does it mean for you to be free in Christ? How is God calling you to use your freedom to help or free others?

(6) How do the examples of faith cited in this chapter inspire you personally? What’s one take-away that you will remember about these activists who ended slavery and promoted civil rights because of their devotion to Jesus and His teachings?

Be a Fruit Bearer!

Read Isaiah 58:1-12 out loud (perhaps more than once!). Silently meditate on ways that you could be holding someone else in spiritual or emotional bondage (for example, through unforgiveness, judgment, gossip, unrealistic expectations, etc.). Ask God how He can help you “release the captive” and “remove the chains” from that person. Reflect on what it means for your own personal healing based on the promises of Isaiah 58:8-12.

Week 7: Literacy & Education

What would your life be like if you couldn't read? Would you work at the same job? Would you enjoy the same lifestyle? Would you be married to the same person? Would your children be able to read? Would you have the same friends? Could you meaningfully engage with your community? How would you perceive the world around you?

Literacy (the ability to read and write) affects many spheres of our lives-- economically, socially, physically, and emotionally. We likely take for granted the fact that we can read the words on this page. Yet for most of history, only 1 out of 10 people could read. As recently as 100 years ago, only 1 out of 5 people around the world knew how to read.

Because early American Christians valued literacy and education, we can now understand, interpret, create, and communicate visually, audibly, and digitally as we interact with our world. Literacy was driven by Jesus-followers who wanted their children and future generations to read the Bible for themselves. They desired for everyone to freely practice their faith in Jesus by personally understanding and interpreting the Word, without relying on anyone else.

In the 1600s, these Christians (called Puritans) enacted a world-changing law requiring towns to provide free education to all children. This law became a historic cornerstone of public education and literacy. At the time, universal education (provided to both boys and girls) was revolutionary. Christianity broke down barriers of gender and social class so that all people could learn to read.

From these roots of universal education, a global movement grew. Social progress and cultural shifts began happening worldwide as literate generations led breakthroughs in science, medicine, human rights, innovation, and technology. Global literacy rates spiked in Christian-saturated regions shortly after these schools were started. Christian missionaries then carried education and literacy with them to more remote parts of the world.

In His final instructions to His disciples, Jesus commanded them, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.” (*Matthew 28:19 (KJV)*) With teaching the Bible as their driving motivation, early believers created the world’s first literate society, fulfilling Jesus’s exhortation to teach the world the truth of the gospel.



The New England Primer, developed by early American Christians, was the on-ramp to literacy for an entire nation. This first reader used the Bible to teach the alphabet.

For Further Discussion

- (1) Imagine yourself living in a country like China or Egypt, where the written alphabet looks differently than ours. What complications or limitations would you experience in navigating daily life there? How would you feel?
- (2) What teacher in your life left the greatest impression on you and why? (Think school, work, church or small group, etc.)

(3) We can look to Jesus as our role model for teaching others. Jesus was such a gifted teacher that wherever He went, great crowds gathered to hear Him speak, sometimes thousands of people. (*Matthew 14:13-21 and 15:30-38.*) Peter, one of Jesus's closest disciples, once said to Him, "You have the words that give eternal life." (*John 6:68*)

Jesus used many different methods of teaching during His ministry. These effective styles of teaching are what we still use today in our classrooms. Four primary methods that Jesus used were²:

- (a) Demonstration: Jesus taught by example, showing His disciples how to live and serve like Him. (*Matthew 18:1-5; John 13:5-17*)
- (b) Lectures: Jesus taught by His authority of Scripture and also through story-telling. (*Luke 20:6-38; Matthew 13:18-23*)
- (c) Questions: Jesus challenged His disciples by asking questions. (*Matthew 16:15-20; Luke 10:36-37*)
- (d) Delegation: Jesus sent his disciples out to minister to others. (*Mark 6:6-13; Matthew 28:16-20*)

Which of these teaching methods would you be most comfortable using to teach others, and why? How might you incorporate this teaching style into sharing your faith and God's truth with others?

² For additional reading on how to evangelize and disciple like Jesus, see "The Master Plan of Evangelism," by Dr. Robert E. Coleman (Baker Publishing 1993).

Be a Fruit Bearer!

Research volunteer opportunities through your church, workplace, local school district, local library, local youth organizations, or community-based organizations to tutor a student in reading.

Additionally, some national organizations rely on community volunteers to help with their reading programs. Two examples are the Boys and Girls Club's "Summer Brain Game: Read!"

(www.bgca.org/programs/education/summer-brain-gain), a summer reading program for youth, and AARP's Experience Corps (www.aarp.org/experience-corps), which pairs adults aged 50+ with students from high-need elementary schools who are struggling to read.

Week 8: Did Jesus Actually Exist?

The evidence for Jesus as a real person is clear and compelling. In fact, far more evidence proves that Jesus existed than most figures from the ancient world.

Outside of the Bible, more than a dozen non-Christian writers from Jesus's era describe a man called "Jesus the Christ" and his movement. Although their accounts are diverse, they all agree on facts central to Jesus's life, death, claims, and movement. These witnesses documented the century in which Jesus lived; who his peers were; that He was an esteemed teacher; that He had a reputation for displaying godlike abilities or miracles; that His followers revered Him as God; that He was crucified by Pontius Pilate near Jerusalem; that His followers claimed He rose from the dead; that the disappearance of His body after a public execution caused an uproar in the ancient world; and that His followers then began spreading His teachings, multiplying the movement. These ancient accounts align precisely with the Gospel accounts of Jesus's life and death.

One leading ancient writer named Josephus wrote: "At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus. His conduct was good and [he] was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. But those who had become his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion, and that he was alive; accordingly he was perhaps the Messiah, concerning who the prophets have recounted wonders."

Likewise, Tacitus, a Roman historian, wrote about Jesus and His followers: “Nero fastened guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus [an ancient way of saying Christ], from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty [crucifixion] during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate, and a most mischievous superstition [referring to the belief that Jesus was God], thus checked for a moment [with Jesus death], again broke out not only in Judea...but even in Rome.”

Other ancient writers, like Pliny the Younger, a Roman administrator, documented the customs of Jesus’s followers, stating, “They [the Christians] were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food—but food of an ordinary and innocent kind.”

In more recent history, dozens of non-Christian historians have devoted their lives to the study of Jesus. These scholars have written thousands of pages on the historical existence of Jesus of Nazareth.

Although it requires faith to believe in Jesus as God, it doesn’t require faith to believe that Jesus actually existed. Facts about the historical Jesus make up our world history, regardless of personal belief.

We can say with certainty that the widespread global impact of Christianity ties back to the real person of Jesus. Jesus spoke truth and lived in such a way that He motivated real people, like us, toward deep belief and radical action. He ignited a lasting movement for good that has expanded and multiplied for 2,000 years.



Clement, a bishop and martyr for his faith, greatly influenced the early church. Ancient historians record that Clement knew Jesus's original 12 disciples and that Clement himself was discipled by Peter and Paul. Clement's letter to the Corinthian church is one of the earliest documents about Christianity outside of the New Testament. In writing about Jesus's followers, Clement said, "Having been fully assured through the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and confirmed in the word of God . . . they [the first Christians] went forth with the glad tidings that the kingdom of God should come."

For Further Discussion

- (1) What evidence of Jesus's existence from this chapter most surprised you? Why?
- (2) The chapter talks about the Apostle Paul, a well-documented Jesus skeptic before his dramatic conversion. Was there a time in your faith journey when you questioned whether Jesus existed? If so, what convinced you that He really lived, died, and rose again?

(3) To convince a group of first-century skeptics, Paul told them, “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.... If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.” (*1 Corinthians 15:17, 19*) Because early Jesus-followers were hated and persecuted for their beliefs, their hope in Jesus would be very sad if His resurrection was untrue. In what ways does the hope of the gospel affect your everyday life?

(4) A common myth in our culture about Christianity is that Jesus was a good teacher, but he never claimed to be God, nor did his early followers think so. Instead, it’s said that “Jesus being God” was made up hundreds of years later by religious authorities so that the church could gain political control. Is it possible to maintain the position that Jesus was a good person but not God? What myths have you read or heard about Jesus or Christianity? What would you say to a friend who believes these myths or doubts that Jesus really existed?

(5) The chapter talks about living in a time “when most people and ideas appear on our screens as videos” (page 200). Because of this, some may believe that things that cannot be seen with our own eyes, like Jesus, might be fake. Jesus Himself even said to His followers during his lifetime, “You believe me because you see me, but blessed are those who will believe without seeing.” (*John 20:29*) Do you typically need to see something with your own eyes to believe it? Why or why not? How does your response affect your faith in Jesus?

Be a Fruit Bearer!

Host a movie night with your friends to watch “The Gospel of John.” This 2003 film recounts the life of Jesus in a word-for-word reading of John’s Gospel from the Bible.

Week 9: Jesus, The Most Influential Person

One-in-three people on the planet (or 2.3 billion people) currently follow Jesus. To put it in modern terms, that's 23 Jesus-followers for every single social media follower of today's most popular celebrities, who top out at around 100 million followers (as noted on page 206). Pretty remarkable numbers for someone who lived 2,000 years ago! Unlike most "famous" people, whose impact dims after mere decades and then extinguishes entirely after a century or two, Jesus's influence only increases as time passes.

In fact, if we apply the same standard to Jesus as we would to every other historical figure, like Socrates, Plato, Mohammed, and Shakespeare, Jesus turns out to be the most influential person of all time. His influence on Western civilization is demonstrated in all of the spheres we've studied in this book and much more. Jesus influenced entire nations to model their systems of government after His teachings. Jesus shaped our global calendar, nationally-recognized holidays, and standardized work weeks. Countless babies, cities, hospitals, and churches around the globe are named after Jesus or His followers.

Respected historians and scholars, many of whom are not Christians, acknowledge the one-of-a-kind mark that Jesus left on human history. One example is Dr. Jaroslav Pelikan, a historian from Yale who authored more than 30 books and became a believer in Jesus based on the evidence and artifacts. Dr. Pelikan stated, "If it were possible with some sort of super magnet to pull up out of the history every scrap of metal bearing at least a trace of his [Jesus's] name, how much would be left?" (page 231)

To truly know Jesus the Messiah, our quest to discover His influence must go beyond an intellectual knowledge. At one point in his personal journey, Oxford scholar C.S. Lewis weighed whether Jesus was a liar, lunatic, or actually the Lord of the universe. Like Lewis and other great minds throughout history, we must each decide for ourselves what we will make of Jesus.

For Further Discussion

- (1) Have you ever thought about Jesus's influence on humanity apart from his spiritual claims? After reading this book, how would you summarize to a friend Jesus's influence as a real person in history?
- (2) What evidence of Jesus's influence from this chapter most surprised you? Why?
- (3) If Jesus had an Instagram account, what do you think He would post and why?
- (4) Does the assertion that Jesus is the most influential person in all of human existence shape or change the way that you study and understand Scripture? If so, in what ways?
- (5) *Read Matthew 16:13-17.* Why do you think Jesus asked His disciples, "Who do you say I am?" when they'd already been following him, witnessing His miracles, and hearing His teachings? How would you respond to Jesus if He asked you this question today?

Be a Fruit Bearer!

Think about a person who left a “spiritual mark” on your life by how he or she lived out faith in Jesus and what he or she taught you about Jesus. Write a letter or email to that person (either in your journal or to send) expressing your gratitude for how he or she influenced you for Christ.

Week 10: What Does Jesus's Influence Mean for Me?

From Grammy-winning rock stars and brilliant scientists with once-in-a-history intellects, to you and me. As followers of Jesus, we join a “parade of changed lives.” Every year millions of people experience radical life transformation-- transfusions of peace, hope, joy, grace, and so much more-- that they credit to the supernatural power of Jesus. This parade of changed lives continues marching along and increasing in number through every century, in every significant culture, and on every populated continent.

Jesus knew we would need rest from a world that tempts us toward busyness and the endless pursuit of temporary things. His offer to us is this: “Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (*Matthew 11:28-29*)

Jesus taught that our souls are worn out from being separated from our Life Source and Creator. Like backpacks full of rocks, we carry burdens of shame, guilt, pain, regret, and distorted identities, broken fragments of our past. Through faith as tiny as a single mustard seed (less than a speck of salt!), we can lay down these burdens and connect with our Father through Jesus, the object of our faith. He alone will meet our greatest needs.

We can only measure Jesus's claim of rest for our souls by taking Him up on the offer. If we “come to Him” with our burdens and needs, then we can experience for ourselves whether these radical transformations are mere fiction or whether they are something more.

For Further Discussion

- (1) What would it look like for you to accept Jesus's offer of rest and peace today? What burdens do you need to lay at Jesus's feet so that He can give you rest?
- (2) Describe a time in your life when you could have prayed: "I believe; help my unbelief!" (*Mark 9:24*) How did Jesus help your unbelief in that circumstance? Are you comfortable acknowledging any areas of unbelief in your life? Why or why not?
- (3) If we're honest with ourselves, we all have faith in something. Maybe it's our own ability to meet our needs. Or maybe we believe in someone we trust. While healthy self-confidence and trusting others are both good things, Jesus teaches that our greatest needs can only be met by Him as God. Describe a time when you placed your faith in something other than Jesus. Then describe a time when your faith in Jesus carried you through, despite your circumstances.
- (4) Review the list of "needs" on page 251 that God meets for us. Which one or two are the most meaningful to you? Have you personally experienced God meeting those needs in your life? What was your experience like? Are there needs on this list that you still need God to meet?
- (5) Chapter 16 talks about another prediction of Jesus that came true: that He would become known "to the ends of the earth." (*Acts 1:8*) Modern research, world maps, and the presence of Christian influence in every major country demonstrate that Christianity has spread around the entire globe.

Just as Jesus predicted, His message started in Jerusalem, then spread to the actual regions of Judea and Samaria, and then “to the ends of the earth” as Jesus followers took His name to numerous countries in the last 2,000 years.

We get to be part of this movement by making Jesus’s name famous wherever we go. Your personal testimony is your story of how God rescued you from sin and death through Jesus, changing your life.

If your testimony was written on a billboard, what tagline (a word or short phrase) would describe your life before Christ? After Christ? (For example, Before Christ: Unworthy of Love; After Christ: Loved Unconditionally By My Father.)

Be a Fruit Bearer!

Write your personal testimony based on the following questions and share it with at least one other person.³ (*Hint: Read Acts 26 for an example from the Apostle Paul about how to share your testimony.*)

- (a) What was your life like before you knew Jesus? Recall deep inner needs that were unmet before you knew Him (for example, lack of peace, fear of death, something missing, lack of purpose, etc.). How did you try to meet those needs without Christ?
- (b) Why did you invite Jesus to be your Savior and Lord of your life? Was there a situation or circumstance that brought this about? If so, briefly describe it.
- (c) How has Jesus made a difference in your life? Focus on changes in your character, attitude, or perspective, not just behavior changes.

³ Adapted from www.cslewisinstitute.org.

We've studied the movement of Jesus and discovered that the evidence is clear. Jesus inspired the greatest movement for social good in history. He illuminates minds and breathes life into novel ideas that better humanity. His movement across humankind continues advancing.

As we've witnessed, some of the greatest intellectuals and activists in history believed that the real person of Jesus descended to earth and left a God-like mark on the human story. They believed that we can live *for* Jesus now and live *with* Him in eternity.

These world changers lived out Jesus's two greatest commandments: "love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength," and "love your neighbor as yourself." (*Matthew 22:37-39; Mark 12:30-31; and Luke 10:27*) Their own writings reflect their holistic devotion to God. This love then compelled them to love their neighbors by improving lives through science, caring for the poor and sick, ending slavery, and other acts of service that changed our world.

If we take Jesus at His word, we can do the same. As we pursue and love God with all that we are, He gives us opportunities to love those around us. Jesus said to His followers, "You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father." (*Matthew 5:14,16*) We can choose to use our resources to share Jesus with others. We can testify to Jesus's joy, peace, fulfillment, purpose, and passion in our own lives so that others are drawn to Him as the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

If you're still questioning what to make of Jesus, that's okay. Skeptics are welcome in Jesus's movement, as the Apostle Paul shows us. Genuine skeptics seek the truth and reject what is false. Jesus will patiently reveal His truth to you if you ask Him. All it takes is a tiny mustard seed of faith.

As Paul said, "If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by openly declaring your faith that you are saved. . . . Anyone who trusts in him will never be disgraced." (*Romans 10:9-11*)

You can meet Jesus right where you are. He's inviting you to trust Him more today, to believe that as God, He can rescue you from brokenness and sin. He can shoulder the weight of your past and instead give you freedom, peace, and unconditional love. If you desire to know more about Jesus, seek out a local Christian church where you can connect with other Jesus followers and learn more about Jesus's teachings. You can also read His own words in the Bible's Gospel of John, available at JesusSkeptic.com/JohnsGospel.