

Are all religions the same?



By Greg Sidders

There is an ancient parable that has been linked with Hinduism and has also been attributed to Buddha, but most recently has been turned into a poem by the 19th-century American writer John Godfrey Saxe. It goes like this:

*It was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind.*

*The First approached the Elephant,
And happening to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side,
At once began to bawl:
"God bless me! but the Elephant
Is very like a wall!"*

*The Second, feeling of the tusk
Cried, "Ho! what have we here,
So very round and smooth and sharp?
To me 'tis mighty clear
This wonder of an Elephant
Is very like a spear!"*

*The Third approached the animal,
And happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands,*

*Thus boldly up he spake:
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant
Is very like a snake!"*

*The Fourth reached out an eager hand,
And felt about the knee:
"What most this wondrous beast is like
Is mighty plain," quoth he;
"'Tis clear enough the Elephant
Is very like a tree!"*

*The Fifth, who chanced to touch the ear,
Said: "E'en the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most;
Deny the fact who can,
This marvel of an Elephant
Is very like a fan!"*

*The Sixth no sooner had begun
About the beast to grope,
Than, seizing on the swinging tail
That fell within his scope.
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant
Is very like a rope!"*

*And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!*

*So oft in theologic wars,
The disputants, I ween,
Rail on in utter ignorance
Of what each other mean,
And prate about an Elephant
Not one of them has seen.*

That poem expresses one very widely-held answer to the question: *Which religion is the right one?* Essentially, the answer it gives is: All of them—and none of them. Every religion contains *some* truth; but no one religion contains *all* truth. When it comes to understanding God, we're all just like blind people groping in the dark.

And if that premise is true—that we're all spiritually blind, that no one on this side of death really knows anything for sure about God—then it would be foolish of us to trust any one person's teaching about God, and it would be arrogant of us to try to convince others that our religion is *the* right one.

But what if someone came along who proved not to be spiritually blind? What if God were to send us a messenger to tell us what he is like and how we can have a relationship with him? And what if God put an obvious, unmistakable, irrefutable stamp of approval on that teacher—so that our search for God wouldn't have to be like blind men touching an elephant?

Actually, if there is a God who loves us and who created us to have a relationship with him, does it make sense that he would want us to wander blindly through life never quite knowing who he is or what he is like? I don't think so. I think that God has illuminated our path so brightly, that, if our eyes are open, we can't help but see the truth.

I believe that Jesus Christ is the one person, out of all the religious teachers that have arisen throughout history, that we can fully trust to tell us the truth about God and about what is going to happen to us after we die. But what is my faith in him based upon? Why is he worthy of being followed?

First, because of His unique **character**. I would invite you to compare Jesus to the other great religious leaders of history—Buddha, Mohammad, Confucius—and see whose life you are most drawn to.

Those who knew Jesus best describe him as a man who showed them what God is like. One New Testament writer (Hebrews 1:3, NLT) said: "Everything about him represents God exactly." His leading disciple, Peter, said that Jesus was "without blemish" (1 Peter 1:19). Christ's closest friend, a man by the name of John, said that, although no one has ever seen God, Jesus has made him known (John 1:18). In fact, John said, when Jesus was born, the Word [of God] became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). He said that Jesus was "full of grace and truth."

And that combination of graciousness and integrity was irresistibly attractive, especially to those who were used to getting the cold shoulder from religious people. Jesus was sinless and yet he was a friend of sinners. He loved flawed people, and he told them the truth.

Lee Strobel is a journalist and a former atheist who, after becoming a Christian, wrote a book called *The Case for Faith*. In the introduction to that book he tells about an interview he conducted with an agnostic by the name of Charles Templeton. Templeton was a friend of Billy Graham when they were both young men; in fact, he was considered to be the better preacher of the two. But Templeton was unable to reconcile his faith in a loving God with the pain and suffering he saw in the world, and so he abandoned Christianity. After he explained to Lee Strobel why he was no longer a Christian, Strobel asked him, "How do you assess Jesus?"

Templeton's body language softened. It was as if he suddenly felt relaxed and comfortable in talking about an old and dear friend. His voice, which at times had displayed such a sharp and insistent edge, now took on a melancholy and reflective tone. His guard seemingly down, he spoke in an unhurried pace, almost nostalgically, carefully choosing his words as he talked about Jesus.

"He was," Templeton began, "the greatest human being who has ever lived. He was a moral genius. His ethical sense was unique. He was the intrinsically wisest person that I've ever encountered in my life or in my readings. His commitment was total and led to his own death, much to the detriment of the world. What could one say about him except that this was a form of greatness?"

I was taken aback. "You sound like you really care about him," I said.

"Well, yes, he is the most important thing in my life," came his reply. "I... I... I," he stuttered, searching for the right word, "I know it may sound strange, but I have to say ... I adore him!"

I wasn't sure how to respond. "You say that with some emotion," I said.

"Well, yes. Everything good I know, everything decent I know, everything pure I know, I learned from Jesus. Yes ... yes. And tough! Just look at Jesus. He castigated people. He was angry. People don't think of him that way, but they don't read the Bible. He had a righteous anger. He cared for the oppressed and exploited. There's no question that he had the highest moral standard, the least duplicity, the greatest compassion, of any human being in history. There have been many other wonderful people, but Jesus is Jesus..."

Abruptly, Templeton cut short his thoughts. There was a brief pause, almost as if he was uncertain whether he should continue.

"Uh... but... no," he said slowly, "he's the most..." He stopped, then started again. "In my view," he declared, "he is the most important human being who has ever existed."

That's when Templeton uttered the words I never expected to hear from him. "And if I may put it this way," he said as his voice began to crack, "I ... miss... him!"

With that tears flooded his eyes. He turned his head and looked downward, raising his left hand to shield his face from me. His shoulders bobbed as he wept.

Those who have gotten to know Jesus Christ realize that there is no one else like him.

We have the same opportunity to get to know this Jesus. God made sure of that, by preserving for us four biographies of Christ's life, each one written by a contemporary of Jesus. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John in the New Testament tell us all about this man. Have you ever read those books for yourself? If you really want to know which religion is the right one, I would encourage you to start by studying the life of Jesus. You might just find that that's also where your search ends.

The second reason I believe that Jesus is the One we can trust to tell us the truth about God is because of His **miracles**. When you read the four gospels you will see Jesus doing things that can only be described as miraculous. You will see him cure people of incurable diseases. You will see him multiply food and still storms. You will even see him raise people from the dead.

Read the story of Buddha, and you will see no miracles.

Read the story of Mohammad, and you will see no miracles.

Read the story of Confucius, and you will see no miracles.

Among the great religious leaders, only one—only Jesus—performed miracles. Do you know why? It was to make it obvious to us that He was the Messiah—the One that God chose to lead people to him.

When John the Baptist was in prison and was wondering if Jesus really was the Messiah, he sent some of his followers to ask Jesus: “Are you the Messiah we’ve been expecting, or should we keep looking for someone else?”

And Luke 7:21-22 says that at that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. So he replied to the messengers, “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.” His response to the question of his identity was to point to his miracles.

Later John 10:24-25 tells us that a group of people gathered around Jesus, saying, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.”

Jesus answered, “I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father’s name speak for me....”

And after Jesus returned to heaven, and his disciples were telling others about him, they said: “God publicly endorsed Jesus of Nazareth by doing wonderful miracles, wonders, and signs through him, as you well know” (Acts 2:22, NLT). They said to skeptics, “You saw Jesus perform miracles. And those miracles are God’s stamp of approval on Jesus. That was how He made it clear to us that Jesus was the One we could trust.”

I know many people think miracles are impossible. And they’re right. And that’s why Jesus did them. He did the impossible—he did what no mere human being can do—to make the question of which religious leader we should follow a no-brainer.

The third reason I am compelled to follow Jesus is because of His unique **teaching**. Some of what Jesus taught, many other religious leaders have taught; there is certainly overlap in the moral teachings of different religions. But there are at least two things that Jesus taught that are totally unique.

First, He taught that *He is the only way to God*. Hinduism says that there are many roads that lead to the same mountaintop, but Jesus said: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

Sometimes Christians are criticized for saying that Jesus is the only way, but it is not Christians who make that claim—it’s Christ himself. Jesus said that no one comes to God the Father except through him. His followers have simply repeated that message. Here’s how the apostle Paul said it in 1 Timothy 2:5-6 (NLT): “...There is only one God and one Mediator who can reconcile God and people. He is the man Christ Jesus. He gave his life to purchase freedom for everyone.”

This passage does more than just tell us *that* Jesus is the only way; it tells us *why* he is the only way. The reason why is because he is the only One who has given up his life to make it possible for us to reach God. Buddha said that the way to reach Nirvana is through a rigorous program of self-improvement. He taught people not to rely on him or anyone else but to work out their own salvation. Muhammad taught that our only hope of eternal life is through strict obedience to the five pillars of faith—affirming the creed, praying five times a day, giving to the poor, fasting and making a pilgrimage to Mecca. Judaism teaches that the way to salvation is through God’s law. We can have a relationship with him if we are good people who obey the commandments.

But Jesus said, “No one is good, except God alone.” (Mark 10:18). He explained to us that God is holy, and that we are not. That’s why we are separated from God right now, and it is why we are in danger of being separated from him forever. And there is nothing that we can do to bridge the gap that our sin has created. We can’t go to church often enough, or give God enough of our money, or go through enough religious rituals to pay for our sins. “The wages of sin is death,” the Bible says (Romans 6:23).

But you see, that is why Jesus died. Even though he never sinned, he gave his life to purchase freedom for everyone. When Jesus was nailed to a cross, he paid the death penalty that we deserve. God the Father punished Jesus for everything we have done wrong. “Christ died for sins, once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God,” 1 Peter 3:18 says.

That’s why Jesus is the only way. No one else has paid for our sins. No other religious leader gave up his life to make a way for undeserving people to re-connect with God. Every other religion says, “If you strive hard enough, you might make it to the top of the mountain.” Jesus said, “If you stop striving and believe in Me, I will carry you there. For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish but will have eternal life” (John 3:16).

That is a unique message. Among a host of religions that promote an uphill climb of works, Jesus offers a free pass called grace. That's why I follow Jesus—because I need grace.

And if Christ's teaching—that eternal life is a gift He purchased for us on the cross—sounds too good to be true, He gave us one more irrefutable proof of His trustworthiness: His **resurrection** from the dead.

What else could God do to make it more clear to us which religious leader can lead us to eternal life than by raising that man from the dead?

Buddha died at the age of 80. And he stayed dead.

Confucius died at the age of 71. And he stayed dead.

Muhammad died at the age of 62. And he stayed dead.

Jesus died at the age of 33. And he did not stay dead.

He was executed on a cross on a Friday. He was confirmed to be dead by a spear thrust into his torso, and then his body was wrapped like a mummy in layers of cloth strips mixed with spices. The body was placed in a tomb cut out of solid rock, and a stone disk weighing over ton was rolled against the entrance.

On Saturday, Day 2, Roman soldiers were ordered to guard the tomb. The penalty for sleeping on the job or deserting their post was death.

On Sunday morning, Day 3, the soldiers were gone, the stone was rolled away from the mouth of the tomb, and inside was an empty cocoon of burial cloths—but no body.

If that really happened, would it answer your question about which religion is the right one?

How can we be sure that it really happened? God knew that something as fantastic as Christ's resurrection would be quickly dismissed if the evidence was not overwhelming. And that's why he gave us overwhelming evidence. It can be summarized with three numbers.

- First is the number **500**. Actually, 500-plus. That's how many **witnesses** saw Jesus alive after His death. On at least 12 different occasions, the resurrected Jesus appeared, primarily but not exclusively, to his followers. On eight of those occasions he appeared to more than one person at a time. Many of those people actually touched him. Some ate with him. Almost all of them talked with him. On one occasion, Jesus appeared to more than 500 people at the same time. The apostle Paul wrote about it in 1 Corinthians 15:6 (TEV): "...He appeared to more than five hundred of his followers at once, most of whom are still alive..."—which was Paul's way of

saying, “If you don’t believe me, ask them!” You can dismiss one or two appearances as hallucinations, but 500—at the same time? That’s tough to refute.

- The second strand of evidence for the resurrection of Christ is **11 transformed men**. I’m talking about Christ’s closest followers, the apostles, not one of which believed that Jesus would be raised from the dead. In fact, after he died, they huddled together behind locked doors, fearing for their safety. And then, all of a sudden, the doors flew open, and these same 11 men went into the streets and began to preach with amazing courage that Jesus had been raised from the dead.

In Acts 2:32, Peter stood with the other 10 apostles and shouted to a crowd that had gathered in the city where Jesus had been executed: “God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact.”

In Acts 4:20, the religious authorities ordered the apostles to stop teaching in the name of Jesus, and Peter said to them, “...We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

Finally the apostles were thrown into jail, and they were beaten mercilessly for refusing to stop preaching about Christ. And when they were released, Acts 5:42 says that “day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.”

Ultimately, the way the opponents of Christianity silenced these men was by killing them. According to church tradition, 10 of the 11 apostles died as martyrs. The 11th died in exile. Don’t you think, if the resurrection was a story they made up, at least one of them would have admitted it under threat of death? Do you think it’s a credible theory that all of these men who abandoned Jesus when he was arrested and hid from authorities after he was killed then decided to conspire a resurrection, and that every single one of them was willing to die for what they knew to be a lie? I don’t think so.

- The third irrefutable proof of the resurrection is the **one empty tomb**. All the religious leaders would have had to do to stop Christianity dead in its tracks was to go and get the body of Jesus, and parade it through the streets. Why didn’t they do that? It’s very simple: It was gone. Why, when the authorities were trying to silence the Christians, did they have to resort to beating them and killing them? It’s because the tomb was empty.

In a cover story for *Newsweek* Magazine (March 27, 2005), Jon Meacham concluded from his study of history that “the tomb in which Jesus’ corpse was placed after his execution was empty; if it were not, then Christianity’s opponents could have produced his bones.... Without the Resurrection, it is virtually impossible to imagine that the Jesus movement of the first decades of the first century would have long endured.”

That same article included a poll that revealed that 78 percent of Americans believe that Jesus rose from the dead. But what is the significance of the resurrection? What does it mean? It means that Jesus is the one and only reliable source of information about eternal life. He is the only one who has come back from the grave, so he is the one we can trust to tell what lies beyond the grave.

And this is what Jesus says to us (John 11:25-26, NIV84): “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.” Have you ever taken the step of choosing, among all the religious options you have, to put your life and your future in Christ’s hands? God has made it crystal clear to us that Jesus is the one who is worthy of our trust. But we have to make the decision to put our faith in him, and him alone. Have you done that?