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Part I: What and why we believe

- † For the past four months, we have been studying the Gospel of John, verse by verse, to see what the Bible says about Jesus. John uses a compelling mix of eye witness testimony and theological reasoning to prove that Jesus was the Son of God come to earth as a man, that Jesus was the long awaited Messiah-Savior, whom we know as Christ.

- † A few weeks ago, I went into the children's class to ask them about what we believe. I was impressed with their answers!
 - They know we believe in one God, but that he has revealed himself to be three individuals, God the Father, Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit, three unique entities who yet are one God. That is so difficult for us adults to comprehend, but the children simply say, "Three in One!" and they are fine with it.
 - The children also know that it was the Son of God who came to earth and was born miraculously by the virgin Mary as the baby Jesus; and that Jesus came to provide us with a way back into relationship with God.

- † Now I asked them about this, about why Jesus came. This might surprise you, but it turns out that none of our children are perfect! Not one! All of them make mistakes, all of them do things that are wrong, even doing things they know are wrong!
 - And because they are not perfectly pure, they cannot go to Heaven. Now that's a scary thought. But they understand that they cannot fix this problem, that nothing they do can make them pure again and right in God's sight.

- † And that's why Jesus came. The Old Testament promised over and over that God would save his people, and that God would send a deliverer called the Messiah or Christ to save his people.
 - So God the Father sent the Son of God, and thus our deliverer, our savior, is both God and man. As a pure man, Jesus could be an acceptable sacrifice for us in the eyes of God the Father; as God the Son, Jesus could bear the penalty for all our sins.
 - Jesus allowed himself to be crucified, so that he could pay the penalty for all our sin. Then he was resurrected from the dead, on the day we call Easter, to prove that he had victory over sin and death, and that later he could resurrect us also.

- † What God asks is that we believe in his promise. The gospel of John says that if we believe in who Jesus is as the Son of God and promised Messiah-Savior or Christ, and if we believe that he did pay our penalty on the cross and rise from the grave on the third day, then we are saved, because God forgives us, and declares us to be righteous in his sight, even though we still struggle with sin. And thus, we can go to Heaven when we die.

- † In the gospel of John, we hear from eye witnesses that Jesus taught these truths and really did rise from the grave. And we see that all of the Old Testament Jewish scriptures build toward the revelation of God on earth in Jesus and the salvation he offers.

- † But why can we believe in what the Bible has to say? One reason is that we have corroborating evidence from other sources that the details of the biblical story are true. Today, all respected historians, whether believers or not, acknowledge that Jesus really lived.
 - For example, Bart Ehrman, a non-believing biblical scholar today, recently wrote about Jesus, “He certainly existed, as virtually every competent scholar of antiquity, Christian or non-Christian, agrees” [*Forged: writing in the name of God*, 285].

- † In the first century, there was a Jewish historian named Josephus. He also was not a believer, but his historical writings help us to understand the culture of Israel in the first century.
 - Josephus wrote about John the Baptist and his imprisonment; he wrote about Jesus’ brother, James as the leader of the church; and he wrote about Jesus himself, saying Jesus was a teacher and miracle worker who had a large following of both Jews and Gentiles, who continued to revere Jesus even after his death. All this agrees with the Bible.

- † The Roman historian Tacitus, a non-believer at the start of the second century, confirmed that Christ was crucified during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of Pontius Pilate, just as the Bible says, but that the Christian faith not only was not squashed, it burst forth out of Judea all the way to Rome. And he wrote that believers in Christ were so sure of their faith, that they were willing to be tortured and killed for it.

- † Secular historian Thomas Cahill wrote a few years ago that some of the greatest evidence for the resurrection of Christ was how many of his followers suddenly were willing to be tortured and killed for their faith.
 - Before the resurrection, there was only a small band even willing to gather together, and they were hiding out. But if you study early church history, you see that thousands of people were willing to suffer greatly and to die, rather than speak against Christ, and their witness was so compelling that it changed the culture and faith of the empire.
 - So why, Cahill asks, would these people be so transformed, be so willing to suffer and die for their faith, if Jesus had not risen from the grave?

- † The Muslim holy book, the Koran, says a lot of negative things about Jesus, but even so, it acknowledges that Jesus was born of the virgin Mary to be a prophet and miracle worker for Israel.

- † We see in the gospel of John, that in Jesus’ day it was tragic that many of the religious leaders did not believe in Jesus, even though they had the evidence of fulfilled Old Testament prophecies, miraculous signs, Jesus’ god-like insight and pure lifestyle, angelic announcements, and the testimonies of contemporary prophets, like John the Baptist.
 - Today, it is just as tragic if you ignore the evidence. Secular history, even Jewish and Muslim history, along with archaeology and manuscript evidence, proves that the historical accounts in the Bible are accurate and true.
 - Those accounts were written by eye witnesses, and written when other eye witnesses were still alive to complain if they had been false. We also have many writings of the early church which detail what these eye witnesses, the disciples of Jesus, themselves taught to their disciples.
 - The evidence is overwhelming, that Jesus really was crucified on the cross and then resurrected from the grave on the third day. The question is whether you are ready to believe.

Part II: Why it matters

- † I want to show you an illustration about why Jesus came to die and rise again, because this is really important, whether you are already a believer or still checking Christianity out.
- † We start out with a glass of pure, crystal clear, water. This is the way God designed us to be: pure, a reflection of his character.
- † However, we are conceived with two kinds of sin. When Adam and Eve rebelled against God the first time, they corrupted their human nature and this corruption has been passed down through the generations, and we inherited this corrupted nature from our parents. We call this inherited sin.
 - Also, God holds all of us guilty for the rebellion of the human race that started with Adam and Eve. We call this imputed sin, because God imputes it or accounts it to us.
 - So even as we are conceived we are not pure like God desired. We represent that with a couple of drops of soy sauce.
- † Of course, as our lives progress, we make our own mistakes. Our children sometimes reveal the character of God in them, but they also reveal the corruption of their nature by being selfish, disobeying parental commands, taking toys from others, and so on. So we add a few more drops to the water, and it starts to get murky.
 - Now I hope all our children will live a better life than I did. But if any of you adults are like me, you made a mess of your life at some point [add lots of soy] – I had a tough decade in my twenties! and I still struggle with a few things – and so we become quite polluted.
- † Now many of us grow out of our wild ways and start to live better lives. Some of us even do this on purpose. So suppose we were to decide to do more of the good things Scripture commands and less of the bad or sinful things.
 - We can pour out some of our sinfulness and add some of the goodness of God, which we will represent with pouring out some tainted water and adding some fresh water. If I continue this process, I can make the water lighter and lighter, but can I ever get it pure again?
 - No, I cannot. And the same way, I can never make myself perfectly pure and holy again. I was corrupted from the start and I sinned along the way. I can try to make myself a better person than I was, but I can never in my own power make myself the righteous and pure person God designed me to be.
 - And catch this: I can never in my own power make myself the righteous and pure person that I *need* to be to have salvation from sin and death so I can spend eternity with our holy God.
- † That's why God offers to do it for us. He asks us to believe in his offer of salvation through Jesus. If we believe in who Jesus is and in what he did for us in his crucifixion and resurrection – that is, if we put our faith completely in Jesus – then God offers us the righteousness and purity of Jesus – he will account Christ's righteousness to us! – even though we have not earned it, even though we still sin.
 - And because God declares us to be righteous in his sight, he can forgive us and welcome us into a relationship with him that will endure forever, even beyond physical death.

- † Most Sundays, after our worship service, some of us gather to talk through some biblical issue. The past month or two, we have been looking at what it means to be saved.
- † While we once were guilty in sin, now God has declared us to be righteous in his sight by allocating the righteousness of Christ to us. We call this justification.
- † While we once were captive to many claims on us, including sin, death, evil, and the Law, Christ paid the price with his blood so we could have freedom from these things. We call this redemption.
- † While we once were under judgment to be condemned for our guilt, we now receive God's mercy and forgiveness, because Christ's sacrifice appeased God's wrath. We call this propitiation.
- † While we once were spiritually dead because of sin, we now are "born again" to spiritual life. We call this regeneration.
- † While we once were enemies of God, we now are in a right relationship with God. We call this reconciliation or atonement.
- † While we once were lost spiritually and under the influence of evil, we now are set apart for Christ. We call this positional sanctification.
- † While we once were excluded from the kingdom of Heaven, we now are welcomed into God's family, as fellow heirs with Christ. We call this adoption.
- † Through his death on the cross, Christ offers us all these things: righteous standing through justification, freedom through redemption, mercy through propitiation, spiritual life through regeneration, intimacy with God through reconciliation, purpose and identity through positional sanctification, and inclusion in God's family through adoption.
- † The resurrection proves that all this is possible. If Jesus was not raised from the dead, then he was nothing but a crackpot. But if Jesus really was resurrected, as the Bible says, as the evidence supports, then he really was the savior and Son of God and he really can offer us this amazing salvation.
- † Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, wrote, "if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is futile and your faith is empty" [1 Corinthians 15.14 NET]. That's how important is the resurrection. That's why we gather together to celebrate that it is historical truth, not just on Easter, but every Sunday!
- † The resurrection proves the value of the crucifixion. The resurrection proves the value of the crucifixion: that Christ can offer us this amazing salvation. And all God asks of us to obtain this salvation, is to believe, to accept this gift in faith. Let's pray...

Benediction: Jesus really lived, he really died on the cross to provide us with salvation, and he really rose from the grave on the third day, what we call Easter. Go with that assurance, and knowing that the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ makes peace with God possible through faith.