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Turning Points

Lee Strobel talks about the process he followed to begin investigating Christianity. Have you ever tried looking at Christianity in this manner? Lee Strobel's books *The Case for Faith* and *The Case for Christ* make excellent additional study material.

In the meantime, here are some suggested areas for study, after you've examined Lee and Rob's personal journeys to check out the Christian faith.

- Rob Bell speaks about how being at a U2 concert awakened something in him. What do you think it might have been that he experienced that got him wondering about God?
- Do such experiences have validity? What do you think about the idea of God reaching a person through things as diverse as rock concerts and movies? Ever had an experience like that?
- Are you surprised to hear Lee Strobel talk about how Christianity stacked up in the face of his very rational attempts to examine it? What do you make of that, especially as many skeptics say Christianity conflicts with science?
- What have you read or studied that's helped you, like Lee, to reach intelligent conclusions about Christianity?
- Rob also makes this comment: *"I think a lot of my awareness of God came from seeing real people doing real things that moved me."* Discuss how this raises the issue of the importance of how Christians behave and how keenly seekers are watching them.
- Ponder this statement by Lee Strobel from the DVD: *"I honestly don't know what God's got around the corner for me, whatever it is it's going to be the very best thing and even though it may be hard and it may be an assignment or a responsibility that's going to be difficult, he's going to equip me to fulfill it, and it's going to be the greatest adventure of my life."* Given that this is a statement from a once hardheaded atheist reporter, does it sound like Lee still feels he's in the driver's seat of his own life, or has he surrendered a measure of control to God? Discuss.



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Bad Things – Good People

All three of our teachers address this thorny issue. For further reading we highly recommend books by Philip Yancey such as *Where is God when it Hurts?* and *Disappointment with God*.

In the meantime, here are some potential areas for study and discussion:

- Philip Yancey comments that: *"I have respect for a God who gives me not only the freedom to reject him but he actually includes the arguments we can use against him in his sacred scripture."* Yancey is commenting on the fact that many of God's great men and women of faith had big questions of their own. Can you find some places in the Bible where this happens? (Try the book of Habakkuk, Psalm 13, Jeremiah 20, and many places in the book of Job).
- Is getting mad with God always unhealthy? Discuss what it can lead to. Look through the progression of thought in Psalm 13 from confusion to resolution.
- Think about this statement from Lee Strobel: *"If God wanted us to experience the greatest value in the universe which is love, we must have free will. We've taken that free will and we've abused it ... we have allowed moral and natural evil to enter into the world."* Looking around in our world, think about and discuss how the choices we make at personal, national and even international levels bear out the truth of that idea?
- Rob Bell says: *"When Jesus' friend Lazarus dies, Jesus comes and sees everybody mourning around the tomb, it says that Jesus wept, so the Son of God takes the full force of the pain and just absorbs it, just takes the hit, and lets himself feel the darkness and pain and anguish and isolation."* Do you find this a useful observation – that Jesus, even knowing he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead, entered into the pain of his friends?
- Does knowing that we have a God who has actually experienced the pain of rejection, betrayal, friendlessness and actual torture, help us to know that he can empathise with us in our hurts? (Check out Hebrews 2: 14-18 and Hebrews 4: 14-16)
- Rob Bell also remarks, concerning suffering: *"The answers first and foremost aren't information but community. I don't need somebody that's trying to explain this darkness: I need first and foremost somebody just to be with me in it, because if I have some people with me I'm probably going to be okay."* He seems to be saying some things in the realm of suffering are inexplicable, and the more important thing is that we have people to love us through the pain. Discuss how you feel about this idea.



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Big Mistakes

This is a huge area for some people. They feel God won't or can't forgive them when they make a bad mistake. Guilt holds some Christians back from achieving their potential because they feel inherently unworthy.

It's worth looking at Psalm 51; the classic plea from David for restoration after his adultery with Bathsheba has been uncovered. Note his earnest hope that God will forgive and restore. From this session's DVD clips, ponder the following:

- Rob Bell has this to say about God's attitude towards us, as seen through Jesus:
"Jesus constantly describes him as good, providing, forgiving, so any sense that God is kind of waiting to zap people or he's got this long list of things you've done wrong just isn't one of the pictures that the scriptures give us." Have you ever paused to think hard about how God feels about you? Have you grown up with the idea that God is essentially mad at people and wants above anything else to punish them? Discuss John 3:16 in the light of these questions.
- Is there ever a risk of us taking too much liberty with the message of salvation by grace? How do we strike a balance between revering God as an Almighty Lord, and accepting his love as a child would relate to a father?
- Think about this comment from Lee Strobel: *"Christianity is the only faith system in the world that's not spelled DO. It's spelled DONE. It's done, it's based on what Jesus did on the cross - he went to the cross, he died for our sins and he offers complete forgiveness and eternal life as a gift that we cannot earn by trying to be good people but that we can merely receive in gratitude."* What are the implications of moving from a performance-based faith to one based on gratitude? And what does that look like?
- Philip Yancey makes an interesting comment on anger. He says: *"The fact that a person is angry it's not good or bad; it's not immoral or moral, it's a natural response, I've been hurt, I've been abused, I've been unjustly treated. The issue though is how do I express that anger, do I express it in constructive ways or do I express it in destructive ways?"* Think about and discuss how this counsel may apply to situations in your own life, which have made you angry.
- Rob Bell talks about coming to a place where we discover how great our need of God's grace really is. He says: *"Some people say, 'you don't understand how screwed I am!' Well, that's kind of the prerequisite to understand all this. I have to get to the point where I realize, okay I'm not good enough for this, at which point I now get it."* Read through some of what Paul writes at the end of Romans 7, (verses 15-25) about his own internal conflict, and discuss in the light of Rob's comments



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Why Trust the Bible?

There are many broad statements thrown around these days; ideas such as, "You can't trust the Bible – it's been reinterpreted so many times." Some people say, "it's just a series of myths and legends," or some ask, "how can a book written between two and four thousand years ago be relevant for our times?"

Rob, Philip and Lee each have their own advice on matters like these. Think about some of the viewpoints they raise.

- Rob Bell says: *"Some things [in the Bible] are so beautiful and huge that you can't contain them in just straightforward reporting, so you have poetry, you have parable, you have metaphor, God is like a groom and his people are like a bride. Does it really mean that people are like all these men are wearing white dresses? No, it's a figure of speech."* Talk about this idea. What other places in the Bible can you think of where illustrations are used instead of literal meanings? (The Song of Solomon and the Book of Revelation are probably good places to start!)
- Lee Strobel makes this comment: *"Every time I go to the Bible and I base a decision on the teachings of the Bible in terms of what it says about morality, about the way I should live my life, about my relationships, about my priorities, I walk away with wisdom that transcends my own."* For people who have been Christians a while, you might try recalling when was the last time you went to the Bible in this fashion and found truth of this sort. For seekers you might ask in which areas of your life you feel you most need wisdom. Perhaps you might be able to help point each other to a particularly relevant passage.
- Philip Yancey says: *"We're human beings: we have family problems, we have feuds, we have wars, we have pain, we weep, we laugh, we love, we hate. The Bible is about human beings and we're human beings."* Choose a story or a parable from the Bible about an actual event from ancient times. Examine the story and discuss its relevance to 21st century life. Possible suggestions – the parable of the man who built bigger and bigger barns (what it teaches us about the pursuit of wealth); the identification of David as future king by Samuel (its lessons about potential being about more than physical appearance). Let your imagination flow!
- Think about the comments Lee Strobel makes about the huge numbers of fragments of New Testament scripture which have been discovered. Check out Lee's books "The Case for Faith" and "The Case for Christ" for his research on the reliability of the Bible. Do a Google search on The Dead Sea Scrolls or the reliability of the Bible and get familiar with the enormous amount of material that's available on how we got our Bible.



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Who was Jesus?

Much of the debate about Jesus centres on this question. You'll note that Rob and Philip concentrate more on the issue of how Jesus behaved and related to people during his ministry, while Lee spends some time on the question of evidence for the resurrection. Again, Lee's book, *The Case for Christ* is extremely helpful here, as is Josh McDowell's classic book, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*.

Here are some possible study areas:

- Rob Bell says it like this: *"What are the values or the truths that I can totally trust? I trust grace, I trust unconditional love, I trust forgiveness and living a life of freedom rather than carrying my past around with me everywhere I go, and so I ask who best embodies those or who best explains and articulates and lives that way of life?"* Clearly, Rob concludes that Jesus best embodies these qualities. Can you find a couple of places in the Gospels which show Jesus living out, or giving out some of these attributes?
- Here's what Lee Strobel says: *"If Jesus lived and if he had claimed to be the Son of God the key question was, did he substantiate that claim? Did he do anything beyond the ordinary to establish that he was not just making an assertion that he's the Son of God, but did he prove it? And that brought me to the resurrection."* Make a study of what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15 concerning the resurrection. Ask yourself, if the resurrection is just a fable, what are the implications for the Christian faith?
- Philip Yancey comments: *"Jesus gave us a striking clue into the kind of world that God wants, and it's a world where little children don't die, it's a world where there aren't wars between nations, there's forgiveness. It's a world where there's no death, no tears, no suffering. Jesus did not wave a magic wand and make that kind of world, but he gave us some clues into the kind of world that God wanted and he gave us some clues into the fact that he intends one day to finish the job."* Can you find some places in the Gospels which Yancey might be referring to?
- Try discussing this: when the name "Jesus" is mentioned, write down the first three images or qualities that come to your mind. Talk about what you wrote. What do the qualities you noted down tell you about the kind of relationship you either have or would like to have with Jesus. Another interesting exercise would be to look at what you wrote about the qualities of Jesus, and ask to what extent Jesus' followers or the Church demonstrate those qualities. (You might even like to do this exercise BEFORE you watch this episode and then use it as a way to start your subsequent discussion).
- In the light of what the three teachers, especially Lee Strobel, said, discuss this great quote from C.S. Lewis: *"A man who was merely a man, and said the sort of things Jesus said wouldn't be a great moral teacher, he'd either be a*



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lunatic, or else he'd be the devil. You must make your choice. Either this man was and is the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse."



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Why Pray?

If you're looking for an easy to read, great guide on the value of prayer, check out a book by Bill Hybels called *Too Busy Not to Pray*.

This session has featured just two of the three teachers, Philip Yancey and Lee Strobel. Think about what they had to say:

- Lee Strobel comments: *"If the historical data is convincing that Jesus Christ really claimed to be the Son of God and proved it by returning from the dead, and if he modeled prayer and if he told his followers to pray, that it makes a difference, then I think based on that, I know that my prayers are not a wasted effort."* This is a vital observation. Find from the Bible some of the times and places where Jesus prayed, and the time he devoted to prayer. What crucial things happened after he prayed? (The choosing of the disciples and Jesus' prayer in John 17 would be good starting places.)
- Philip Yancey speaks about a couple of aspects of prayer: listening to God and then being attuned to God's promptings during the day after we've prayed, as various situations arise. Think about your own prayer life. Do you resonate with what Philip says? Can you think of times when having been prayerful has made a difference? Why do you think so many of us have difficulty, as Yancey puts it, putting aside time at the start of the day for prayer?
- What do you make of Lee's story about being prompted to send money to the woman who needed it? Do you see the point he is making about how God sometimes works in a special way that involves us in the process of answering someone else's prayer? Have you ever experienced anything like this? If so, what did you learn from that experience?
- Philip Yancey makes the case for a more personal and familiar style of praying to God – almost a sense of a casual conversation between friends. What are the pros and cons of this approach to prayer?
- Lee Strobel makes this comment on how God responds to some of our prayers:
"Somebody once said the worst thing that could possibly happen is for all your prayers to be answered the way you wanted, because if they are, I mean I ask for things sometimes and then in retrospect years later I think thank goodness God had the wisdom not to answer that prayer in the way that I had asked him to, it would have been a disaster." Think about this for a moment. Do you think you've ever found this to be true in your own life?



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The Church – Why bother?

Rob Bell especially tackles two big issues here - why Christian fellowship matters, and how to approach the question of giving.

Look at some of these comments and discuss.

- Rob Bell believes I can learn about the love of God by seeing how another Christian loves me, even when I do not deserve it. He says: *"I can't conceive of God being unconditionally loving, but I can understand that this person has loved me even when I've just been horrible to them. So when we cut ourselves off from others because we want to connect with God, we ultimately are disconnecting ourselves with God as well."* Where have you ever seen this in action? What kind of qualities do you think Rob is talking about?
- Rob also makes this comment about the relationship between us and fellow Christians: *"At some point the issue isn't what you call it, the issue is whether you're going to become the kind of person who's in authentic community with others."* If we're supposed to become someone who flourishes in authentic community with others, what are some of the things we have to overcome, especially when there are difficult people around us?
- Lee Strobel takes a slightly different tack and says he believes taking the plunge with God and the church had major benefits for him. He remarks: *"Had I continued to go down the path I was going down which was the path of selfishness, self-centeredness, narcissism, self-destructive behaviour, immorality, had I continued down that path I shudder to think where I would have ended up."* Given that many of these issues are matters we need to work out *personally* with God, how can Christian fellowship help address some of these traits in us?
- In the realm of giving, Rob Bell says it's not about satisfying God or a church that wants to tap into our wallets. He says: *"When I join up with the community one of the ways I stand in solidarity with this community is I commit some of my resources. I want this community to be great and I want us all to be about something bigger than ourselves."* Talk about this as a framework for giving. TIME magazine has found that one of the big keys to happiness is about giving yourself and your resources away happily and voluntarily. How has this worked for you – or maybe it hasn't yet!
- Rob also has this to say about giving: *"I want to make sure that my life is expanding and getting bigger and bigger and bigger because if it's not then it's getting shrunken, it's getting smaller, and one of the lies is that your life can remain neutral."* There are two great passages of scripture on the subject of giving that relate to this comment. They are found in Luke 6:38 and Proverbs 11:24-25. Discuss.



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Forgiveness

This section features Philip Yancey on his own, talking comprehensively about the complexities and value of forgiveness.

For a powerful look at forgiveness being worked out in difficult situations, check out Week One of *Life Stories*, another Great Journeys Resource available from Great Journeys Resources in New Zealand or from our distributors in Australia and the UK.

In the meantime here are some suggested areas for discussions:

- Philip remarks: *“Mahatma Gandhi said if you took the principle an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth to its logical conclusion eventually the whole world would be blind and toothless, and the more we act like that as human beings, the more we act like animals, the more this endless chain goes on.”* Eye for eye and tooth for tooth were actually Old Testament principles. Read through in Matthew 5: 38-42 what Jesus said about a “new” approach to vengeance. Do you think this means God decided His “old” law was faulty? (Leader's Note: The answer is clearly no. The old law actually *limited* retribution, and God's intention always was that forgiveness was to be a better option.)
- In Matthew 5: 23-24 Jesus talks about us initiating reconciliation where there is unresolved difficulty between you and another person. How do you begin this process? Maybe it's all about starting out in faith and believing God to give us (as one teacher has coined it) “power along the way.” For example in Luke 17: 11-14, the lepers who asked Jesus to heal them found their healing came “as they went.” Talk about taking some first steps to obey God and what this can lead to.
- Has there been a situation in your own life where you have found the process of forgiveness really hard and you're still struggling? Have you heard anything from Philip Yancey in this session that particularly resonates with you, given the pain you have endured? Reflect on his comments about forgiveness being “an unnatural act”, how it's hard, how it can take a long time, and how the ultimate hurt in the process of harbouring unforgiveness is mostly inflicted upon ourselves. Discuss.
- Philip's story about reconciliation and forgiveness in South Africa is very powerful. Can you talk about some of the feelings you had as he was relating the tale? What do you think that woman's relationship with God would need to have been like, in order for her to forgive like that?
- A woman who decided to forgive a man for a dreadful series of crimes against her says: *“We don't sing a song called Amazing Justice, because justice alone is often not enough to heal our hurts. We need God's Amazing Grace and that's what can heal us.”* Talk about this idea. The whole principle of the Cross is important here.