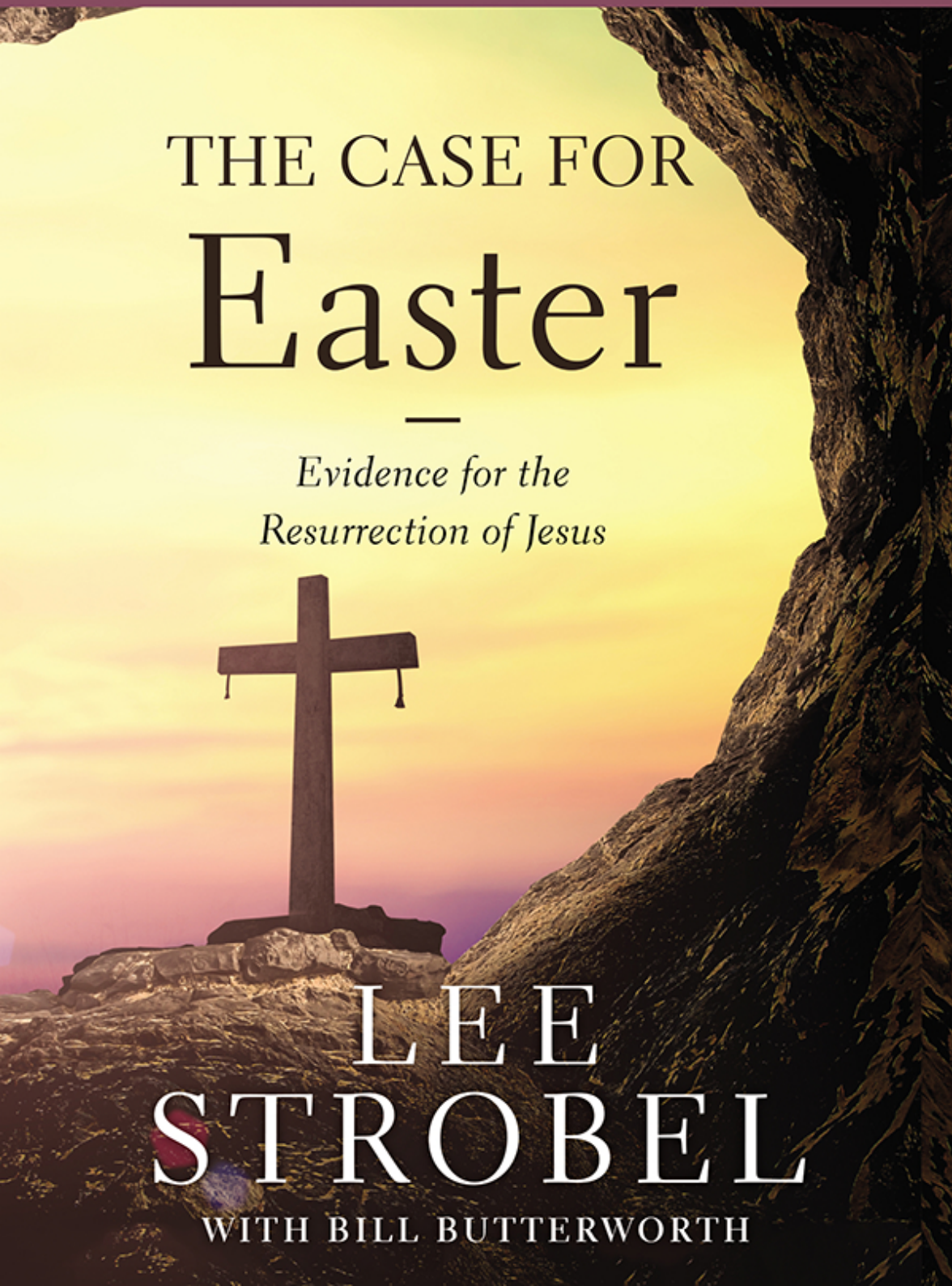
STUDY GUIDE | FOUR SESSIONS

THE CASE FOR Easter

Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus



LEE STROBEL

WITH BILL BUTTERWORTH

THE CASE FOR

Easter

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THE CASE FOR Easter

Investigating the Evidence for the Resurrection

STUDY GUIDE | 4 SESSIONS

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WITH BILL BUTTERWORTH

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The Case for Easter Study Guide
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How to Use This Guide

Do you have questions about the first Easter? Then you are in the right place. During the next four weeks, you and your group will look at the story surrounding the death and resurrection of Jesus—and how you can know the events recorded in the Bible are true.

The Case for Easter video study is designed to be experienced in a group setting such as a Bible study, Sunday school class, or any small group gathering. Each session begins with a brief introduction and opening questions to get you and your group thinking about the topic. You will then watch a video with Lee Strobel and jump into some directed small-group discussion. You will close each session with a time of prayer.

Each person in the group should have his or her own study guide, which includes video teaching notes, group discussion questions, and between-sessions personal studies to help you reflect on the material during the week. You are also encouraged to have a copy of *The Case for Easter* book, as reading it alongside the curriculum will provide you with deeper insights and make the journey more meaningful.

To get the most out of your group experience, keep the following points in mind. First, the real growth in this study will happen

during your small-group time. This is where you will process the content of Lee's message, ask questions, and learn from others as you hear what God is doing in their lives. For this reason, it is important for you to be fully committed to the group and attend each session so you can build trust and rapport with the other members. If you choose to only "go through the motions," or if you refrain from participating, there is a lesser chance you will find what you're looking for during this study.

Second, the goal of your small group is to serve as a place where you can share, learn about God, and build intimacy and friendship with others. For this reason, seek to make your group a "safe place." This means being honest about your thoughts and feelings and listening carefully to everyone else's opinion. Resist the temptation to "fix" someone's problem or correct his or her theology, as that's not the purpose of your small-group time. Also, keep everything your group shares confidential. This will foster a rewarding sense of community in your group and create a place where people can heal, be challenged, and grow spiritually.

In between your group times, you can maximize the impact of the curriculum by completing the personal study activities. This individual study will help you reflect and actively respond to the lesson. You may wish to complete the personal study in one sitting or spread it over a few days (for example, working on it a half-hour per day on four different days that week). Note that if you are unable to finish (or even start!) your between-sessions personal study, you should still attend the group study video session. You are still wanted and welcome at the group even if you don't have your "homework" done.

Keep in mind that the videos, discussions, and activities are simply meant to kick-start your imagination so you will be open to what God wants you to hear through this study. The goal is for you

to see the Easter story in a whole new light and know with confidence that the Gospel accounts of Jesus' death and resurrection are accurate and true. This will hopefully prove to be a journey that will stimulate your mind, warm your heart, and satisfy your soul.

Sound good? Then let's get started.

Note: If you are a group leader, there are additional resources provided in the back of this guide to help you lead your group members through the study.

SESSION 1

Evidence for the Resurrection

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic . . . or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse.

–C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

Introduction

For many of us, there were two stories in our childhood that captured the essence of Easter. Like the rails of a train track, the duo never intersected but ran in parallel tandem through our memories. The first was the story of the Easter Bunny. We heard tales of the happy white rabbit, dressed in human clothes, who would fill empty baskets with all sorts of our favorite chocolate candies . . . if we behaved ourselves throughout the year.

The other rail was more serious. It was the story of Jesus Christ, who died on the cross in a grotesque manner known as a *crucifixion* on Good Friday, but then miraculously rose from the grave on Easter Sunday to show his power over sin, death, and hell. Easter would likely find us dressed in our Sunday finest, attending a church service (whether we were regular church attenders or not), and returning home to baskets of melting chocolate while we waited for the family's traditional Easter dinner. If we were lucky, there would be an after-dinner Easter egg hunt featuring color-dyed, hard-boiled eggs.

The Easter Bunny and the resurrection of Jesus. One is decidedly childish, while the other represents the most profound event to ever occur in human history. But for many people today, believing Jesus' claims that he was the Son of God—and that he *actually* rose from the dead on the third day—is like believing the big magical bunny is real. They doubt whether the Gospel accounts can be trusted and prefer to pass off the story as a legend or mere mistake.

So, what proof do we have that Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection actually took place? How can we know that he actually was executed and died on a Roman cross those many years ago? And what does the reality of Jesus' resurrection mean in our lives? In this first session, we will start to dig into these issues by examining the events surrounding Good Friday and, in particular, the Roman execution-style murder that took place that day.

Before You Watch

Pair up with another group member, ideally someone you don't know that well, and briefly talk about the following questions:

- What was Easter like for you as a child? What was the best part for you? What was the worst part for you?
- What are some of your favorite Easter memories? How big a role did the resurrection of Jesus play in your typical Easter celebrations?
- Now that you are an adult, do you celebrate Easter any differently than you did as a child? What changes have you made in the way you celebrate?

Video Teaching

Play the video segment for session one. As you watch, use the following outline to record any thoughts or concepts that stand out to you.

Notes

Some have claimed there is no scriptural text in which Jesus said explicitly he was divine. But just because Jesus didn't make this claim directly doesn't mean he didn't make it at all.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus' claims to divinity were crystal clear to his audiences—as if he had said outright, "I am God." For instance, in John 10:30, Jesus declared, "I and the Father are one," which caused his opponents to accuse him of blasphemy.

Christianity is an investigate-able religion. While the origins of many world religions are lost in the mists of history, Christianity makes specific claims about events that occurred in time and space—right there in the first century.

When we scrutinize the data of history, we find four facts that establish convincingly that Jesus rose from the dead—which we can call "the four *E*s." The first *E* stands for *execution*—Jesus was truly dead after being executed by the Romans at the behest of the Jewish leaders.

Before he was crucified, Jesus was flogged by Roman soldiers. In fact, he was evidently flogged *two separate times*. The Greek word used to describe the flogging indicates a punishment inflicted after a death sentence has been pronounced.

Because of the terrible effects of this beating, there's no question Jesus was already in serious-to-critical condition even before the nails were driven through his hands and feet.

Group Discussion

Once the video has concluded, break into small groups for a time of discussion. Ideally, the group should be no less than four people and no more than six. Don't be shy—grab your chair and circle up! Find someone who will become your partner over the next few weeks. If you're married and your spouse is in the group, you've got the option of choosing him or her, or you may opt for someone completely different. If not your spouse, it's best for women to choose another woman and men to choose another man. Get your new partner's cell phone number and email so you can connect during the week.

1. Do you have any doubts that Jesus clearly claimed that he was God? Are the statements covered in the video teaching evidence enough, or do you need further convincing? Be honest about your questions. That's why we're meeting!

2. Now that you've heard the teaching on the crucifixion of Jesus, did you find this type of execution was more painful and graphic than you previously believed? Why or why not?

3. What part of the execution of Jesus made the biggest impact on you as you heard it presented? Why do you think it affected you the way it did?

4. What other questions have you had about whether Jesus actually claimed to be God? What questions have you had about whether he really died on the cross—or even existed at all? How did this week's teaching help address these concerns?

Closing Prayer

Conclude your group discussion time with a few minutes for prayer. Share one another's needs and requests and offer them up to God. Nothing will bring your group together quicker than knowing you have brothers and sisters who care enough about issues you raise to bring them before the Lord for his answers and his direction.

SESSION 1

Between-Sessions Personal Study

Reflect on the content you've covered this week by engaging in any or all of the following between-sessions personal study. The time you invest will be well spent, so let God use it to draw you closer to him. At your next meeting, share with your group any key points or insights that stood out to you as you spent this time with the Lord.

Study God's Word

A good place to start our investigation into the resurrection is with Jesus' claims to be God. This week, examine Mark's account of Jesus' trial before the high priest. Note what Jesus says in this passage and how the high priest responds:

> The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death, but

they did not find any. Many testified falsely against him, but their statements did not agree.

Then some stood up and gave this false testimony against him: "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with human hands and in three days will build another, not made with hands.'" Yet even then their testimony did not agree.

Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?" But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer.

Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?"

"I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

The high priest tore his clothes. "Why do we need any more witnesses?" he asked. "You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?"

Mark 14:55–64

What stands out to you in this passage that you didn't notice previously?

One way to highlight and personalize the Scriptures is to use a technique called *paraphrasing*, where you rewrite the verses using your own words. By doing this, you can interact with the text in an intimate way. Take your time with this exercise. Start with a brief prayer, asking the Lord to help you as you work through the text. Next, take a few minutes to read through the entire passage again slowly and carefully. Then, begin your paraphrasing.

Write down a few statements to summarize how it felt to interact with the text in this way. Weave in some of this week's lessons along with the insights you are gleaning personally.

Put It into Practice

Take some time this week to think about how the material you are covering with your group can make a difference in the way you live your life. In the New Testament book of James, the author implores us to be *doers* of God's Word and not *hearers* only. The real test of what is important to us is how well we integrate it into our lives.

Can you put into a single sentence why it is important that Jesus makes unmistakable claims in the Gospels that he is God? Can you do the same for the execution of Jesus?

How does this week's lesson impact the way you would share your faith with someone else?

What is the biggest truth you learned this week? Write it down.

What are two more concepts that emerged from your study this week?

For many of us, coming to grips with the agony Jesus went through on our behalf is an emotional experience. The best way to deal with those emotions is to allow them to flow. Using the space provided on the next page, take a few minutes and compose a letter to Jesus, expressing what it means that he went through this for you and, most of all, *thanking him* for enduring it for your sake.

Dear Jesus:

Make contact with the partner you selected at the meeting either through a text or, better yet, a phone call. Check in to see how he or she is doing:

- Is the person enjoying the study? Why or why not?
- Is there any frustration or confusion that he or she can verbalize?
- How does trusting the Bible make a difference in the way that person is living his or her life?
- Is there anything you can do to be of help to them between now and the next time the entire group gets together?

Talk to your partner about the answers to the previous questions—the big truths you've come away with as a result of the study and how your time together has made an impact on you.

CLOSING REFLECTION

Even for a decorated cold-case homicide investigator, this was a formidable challenge. J. Warner Wallace had used his considerable detective skills to solve murders that were decades old, but he had never tackled a case that stretched back for two millennia.

What's more, this time he wasn't merely attempting to identify the perpetrator of a long-ago crime; instead, he was trying to determine whether the victim was truly deceased—and whether he defied all naturalistic explanations by rising from the dead three days later.

Quite an assignment for someone who was at the time a hyper-skeptical atheist. . . .

I've always appreciated Wallace's no-nonsense "just-give-me-the-facts" exterior, which syncs up well with my own journalistic bent, but I also admire what's underneath—an exceedingly compassionate and gracious heart toward others. I know because I've been the grateful recipient of his kindness in the past.

Oddly, though, I had never talked at length with Wallace about his journey from atheism to faith. After we sat in his recreation room and chatted for a while about family, I asked, "What prompted you to start checking out the Gospels?"

"My wife Susie was raised with a cultural Catholicism, so she thought it was important to take the kids to church, and I went along," he explained. "One Sunday the pastor said, 'Jesus was the smartest guy who ever lived,' and our Western culture is grounded in his moral teaching."

"How did you react?"

"I thought, 'I'm a cop enforcing the penal code, but I know there's a universal moral law above that.' After all, adultery is legal, but it isn't right. So it got me thinking about where that moral code came from. That's why I went out and bought this."

He pulled a red pew Bible from the shelf and handed it to me. "I got this for six bucks," he said.

I flipped it open to a random page and saw that it was very neatly but quite thoroughly marked up. There were homemade tabs, notes in small print in the narrow margins, and color-coded underlining throughout. I went to the Gospel of Mark and saw that it was densely annotated.

"I was using forensic statement analysis to analyze the Gospels—for instance, here in the Gospel of Mark I was looking

for the influence of Peter, so that's what one of the colors represents," he explained. "I was nitpicking the details; by the time I was done, I had gone through three Bibles."

"How long did your analysis take?"

"Six months."

"What was your verdict?"

"That the Gospels reliably recorded true events," he said. "But that presented a problem for me."

"Why?"

"Because they talk about the resurrection and other miracles," he said. "I could believe the Gospels if they said Jesus ate bread, but what if they said the loaf levitated? C'mon, I couldn't believe that. I didn't believe miracles could happen, so I rejected them out of hand."

I could relate to the impediment of the supernatural, since it was a stubborn obstruction in my own spiritual investigation. "What changed your mind?" I inquired.

"I asked myself, 'Do I believe anything supernatural?' And I concluded, that, well, yes, even as an atheist, I did believe something extra-natural occurred."

"For instance?"

"The Big Bang," he replied. "Everything came from nothing. If nature is defined as everything we see in our environment, then there had to be something before that, a first cause that was beyond space, matter, and time. That meant the cause couldn't be spatial, material, or temporal. . . . I realized that if there was something extra-natural that caused the beginning of all space, time, and matter as recorded in Genesis 1:1, then that same cause could accomplish all miracles recorded in the

Gospels. In other words, if there is a God, then miracles are reasonable, maybe even expected."

"So you got past your presupposition against the miraculous," I said.

"I did. As a detective, I knew presuppositions can derail an investigation. I remember a case in which a woman was found dead in her bed. She was a locally notorious drug addict, and there was drug paraphernalia on her nightstand. The patrol officers got there and didn't even bother to pull down the sheets, since this was so obviously an overdose. But when investigators got there, they pulled down the sheets—and they saw she had been stabbed to death."

He paused as the implications registered with me. "Presuppositions can be impediments to truth," he said. "The resurrection was the most reasonable inference from the evidence, but I was ruling out miracles from the outset."

"What led you to conclude that this first cause of the universe was personal and not just some force?"

"I recognized that there are universal moral laws," he replied. "For example, it's wrong to torture a baby for fun in any culture, anywhere, any time. And transcendent moral laws are more than simply truths—they are obligations between persons. If there are objective, transcendent moral obligations, the best explanation for them is an objective, transcendent moral person."

"Okay, you concluded the Gospels contain reliable eyewitness accounts, even of the miraculous," I said. "What came next?"

"I was stuck on the 'why' question: why did Jesus come, die, and return from the dead? I started analyzing Paul's writings,

and I was amazed by his insights into what he called 'natural man' or sinful people. His description fit me in an uncanny way," he replied.

"Plus, the message of grace is so counterintuitive. Every other religion is based on performance, which makes sense because humans love to achieve and compete to get a reward. This message of grace—of unearned forgiveness—didn't sound like it had human origins. It came off as either ridiculous or divine. This doesn't prove anything in and of itself, but it was one more piece of the puzzle."

"In the end, then, it was a cumulative case," I said, a declaration more than a question.

"Bingo," he said crisply. "The totality of the evidence overwhelmed me. When we're trying to solve a homicide, we typically put all the facts on a white board and see if we can make the case. I didn't have to do that here. The case made itself."

—*Lee Strobel, from* The Case for Miracles