



## “Foundations of faith: Why I still believe” by Paul Williams

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One of the outcomes of being a vacant parish is that we have been exposed to a diversity of preachers which, I think, has been quite stimulating. We never know what we are going to get - neither do you today! For me it has forced me to do some thinking and writing when I have had a turn. I am aware, however, that I do tend to pack a lot of ideas in so just warning you – today, I fear, will be no exception.

Those of you who have only known me for a few years probably know I work as a counsellor, but you may not know that in my inner being I am grounded in science. As a teenager I was passionate about science and would watch every TV science documentary that I could and spent big chunks of time reading science (Rachel Carson – The Silent Spring and Jacques Cousteau the Silent World). At university I studied mostly biological sciences and chemistry. I then taught science for about 25 years.

Being a scientist, I have a need for an evidence basis to support the things I believe. I guess in some ways what I am attempting here today is to give you my version of why I believe Christianity is a rational belief and why I am still a Christian. This doesn't mean I don't have doubts and questions. And I don't have an answer to everything: some things are just a mystery and cannot be explained.

In the end, I don't think that one can absolutely prove the truth of the Christian faith. However Paul was not frightened to have a go which is why I chose the reading from Acts. I also recall the verse in 1 Peter: ***“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.”***

I have a friend who is a Doctor, and like me an ex-science teacher. From time to time he will say to me something like “Paul, with all your science background how can you believe in God?” So perhaps what I am sharing with you is my answer to my friend.

### **The universe reflects the hand of God:**

By way of introduction to my first theme I want to start with a fairy story.

Once there was a young girl called Goldilocks who visited a house owned by three bears – father bear, mother bear and baby bear – you know the story. When Goldilocks got to the porridge one bowl was too hot, one bowl was too cold but the last bowl was perfect.

The planet we live in is sometimes referred to as being in the Goldilocks zone. We live on a planet that is perfectly positioned in relation to the sun – not too close so we don't fry nor too far so we don't freeze. Within the universe we can find a range of temperatures from -273C to millions of degrees. But life needs liquid water probably between about 5C and 35C. The earth is very special – it's just in the right place.

And now we come to an even more interesting and critical point – which for the sake of brevity I am simplifying a bit otherwise we would be here all day.

The universe is governed by 4 key forces: the weak nuclear force; the strong nuclear force; the electromagnetic force; and gravity.

Each of these has a critical value in terms of how it operates, but there is no particular scientific reason why any of these forces has the particular value that it does.

However, if any of these values were different, we would have a very, very different universe – one in which a planet like earth could not exist nor would the building blocks for life. For example, life is built around the element carbon. It is the only element capable of building complex molecules that allow life to exist. Make the strong nuclear force weaker and only the element hydrogen could exist. Change the gravitational constant and make it weaker and stars and planets could not form. Make the gravitational constant too strong and stars would collapse and burn their fuel too quickly for life to evolve on a planet. In such a universe no observers would exist.

In astrophysics, the idea that the universe we are in allows for the existence of observers (us), is known as the anthropic principle. It looks like the universe has been designed for life; which I believe it has. There are other options: one hypothesis is called the multiverse – the idea that there are perhaps billions of universes - all with randomly assigned values of the 4 critical forces of nature – we just happen to live in the one universe that allows Goldilocks zones to exist. Another option is that there is only one universe that by an incredible sequence of unlikely events, just happens to have all the values that will allow life to exist (one author calls this the absurd universe). The first option that the universe is designed seems to me to require the least amount of faith.

Just as an aside, I do believe that evolution has played a significant part in how we and all living things got here. I do not have any trouble reconciling a scientific view of the universe with the Bible. They are primarily coming from a different paradigm. The Bible is about the why; about meaning and purpose. Science is about the what, and the how. Sound theology and good science cannot conflict, as they both describe the same God given reality, but from different perspectives.

I still believe, as Psalm 104 so clearly states, that “God is the creator and sustainer of us all.” As a scientist, I cannot help but be moved and marvel at the things we see in the world around us. I think of pictures taken through high resolution telescopes; snow clad mountains; wild animals on the plains of Africa; all reflections of the nature of God the creator.

I love the long passage in Job 38 when God responds to Job's questioning:

*Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations?*

*Tell me if you understand?*

*Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!*

*Who stretched a measuring line across it?*

*On what were its footings set,*

*or who laid its cornerstone*

*while the morning stars sang together*

*and all the angels shouted for joy?*

*"Have you journeyed to the springs of the sea*

*or walked in the recesses of the deep?*

*Have you comprehended the vast expanses of the earth?*

*Tell me, if you know all this.*

So my number 1 point is that the universe reflects the nature of God and there is strong evidence that a purposeful designer sits behind it.

### **The material world is not all that exists:**

There are of course many, like my doctor friend, who believe that the material world as described by science is all that exists.

There is part of me that could be tempted to take this stance, but in the end I do not think that everything can be explained in a purely scientific and materialistic manner.

The Bible contains a number of reports of strange phenomena and indications that there is a spiritual dimension; that there is more than just the physical universe. There are accounts of meetings with angelic beings, miracles and hearing the voice of God. While we could perhaps dismiss some of these stories as myths hidden in the mists of time, there are some, particularly in the New Testament, that are harder to dismiss. I will look at the NT in more detail shortly.

I want to briefly touch on a couple of examples of things outside of the Bible that a staunch materialist might find hard to explain.

I have another friend who has done extensive research into near death experiences. In summary, he is convinced that they are a window into a spiritual dimension. People who have experienced near death (in essence have died but then been revived), consistently report an experience of peace, light, and warmth often experiencing some kind of life review or meeting beings of light. This seems to indicate a spiritual reality that transcends this physical universe.

In my work as a counsellor, I came across a fascinating book that is an account of the work of a team of doctors and counsellors working in mental health with Maori and Pacifica young people in Wellington. I will choose just one of the many stories that is very hard to account for if we were to believe that there is nothing beyond the physical world.

The therapy team is working with a very distressed, unwell and uncooperative young woman, Shannon. Wiremu, who is a kind of cultural therapist, comes into the room where the Psychiatrist and Shannon are sitting. Wiremu has never met Shannon. Prior to Wiremu's arrival there are just

the two of them in the room. As Wiremu arrives he sees in the corner of the room an old woman. To quote briefly from the book in Wiremu's words: *"As I looked at the old lady, I became aware of her name and I heard and felt a message from her for her mokopuna. Shannon was still kicking up a ruckus. I said to her "who's the Nanny standing here talking to you at the door?" Shannon responds "There's no Nanny there!" And I said "well, her name is Makarita and she's saying "slow down moko! I want to put my arms around you!" As I told her what the old lady had said, Shannon looked stunned and went suddenly quiet. She was just staring at me with her mouth gaping open."*

There is more to the story in the book but this little incident was transformative and from this point on the team were able to make great progress in their work to help Shannon.

So my number 2 point is that there seems to be a spiritual reality beyond the physical world.

### **Old testament prophecies foretelling the coming of the Messiah:**

There are many Old Testament prophecies that predict the coming of the Messiah. Depending on who you read, the number of these varies from maybe about 40 to 300. Some are quite general but some are quite specific. A short selection:

*"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel".* Isaiah 7:14

*"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."* Micah 5:2

*"Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."* Zechariah 9:9

*"Dogs surround me, a pack of villains encircles me; they pierce my hands and my feet". "They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment".* Psalm 22

We know that the OT was written hundreds of years before the birth of Christ and yet somehow predicts many of the events of the birth, life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. It seems to me difficult to account for these if the prophecies were not real predictions about real events concerning a real Messiah.

So point number 3: Old Testament prophecies accurately foretell the coming of the Messiah.

### **Jesus of Nazareth: a man in history**

What does history say? I once heard a speaker say that there is far less historical evidence for the existence of Julius Caesar than there is for Jesus Christ. And yet ironically many deny Christ ever lived.

There was a Jewish historian, Josephus, who wrote a history of the Jewish people in about 94AD. His writings contain two references to [Jesus of Nazareth](#) and one reference to [John the Baptist](#).

The first reference states that Jesus was the [Messiah](#) and a wise teacher who was crucified by [Pontius Pilate](#). While there is some scholarly debate about the authenticity of this passage in

its present form, most scholars accept that it contains an authentic nucleus referencing the life and execution of Jesus by Pilate.

There are two other passages in Josephus that are regarded as authentic: one mentions *"The brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James."* The other refers to the imprisonment and death of [John the Baptist](#).

There is also a [Roman historian, Tacitus](#), who in his writings (dated about AD 116) refers to [Jesus, his execution](#) by [Pontius Pilate](#), and the existence of [early Christians in Rome](#). The scholarly consensus is that Tacitus' reference to the execution of [Jesus](#) by [Pontius Pilate](#) is both authentic, and of historical value as an independent Roman source.

And then we have the New Testament. We know that the four gospels and the book of Acts were written between AD 65 and AD 90. John perhaps a little later, scholars suggesting between AD 90 and 110. With the crucifixion of Jesus around AD 30 it is very likely the authors would either have been first hand witnesses to the ministry of Jesus or had access to people who were alive at the time of Jesus.

I love the start of Luke's gospel where Luke states that he has very carefully researched his narrative: *"Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught."*

Just because the gospels may have been written from word of mouth accounts and memory does not necessarily mean that they are not a reasonably accurate historical record of actual events. How accurately can you remember some things from 50 years ago? If you make an effort I would bet there are a lot of things you remember well.

In a way, the fact that various accounts of events in the Gospels have some variation lends credibility. If we were "cooking the books", wouldn't we make sure things were closer to being identical?

It would seem that a rational analysis of the evidence supports the facts that:

- Jesus Christ existed;
- He had a brief but profound ministry;
- He was crucified under the orders of the Roman Governor;
- that something very unusual happened 3 days after His death;
- and that this triggered an incredible new movement that spread rapidly throughout the Roman Empire transforming lives wherever it went.

So point 4 is that the core of our faith, Jesus of Nazareth, is anchored in history.

### **Personal experience**

And now to my final point – my own experience.

It works! It makes sense!

In some ways in this final section I am moving from talking about a faith or a belief that says “God exists” to talking about a faith that is about “trusting in God”. The first is more a matter of the head; the latter of the heart. But obviously we have to first believe that God exists before we can put our trust in him. Our experience of faith is subjective. But I believe it has a rational basis which is what I have tried to explore today.

I also think that in the end faith is one of God’s gifts to us. All good things come from him. As it says in Ephesians: *“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”*

When we look at the world - and I’m now talking about people - there is much that is good but much that is bad – even downright evil. The picture of humanity that is portrayed in the Bible matches my sense of what we humans are like; particularly in the Gospels and the teachings of Jesus.

A couple of weeks ago Peter McClure gave us some insights into this good - bad dichotomy but in particular he painted a great portrayal of the truth and power of the gospel. When it is truly followed it is transformative!! To me the gospel makes sense and it feels right!

If I had to briefly sum up the gospel that I believe in I would use 2 parables: Firstly, the Parable of the Prodigal Son – this speaks to us of the undeserved grace of God in forgiveness and bringing us back to him. The parable paints a picture of wrong-doing, repentance, God’s forgiveness and a new beginning.

And secondly, the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The Good Samaritan talks to us about our calling love our neighbour; to be agents of change.

Sadly none of us is perfect. I am definitely not, so I will never perfectly live this out this parable. Nevertheless, imperfect though we are, we are called to be salt and light; to be the hand of God in the world.

The other day I came across a Portuguese proverb that reflects this beautifully: *“God writes straight with crooked lines.”* If there is hope for the world then it will come from those who are followers of the Way.

I want to finish with a quote from Bishop Tutu that is both inspiring and challenging:

*“All over this magnificent world God calls us to extend His kingdom of shalom – peace and wholeness – of justice, of goodness, of compassion, of caring, of sharing, of laughter, of joy, of reconciliation. God is transfiguring the world right this very moment through us because God believes in us and because God loves us. What can separate us from the love of God? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. And as we share God’s love with our brothers and sisters, God’s other children, there is no tyrant who can resist us, no oppression that cannot be ended, no hunger that cannot be fed, no wound that cannot be healed, no hatred that cannot be turned to love, no dream that cannot be fulfilled.”*

Amen