Book Review

The Case for Christ
BY LEE STROBEL
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Many times, difficulties arise in the truth of Christianity, and skeptics are able to pose challenging questions that seem to make the faith seem contradictory and hard to believe. In this book, Lee Strobel, a journalist and lawyer from Yale Law School, writes about his journey in search of facts and the truth about Christianity. Strobel was once an atheist, but decided to ask the tough questions we all sometimes wonder about. Questions such as: “how reliable are the New Testament texts?” “What happened to this man named Jesus when he was on the earth?” “Did this fellow really rise from the dead?” Each chapter in this book is based on an interview between Strobel and experts who have Doctoral degrees in history, archaeology, psychology, philosophy, etc.

The book is filled with answers to apparent contradictions and difficult questions that some Christians may not think of, but outsiders dwell on. For example, in a chapter titled “Is there Credible Evidence for Jesus outside his biographies?” Strobel speaks to a doctor of Mediterranean studies to find out what secular history says about Jesus. He probes the questions as a lawyer would in a court case, and the evidence he finds turns out to be very convincing and provides reasonable grounds for believing in Christianity. The Case for Christ is easy to read, and is much like entering a court case in which Christianity is put on trial to see if it passes the test of being historically possible and coherent. This book is a great read for anyone who wants to strengthen their faith by approaching it from a primarily objective point of skepticism.

Shepherd of Hermas
A Parable of Two Cities

He spoke to me: "You know," he said, "that you who are servants of God are living in a foreign country, for your city is far from this city. If, therefore, you know," he said, "your city in which you are destined to live, why do you prepare fields and expensive possessions and buildings and useless rooms here? If you are preparing these things for this city, you obviously are not planning to return to your own city. Foolish and double-minded and miserable person, do you not realize that all these things are foreign to you, and under someone else's authority? For the lord of this city will say, 'I do not want you to live in my city; instead, leave this city, because you do not conform to my laws.' So you who have fields and dwellings and many other possessions, what will you do with your field and your house and all the other things you have prepared for yourself when you are expelled by him? For the lord of this country has every right to say to you, 'Either conform to my laws, or get out of my country.' So what are you going to do, since you are subject to the law of your own city? For the sake of your fields and the rest of your possessions, will you totally renounce your own law and live according to the law of this city? Take care; it may not be in your best interest to renounce your law, for if you should want to return to your city, you will certainly not be accepted, because you have renounced the law of your city,
and will be shut out of it. So take care; as one living in a foreign land, do not prepare for yourself one thing more than is necessary to be self-sufficient, and be prepared so that whenever the master of this city wants to expel you because of your opposition to his law, you can leave his city and come to your own city, and joyfully conform to your law, free from all insult. Take care, therefore, that you serve the Lord and have Him in your heart; do God’s works, remembering His commandments and the promises that He made, and trust Him to keep them, if His commandments are kept. So instead of fields, buy souls that are in distress, as anyone is able, and visit widows and orphans and do not neglect them; and spend your wealth and all your possessions, which you received from God, on fields and houses of this kind. For this is why the Master made you rich, so that you might perform these ministries for Him. It is much better to purchase fields and possessions and houses of this kind, which you will find in your own city when you go home to it. This lavish expenditure is beautiful and joyous; it does not bring grief or fear, but joy. So do not practice the extravagance of the outsiders, for it is unprofitable to you, the servants of God. But do practice your own extravagance, in which you can rejoice; and do not imitate or touch what belongs to another or covet it; for it is evil to covet someone else’s things. But do your own task, and you will be saved.

The Shepherd of Hermas. Parable 2.1

Prayer, Providence, Predestination

Fr. Thomas Hopko

But we do pray. We can pray, for example for healing. We can pray for another person to be forgiven. We can pray for a person to be converted. We can pray for dead people to receive mercy before God when they are standing in judgment after they have died. We Orthodox believe all these things. Why? We believe that prayer is effective, and it is effective because God hears our prayers before he even creates the world! That’s the point.

Jesus said God knows what we need and hears our prayers before we even say them. You could say, “Well, why bother saying them?” If we don’t bother saying them, then God doesn’t hear them. He doesn’t have anything to hear. But what he does hear beforehand, he hears because we actually freely do it. Think about that. It is very important, because what that means is the whole providence of God depends on what we do—whether or not we pray, what we want, what we hope for...

what we are trying to live by, and what we actually do.

Of course, we pray to God not so much to get God to do stuff, we pray to God so that He would show us what we’re supposed to do. Then of course, we can pray to God, for example, for healing, but we also have to say, “Nevertheless, you will be done,” because we know darn well it was God’s plan not to keep his son Jesus alive in this world, but to let him get crucified. We know that it is God’s plan that some people would die young, some people would live to be old, some people would suffer, other people wouldn’t. That is all part of God’s inscrutable, unsearchable plan....

Getting back to prayer, the claim would be this: God hears our prayers before we even make them, and they become part of divine providence, so whether I pray or don’t pray: that changes everything. How persistently I pray: that changes everything. My prayer actually, so to speak, in Christ, and by God, actually becomes a power and a presence in other people’s lives...All of our prayers affect other people by way of God. They do not affect other people directly. It is because we, through God, through the Holy Spirit, become a power and a presence in other people’s lives because of our prayers.

That is why some people could even say, “I know that I have been saved by the prayers of my mother.” St. Augustine, for example. “How could those tears and prayers go unanswered?” Well, they could’ve. He could have remained a lecher and a lascivious fool, but he did not. He surrendered to the grace of God in his life, which is not irresistible. He could have resisted it.

But then he came to believe that a big part of the grace of God in his life came because of the petitions of his mother, and that she was part of that conversion process, even a crucial part. When we cooperate with God, we become God’s co-workers for the sake of the salvation and the healing and the well-being of the whole world and of other human beings.

The point here is this: Whether we pray or whether we don’t pray is a big difference, and it is never too late to pray for anything. My mom has departed this life; so has my father. I pray for them every day. I say, “God, give rest to my parents, receive them into paradise. May they accept your divine glory.” Some folks would say, “What are you wasting your time for? They’re dead, it is over.” But I say, “Over for whom?” It is not over for God. I’m still in space and time. I am on the planet earth. They are buried in the cemetery in Endicott, New York—their bodies are, anyway.

Their life is in the hands of God. But if I pray for them, I believe God heard the prayer, not only before they died; he heard the prayer before they were born. He heard the prayer before I was born. He heard the prayer before he created the whole world. He heard the prayer before there was anything, and he shaped and designed his whole divine providence on the basis of my prayer, whether or not I prayed—and your prayer and everybody’s prayer and the prayers of the whole universe ...