



# What Is Faith in Jesus?

by Don Everts

My name is Don, and I am a Christian. One of the things you'll learn about me in this booklet is that I find belief in Jesus to be a remarkable, life-changing reality. This may not come as a huge surprise to you, since believing in Jesus is something Christians bring up all the time. In fact, if you've ever seen a Christian holding up a poster at a football game with a Bible verse on it, it most likely was John 3:16. That verse celebrates believing in Jesus:

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16 ESV).

Believe in Jesus and you will live forever. That's a pretty big claim. In fact, football fans don't always put the next verses on their posters, but the very next verses go on to underscore just how significant believing in Jesus is:

“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” (John 3:17-18).

That's a pretty deep message to wave around at a football game! God loves us. (That's big news.) He sent his Son Jesus to save us from condemnation. (Even bigger news!) And finally, it's *believing in Jesus* that allows us to be saved rather than be condemned. (Kind of makes you wonder what exactly it means to believe in Jesus!)

So, let's go ahead and ask this question people, the world over, have found themselves asking generation after generation for the last 2,000 years: What exactly does it mean to believe in Jesus?

## What Does It Mean to Believe in Jesus?

This is a very fascinating question to ask. It is related to other important (and sometimes hotly debated) topics related to Christianity, such as: *Is the Bible true? Is the Christian church corrupt? Aren't all religions the same?* These are all important questions to ask. But if you want to understand the core of the Christian faith, you also need to ask this important question: *What does it mean to believe in Jesus?*

Now, there is general historical consensus that this man, Jesus, did actually exist and left in his wake a movement of people (Christians) who, from the very beginning, shocked the world. This much is almost universally accepted as true. But believing the historical details *about* Jesus is different than believing *in* Jesus himself.

To believe in Jesus himself means believing in who he was, what he taught, what he did, and the mission he came for. But it can be a bit tricky to talk about believing in the sum total of Jesus' life and identity and teachings and mission. Why? Because at the core of everything about Jesus lies a simple invitation: Jesus called people to follow him. That's what he was all about. But how exactly do you believe in an *invitation*?

Believing in a propositional statement is one thing. If I say, “rain helps grass grow,” that's a propositional statement. I can then naturally enough ask: Do you believe rain helps grass grow? To come to a decision about whether or not you believe this statement, you could study the nature of rain, the effects of rain on grass, etc. Believing in a simple propositional statement is one thing.

But believing in a simple invitation? If I say, “Come have dinner with me,” it’s a little trickier to then ask: Do you believe in ... coming to have dinner with me? That’s a weird question. To get at the truthfulness (or believability) of an invitation, you have to probe a little more, ask more questions: Who exactly is inviting me to dinner? What do I know about them? What are they serving for dinner? Has anyone else ever eaten at their house? If so, how did that go for them?

The believability of an invitation ultimately comes down to trusting the person doing the inviting. So, belief in Jesus is so much more than belief in a historical or theological statement *about* Jesus. Belief involves exploring who Jesus was and what he said and did and what he’s inviting you to. Ultimately, believing in Jesus boils down to trusting Jesus himself.

This is an important distinction. We tend to treat belief as merely an intellectual activity. For example, I could point to a bridge and ask you, Do you believe that bridge can hold you up? And you could reflect on the variables (your weight, the construction of the bridge, etc.) and reply, theoretically, whether or not you think the bridge could hold your weight. This is mostly an intellectual activity you can perform from a safe distance from the bridge. That’s how we tend to treat the act of believing.

But believing in Jesus is not only an intellectual activity. Consider that football verse again: *whoever believes in Jesus will not perish but have eternal life*. When you look more closely at the original Greek word John used there that we translate “believes” (*pisteo*), you discover John is talking about much more than just intellectual assent. That Greek word is not a mind word, it is a life word.

*Pisteo* is a rich word that implies real trust. In fact, the noun form of that rich word (*pistis*) is usually translated by the equally rich English word, *faith*. To honestly say I “believe” that bridge can hold my weight, you would have to step onto the bridge. The belief John is writing about implies real trust, not just intellectual assent. While trust *involves* the intellect, it is ultimately a whole life thing, not just a mind thing. You can’t trust from a safe distance.

To believe in Jesus means to trust Jesus.

## What Does Trust Look Like?

Trusting Jesus is at the core of the Christian faith. But what exactly does it look like for someone to trust Jesus? Put simply: trust is all-in, trust is beautiful, and trust is authentic.

### #1 Trust is All-In

From the beginning, Jesus used a specific word when inviting people to trust him. It’s an interesting and meaningful word. That word is: *repent*.

To repent simply meant to change your mind. It was not a religious term, per se, just an everyday word. For example, if you were walking south to the store one day and someone invited you to head to a different store to the north ... you could “repent” and head north with them. That’s what it meant to repent. So, when Jesus came on the scene calling people to trust him, he invited them to first repent from wherever they were already walking in life and instead follow him.

Jesus understood we all go through life trusting in something or someone. Whether you trust yourself, a chosen authority figure, the scientific method ... we all live life trusting something or someone above all else. Jesus knew this about us and so invited people to *repent* and believe— transferring their trust from wherever it had been placed onto him.

By connecting repentance to trust in this way, Jesus made it clear once and for all that believing in him means trusting him *above all else*, not *in addition* to other things in life. Trust is all-in. And it was from the very beginning.

Consider Peter and Andrew, two of the first people to trust Jesus. These two brothers were fishermen. One day they were together in their family boat on the Sea of Galilee, casting their nets into the water. Jesus was walking along the beach and called out to them. He called out an invitation to come and follow him. Did Peter and Andrew trust the one inviting them? They did. And what did that trust look like? It was all-in:

“And immediately they left their nets and followed him” (Mark 1:18).

Peter and Andrew’s trust was all-in. They trusted Jesus above all else in life. And when Peter later shared this invitation to trust Jesus with others, he was sure to not just invite people to believe, but to *repent* and believe—transferring their trust onto Jesus. As Peter put it:

“Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord” (Acts 3:19).

Peter makes it clear that trust is all-in. Peter also uses a phrase I’ve grown to love: “times of refreshing.” In that phrase, Peter hints at another aspect of what trust looks like. Trusting Jesus is beautiful.

## **#2 Trust is beautiful**

From the very beginning it was clear that trusting Jesus was a beautiful experience. Our football verse implies as much:

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Since believing in Jesus brings forgiveness of sins and eternal life, no wonder Jesus and his church called this “good news”! Being forgiven for your every sin is a sublime experience: “times of refreshing” is indeed an apt description.

Consider how Peter and other early Christians spoke and wrote in such moving ways about this beautiful experience of being forgiven:

“All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43).

“Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you” (Acts 13:38).

“He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:13-14).

Trust is beautiful. This is what generation after generation of Christians have been saying about their experience of trusting Jesus, sometimes going so far as to hold up signs at football games that announce this good news!

Trust is beautiful. But that doesn’t mean trust is void of real, gritty realities. On the contrary, trust is an authentic human experience.

## **#3 Trust is authentic**

From the very beginning, it became clear that trusting in Jesus was a relational human experience. Jesus was inviting real people, not perfect robots, to repent and follow him.

Just consider Peter, again. Peter left his nets, trusting fully in Jesus. Did that mean Peter was a perfect, squeaky-clean disciple of Jesus every moment for the rest of his life? No. Peter was not a robot. Peter was a human who trusted Jesus, which meant his trust was relational and authentic.

What exactly does relational, authentic trust look like? Well, Peter always trusted Jesus, but at times he was afraid. Sometimes Peter frustrated Jesus. Peter kept asking Jesus honest questions that he had. On one occasion, Peter outright disagreed with Jesus and rebuked him publicly. On another occasion, Peter lied, denying he even knew Jesus! In these ways we see that Peter was a real person in an authentic trusting relationship with Jesus.

Did this somehow disqualify Peter? Not at all. Peter was actually the “rock” that Jesus founded his entire church upon. Did Peter’s messiness or honest questions mean he no longer trusted Jesus? Not at all. Peter became a model of authentic trust, his writings inspiring generations of Christians in their own trust in Jesus.

You see, Jesus never expected people to be perfect. He invited them into a relationship of trust. Consider that one day Jesus’ inner group of leaders, who had already repented and put their trust in him, admitted in transparency that their faith in Jesus was a humble, small faith. They didn’t hide this from Jesus; they simply asked Jesus for more faith:

“The apostles said to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith’” (Luke 17:5).

Did Jesus roll his eyes and get rid of these leaders? Not at all. Jesus replied that even if they have faith the size of a mustard seed, they've got enough. A mustard seed is a really small, unimpressive seed. But it is a real seed. Trust, Jesus was assuring his disciples, isn't about an impressive performance.

People who trust Jesus are real people, in a real relationship with Jesus. They still have questions and doubts and fears. They still make mistakes and ask for forgiveness. Trust is not intended to be squeaky clean; it is intended to be relational and authentic.

What does it look like to trust Jesus? It is an all-in posture that is as beautiful as it is authentic. But how, exactly, does someone arrive at this all-in, beautiful, authentic trust?

## The Journey to Trust

Jesus gave his disciples a great image of what it's like to be walking through life and arrive at a place of all-in, beautiful, authentic trust. Two images, actually. The first image of journeying to trust looks like this:

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, when a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field" (Matthew 13:44).

Do you see the picture Jesus paints? A man is just walking along, tending to the duties of his day, when he stumbles upon a treasure. The course of his everyday activities takes him straight into a thing of great value.

That treasure he finds is so valuable that he—in joy!—sells everything he has to buy the field, and its treasure. Once he sees the treasure, that's it. He wants the treasure. And so he "repents" if you will: he sells everything else in his life and goes all-in on the treasure.

This is a picture of what it is like to journey to trust. This man's journey involves going all-in (he sells everything), is undoubtedly beautiful (he has joy), and is authentic (it happens in the midst of his everyday life). Sometimes the journey to trust is just like this—someone is just living their life when they somehow stumble upon Jesus. Maybe they've heard of Jesus before but have never really *run into him*, never really confronted Jesus himself—who he is, what he taught and did, what his mission was. And when they do—they find they want him more than anything. They find trust inside of them.

But sometimes the journey to faith is a little different. Jesus painted another image:

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went and sold everything he had and bought it" (Matthew 13:45-46).

Do you see the picture Jesus paints? In ways this second image is similar to the first: trust is all-in and beautiful and authentic. But in this case, the man didn't just stumble into the treasure. This man's journey was a little different. It involved a long period of searching, asking questions, going from market to market, weighing the value of different pearls ... and then came the moment. This man, after careful searching and weighing, found a pearl of such great value that he—in joy—went all-in.

Sometimes the journey to trust looks more like this: careful searching, asking lots of questions, exploring and weighing various religions and traditions and spiritual claims. And somewhere in that careful process they are confronted by Jesus himself—who he is, what he taught and did, what his mission was. And when they do—they find they want him more than anything. They find trust inside of them.

As Jesus makes clear with his two images, trust is always all-in and beautiful and authentic. But the path to trust varies greatly from person to person.

## My Own Journey to Trust

In my own experience, I was a little bit like the careful pearl merchant and a lot like the fellow just wandering through a field.

Since even before I could read, I've always been curious and inquisitive—in some fairly nerdy ways. (I've learned that not every third-grader reads multiple biographies of Gandhi to compare them with his autobiography.) So, there was a little bit of the pearl merchant in me growing up.

But by the time I got to high school I was mostly just wandering. In fact, when my best friend, Todd, invited me to go to a Christian camp up in Canada the summer after my sophomore year, I mostly saw it as a chance to meet cute girls. So did Todd. (It's embarrassing to admit, but Todd and I made elaborate plans beforehand about how many girls we would each meet during the trip.)

I suppose we *knew* it was a *Christian* camp, but we weren't actually that thoughtful going in—we heard they had speed boats and lots of teenagers. So, we went!

But neither Todd nor I talked with any girls that week. Both of us, independently, stumbled upon this treasure of Jesus himself. I had learned lots about Jesus growing up. I knew lots of the Bible stories. But I had never encountered Jesus himself—who he was, what he taught and did, and what his mission was—until I saw a skit about an orange up at that camp in Canada.

It was really a skit about a girl's heart. I'll never forget that skit. We were sitting on the floor, a couple hundred of us, watching the young actors on the stage. The main girl held this perfect, bright orange in her hands. The orange represented her heart. As she went through life and had interactions with people (represented by little scenes with her parents, with friends, with a boyfriend), she was inevitably hurt by them. As a physical representation of this, the other actors plunged long nails into her orange—illustrating the hurt to her heart.

Eventually, having been hurt by so many people, she stood center stage staring down at her wounded heart. Her heart was a mess. This once perfect orange was now filled with nails, disfigured, dripping. And as her sadness turned to anger (I recognized self-hatred in her eyes, an emotion I was well acquainted with myself in high school), she began to beat at her heart, plunging her own nail into her own heart.

There on the stage, in that actress, I saw my life. As she began to cry, I had to hold back the tears.

And then something simple but incredible happened. A new character came into the sorrowful scene. It was Jesus. (It had to be Jesus; what other man would be wearing a robe?) He came to this young woman and told her, with love in his voice, that he was so sorry for what had happened to her heart. He clearly had compassion for her.

And then he told her some good news as he looked down at the orange: he could heal her heart. She looked up at him with obvious interest. And then Jesus told her who he was: he was the Son of God. He told her what he had done: he had died on a cross to pay for her every sin. And he told her about the mission he was on: he was sent to earth to suffer, die, and rise from the dead to establish a Kingdom of the saved. This kingdom was a place of forgiveness and hope, a place of healing.

She looked back down at the orange, clearly grappling with this message of hope. And then Jesus invited her to trust him. "I can heal your heart. You just have to trust me with it."

She was clearly conflicted, and my eyes grew wide as I watched her wrestle with this invitation. Clearly, she wanted to believe healing was possible. But her heart had always been hurt by others ... could she trust Jesus with it? As she stood, confronted by Jesus on the stage, I was sitting on the crowded wooden floor, confronted by Jesus himself.

And then it happened. She trusted him. She found trust for Jesus within her. And then Jesus told her, and all of us sitting there, the good news that I had seen held up at so many football games: that God so loves the world that he gave his only Son so that whoever trusted in him would never perish but receive eternal life. And as he did this, the actor playing Jesus must have done some sort of sleight of hand because all of a sudden the young woman's orange was whole, bright, and pure. Not a single nail remained. It was beautiful.

It's wasn't just the new orange that was beautiful, the whole exchange between this young woman and Jesus was beautiful. That experience of trust was beautifully and simply portrayed on the stage in front of me. The young girl was thrilled and joyful; Jesus was thrilled and joyful, and I ... I had stumbled upon a treasure, I realized.

All of a sudden, I was confronted by Jesus himself. And I realized I trusted him. Like the folks in the parable, I could see Jesus was a treasure worth more than anything I had in life. I could see he was inviting me to trust him *above all else in life*. And I realized I did.

And so later that night back at my cabin I prayed—expressing to God this trust that resided inside me. It was a simple prayer. There was nothing fancy or religious about this prayer. It was simply a heartfelt way of telling God that I saw now what a treasure he had given me in Jesus. I told him I was all-in. I didn't literally sell all my possessions but, in a way, I did. Here was my true treasure: Jesus.

After burping out this authentic prayer, I said, simply, "Amen." And right at that moment fireworks went off. Not just figuratively—literally, fireworks went off outside! (I know, it seems too perfect or cheesy to be true ... but that's exactly what happened.) You see, it happened to be the Fourth of July and even though we were in Canada, someone had set off fireworks at the very moment that I said "Amen!" I know, it was a pretty cool moment.

## The Gift of Faith

But as cool as that moment in time was, I realize looking back, that it was really the culmination of a long journey.

I arrived at that moment of trust because of ... my early spiritual curiosity in life, all the Bible stories and teachings I heard growing up, an undeniable sense as an early teen of my own sinfulness, an honest recognition of the wounds I had suffered in life, that decision to go on this trip up to Canada, my attentive focus on the skit about the orange. I had been on a journey. And as I was going through each part of this journey I was keenly aware of my decisions and actions. I was living this life that came, ultimately, to this moment of all-in, beautiful, authentic trust in Jesus.

But as I reflect back on this journey with the benefit of hindsight, I realize God himself was at work all along the way. God stirred that early curiosity within me. He led me to places where I could hear his words from the Bible taught and proclaimed. His Holy Spirit convicted me of my own sinfulness. He gave me the courage to examine the wounds I had received in life. He led me up to Canada and opened my eyes and ears with attentiveness the night of the skit. And even this trust I have within me, where did that trust come from? God himself placed that trust within me.

Looking back, I realize it was all a gift.

God himself brought me on this journey to trust. Reflecting back on my own story underscores for me just how big a gift God has given me. I believe in Jesus—because God gave me the gift of belief. That realization is even cooler than when the fireworks went off outside! This is why I love the more robust word we use to refer to this posture of belief and trust in Jesus: faith. God gave me the gift of faith.

The Bible is clear that faith is always a gift. As Paul puts it in his letter to the Ephesian church:

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8).

Paul's reasoning building up to this verse in Ephesians resonates within me: before coming to Jesus we are all spiritually dead. We need someone to come to us and save us. That's the bad news Paul clarifies. But it underscores the beauty of the good news Paul clarifies: God is "rich in mercy" and loves us with such a "great love" that he comes to us. He gives us the gift of faith. And it is through faith that we are saved— just as the football verse celebrates.

Looking back, I realize by grace I was saved through faith. It was pure grace, a complete gift, that God saved me by giving me faith. Christians throughout the centuries have been humbled and amazed by this gift. We journey to faith and, once we arrive, we look back and realize how kind and loving God has been to us to bring us there.

Even for those who are still on the journey, this big picture of the gift of faith is important to grasp and reckon with. I recently read the story of a Christian theologian who was confronted with the gift of faith early in life while still a non-Christian.

As a religion student, she was studying a historical Christian text, the *Augsburg Confession*, and as a non-Christian was struggling to understand a phrase used in the text: "justification by grace through faith." Justification is a theological term for being forgiven for all your sins (being "justified" before God). Justification comes to us as a gift (by grace) as faith is given to us. Pondering this phrase caused the student to confront the good news of Jesus in a way she never had before.

As she reflects back on that moment:

“Justification by grace through faith’ ... justification by grace through faith—what are they talking about? So I decided to try it on. I lifted my arms up and I put over me like a dress, the doctrine. I tried it on myself. It wasn’t just words. I tried it out. And I fell off the chair. It was in July, it was very hot; I was on the third floor in my study ... I tried it on like a dress, and I just fell over.” (*Habits of the Mind: Intellectual Life as a Christian Calling*, James S. Sire, pg. 73.)

Confronting the gift of faith made this religion student confront the great love and rich mercy of God. Just *reflecting* on the gift of faith is enough to floor you. To experience it personally? It’s cooler than fireworks, to say the least.

## Your Journey to Faith

If you’ve read this booklet, you are likely on a journey of your own. Obviously, I can’t know all the wonderful, painful details of that journey, but there are a few things I am confident of based on my own journey and the journeys of many others that I’ve met over the years:

### #1: It is important to encounter Jesus himself.

While it is natural and understandable to ponder and ask all sorts of questions about Christianity and the church, each of us must ultimately encounter Jesus himself. This means confronting, head-on, Jesus’ life: his identity, what he did, what he taught, and the mission he was on.

How do you confront the details of Jesus himself in this way? One way is to get in an honest conversation with a Christian. Ask a Christian you know to share some of the ways Jesus is at work in their life. Ask them to connect the dots between Jesus and issues of everyday life.

Another way to confront the details of Jesus himself is to spend time in one of the gospels. There are four ancient records of Jesus’ life, teachings, actions, and mission that we have: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Spend enough time in one (or some) of those and you will undoubtedly encounter Jesus himself.

### #2: It is important to ask your questions.

While Jesus and his invitation to follow him is at the core of Christianity, there are plenty of other questions you may have on your journey to faith. Questions about Christians, church, the Bible, or prayer. Questions about a specific Christian teaching or specific section in the Bible. Questions about the history of the church or behavior of Christians. Questions about what you read and hear about Jesus.

It is good and right to ask these questions and search for answers. Again, you can do this by asking a Christian friend or family member to help you explore these questions. They may have some specific answers but will also likely know where to look for more information. There are also many books written by Christians for folks who are journeying toward faith, and many churches have various resources for those who are asking questions. Also, you can always explore the Bible itself. Spend enough time reading in the Bible and you will undoubtedly find some answers to some of your questions.

### #3: It is important to clarify the costs and benefits of following Jesus.

As we’ve seen faith is all-in. There are real costs to following Jesus—it’s important to get honest about those. Spend time counting up those costs. As we’ve also seen faith is beautiful. There is a sublime beauty to having your sins forgiven and entering Jesus’ kingdom of hope and healing. Following Jesus is beautiful. Spend time reflecting on that beauty.

Finally, faith is authentic. It is about the real you following the real Jesus. Faith is a relationship of trust, not a theory about trust. Faith is about you being all-in and forgiven, not just about theoretical costs and benefits. Spend enough time reflecting personally on faith and you will undoubtedly take a few steps on your journey.

And if one day you realize you trust Jesus, give voice to that trust in prayer. It doesn’t have to be fancy or religious. Just express your trust to God. You may not hear fireworks here on earth, but heaven will be filled with joy. As Jesus himself described it:

“In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:10).

Don Everts is an award-winning author of more than a dozen books about Jesus of Nazareth and the adventure of being one of his disciples. As a college minister, ordained pastor, and friendly neighbor, Don has been getting into conversations about Jesus for more than 25 years.



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