

OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

Confidence to Rejoice

David Anguish

In an episode of their *Ask NT Wright Anything* podcast, Mike Bird and Wright responded to a listener who wondered how, if the disciples were asleep in the garden of Gethsemane, the Gospel writers knew what Jesus said in his prayer. Another questioner asked about conspiracy theories relative to the origins of Christianity and the Gospels. Both questions go to the credibility issue expressed in the episode's title: "Can We Trust the Gospels? N. T. Wright on Bible Mysteries and Conspiracy Theories" (listen here, or on YouTube).

Their conversation reminded me of a YouTube clip I had noticed several times in my feed; it includes excerpts and commentary on a 2025 podcast in which historian and Hoover Institution Senior Fellow Victor Davis Hanson joined Jillian Michaels, fitness influencer and one-time cohost of a fitness reality show. When Hanson explained the Roman reaction to Jesus' ministry, Michaels looked confused, and then volunteered that she had always thought Jesus didn't really exist. In reply, Hanson cited several extra-biblical sources that mention him. (See Michael Foust's summary here; or a transcript of the conversation here.)

"How could she not know?" we wonder. Her statement may surprise us because we are so familiar with Jesus' story; surely everyone else must be aware of it too. It's also possible we've not paid enough attention to our culture's thinking; people have other interests that take precedence over faith claims, and advocates for alternative views of Jesus have successfully publicized their ideas to the populace.

Copyright 2026 by David Anguish

Bird and Wright acknowledge those efforts, specifically mentioning the Jesus Seminar, the scholars group formed in the mid-1980s for the purpose of "identifying evidence about what, in all probability, Jesus actually said and did without privileging any traditional religious claims about him. The invitation [to join the group] included a commitment to making the results of the inquiry available to the general public as a contribution to religious literacy." To that end, they began the Westar Institute, whose website remains current, and on which the above quotation appears. The headline on their home page makes their intention clear: "Making world-class scholarship in religion accessible to everyone." They are not alone, of course; for decades, numerous popular-level media, including non-fiction narrative books, novels, documentaries, and feature films, have been widely disseminated. Multiple believers have answered their claims, but face the difficulty of being heard in a very noisy media—not to mention social media—environment.

Because we benefit from the cultural dominance Christianity eventually achieved, we can lose sight of how out of step with their world Peter and his readers were. They had renounced allegiances and practices that allowed participation in mainstream Greco-Roman society. As a consequence, they were alienated, social misfits viewed with contempt. That Peter empathized with their ostracism is seen first, in the fact that he addressed them as "strangers and exiles" (1 Pet 2.11); second, in his repeated exhortations to persevere and be unashamed in the midst of their suffering (3.13–17; 4.1–6, 12–19); and third, in his call for them to be "ready … to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you" (3.15).

It's also evident in his awareness that his readers did not share his experience of having seen, heard, and touched Jesus (cf. Luke 24.39; 1 John 1.1): "Though you have not seen him, you love him; though not seeing him now, you believe in him, and you rejoice with inexpressible and glorious joy" (1 Pet 1.8). This verse is part of a substructure within the one long Greek sentence that comprises 1.3–12 wherein "the two occurrences of the verb ἀγαλλιᾶσθε (*agalliasthe*, you rejoice), in verses 6 and 8, form an inclusio, with the present joy of Christians qualified by certain concessions in between" (Jobes 2022, 94).

> 6 You *rejoice* in this, even though now for a short time, if necessary, you suffer grief in various
> trials 7 so that the proven character of your faith—more valuable than gold which, though perish-
> able, is refined by fire—may result in praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. 8
> Though you have not seen him, you love him; though not seeing him now, you believe in him, and
> you *rejoice* with inexpressible and glorious joy, 9 because you are receiving the goal of your faith,
> the salvation of your souls (1 Pet 1.6–9).

Recall that in verses 3–5, Peter blesses God who, out of his mercy, has given Christians a new birth that, through Jesus' resurrection, provides access into a living hope. That hope is the basis for assurance of an imperishable, undefiled, and unfading inheritance kept in heaven and guarded by God's power until the time salvation will be revealed. Therefore, we can "rejoice" (v. 6), even as we suffer trials which prove the character of our faith. We can do this even though, unlike Peter, we have never seen Jesus. It's a remarkable analysis of Peter's response to their situation, as Karen Jobes explains:

> In other words, the trying circumstances Peter's readers are in would not, humanly speaking, give
> them any reason to hope in the glorious future that is theirs in Christ. Nor have they had the empir-
> ical experience of witnessing Jesus either during his life or in his resurrection glory. They love

Copyright 2026 by David Anguish

> Jesus even though they did not see him (ἰδόντες, *idontes*, aorist); they believe in Jesus even though they are not now seeing him (ὁρῶντες, *horōntes*, present). They are truly walking by faith, not by sight, and therefore are blessed as Jesus himself promised in John 20:29: "Blessed are those who do not see [me] and believe" (Jobes 2022, 95).

But what if our confidence is eroded and joy diminished by ignorance or uncertainty about the events on which our faith is based? As Clark Pinnock once wrote, "The heart cannot delight in what the mind rejects as false" (Pinnock 1967, 3). Nor can it rejoice in what the mind has not accepted.

Like Peter's first readers, we are called to love and believe Jesus despite never having seen him. But that doesn't mean we can't learn what we need to be confident about his life and rejoice in the blessings he provides. To fully appreciate this, we must first understand that people in Peter's world also needed adequate evidence of the apostles' claims before they would accept them (cf. John 20.29). But not all of them were convinced, and their reasons—and presuppositions—for disbelief were much like those we hear now (cf. John 11.45–48; 12.9–10; Mark 11.18).

Except for the comparatively few who had firsthand experience of Jesus, they were asked to believe based on testimony—just as we are; Peter's own testimony about what he had seen and heard would have been part of the evidence they considered. But the fact that the evidence to which we have access is documentary testimony does not, per se, alter its credibility. As Bernard Ramm wrote, "Once an event is recorded reliably in document form, the reliability of the document is not changed by the mere passage of time. If the raising of Lazarus [John 11] was actually witnessed by John and recorded faithfully by him while still in soundness of faculties and memory, *for purposes of evidence*, it is the same as if we were there and saw it" (Ramm 1953, 140–141).

If more people now do not have the knowledge, assurance, and joy Peter's readers did, part of the reason may be that believers have said too little about the evidence for our confidence and rejoicing. We should do more.

Works Cited

Bird, Mike, and N. T. Wright. 2026. "Can We Trust the Gospels? NT Wright on Bible Mysteries and Conspiracy Theories." *Ask NT Wright Anything Podcast. Premier Insight*. https://www.premierinsight.org/program/ask-nt-wright-anything/ Accessed Nov. 3, 2026.

Foust, Michael. 2025 (Nov. 21). "Jillian Michaels' Candid Reaction to Non-Biblical Evidence for Jesus Goes Viral." *Crosswalk*. https://www.crosswalk.com/headlines/contributors/michael-foust/jillian-michaels-candid-reaction-to-non-biblical-evidence-for-jesus-goes-viral.html. Accessed Nov. 4, 2026.

Jobes, Karen H. 2022. *1 Peter*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. 2nd ed. Baker Academic.

Pinnock, Clark H. 1967. *Set Forth Your Case: Studies in Christian Apologetics*. The Craig Press.

Ramm, Bernard. 1953. *Protestant Christian Evidences*. Moody Press.

Schwartz, Ian. 2025 (November 18). "Victor Davis Hanson: The Story Of Jesus Christ And How Christianity Shaped The World." *RealClear Politics*. https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2025/11/18/victor_davis_hanson_the_story_of_jesus_christ_and_how_christianity_shaped_the_world.html. Accessed Nov. 4, 2026.

Westar Institute. 2026. https://www.westarinstitute.org/ Accessed Nov. 5, 2026.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the CSB
(All emphasis in Bible quotations added by the author)

Copyright 2026 by David Anguish

Permission is granted to reprint original materials with the credit line, "Reprinted from David Anguish, 'Opening the Scriptures,' November 10, 2026"

I appreciate comments and questions. Direct them to david@davidanguish.com

To receive each new issue of this newsletter in your inbox, click here.

An Additional Thought

"Suffering is no less real … just because it does not lead to death. Since scorn and contempt are slow-working acids that corrode individual and communal identity, social alienation should not be viewed as a trivial form of suffering. Persecution may bring death, but the martyr has the advantage of dying with meaning. Societal scorn, however, threatens meaning and identity. In the face of outside hostility or contempt, intentional communities often respond by portraying the outsiders as evil. It is remarkable; therefore, that 1 Peter advocates such an open attitude toward the larger society, which, according to the writer, only needs to be shown that the Christian way is harmless."

~ Luke Timothy Johnson. 2010. *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation.* 3rd ed. Fortress Press, 427

Copyright 2026 by David Anguish