

EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY

- A. Introduction: When Jesus left this world two thousand years ago He promised His followers that He would return, and warned them that the years preceding His return will be marked by deception and tribulation which He compared to birth pangs. They will increase in frequency and intensity. Acts 1:9-11; Matt 24:4-8
1. Luke 21:28—Jesus told His followers that when we see these troubles coming on the earth we should be elated in joyous expectation. You can only do this if you understand what is happening and why, and if you know that God will get you through whatever is ahead. The Bible gives us the “what” and the “why” along with the confidence and wisdom we’ll need in the days and years to come.
 - a. The best thing you can do to prepare for what is ahead is to become a Bible reader. Since Bible reading is a challenge for many sincere Christians, we’re taking several weeks to talk about how to read it and we’re discussing information that will help you as you read.
 - b. Bible reading is overwhelming because people don’t know how to approach it. So, I’m giving you an effective way to read the Bible. Start with the New Testament and become a regular, systematic reader. (The Old Testament is easier to understand after you are competent in the New.)
 1. By systematic reading I mean don’t skip around and read random passages. Read each book and letter from start to finish. Don’t stop to look up words or consult commentaries; just read.
 - A. This doesn’t mean you can’t ever skip around or look up words and topics in a dictionary or commentary. But do that at another time besides this regular, systematic reading time.
 - B. The goal is to become familiar with the New Testament because understanding comes with familiarity and familiarity comes with frequent, repeated reading.
 2. By regular reading I mean: Set aside ten to twenty minutes each day and read as much as you can. Leave a marker where you stop and, the next day, pick up where you left off. Try to read some of the smaller epistles in just one sitting. If you miss a day or two (or more) don’t get discouraged and stop reading. Start again. Make regular, systematic reading a lifelong habit.
 2. Before we get into tonight’s topic, let me make two helpful comments about regular, systematic reading.
 - a. First, I’m not giving rules for reading that must be followed to the letter. You can change things up. My goal is to get you to read entire New Testament books and letters in a short period of time.
 1. As a new Christian, after I read through the New Testament a couple of times, I modified my reading. I’d read a gospel and then all the epistles, repeating with each gospel and then Acts.
 2. I didn’t read Revelation again for several years. I had never heard of the second coming prior to becoming a committed Christian and Revelation was completely over my head at that point.
 - b. Second, the purpose of this kind of reading is to become familiar with the New Testament—and that takes some time. But this doesn’t mean that you can’t get help until you’re familiar with the Bible because God can and will meet you where you are.
 3. For many Christians, it’s hard to see the Bible as anything other than a book of Sunday school stories. This makes Bible reading difficult because it doesn’t seem relevant to their lives. In this lesson we’re going to address this issue by beginning to look at how the New Testament came into existence.
- B. About half of the Bible is history. It is a reliable, historical record of real people. Let’s consider what the New Testament was in the context of the people who wrote it and the people who first heard and read it.
1. We’ve made the point in previous lessons that Jesus was born into a people group that, based on the writings of their prophets, were expecting a Redeemer (Messiah) who would come to this world, restore it to pre-sin conditions, and establish God’s kingdom on earth. Dan 2:44; Dan 7:27; Isa 65:17; Isa 51:3
 - a. Jesus’ first followers (the twelve apostles) became convinced that He was the promised Messiah. They spent over three years with Him listening to Him teach and watching Him authenticate His message with miracles. Their time with Jesus culminated in Him dying by crucifixion and being

buried in a nearby tomb. Three days later, He rose from the dead.

1. Luke 24:44-48—On the day of His resurrection Jesus appeared to His apostles and began to explain what had happened over the previous three days.
 2. Jesus revealed that His blood was the once for all, final sacrifice for sin and His resurrection is proof that sin is paid for. Reconciliation between God and man is now available to all who believe and give their lives to Him. Rom 4:25; Rom 5:1-2
- b. Note that on resurrection day Jesus reminded His apostles that they were witnesses of His death and resurrection. (v48—You are eyewitnesses, J.B. Phillips).
1. A witness is someone who can testify to the truth of what he has seen, heard, and knows. The Greek word translated witness is *martus*. The English word martyr comes from it. A martyr is someone who bears witness or testifies to the truth of what he believes and says by his death.
 2. All of the men Jesus spoke to (except for John) would eventually die a martyr's death. They were so persuaded of what they witnessed that they wouldn't deny it even in the face of death.
- c. Jesus remained with the apostles for forty days and then returned to Heaven. Before He departed He told them to wait in Jerusalem where the Holy Spirit would come upon them, and they would be His witnesses unto the ends of the earth. Acts 1:4-8
1. The Book of Acts is a record of the apostles' actions following Jesus' return to Heaven. Acts reveals that they went out and proclaimed what they had seen. They were witnesses who testified to the fact that Jesus rose from the dead. Acts 2:32; 3:15; 4:33; 5:30-32; 10:39-41
 2. When the apostle Paul was converted Jesus told him that he too was to be a witness of what he had seen (the resurrected Lord) and what he would see and hear when Jesus appeared to him again in the future. Acts 26:16; Acts 22:10-15.
2. Christianity stands apart from every other religion in that it is not based on its founder's dreams and visions or on His ideology and belief system. It is founded on a historical fact, the resurrection of Jesus.
- a. When the resurrection of Jesus is examined with the same criteria used to assess other historical events (like eyewitness accounts) we find that there is more evidence for the resurrection of Jesus than for many events recorded in history textbooks used in our schools and universities.
 - b. There are many accounts of skeptics and unbelievers through the centuries who set out to disprove Jesus' resurrection but came away as believers when they realized the evidence overwhelmingly confirms that He did rise from the dead. (Josh McDowell, MORE THAN A CARPENTER, THE RESURRECTION FACTOR, and Lee Strobel, THE CASE FOR CHRIST, are two good examples).
 - c. We could do lessons on this topic, but consider just a few examples of the evidence that exists.
 1. An empty tomb. No one disputes that Jesus' tomb was empty. The argument is over what happened to the body of Jesus. That's why the Jewish authorities paid the Roman guards to say that Jesus' disciples stole His body. Matt 28:11-15
 2. No one was able to produce a body and no one came forward with testimony saying that they saw the disciples move and dispose of the body. This silence is deafening since it would have been in interest of the authorities to produce a body and stop this movement before it began.
 3. Women were the first to see the empty tomb and the risen Lord and the first to spread the news. Women were not highly regarded in that culture. If you were making up a story you would not select a woman to be the source of your story. Matt 28:1-8; John 20:11-16
 4. When Peter and John went to the empty tomb they saw something that made them immediate believers—undisturbed grave clothes. Jesus' body was wrapped like a cocoon according to Jewish customs, with strips of linen and more than 100 pounds of spices. The body couldn't have been removed without destroying the cocoon. John 20:4-8; John 19:39-40
 5. Jesus made numerous post-resurrection appearances to a variety of people, including 500 at once, and hostile witnesses like Saul (who became Paul) and Jesus' half-brother James, both of

- whom were convinced of the resurrection by what they saw. I Cor 15:5-8
- d. The men who wrote the New Testament were eyewitnesses (or close associates of eyewitnesses) of the resurrection—Matthew, Peter, John, (apostles), Mark (a close associate of Peter), Luke (a close associate of Paul), James and Jude (Jesus’ half-brothers), Paul (met Jesus on the Damascus road),
3. These men did not set out to write a religious book. They set out to proclaim a vital message—salvation from sin has come through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. And we saw Him alive!
 - a. The apostles lived in an oral culture that emphasized memorization. More than 50% of people in the Roman Empire could read or write. There were no printing presses or recording devices and books (scrolls). Education was done by word of mouth. So, they spread their message orally.
 1. Certain literary devices were included in oral stories to make them easier to remember. Rabbis were famous for memorizing the entire Old Testament.
 2. It’s highly likely that Jesus’ disciples committed much of what He said to memory. Keep in mind that they had the Holy Spirit to help them remember what Jesus said and did. John 14:26
 - b. This first generation of believers memorized testimonies (eyewitness accounts about Jesus), along with creeds (statements of belief), and hymns and shared them with each other.
 1. Paul wrote some of the earliest documents in the New Testament (late 40’s and 50’s AD). His epistles contain hymns, creeds, and confessions of faith used by the first Christians, showing us what they believed about Jesus. Phil 2:6-11; Col 1:15-20
 2. I Cor 15:3-7—Paul’s language indicates that he was passing along an oral tradition. He went to Corinth in AD 50 and wrote I Corinthians about AD 54 to the church he founded in the city.
 - A. The crucifixion occurred in AD 30 and Paul was converted in AD 32. After he met Jesus, Paul continued on to Damascus and stayed with a believer named Ananias. Paul later met with the apostles in Jerusalem about AD 35. Acts 9:8-18; Gal 1:18
 - B. Some time in this period Paul heard the creed he repeated in I Corinthians. It was being used by the first Christians two to five years after the actual events, revealing that they believed in the resurrection from the beginning. (It wasn’t a myth added later.)
 - C. Note that Paul gave a list of many who saw Jesus post-resurrection who were still alive and could verify what Paul said and wrote. All of that is eyewitness testimony.
 4. The epistles were the first writings that became part of the New Testament. Although they are referred to as letters they are actually discourses or sermons. When the author couldn’t be there to deliver the message himself, he sent a substitute (the epistles). They were meant to be read aloud, usually to a number of people at once, and were written with that fact in mind. Acts 15:30; Col 4:16
 - a. Epistles were written to people converted to Christ through the ministries of the apostles during the period described in Acts. They explain what Christians believe and give instruction on how to live.
 1. The earliest epistle (James, AD 46-49) was written to Christians scattered through the Roman Empire—Jewish pilgrims who were saved in Jerusalem at Pentecost who had returned to their homes and those from Palestine who were scattered by persecution. All of them needed instruction and encouragement in their new faith. Acts 2:9-11; Acts 8:1-4; Acts 11:19-21
 2. Paul wrote Galatians (AD 48-49) to a group of churches he established in the Roman province of Galatia (in Asia Minor) when a report was brought to him that false teachers had influenced the churches, claiming that believers must keep the Law of Moses to be right with God.
 3. Paul wrote I Thessalonians (AD 51-52). He had established a church in Thessalonica but persecution broke out after only a few weeks and Paul was forced to leave. He wrote to his new converts to encourage them and provide further instruction in the faith. Acts 17:1-15
 - b. Notice that these epistles were written by real people to other real people about real issues regarding their faith in Christ and their lives as Christians—not to make a Sunday School book for them.
 5. The gospels were written 20-30 years after Jesus returned to Heaven. As eyewitnesses began to die off,

their words were preserved in written form. These documents went where eyewitnesses couldn't.

- a. The Gospel of Luke (AD 0-68) was written to Theophilus, a new convert, to assure him of the historical reality of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Luke has earned a reputation today as a historian even among secular scholars through giving historical details. Luke 1:5; Luke 2:1; 3:1; etc.
 1. Luke 1:1-4 (NLT)—Most honorable Theophilus: Many people have written accounts about the events that took place among us. They used as their source material the reports circulating among us from the early disciples and other eyewitnesses of what God has done in fulfillment of his promises. Having carefully investigated all of these accounts from the beginning, I have decided to write a careful summary for you, to reassure you of the truth of all you were taught.
 2. Although Luke was not an eyewitness of the ministry of Jesus, he researched his gospel, gathering information from eyewitnesses. How did he do it? This is what we know.
 - A. Short narratives of certain events in Jesus' life written by eyewitnesses circulated among the early church before the inspired gospels were written. Luke was familiar with them.
 - B. Luke went to Jerusalem and to Caesarea. Many eyewitnesses lived in both cities. He could have talked with the apostles, the seventy disciples, Mary Magdalene and certain other women, and with Mnason, an old disciple. Luke mentions them all in his gospel. Luke 10:1; Luke 8:2-3; Acts 21:6.
 - C. Luke and Mark were in Rome together. Mark lived in Jerusalem while Jesus ministered there. Luke could have talked with Mark about what he witnessed. Col 4:10; Col 4:14
- b. John wrote his gospel AD 80-90: Jesus' disciples saw him do many other miraculous signs besides the ones recorded in this book. But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life (John 20:30-31, NLT).
 1. In one of his epistles John wrote: The one who existed from the beginning is the one we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is Jesus Christ, the Word of life...we are telling you about what we ourselves have actually seen and heard (I John 1:1-3 NLT).
 2. Peter reported: For we were not making up clever stories when we told you about the power of our Lord Jesus Christ and his coming again. We have seen his majestic splendor with our own eyes. And he received honor and glory from God the Father when God's glorious, majestic voice called down from heaven, "This is my beloved Son; I am fully pleased with him." We ourselves heard the voice when we were there with him on the holy mountain (II Pet 1:16-18, NLT).
6. These men all saw something life changing—Jesus Christ rise from the dead. They were so persuaded of what they witnessed that they gave their lives to get this message to as many people as possible. That's why, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they wrote the New Testament.

C. Conclusion: The Bible has a fairytale quality to it for most Christians because they don't read it the way it is meant to be read. And, this supernatural book never affects them as God intended.

1. The Living Word, the Lord Jesus, is revealed to us through the written Word. The Bible is our only 100% reliable source of information about Jesus.
 - a. We get to know Him through His Word. If you become a regular, systematic reader of the New Testament Jesus will become real to you in a way not possible through any other source.
 - b. We have a lot more to say about the reliability of the New Testament next week, but consider this statement as we close. It is a paraphrase of John 6:63—All the words through which I have offered myself to you are meant to be channels of the spirit and of life to you, since in believing these words you would be brought into contact with the life in me (J. Riggs).
4. The greatest gift you can give yourself is to become a regular, systematic reader of the New Testament.