

## BOOKS ABOUT JESUS

- A. Introduction: Many sincere Christians struggle with reading the Bible. We're working on a series aimed at helping people learn how to read more effectively. Thus far, we've made a number of important points.
1. The Bible is a collection of sixty-six books that together tell the story of God's desire for a family and the lengths to which He has gone to obtain His family through Jesus Christ. The sixty-six books are divided into two parts: the Old Testament (thirty-nine books) and the New Testament (twenty-seven books).
    - a. The Old Testament is made up of writings written and preserved by the Jews (Israelites), the people group through whom Jesus came into this world. It is primarily a record of their history. It also has many prophecies about Jesus, along with types and shadows—people and events that picture what He would be like and what He would do (pay for sin at the Cross and redeem God's family).
    - b. The New Testament was written once Jesus came to earth. It is a record of the completion of what the Old Testament anticipated. Therefore, effective Bible reading begins with the New Testament. The Old Testament is easier to understand once you are competent in the New Testament.
  2. The individual books that make up the Bible are meant to be read from beginning to end (just like other books). Therefore, I am encouraging you to become a regular, systematic reader of the New Testament.
    - a. Regular reading means that you set aside time to read—15 to 20 minutes at least several days a week. Systematic reading means you read each book all the way through from start to finish.
    - b. When you read, don't stop to look up words or consult a Bible commentary or read the study notes. You can do that at some other time besides your regular, systematic reading.
      1. Don't worry about what you don't understand. You are reading to become familiar with the text because understanding comes with familiarity. Familiarity comes with repeated reading.
      2. Once you've completed the New Testament, read through it again and again. The main key to successful reading is reading each book from start to finish to become familiar with it.
  3. The Bible is a supernatural book because the inspiration for its writings came from a realm beyond this physical world. The Spirit of God inspired the words. Inspired means God-breathed. II Tim 3:16
    - a. The Bible is the Word of God. It works in us and changes us as we read it. If you become a regular, systematic reader of the New Testament you will be a different person a year from now—because of the effect God's Word will have on you and in you. I Thess 2:13; Matt 4:4; I Pet 2:2
      1. The Bible will change your perspective which in turn will change how you deal with life (more on this in upcoming lessons). God's Word will hold you steady in the hardships of life.
      2. Ps 119:92-93—If your law (the written Word of God) hadn't sustained me with joy, I would have died in my misery. I will never forget your commandments, for you have used them to restore my joy and health (NLT).
    - b. We're taking time to talk about why you can trust the Bible to be what it claims to be—a book from God. In the last two lessons we began to address the charges some people make that the Bible is filled with myths, contradictions and errors, and that the books that make up the Bible were picked by church councils for political reasons. We have more to say about why none of that is true.
- B. We begin tonight's lesson with the first four books of the New Testament—the gospels. Understanding who wrote them and why they wrote will help you see why we can trust what we read in the Bible.
1. The gospels were written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, all of whom were eyewitnesses of Jesus (or close associates of eyewitnesses). Matthew and John were part of Jesus' original twelve disciples. Mark was a close companion of Peter (an original apostle) and Luke traveled with Paul (an eyewitness).
    - a. The Bible doesn't use the word gospel as a name for the books that we call the gospels. They were not known as gospels until the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, many years after they were written.
      1. The word gospel comes from a word that means good message. In the New Testament the

term gospel is used to mean the good news of salvation provided by the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I Cor 15:1-4

2. There is only one gospel or message of salvation through Jesus, and each of these four men (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) wrote about it. Their books give historical information about Jesus from His birth to His death, resurrection, and ascension (His return to Heaven).
  - A. The gospels don't all cover the same events, but some events are repeated in each. They include few details about Jesus' early life, but pay great attention to His last week of life.
  - B. When the gospels are harmonized or put together with the events in order and nothing repeated or left out, only about fifty days of Jesus' public ministry are recorded.
- b. The gospels are actually biographies. Biographies in the ancient world were different than those of today. The purpose of recording history was to learn from the characters involved. Therefore, much of the writing in ancient biographies was devoted to the major events in people's lives.
  1. Childhood wasn't important and ancient biographers had no concept of giving equal time to each stage of life. Since Jesus came to die for sin, the fact that the gospel writers devoted more attention to the events leading up to His death and resurrection makes sense.
  2. Ancient biographers didn't consider it necessary to put events in chronological order or quote people word for word as long as they preserved the essence of what happened and what was said. So, the order of events in the gospels varies, as do statements made by people they quote.
2. Critics argue that the Bible contradicts itself because the gospels writers differ in their accounts. For example, Matthew reports that two demoniacs were healed, while Mark and Luke mention one demoniac (Matt 8:28-34; Mark 5:1-20; Luke 8:26-40). And, there are other similar examples in the gospels.
  - a. We said last week that if you have two demoniacs you also have one. Less information or different information is not incorrect or contradictory information. The goal of these ancient writers wasn't to give a detailed description of every event. Their point was: Jesus healed all who came to Him.
    1. Critics tend to focus on these differing details, not because they're interested in knowing the truth, but in the hope of discrediting the Bible so they don't have to take its message seriously.
    2. The fact that the gospels aren't exactly alike adds to their credibility. When people make up a story, much effort goes into getting the story straight so their deception won't be discovered.
  - b. There were plenty of other eyewitnesses of Jesus besides the original apostles. Multitudes saw Jesus during His earth ministry and numerous people saw Him after His resurrection.
    1. Fifty days after the resurrection Peter preached to a huge crowd in Jerusalem that God endorsed Jesus through miracles and signs and reminded them that they all knew it. Acts 2:22
    2. Paul referenced an incident where over 500 people saw the resurrected Lord Jesus at the same time, stating that most of them were still alive to be questioned about it (I Cor 15:5-7), and later testified that the events of His death and resurrection was well known in Jerusalem. Acts 26:26
    3. The first Christians lived in community with each other and there were plenty of people who would have corrected the story if someone misrepresented or altered original testimony.
  - c. Everything in the Bible was written by someone to someone about something. These three factors set the context which helps us understand the meaning. Often, so-called contradictions and errors are nothing more than the reader not understanding the culture in Jesus' day. Consider an example.
    1. Matt 13:31-32—Jesus called mustard seeds the smallest seed of all, yet stated that it can grow into a tree big enough to house birds. But mustard seeds are not the smallest seed in existence.
    2. Jesus wasn't talking about every seed in the world. He was speaking to Jewish people living in Israel. Mustard seed was the smallest seed known to them and cultivated in their fields. Two species grew wild in Israel and one was grown for a condiment (black mustard). It can in fact grow big enough to house birds. Some mustard seeds grow into trees about ten feet tall.
3. The writers of the gospels all wrote to tell what they had seen and heard of Jesus. However these men

wrote to different audiences for different purposes—so there are differences in their books.

- a. Matthew’s book was aimed at a Jewish audience to convince them that Jesus is the promised Savior (Messiah) of the Old Testament. Matthew quoted from and alluded to the Old Testament more than the other gospels (almost 30 times). He used the phrase “that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled” (or a similar one) sixteen times. This phrase isn’t found in the other gospels.
    1. Matt 1:1-17—Matthew opened with a genealogy that demonstrates Jesus is a direct descendant of both Abraham and David, just as the prophets said Messiah must be. To a first century Jew (the people group to whom Jesus first came) this would have been enthralling information.
    2. Matthew emphasized the fact that the major events in Jesus’ life were fulfillment of prophecy—born of a virgin (Matt 1:21-23); born in Bethlehem (Matt 2:1-6); lived in Nazareth (Matt 2:23); was arrested and crucified (Matt 26:55-56; Matt 27:35); etc.
  - b. Mark’s book was aimed at a Roman audience. He wrote to present Jesus as the Son of God who gave His life to redeem men from sin through His death and resurrection. Mark 1:1; Mark 10:45
    1. Romans were more impressed by action than teaching, and Mark portrayed Jesus as a man of miracles and power who demonstrated His deity by rising from the dead.
      - A. Mark’s book is the shortest and the earliest to be written. It has a sense of urgency and emphasizes action rather than teaching. The first Christians expected Jesus to return soon so there was urgency to their proclamation of the gospel. Mark used the Greek word *euthus* 42 times. It means at once or soon and is translated immediately, straightway, forthwith.
      - B. Because Jesus was born in what is today Israel and spoke Aramaic, Mark interpreted Aramaic terms for his readers and gave details about geography and customs that Romans might not be familiar with. Mark 3:17; 5:41; 7:34; 15:22; Mark 1:5, 2:18; 13:3; etc.
    2. Mark was not one of the original twelve disciples. But he lived in Jerusalem, may have seen Jesus at some point, and certainly would have known people who saw or heard Jesus. Mark traveled with Peter, who may have led him to faith in Christ. Church fathers tell us that Mark’s gospel is based on Peter’s eyewitness testimony. I Pet 5:13
  - c. Luke’s book is the longest and most comprehensive. He wasn’t an eyewitness and seems to have been a Gentile, but he traveled and worked with Paul on some of his missionary journeys.
    1. Luke wrote to assure a new convert named Theophilus that he could trust what he had believed, stating that he (Luke) had personally researched the information he shared. Luke 1:1-4
      - A. Short narratives of certain events in Jesus’ life written by eyewitnesses circulated among the early church before the inspired gospels were produced. Luke was familiar with them.
      - B. Luke went with Paul to Jerusalem and Caesarea where many eyewitnesses lived, including some of the apostles, the seventy disciples mentioned in Luke 10:1, Mary and certain women mentioned in Luke 8:2-3, and Mnason, an old disciple mentioned in Acts 21:16.
      - C. Luke and Mark were together in Rome. Luke could have talked to him about what he witnessed when Jesus was ministering in Jerusalem. Col 4:10-14
    2. Because of the historical details he gives, Luke has a reputation as a historian even among those who don’t believe the statements about Jesus’ deity and resurrection. Luke 1:5; 2:1-2; 3:1
  - d. John wrote his book later than the other three writers to prove that Jesus is God. John 20:30-31
    1. Although the other writers clearly presented the deity of Jesus, by the time John wrote, a belief system known as Gnosticism was developing. Among other things, Gnosticism denied the deity of Jesus and His incarnation (the fact that He took on a human nature).
    2. John opened his gospel with a clear statement that Jesus is God, calling Jesus the eternal Word who pre-existed with the Father, but is distinct from the Father. Jesus is the Creator, the source of light and life. The Word was made flesh and dwelled among us. John 1:1-14
4. Remember what we said last week. The Bible is infallible and inerrant because it is a book from God.

Infallible means incapable of being wrong and unable to deceive, and inerrant means free from error.

- a. Inerrancy and infallibility apply only the original documents. There are no original copies of the Bible (Old or New Testament) or any other ancient document because the originals were written on highly perishable materials. What we have are copies. Here's the issue; how good are the copies?
    1. There are more than 24,000 manuscript copies of all or portions of the New Testament. No other document from antiquity comes even close to these numbers. These copies can be compared to see each other for accuracy. Do they all say the same thing?
    2. There are variations or difference in the copies because copyists did make mistakes. But the overwhelming majority are spelling or grammar errors and words that are reversed, left out, or copied twice—errors that are easy to recognize and do not affect the meaning of the text.
  - b. The other issue is how close are the copies to the time of the originals? The New Testament was originally written between AD 40 and AD 100, and the earliest known copies date from AD 125.
    1. The testimonies of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were written down within their lifetimes and can be traced back to them and their interaction with Jesus. Jesus was crucified about AD 30. These first biographies of Jesus were written down 25 to 35 years later: Mark in AD 55-65, Matthew in AD 58-68, Luke in AD 60-68, and John in AD 80-90.
    2. How does this compare with other ancient biographies? The two earliest biographers of Alexander the Great (the founder of the Greek Empire) were written more than 400 years after he died in 323 BC.
5. Every challenge to the truthfulness and reliability of the Bible can be addressed in favor of the Bible—if critics will take the time to carefully and fairly examine it as they would any other historical writing.

- C. Conclusion: The gospels are books about Jesus. They were designed to produce faith and confidence in people that Jesus is the Savior: 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. Consider one other statement that John the apostle wrote in his biography of Jesus. At the Last Supper (the Passover meal Jesus and His apostles ate together the night before He was crucified), in the context of the fact that He was soon going to leave them, Jesus made this statement:
    - a. John 14:21—Those who obey my commandments are the ones who love me. And because they love me, my Father will love them, and I will love them. And I will reveal myself to each one of them (NLT).
      1. First, here's what Jesus is not saying. He isn't saying that God doesn't love those who don't keep His commandments. God loved us while we were His enemies so much so that He sent His Son to die for us. Rom 5:8-10; John 3:16
      2. Here's what He is saying: Those who walk in willful, persistent disobedience will not have the assurance or experience of His love. (lessons for another day)
    - b. Here's the point for our present topic: God's commandments are found in His written Word. Jesus promised His followers that even after He left this world He would (and will) continue to reveal Himself to His followers through His written Word—the Bible.
  2. The men who wrote the New Testament saw something that changed their lives to the point where they were willing to lose all, including their lives, to follow Jesus. They saw Him conquer death.
    - a. What if Jesus became half as real to you and me as He was to the men who heard Him speak those words? It would give you a confidence and courage to face whatever life brings your way.
    - b. Jesus will reveal Himself to you through the pages of Scripture if you become a regular reader of the New Testament. Lots more next week!