

## WE HAVE THE RIGHT BOOK

- A. Introduction: We're talking about the importance becoming a regular Bible reader—especially the New Testament. We need to read it cover to cover, over and over, until we become familiar with it. Understanding comes with familiarity and familiarity comes with regular, repeated reading.
1. There are many reasons why we need to be Bible readers. But one of the most important reasons is so that we get an accurate picture Jesus—who He is, as well as the message He proclaimed.
    - a. Jesus is coming back to this world in the not too distant future. And, He warned His followers that prior to His return, religious deception will abound. He specifically warned that false christs and false prophets with false signs and wonders will deceive many. Matt 24:4-5; 11; 24
    - b. To be deceived means to believe a lie. Our only protection against being deceived by false christs and false prophets is the truth—accurate information from the Bible. Through its pages, we get to know Jesus as He truly is and come to understand the message that He preached.
  2. Lessons like this don't seem very practical because we all have problems in our lives, and teaching about false christs and the real Jesus don't directly address our most pressing needs. Consider three thoughts.
    - a. One, we live in a sin damaged world. There is no such thing as a problem free life, and many problems can't be easily solved. The Bible helps you through life's hardships, not by changing circumstances, but by changing your perspective which then changes the way you deal with trouble. I've taught many lessons on this topic and intend to do more in the future.
    - b. Two, no one is immune to deception. If you can't tell the difference between a false christ and false gospel then you can be deceived. If you can't be deceived, then why did Jesus tell you to beware of deception, since "they will even try to deceive God's chosen ones" (Matt 24:24, CEV)?
    - c. Three, getting to know Jesus as He truly is changes us. Peter and John, two of Jesus' apostles, were detained by the religious authorities in Jerusalem because they proclaimed Jesus' resurrection.
      1. After examining them, the authorities made this statement: When the council saw the boldness of Peter and John, and could see that they were obviously uneducated non-professionals, they were amazed and realized what being with Jesus had done for them (Acts 4:13, TLB).
      2. Peter and John's association and interaction with Jesus gave them the boldness to stand up to the most educated and powerful men of their day with impressive and persuasive words. And, it enabled them to stand their ground despite extreme pressure. We need that same boldness. We get that boldness by interacting with Jesus as He is revealed in His written Word, the Bible.
  3. The New Testament is the portion of the Bible that was written after Jesus returned to Heaven. All its documents were written by eyewitnesses, men who walked and talked with Jesus when He was here.
    - a. With the exception of two, these writers had close, personal interaction with Jesus. What they witnessed changed their lives. (The other two had close interaction with multiple eyewitnesses.)
    - b. Last week we emphasized that these eyewitnesses knew that Jesus was and is God—God become man without ceasing to be God. He is Emmanuel—God with us. Isa 7:14; Matt 1:22-23
      1. Jesus' first followers were Jews who lived according to the Law of Moses. The number one commandment over their lives was: Worship only God. These men knew that it was wrong to worship anyone but God. Yet, they worshipped Jesus. Ex 20:1-5; Matt 14:33
      2. They believed that Jesus was and is the Son of God. To them, the phrase son of meant sameness of nature and equality of being (Eph 2:2-3; Eph 5:6-8). That's why many Jews took up stones to stone Jesus when He called God His Father (John 5:17-18).
      3. We examined several creeds recorded in the New Testament which demonstrate that the first Christians believed Jesus was God Incarnate—God in human flesh. Phil 2:6-11; I Tim 3:16
    - c. These men did not set out to write a religious book. They wrote as part of their effort to tell the world what they saw. They saw Jesus die on the Cross for the sins of men and then come back to

life. The resurrection authenticated everything that Jesus proclaimed about Himself. Rom 1:3-4

4. We have more to say about who Jesus is (according to the Bible) in upcoming lessons. But for the rest of this lesson, we're going to focus on why we know we can trust that the Bible we use today is an accurate record of what the writers (eyewitnesses) saw and heard.
- B. The Bible was written by real people to other real people to communicate information. When we consider who the New Testament writers were and why they wrote, it strengthens our confidence in what is written.
1. We've made the point in previous lessons that Christianity is unique because it isn't based on its founder's dreams and visions or his ideology and belief system. Christianity is based on a verifiable historical reality—the resurrection of Jesus.
    - a. When the resurrection of Jesus is examined with the same criteria used to assess other historical events, or in the same way that evidence is examined in a court of law, the evidence makes a powerful argument that Jesus did in fact rise from the dead.
    - b. Critics sometimes try to say that the apostles made up the story of Jesus' resurrection. That makes no sense because their profession of faith in His resurrection did not make them wealthy or famous.
      1. They were rejected by much of society and the prevailing religious establishment, and some of them were ultimately executed. No one suffers and dies for something that they know is a lie.
      2. Peter's testimony in the face of execution for his faith was: But the Lord Jesus has shown me that my days on earth are numbered and I am soon to die. So I will work hard to make these things clear to you. I want you to remember them long after I am gone. 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 (II Pet 1:15-16, NLT).
    - c. All the New Testament writers believed that Jesus rose from the dead because, with the exception of two of them (Luke and possibly Mark), they all saw the resurrected Lord Jesus.
      1. Mark lived in Jerusalem when Jesus ministered there and may have seen and heard Jesus teach. He undoubtedly knew people who saw Jesus. Mark was converted, probably through Peter's influence (an eyewitness), and later traveled with Paul (an eyewitness). I Pet 5:13; Acts 12:25
      2. Luke was not an eyewitness. But he traveled with Paul (an eyewitness) and did extensive research for his books (Gospel of Luke and Book of Acts). He interviewed people who interacted with Jesus. Luke wrote his books to assure a man named Theophilus that the message he had accepted about Jesus was the truth. Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-3
  2. The idea that these writers made up the story of the resurrection is further weakened by the fact that the things they wrote about Jesus were witnessed by multitudes of people besides them.
    - a. Thousands of people saw and heard Jesus during His three plus year ministry, not only in Jerusalem, but as He traveled from town to town preaching His gospel and healing sick bodies. Matt 4:23-25
    - b. Jesus was crucified during the Passover celebration, one of three annual feasts where all adult males had to appear before the Lord at the Temple in Jerusalem.
      1. As many as 50,000 people traveled to Jerusalem from all over the Middle East. The city was jam packed with visitors when the crucifixion and resurrection took place.
      2. Jerusalem covered about 425 acres, approximately 4300 ft by 4300 ft. There were plenty of potential witnesses in a small area and Jesus' tomb was only about 15 minutes from the Temple.
    - c. Because the New Testament writers weren't the only witnesses, there were many other people who would know if the apostles got their facts wrong or added untrue details to their preaching and writing. And many of those people would have been happy to point out the mistakes or lies.
      1. Paul reported that over 500 believers saw the resurrected Lord Jesus at one time, most of whom, according to Paul, were still alive and could be questioned about what they saw. I Cor 15:6
      2. When Paul was arrested after an angry mob attacked him at the Temple, as he stood before

Roman officials to testify about his role in the riot, he proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus. As part of his defense, he made the statement: King Agrippa knows about these things. (Agrippa was the provincial governor of Israel under Rome.) I speak frankly, for I am sure these events are all familiar to him, for they were not done in a corner (Acts 26:26, NLT).

3. The men who wrote the New Testament documents believed that Jesus is God Incarnate and that, through His death and resurrection, Jesus opened the way for men and women to receive salvation from sin (both its penalty and power) through faith in Him. This was a vital message.
  - a. And, after His resurrection, Jesus commissioned His apostles to proclaim this message to the world. Because of the importance of the message and the fact the God Incarnate assigned them to preach it, accurate transmission was critical. Luke 24:44-48
  - b. Because the apostles lived in an oral culture (one where information and events are memorized and then transmitted orally), they spread the message orally at first. But as time passed, they began to use written documents to facilitate the spread of their message. The earliest New Testament documents were written less than two decades after the resurrection.
  - c. Not only was accuracy important to the New Testament writers themselves, it was important to the first people to whom these documents were written. As the New Testament documents began to circulate, the various documents were accepted by the first generation of Christians *because* it was well known that they came from the *original eyewitnesses of Jesus*—His first apostles.
    1. A new type of manuscript came into use in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, the codex. It was the ancestor of modern books. Sheets of papyrus were stacked, folded, and bound. Churches kept libraries of their codexes or codices. These documents were highly prized and carefully stored.
    2. As these early believers gathered materials for the libraries, their criteria for inclusion was—can these writing be traced to an apostolic eyewitness? If not, the document was rejected.
4. It has become increasingly common to hear people say that the books in the New Testament were chosen centuries after Jesus lived by church councils (i.e., the Council of Nicaea) to advance political agendas, mislead, and control people. But that’s contrary to what we know about the spread of the early writings.
  - a. No one “picked” the books that became New Testament. From the beginning the first Christians recognized certain documents as authoritative or directly traceable to an original apostle.
    1. We know this from the early church fathers or church leaders who followed the apostles (men taught by original apostles who became the next generation of leaders). They and many other such men wrote extensively about the early church, its practices and doctrine.
    2. All the existing works of these men down to the AD 325 Council of Nicaea have survived. They have been translated into English and give us much information about the early church and the New Testament—including what books were universally recognized as authoritative from the very beginning, from the earliest days of Christianity.
  - b. In recent years “newly discovered manuscripts” from the Middle Ages have been used to challenge the reliability of the New Testament. These so-called “lost books” have information that contradict core Christian beliefs and are used by critics to undermine the reliability of the New Testament.
    1. But when you know that the books in the New Testament were accepted early on because they could be directly connected to an original apostle, you know that later documents don’t qualify.
    2. The last of the twelve apostles, John, died at the end of the first century. A document from the Middle Ages, that contradicts the contents of the books accepted early on has no merit.
- C. Even if we have the right books, how can we be certain that the books have the right words? Aren’t there all kinds of mistakes and contradictions in the Bible? Let’s briefly address these two questions.
  1. There are no original copies of the books of the Bible (or any other book from antiquity). The originals (called autographs) disintegrated centuries ago because they were written on highly perishable materials

—papyrus (early form of paper), leather (animal skins), parchment (made from stretching animal skins).

- a. Every Bible manuscript we have today (both Old and New Testament) is a copy. Until the printing press was invented all books had to be copied by hand. (Johan Gutenberg printed a Bible in 1456.)
  - b. The issue is: How reliable are the copies? How many are there and how close to the originals were the copies made? The more copies you have and the closer to the time the originals were written, the more you can compare to see if there are errors or changes.
    1. We have over 24,000 copies (partial and complete manuscripts) of the New Testament. The New Testament was written between AD 40 and AD 100, and the earliest known copies date from AD 125 (a 25 year time span). The New Testament far surpasses any document from antiquity in terms of the number of manuscript copies and nearness to the writing of originals.
    2. The next closest document is the *Illiad* by Homer. Only 643 manuscripts still survive. The *Illiad* was written about 900 BC. The earliest copies date from 400 BC—a 500 year time span.
  - c. In addition to the number of surviving manuscripts, we have another check on the accuracy of the New Testament. The early church fathers I mentioned earlier quoted the New Testament so often, that in their writings, we find almost every single verse in the New Testament.
  2. II Tim 3:16—The Bible declares itself to be inspired by Almighty God. If it truly is inspired then it must, by definition, be error free because God cannot lie or make a mistake. The Bible is infallible and inerrant. Infallible means incapable of being wrong and inerrant means free from error.
    - a. Inerrancy and infallibility apply only the original documents (autographs) because copyists did make mistakes—some unintentional and some intentional.
      1. There are textual variants or difference in the copies—about 8% in the New Testament. 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.
      2. Sometimes a copier tried to make the meaning clearer by explaining what they thought a verse meant. And they weren't always correct. Or they added a detail known to them, but not included in the original document.
    - b. These changes are insignificant. They don't alter the narrative, and they don't affect the major doctrines (teachings) of Christianity. And, we have hundreds of early manuscripts that show us what the text looked like before the additions were added.
  3. What about the claim that the Bible is full of contradictions? When we carefully examine the so-called contradictions we find that they don't contradict. The accounts have more or less information or different details. Different writers wrote from different perspectives for different purposes. None of the differences affect the narrative or the doctrines of Christianity. Consider one example.
    - a. Matt 8:28-34 reports that Jesus freed two demon possessed men in the country of the Gergesenes. Mark 5:1-20 and Luke 8:26-40 mention only one demonic in the country of the Gaderenes.
      1. The incident occurred in the city of Gadera. Gergesa was another town in the region. The terms country of the Gergesenes and the Gadarenes were general geographic terms for the area.
      2. Mark and Luke (not part of the original twelve apostles) were not eyewitnesses to the event. Matthew was present at the incident (Matt 8:23). Mark and Luke's accounts are less complete but not contradictory. If you have two men, then you clearly also have one. Perhaps Mark and Luke focused on the more prominent man or the one who was the more violent of the two.
    - b. The fact that an account isn't explained down to the last detail doesn't make it false. Ancient writers weren't that concerned with putting events in chronological order or quoting people word for word as long as the essence of what happened and what was said was preserved.
- D. Conclusion: We can trust the New Testament that has come down to us. We have the right book! Get to know Jesus through the testimony of the eyewitnesses. More next week!!