

EVIDENCE OF JESUS AND HIS RESURRECTION

- A. Introduction: In this series we are talking about the Bible—what it is, why it was written, and why we know that we can trust it. Our goal is to inspire all of us of become regular Bible readers.
1. The Bible is a collection of 66 books and letters that were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, by more than 40 authors over a 1500 year period (roughly 1400 BC to AD 100).
 - a. The Scriptures were written to reveal Almighty God and His plan of Redemption. Redemption is His plan to deliver humanity and the earth from bondage to sin, corruption, and death through Jesus.
 - b. When the first human beings (Adam and Eve) sinned, the human race and the earth were infused with sin, corruption, and death. From that point on, God began to gradually reveal His plan to undo the damage, with the promise of the coming Seed (Jesus) of the woman (Mary). Gen 3:15
 1. The Bible is primarily a historical narrative. It chronicles people and events that are verifiable through secular records and archaeological discoveries. Each book in the Bible adds to or advances God’s unfolding plan of redemption in some way.
 2. The writers of the Bible did not set out to write a religious book. They wrote to communicate and preserve vital information about God’s plan of redemption.
 - c. Early in the narrative, God identified the people group through which the promised Seed (the Redeemer) would come into this world—the Israelites or Jews (descendants of Abraham). The Old Testament is mostly their history up until Jesus was born.
 2. In the last few lessons we summarized the Old Testament’s historical narrative from Abraham down to the completion of the Old Testament documents (400 BC). And, we noted that by the beginning of the 1st century AD, there was great anticipation in Israel that the coming of the Redeemer (Jesus) was near.
 - a. Jesus began His public ministry about 29 BC with the message that men should repent (turn to God) and believe the good news that God’s kingdom was at hand (Matt 4:17). Word of His ministry quickly spread and large crowds began to follow Him.
 1. Jesus claimed to be the fulfillment of all the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah (the promised Redeemer), and He put His own teachings on the same level as the Scriptures. John 4:25-26; Matt 26:63-64; Matt 7:21-27
 2. Jesus also claimed He would die and then rise from the dead. By rising from the dead He authenticated every claim He made about Himself. Matt 16:21; Matt 20:17-19; Rom 1:4
 - b. The record of Jesus’ ministry, crucifixion, death, and resurrection is found in the portion of the Bible known as the New Testament. Can we trust what it says about Jesus and the resurrection?
 1. People have a bias against the Bible because of the supernatural element. However, when the New Testament is assessed with the same standards that are applied to other ancient documents, it holds its own and stands up to the scrutiny.
 2. In this lesson we’re going to consider the evidence for Jesus—the evidence that He was an actual historical figure and that He actually did in fact rise from the dead.

- B. There is a standard process that scholars use to determine whether or not historical claims are authentic (real). When the source of historical information is a written document, historians consider several factors to assess its reliability. Those standards can be applied to the New Testament documents.
1. The first thing historians do is consider when the document was written. How close was the writing of the document to the time of the people and events it records? The New Testament passes this test.
 - a. Note that the two earliest biographies of the life of Alexander the Great were written more than 400 years after his death in 323 BC. Yet historians consider the documents close enough to be reliable.
 - b. The four New Testament gospels are biographies of Jesus. Jesus was crucified AD 30-AD 33. Mark wrote his gospel AD 55-65, Matthew AD 58-68, Luke AD 60-68, and John AD 80-90. All

were written less than 100 years after the event. They more than pass this first test.

1. Historians also consider whether there are multiple, independent sources about the event or person described in the document. If an independent source is hostile (having no vested interest in promoting or gaining from the information), that's even better.
2. Although Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are friendly sources, they are independent sources. They are four documents written by four different people at different times.
2. The gospels themselves are not the only sources of information about Jesus. He is mentioned in a number of secular (outside the Bible) sources, some of which were quite hostile to Christianity.
 - a. Josephus was a Jewish historian, born in AD 37. He was a priest and a Pharisee, and there is no evidence that he ever became a believer in Jesus as Messiah.
 1. He wrote *The Antiquities*, a history of the Jews from creation to his time. In it he mentioned the martyrdom of James and referred to him as the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ.
 2. In another document, Josephus wrote that Jesus was a wise teacher who became the leader of a sect in Jerusalem, established a broad and lasting following, and was crucified under Pilate.
 3. Josephus is considered a reliable historian. He wrote a record of the Jewish war against Rome (AD 66-74) that is very accurate. Other historians (independent sources) and archaeology support his account. There is no reason to believe he made up the information about Jesus.
 - b. Tacitus was the most important Roman historian of the 1st century AD. He too had no sympathy for Christians. He recorded that there was a man named Christus who was crucified by Pontius Pilatus. He also wrote that his following grew to an "immense multitude...willing to die rather than recant".
 - c. Pliny the Younger (a Roman governor of Bithynia in NW Turkey) wrote a letter to Emperor Trajan about Christians he arrested (AD 111). Pliny reported that they refused to deny Jesus, even when tortured. He stated that they came from all walks of life (slaves, Roman citizens, city and country folk, men and women). They honored Jesus as God and refrained from adultery, theft, and robbery.
3. Even without the New Testament documents we have some basic facts about Jesus from the above sources and other secular records. This is what we know about Him from writings other than the Bible:
 - a. Jesus was a Jewish teacher. Many believed that he performed healings and exorcisms. Some believed He was the Messiah. He was rejected by the Jewish leadership and crucified under Pontius Pilate in the reign of Emperor Tiberius. After His death, His followers spread beyond Israel, and there were multitudes of them in Rome by AD 64.
 - b. There are several non-biblical references to an unnatural darkness that was seen in Rome, Athens, and other Mediterranean cities at the time Jesus was crucified (Matt 27:45-51). Consider two.
 1. Thallus was a Samaritan who lived in Rome in 1st century AD. He wrote a history of the eastern Mediterranean in AD 52, and made reference to the darkness at the time of the crucifixion. He said he thought an eclipse caused it.
 2. Phlegon, a Greek writer and historian, wrote about an eclipse during the reign of the Emperor Tiberius, from the 6th to the 9th hour. Not only were the stars visible, there was a great earthquake in Bithynia and many things overturned in the city of Nicaea (both in NW Turkey).
 3. A side note: An eclipse was impossible explanation for the event. Jesus died at Passover (Matt 26:1-2). Passover takes place during a full moon. An eclipse of the sun cannot occur during a full moon since the moon would be on the opposite side of the earth.
 - c. Some might ask: Why wasn't more written about Jesus? Because He wasn't a big deal at that time. He was the leader of what was believed to be an offshoot of Judaism, and Israel was a little backwater province with a small, but rebellious population. No one at that time knew that the life and death of Jesus would impact the entire world and grow into a major world religion.
4. As part of their effort to validate documents, historians not only look for independent, hostile sources to authenticate a document, they also consider whether there are any unflattering details in it. When

people make up information, it's usually flattering to the subject.

- a. The New Testament passes this test because it gives many less than flattering details, which lend support to its authenticity.
- b. Jesus was accused of being a sinner, a drunkard, and a blasphemer who did miracles by the power of the devil. Peter tried to talk Jesus out of going to the Cross. His followers jockeyed for positions of power. All of them abandoned Him when He was arrested, and at first, doubted the resurrection. Matt 11:19; Matt 16:22; Matt 12:24; Mark 10:36-37; Luke 24:18-24; John 9:16; John 20:24-25

5. Scholars also consider whether or not the information in the document is consistent with known historical facts about the time and place the person lived or the events occurred. This is where secular sources and archaeology has helped to confirm the truthfulness of the Bible text. Consider an example.

- a. Sir William Ramsay (1851-1939) was a famous archaeologist who taught at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. He was a Bible skeptic who believed that the writers made up much of the content. He specifically cited the Book of Acts (written by Luke) as being full of errors.
 1. Much of the action recorded in Acts took place in Asia Minor, so Ramsay travelled there to prove his theory and to show that Luke was a poor historian. Ramsay returned to Scotland a believer. Ramsay himself uncovered archaeological evidence that confirmed Luke's account.
 2. Ramsay later said: "Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy...this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians."
- b. Consider one example from Luke's gospel. In Luke 3:1-2 he named six real people and three place in one passage. Tiberius Caesar was Emperor of Rome (AD 14-37). Josephus confirms that Herod and Philip were sons of Herod the Great, and that Annas and Caiaphas were high priests at the time of the crucifixion. Iturea, Trachonitis, and Abilene were provinces of Syria, bordering Judea.

C. Christianity stands apart from every other religion system in that it isn't based on its founder's dreams and visions or his teachings and belief system. It's based on a verifiable historical reality—Jesus' resurrection.

1. We can't recreate His resurrection in a scientific laboratory. But when the resurrection is examined with the same criteria used to assess other historical events, or in the same way evidence is examined in a court of law, it makes a powerful argument for the reality of the event. Let's argue the case.
 - a. All four gospels state that Jesus rose from the dead. Critics say the writers made that up. The idea that they made up the story of the resurrection is greatly weakened by the fact that women were the first to see the empty tomb and the risen Lord, and spread the news. Matt 28:1-8; John 20:11-18
 - b. Women were not highly regarded in that culture. If you were going to make up a story, you would not select women to be the source of your story because it would be immediately discounted.
 1. When the women reported that the tomb was empty, Peter and John went to see for themselves. They saw something that made them immediate believers—undisturbed grave clothes.
 2. Jesus' body was wrapped according to Jewish custom—like a cocoon, with strips of linen and more than 100 pounds of spices and ointments. His body couldn't have been removed without destroying the cocoon. Yet there it was. John 19:39-40; John 20:4-8
2. The idea that Jesus' disciples made up the resurrection is further weakened by the fact that 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.
 - a. 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.
 1. Jerusalem covered about 425 acres (4300 ft by 4300 ft). Jesus' tomb was only a 15 minute walk from where He was crucified. Any of the thousands of visitors could visit it.
 2. A number of years later, when Paul the apostle was testifying to government officials about his faith in Jesus and the resurrection, he said to King Agrippa (an expert on Jewish customs and

controversies): I am sure these events are familiar to (your) for they were not done in a corner (Acts 26:26, NLT). In other words, Paul appealed to well known circumstances in his defense.

- b. No one disputed that Jesus' tomb was empty—everyone in Jerusalem knew it was empty. The argument was over what happened to His body. That's why Jewish authorities paid the Roman guards to say that Jesus' disciples stole His body. Matt 28:11-15
 1. No one was able to produce a body, and there is no record of anyone coming forward with testimony saying that they saw the disciples move and dispose of the body.
 2. This silence is deafening since it would have been in interests of the authorities to produce a body and stop this new movement before it began.
3. A movement based on resurrection could not have taken root in the same city where Jesus was publicly executed and buried if people knew there was a body or could produce one.
 - a. Yet, within five weeks, over 10,000 Jews were converted and gave up or altered religious practices they had observed for centuries—traditions they believed came from God. Acts 2:41; Acts 4:4
 1. They no longer participated in animal sacrifices, the Sabbath was changed from Saturday to Sunday, and the Law of Moses was abandoned for Jesus' teachings.
 2. The Jewish people were monotheists (believed in only one God), and the idea that someone could be both God and man was heresy. Yet they began to worship Jesus as God. Jesus authenticated every claim He made about Himself by rising from the dead. Rom 1:4
 - b. To the Jews, resurrection was physical. It was their custom, once the flesh was rotted away, to gather up the bones and place them in boxes until the coming resurrection of the dead, foretold by the Old Testament prophets. These first believers were certain a literal resurrection had occurred.
4. Jesus made numerous post-resurrection appearances to a variety of people besides His original twelve followers. He even appeared to hostile witnesses.
 - a. Hostile witnesses included James (Jesus' half brother) who, like the rest of his family prior to the resurrection, didn't believe that Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus also appeared to Paul, a Pharisee who ardently persecuted Christians before he was converted. I Cor 15:7-8; Acts 9:1-5
 - b. Paul later wrote in one of his epistles (AD 55-57) that Jesus appeared to over 500 believers at one time—and that most of them were still alive. Paul's implication was, if you don't believe me go ask some of those people who saw the Lord. I Cor 15:6
5. It makes no sense that the New Testament writers made up the story of the resurrection. Their claim didn't make them wealthy or famous. They were rejected by much of society and the religious establishment. Some were even executed. No one suffers and dies for something they know is a lie.
 - a. Consider the testimony of an eyewitness of Jesus—Peter, one of the original disciples. He saw Jesus die and then saw Jesus alive again. Peter was willing to die rather than deny what he saw.
 - b. Peter wrote these words just before he was executed by crucifixion for his faith in Jesus: For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty (II Pet 1:16, ESV).

- D. Conclusion: We have more to say next week. But consider one thought at we close. Why does this matter? Aren't there more practical life issues for us to talk about?
1. We're living in a time of increasing religious deception. It's becoming more and more common to hear even so called Christians deny the resurrection. They say it doesn't really matter if Jesus rose from the dead or not—it's the spiritual lessons of rebirth and second chances that matter. That's a deceptive lie.
 2. When you're facing hard times, and the only evidence you have that you will make it through the hardships is the Bible, you need unshakeable confidence in God's revelation of Himself. You need to be able to answer the doubts that bombard you mind. You need to be convinced that you have a source of information that you can trust—the Word of Almighty God who cannot lie and will not fail to help.