

CAN WE TRUST THE BIBLE RECORD?

- A. Introduction: I realize that the lessons we've done over the last few weeks might seem impractical, since we all need God's help in specific areas. And, although talking about the history of the Bible and how it developed is interesting, it may seem like wasted effort when we need real solutions to our real problems.
1. But our help comes from God as we learn to trust Him—and trust in God comes from knowing Him. When we know who He is and what He is like (His goodness, mercy, and love), it's easier to trust Him.
 - a. Ps 9:10—All those who know your mercy, Lord, will count on you for help. For you have never forsaken those who trust in you (TLB).
 - b. God inspires our trust or faith in Him by revealing Himself to us through His Word: So faith (trust) comes by hearing [what is told], and what is heard comes by the preaching [of the message that came from the lips of Christ, the Messiah [Himself]]. (Rom 10:17, Amp)
 1. The Bible is God's revelation of Himself to mankind. Through the Bible, the Lord reveals not only His character and power (who He is and what He is like), He also reveals His plan to deliver humanity from sin, corruption, and death through Jesus. II Tim 3:15
 2. Since every problem in this world is present because of sin (going back to Adam and the first act of disobedience), the ultimate solution to every issue in our lives is knowing God more fully through His Word. II Pet 1:2—May God bless you with his special favor and wonderful peace as you come to know Jesus our God and Lord, better and better (NLT).
 2. We are living in a time when Bible reading and solid Bible teaching are at record lows. The reliability of the Bible is being increasingly challenged, not only by the secular world, but by a false form of Christianity that denies basic Bible teachings (doctrines) and misapplies Bible verses.
 - a. We need to know for ourselves (like never before) what the Bible actually says. Therefore, in this series, we are taking time to talk about how to read the Bible effectively. Part of effective reading involves understanding why we can be certain that the Bible is filled with accurate information.
 - b. In the past few lessons we've been making the point that the Bible is primarily a historical narrative that is verifiable through secular records and archeological evidence.
 3. Last week we examined the evidence for Jesus and the resurrection. This week we want to pick up the historical narrative, and talk about how the New Testament developed and why we can trust it.
 - a. The New Testament is made up of 27 documents that were written after Jesus returned to Heaven. All of the documents were written by eyewitnesses of Jesus or close associates of the eyewitnesses.
 1. Matthew, John, and Peter were part of the original twelve apostles. Jesus appeared to Paul a few years after the resurrection and on subsequent occasions. Mark was converted through Peter's influence, and later travelled with Paul. Matt 10:2-4; I Pet 5:13; Gal 1:11-12; etc.
 2. Luke also traveled with Paul and did extensive research for his writings, interviewing a number of direct eyewitnesses. James and Jude were Jesus' half brothers and became believers after the resurrection. Matt 13:56-56; Luke 1:1-4; I Cor 15:7; Gal 1:19; etc.
 - b. The eyewitnesses saw Jesus dead and then saw Him alive again. They were so convinced of what they saw that they devoted the rest of their lives to proclaiming Jesus and His resurrection at great cost to themselves. That kind of commitment speaks to their credibility.
- B. Back to the historical narrative. After His resurrection, Jesus remained on earth for forty more days. During this period “he appeared to the apostles from time to time and proved to them in many ways that he was actually alive. On these occasions he talked to them about the Kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3, NLT).
1. Before Jesus returned to Heaven, He commissioned His apostles (the eyewitnesses) to go out and tell the world the good news (gospel) that, because of His death and resurrection, remission (or the wiping out) of sins is available to all who believe on Him. Luke 24:44-48

- a. Ten days after the Lord returned to Heaven, His first followers were baptized in the Holy Ghost, as Jesus said they would be. The first thing they did was testify about the resurrection to a hostile crowd that was accusing them of being drunk. Acts 1:4-8; Acts 2:13
- b. Peter told the crowd: You saw the miracles Jesus did. You saw Him die. And you know that the tomb is empty. None of this was done in secret. Repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Acts 2:22 (Acts 26:26); Acts 2:37-41
 1. The Book of Acts is a historical record of their activities in Jerusalem and surrounding areas as they went out and proclaimed the resurrection. Acts 1:8; 21-22; 2:32; 3:15; 4:33; etc.
 2. Midway through the narrative, the focus shifts to Paul, who preached the resurrection all over the Roman Empire. Paul made Antioch, Syria his hub, and travelled over 1500 miles from Syria to Greece on three missionary trips which are detailed in the Book of Acts.
 3. Acts was written by Luke (AD 60-68) who traveled with Paul. Last week we noted that archaeological evidence has confirmed Luke's ability as a historian (more credibility.).
2. Because the apostles lived in an oral culture, they spread their message orally at first. Less than half the population in the Roman Empire could read. People relied on memorizing and reciting from memory.
 - a. In that culture, people were trained from childhood to memorize stories, songs, poetry—even entire books. Jewish rabbis (teachers) were famous for memorizing the entire Old Testament. Can we trust the apostles' memories? Consider these two points.
 1. Jesus' first disciples (the apostles) believed almost from the beginning that He was the Messiah, so they would have been careful to accurately memorize and repeat what they heard and saw.
 2. Jesus' teachings were given in concise, easy to remember segments. At the Last Supper, Jesus promised that the Holy Ghost would help the apostles remember what He said. John 14:26
 - b. The New Testament writers had strong motivation to get their message right. First, Jesus, whom they believed to be God, commissioned them to preach it. Two, enemies of their message would have loved for them to get something wrong, so the message could easily be discredited.
3. The men who wrote the New Testament documents did not set out to write a religious book. They wrote to facilitate the spread of their message, and written documents greatly expanded their reach.
 - a. As the apostles preached their message, communities of believers known as churches (*ekklesia*) were established. The Greek word means a calling out and was used for an assembly of people (Acts 19:39). The word came to be used for an assembly made up of believers in Jesus. At that time, the church meant people, not buildings. The assembly (the church) met in peoples' homes.
 - b. As the apostles moved from one place to another proclaiming Jesus, they continued to communicate with already established assemblies (churches) though epistles (letters). Remember, Rome had an efficient road and postal system throughout its empire, making communication relatively easy.
 1. The epistles further explained what Christians believe (doctrine), gave instruction on how Christians are supposed to live, and addressed problems and questions that arose in the groups.
 2. The epistles were the first New Testament documents to be written. James (AD 46-49), Galatians (AD 48-49), I & II Thessalonians (AD 51-52), Romans (AD 57).
 - c. The epistles were more like sermons than letters. They were meant to be read aloud by a leader or a co-worker of the writer, to a number of people at one time. Once an epistle was read, it was copied and shared with other groups in the area.
4. The gospels were also written for practical reasons. New Christians wanted a written record of what Jesus said and did. And the apostles wanted a written record of what they witnessed to insure that the accurate message would continue to spread after they died. II Pet 1:15; II Pet 3:1-2
 - a. The gospels are named for the men who wrote them (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John). They weren't called gospels until later in the 2nd century. These books use the term gospel for the message of salvation from sin through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Rom 1:1; I Cor 15:1-4

- b. The gospels are actually biographies of Jesus. Ancient biographies differed from modern ones. Authors weren't concerned with the subject's entire life from birth to death. They focused on parts that affected history—major events, accomplishments, and lessons to be learned from them.
 - 1. Jesus came into this world to die for sin, so the gospels emphasize the final weeks of His life leading up to His crucifixion. Without Jesus' death and resurrection, His teachings and miracles are meaningless. We are still under our sins I Cor 15:14-17
 - 2. Ancient biographers didn't consider it necessary to quote word for word from the subject, as long as the essence of what they said was preserved (neither Hebrew nor Greek had quotation marks). And it wasn't important for the story to be told in chronological order.
 - 3. This accounts for some of the variations in the gospels, and adds to their trustworthiness. If all the details were exactly the same, one could reasonably presume that the authors colluded.
- 5. Accurate information about Jesus was also important to the people who received the writing that became the New Testament. They wanted to know what happened—according to the people who saw Jesus.
 - a. The various assemblies (churches) began to collect and preserve these written documents. As they gathered materials for their collections, the criteria for including a document was: Can this writing be traced to an apostolic eyewitness? If not, the document was rejected by the first churches.
 - b. It's not uncommon to hear Bible critics say that church councils decided which books should and shouldn't be in the Bible by flipping a coin, and that important books were left out. That's not true!
 - 1. By the time John, the last apostle, died around AD 100, the 27 books that now make up the New Testament were considered the inspired Word of God. No one "picked" the books. Believers recognized those that were authoritative—they could be traced back to the eyewitnesses.
 - 2. We know this from the early church fathers (men taught by the apostles who became the next generation of leaders). They wrote much about the early church, including which books were universally recognized as authoritative from the beginning. (Their writings have survived.)
 - c. In recent years "newly discovered manuscripts" from the Middle Ages have been used to challenge the New Testament's reliability. However, these "lost books" have information that contradicts core Christian beliefs, and critics used them 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 in the beginning has no merit.
- C. The writers of the New Testament had no reason to lie or to make up information. In fact, as noted above, they had every reason to be as truthful and accurate as possible in what they wrote. But, some say that there are mistakes and contradictions in the Bible. Is that true? Let's examine the facts.
 - 1. There are no original manuscripts of the New Testament (or any other ancient books) because they were written on perishable materials that disintegrated long ago (papyrus, animal skins). What we have today are copies. Even if the originals were accurate, can we trust the copies?
 - a. Critical to determining the reliability of the copies is: How many copies exist (so they can be compared to make sure they say the same thing), and how close to the originals were the copies made (less passage of time means less chance that the information was altered)?
 - b. More than 24,000 New Testament manuscripts (full or partial) have been discovered. The earliest we have is a fragment of the Gospel of John, dating to within 50 years of the writing of the original.
 - 1. The New Testament was written AD 50-100. We have 5,838 manuscripts that are earlier than AD 130. That's only a 50 plus year time gap. How does this stack up to other ancient books?
 - 2. Homer's *Iliad* was written in 800 BC. There are 1,800 plus manuscript copies, the earliest dates to 400 BC (400 year time gap). Herodotus' *Histories* was written between 480-425 BC.

We have 109 copies. The earliest dates to AD 900, a 1,350 year time gap. Plato's works were written in 400 BC. We have 210 copies. The earliest dates to AD 895, a 1,300 year time gap.

2. Copyists (or scribes) did make mistakes. There are textual variants (differences) in copies, about 8% in the New Testament. The overwhelming majority are spelling or grammar errors and words that are left out, reversed, or copied twice—errors that are easy to recognize and don't affect the meaning of the text.

a. Occasionally a scribe tried to harmonize two passages about the same event in different gospels or added a detail known to the scribe but not found in the original. Sometimes a scribe tried to make the meaning clearer explaining what they thought a passage meant (they weren't always correct).

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.

1. If the Bible truly is inspired by Almighty God as it claims to be (II Tim 3:16), then it must be error free, because God cannot lie or make a mistake. The Bible is infallible and inerrant.

2. Infallible means incapable of being wrong and unable to deceive. Inerrant means free from error. Inerrancy and infallibility apply only the original, God inspired documents.

3. What about the charge 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.

a. Matt 8:28-34 reports that Jesus freed two demon possessed men. Mark 5:1-20 and Luke 8:26-40 mention only one demonic. Mark and Luke's accounts are less complete, but not contradictory. If you have two men, then you clearly also have one. An incomplete report is not a false report.

b. The fact that an account isn't explained down to the last detail doesn't make it false. Ancient writers were mainly concerned with preserving the essence of what was said and done.

c. 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.

D. Conclusion: When we consider the motivation of the New Testament writers, it strengthens our confidence in the reliability of what they wrote. It was critical to them to convey accurate information.

1. They weren't writing about their religious or philosophical ideas. They were recounting life changing events that they themselves witnessed.

a. They were commissioned by the resurrected Lord Jesus to go out and tell the world what happened, so that men and woman can have their sins remitted and receive eternal life. John 20:31

b. They were speaking and writing in the name of Almighty God, just as their ancestors, the Old Testament prophets, had done. Lying or making things up would have been out of the question.

2. They wrote what they saw and heard from the promised Messiah

a. Peter wrote: 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).

b. 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).

3. We can trust the written record they left us. Much more next week.