

## How can you trust the Bible?

PHBF 06.23.13

TEXT: various

Scr. Reading: Luke 1:1-4, 1 Cor 15:1-6

### Questions Christians Hope No One Will Ask

Four weeks ago, when we began this series, I shared the story of an experience I had trying to answer a question from a skeptic. I was on a flight to Amsterdam, ultimately heading to Africa to share Christ in the capitol city and some outlying areas of Kenya. When my neighbor in first class learned of the purpose of our trip, he challenged me: “Why do you want to force your religious views on these people? It seems to me they are religious enough already. Besides, doesn’t Africa have bigger needs than Western religion?” I was speechless. Why? 1 Peter 3:15 explains:

*In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.*

Why wasn’t I prepared to answer the man’s accusing question? Not because I lacked the right thoughts in my mind; it was because I lacked the right focus in my heart. I was angry at him for scorning me, embarrassed by what he thought of our mission. In other words, my heart was fixed on ME. But had it been on Jesus, like Peter recommends, the answers would have come naturally.

It might surprise you to hear that a clear focus on Jesus can be one of the most helpful ways to answer today’s question: “How can you trust the Bible?” There are all sorts of good arguments we could make:

- The manuscript evidence is overwhelmingly consistent, well-attested, and ancient.
- Archeological work continues to demonstrate the trustworthiness of the Bible.
- Fulfilled prophecy demonstrates the supernatural source of the Bible.

But instead I want to zero in on Jesus Himself as we consider this question of whether it’s a good idea to trust what the Bible says. Here’s the specific question I want to start with: What was Jesus’ view of the Bible? Did He believe it? Of course, He had only the Old Testament, but the question still applies. Did He trust the Old Testament? ***If we put our faith in Jesus, then His view of the Bible will become ours.***

This is, quite literally and personally, how this question got answered in my life. Years ago as I tried to sort out this issue for myself, I realized I

would never be able to prove the whole Bible was factually true. No one can. But I was compelled by Jesus. He was attractive to me, and He seemed very trustworthy. So, I thought, ***if He trusted the Bible as He knew it, then I should be willing to trust the Bible as I knew it.*** This line of argument narrows the questions down to just two:

- Did Jesus trust His Bible?
- Can we trust what the Bible says about Jesus?

### JESUS’ VIEW OF HIS BIBLE

Jesus’ own words indicate the respect He had for the Old Testament.

- He used the OT as a weapon against Satan during His temptation (Mt 4:4,7,10).
- He said He came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets and even the smallest details of the OT would be accomplished (Mt 5:17-18).
- He posited the infallibility of the Old Testament by saying, “The Scriptures cannot be broken” (Jn 10:35).
- He rebuked people for not believing all the prophets spoke (Lk 24:25).
- He referred to the Fifth Commandment (Ex 20:12 – i.e., honor your father and mother) as “the commandment of God” (Mk 7:9).
- He once quoted a psalm of David (110) and attributed it to the Holy Spirit (Mk 12:36).
- He quoted Genesis 2 and attributed these words to “the Creator” (Mt 19:4-5).
- He stated to His followers, “Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms” (Lk 24:44). His description of the Old Testament here is especially intriguing because he explicitly refers to the threefold structure of the Hebrew canon, clearly demonstrating that He held all of it in high regard.
- During one discussion (Mt 23:35), He alluded to “all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah.” These two murders are significant because they sort of bookend the Hebrew Old Testament. Abel’s murder is toward the front of the first book (Genesis 4) and Zechariah’s murder is toward the very end of the last book (2 Chronicles 24:21 NOTE: Chronicles is the last book in

the Hebrew arrangement of the Old Testament). Clearly, Jesus of Nazareth regarded the Old Testament as authoritative, inspired, and infallible.

This narrows our options considerably. ***We can reject the Old Testament and Jesus of Nazareth along with it, or we can embrace Jesus and the OT together.*** Whatever we choose, it's a package deal. You cannot have one without the other. This is why I said a moment ago, focusing on Jesus can be very helpful for answering this question about whether we'll trust the Bible. The question for us is not "Do we believe that the Bible can be trusted?" The real question is "Did Jesus believe the Bible could be trusted?"

Of course, all of this "evidence" about what Jesus believed goes up in smoke if the records of Jesus' own life are suspect. If the gospel records (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) aren't trustworthy, then we have no idea what Jesus believed or said or if He was even a real person at all. So that's the question we have to answer next: ***Can we trust what the Bible tells us about Jesus?***

The question usually has all sorts of objections tacked onto it: "Aren't the gospels full of contradictions? Wasn't most of it made up by people who wanted to control the masses through fear and guilt? Didn't the early church embellish the original stories about Jesus into great legends and then finally write it all down once nobody knew the difference between fact and fiction?" ...as if Jesus is the ultimate fish story, that keeps growing over time: "It was this big... no *this* big... no THIS big."

Four arguments:

- The Form is too detailed to be ancient fiction.
- The Accounts read like eyewitness reports.
- The Content is too unflattering to be made up.
- The Timing is too early for myths.

In short, the gospel records give us the trustworthy FACTs about Jesus.

**LITERARY FORM: The form is too detailed to be ancient fiction.**

One of the things you'll notice as you read through the gospels is the

random details:

- J&J were mending nets when Jesus called them (1:19)
- Jesus slept with his head on a cushion (Mk 4:38).
- When they left on that trip, other boats were there, too (4:36).
- Jesus tells people to give the little girl he just raised from the dead something to eat (Mk 5:43).
- Peter pulled in a net with 153 large fish (Jn 21:11).

It's intriguing to us, but not all that unusual. We're used to detailed stories. Even when we read fiction, the details make the story seem more realistic: rain on the window, the color of someone's eyes, the smells and sounds of the place in view. It reads like you're actually there, whether it's a true story or not. But ***in the ancient world, there was no such literary genre as realistic fiction, with all its fabricated details and dialogue.*** Ancient fiction doesn't read like an eyewitness account. You'll never read about the color of Beowulf's eyes or how much Odysseus liked the smell of saltwater. Any details in ancient fiction either drive the plot or develop the characters; they never simply add realism to the story:

Wolfgang Schadewaldt (mid-twentieth century scholar of classical literature): "As a philologist, someone who has acquired some knowledge of 'literature,' I am particularly concerned here to note that when we read the Synoptic Gospels, we cannot be other than captivated by the experiential vividness with which we are confronted... I know of no other area of history-writing, biography or poetry where I encounter so great a wealth of material in such a small space." ("The Reliability of the Synoptic Tradition," in *Studies in the Gospel of Mark*, Fortress, 1985)

C. S. Lewis: "I have been reading poems, romances, vision literature, legends, and myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know none of them are like this. Of this text there are only two possible views. Either this is reportage... or else, some unknown writer... without known predecessors or successors, suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern novelistic, realistic narrative." (*Christian Reflections*)

What's even more telling, these random details tend to fade away altogether in moments of high drama and significance. If the authors were making this stuff up, we'd expect the details to really get thick when Jesus chooses the 12 (3:13-19) or Judas betrays Him (Mk 14:10-11). But instead, the random details and embellishments fade away

altogether at these times. In short, the level of detail in the gospels and the way it's used doesn't fit the form of fiction in the ancient world.

### **FIRSTHAND ACCOUNTS: The Accounts read like eyewitness reports.**

People sometimes say, "I've heard the Bible is full of contradictions." And there's a kernel of truth there. The gospels aren't *full* of contradictions, but there are a number of details that don't quite line up. How many times did the rooster crow, once (Mt, Lk) or twice (Mk)? Was Jesus crucified the day after (Mt, Mk, Lk) or the day of (Jn) the Passover? Did Judas hang himself (Mt) or get disemboweled (Acts)? Was there one angel (Mt, Mk) or two (Lk) at Jesus' tomb? It's worth noting, in the first place, that plausible explanations have been found for most (or all) of these apparent contradictions.

**More importantly, however, these minor variations in detail are exactly what we would expect from independent eyewitness reports.** Different perspectives are going to yield different details, though the central features remain the same. Survivors of the *Titanic* disaster disagreed whether the ship broke apart or went down whole; but they all agreed that it hit a berg and sank within a few hours. (cf. JFK's assassination)

Mark reports that Jesus healed a blind man as he left Jericho (Mk 10:46). Luke indicates it was as He was entering Jericho (19:1). These details are really incidental to the main story. Now if Luke were to switch around the main characters and tell us the blind man reached out and healed one of the disciples, THAT would be a different story!

But as the accounts stand, this is exactly the sort of discrepancy that normally appears in eyewitness testimony, and nobody quibbles over those details or accuses one of the writers of lying. In fact, apparent contradictions are so common in eyewitness testimony that if investigators hear too many similarities between accounts, they begin to suspect that these witnesses have been collaborating to get their story's lined up together. And when that happens, they actually lose credibility, because these aren't independent accounts anymore.

### **SELF-DEFEATING CONTENT: The Content is too unflattering to be made up.**

The gospels contain several details that would seem to be damaging to the church's cause. This argument is sometimes called the "criterion of embarrassment." ***Why would the church make up material which is counterproductive to their case or cast their leaders in a negative light?***

Some examples (all from Mark):

- Jesus' baptism identified Him with sinners and could be interpreted as showing that John was greater than Him (1:4-11).
- Jesus' own family questioned his sanity (3:21).
- Jesus could not perform miracles in his hometown (6:5) and was rejected by the people there (6:3).
- Jesus was sometimes rather brusque, bordering on rudeness (7:27).
- Peter, the great leader of the church, was once referred to as "Satan" by Jesus (8:31-33)
- The disciples weren't always successful in casting out demons (9:18)
- Jesus called his own goodness into question (10:18)
- James & John, other leaders in the church, were arrogant and self-promoting (10:35-37)
- The Garden of Gethsemane (14:33-35) – How does that make Jesus look good? Or his cry of abandonment on the cross? He looks weak, doubtful, and afraid.

In fact, all the details of the passion – betrayal by Judas, denial by Peter, abandonment by the other 10, trial under Pilate, mockery, and ultimate crucifixion by Romans – is a whole string of embarrassing events. Why make up a crucifixion – a death for criminals?

### **QUICK TIMING: The Timing is too early for myths.**

As it's presented in *The Da Vinci Code*, the NT gospels took quite some time to come into their written forms, and it happened long after Jesus and His followers had passed off the scene. The stories of Jesus' life originally existed as oral traditions, passed down by word of mouth from person to person. Over the years, so it goes, these stories grew

into legends, adding a little pinch of drama here, a mystical flavor there, and a supernatural element over there. Finally, long after the actual events themselves, these tall tales about Jesus were finally put in writing, and by then it was virtually impossible to know how accurate these stories really were.

The only problem is, none of the facts back that up. Manuscript evidence proves that the gospels were written within a few decades of Jesus' life. ***This means the eyewitnesses would have still been alive, and anyone who doubted the gospel accounts could go ask them.*** In fact, Luke (1:1-4) claims he did exactly that. And Paul says (1 Cor 15:3-6) that Jesus appeared to hundreds of people after His resurrection.

When these eyewitnesses are named, it's as though the writers are imploring people to verify their story. Mark writes (15:21): "Simon of Cyrene carried Jesus' cross. You know him – he's the dad of Alexander and Rufus. Go check it out. Ask them about it."

Think about the significance of this fact. When the gospels were first written, the claim to an empty tomb could be verified. The words and actions of Jesus were heard and seen by witnesses who were still alive! If you and I wanted to make up a religion, it wouldn't be all that hard. We could put together some cool stories about a miracle working teacher who was martyred 2,000 years ago, and we could start spreading our myths to everybody. And what could they say? Who could contradict our report? But the gospels were written under entirely different circumstances. Christianity wasn't popular with the Jews or the Romans. If Christianity's central documents – the four records of Jesus' life written by His followers – could be discredited, surely this was the setting where it would have happened. ***The Jews and Romans both would have quickly refuted the gospels if everyone knew they were fictitious or exaggerated.***

So here are the FACTS about the gospel records of Jesus:

- The Form is too detailed to be ancient fiction.
- The Accounts read like eyewitness reports.
- The Content is too unflattering to be made up.
- The Timing is too early for myths.

What is left, except to believe the gospels are telling the truth?

APPS:

- If you believe it, read it! Don't just believe on Jesus through the word; feed on Him. Fellowship with Him. Do you have a plan for meeting with Jesus regularly this summer?
- If you don't believe it, you read it, too! Why? God's word doesn't just *require* faith; it *produces* faith. It has a power of its own, not just for *people who believe*, but for *power to believe*. It is, you might say, "self-authenticating." Things that are self-authenticating don't require confirmation, proof, or well-reasoned arguments. Their very nature makes the case for them. No one has to be convinced that the sun is bright or that honey is sweet. The answer for the skeptic is to simply know the thing—get sunlight in your eyes and honey on your tongue.

See how the answers emerge as we focus on Jesus like this? ***God hasn't given us a watertight argument for Christianity; but He has given us a watertight Person.***

Let me remind you of Peter's words:

*In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.*

The main question we want people to ask is "Where do you get your hope?" And the answer from the Bible is that hope comes from looking to Jesus, loving Jesus, and seeing Jesus as holy.

Friends, this is absolutely crucial. We want to see people come to Jesus and be saved. But we'll never do it if all we have are reasons in our head and no hope in our hearts. ***Reasons do not save anyone. Hope in Jesus saves.***

It might sound something like this: "Why go to Africa? Sir, let me tell you about the most incredible Man who ever lived, and once you hear about Him, you'll understand why can't wait to talk about Him with everyone."

Or this: "Why do I trust the Bible? Because Jesus trusted the Bible, and I trust Him."

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