

How Can I Trust the Bible?

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good evening and welcome to the first of six weeks that we're going to do in our evening studies on the topic of questioning Christianity. So welcome to you if you're a regular with us and we're back after the summer. It's good to be able to share together again. Welcome if you're friends, if someone's invited you along to come and listen along with us and to think together. We're really glad to be able to welcome folks to join with us.

I'm on location today. Our next door neighbour is getting some work done so we've moved to the sitting room which I have, I hope, tidied up having a wee look there.

Our first session tonight is on the question, how can I trust the Bible? So many questions that people have about Christianity, sometimes objections, sometimes the questions that come up in investigation. But one of the foundational ones, because the Bible is so foundational to our faith, is can the Bible be trusted? Is it reliable? So I want us to begin hearing the words of Jesus and these passages we'll then briefly return to at the end and then we'll explore together some different avenues for thinking about that question, how can I trust the Bible? So our first passage comes from Matthew chapter 5. In Matthew chapter 5 we have the Sermon on the Mount, one part of Jesus teaching that people really appreciate whether they're Christians or not, but there are some surprising elements in there for those who only know maybe some select parts. Here's what Jesus says,

Matthew chapter 5, Do not think that I have come to abolish the law of the prophets. I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfil them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen will by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished. Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. And then later on as he is discussing with some of the opponents that Jesus encountered in his day, some of the religious leaders, in Matthew chapter 12 we read this at verse 38, Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to Jesus, Teacher, we want to see a sign from you. He answered, A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of

Jonah. And now something greater than Jonah is here. The Queen of the Scythe will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom. And now something greater than Solomon is here. And then into John's gospel and chapter five, and again, confrontation that religious leaders have with Jesus. And at this point in verse 39 of chapter five, he says this to them, You study the scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life.

[4 : 09] These are the very scriptures, speaking about the Old Testament, that testify about me. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life. I do not accept glory from human beings, but I know you. I know that you do not have the love of God in your hearts. I have come in my Father's name and you do not accept me. But if someone else comes in his own name, you'll accept him. How can you believe that you accept glory from one another, but do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? But do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. Now Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible. If you believe Moses, you would believe me for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?

So to our question, how can I trust the Bible? So maybe even at this stage, you're surprised you you've tuned in to a service, the 21st century in Edinburgh, and you discover, and if you've tuned in before or if you've come to church physically, you'll discover that we take the Bible seriously.

And we read it, we teach from it. It's the centrepiece of our gatherings together. We trust in the Bible. Christian faith is built on the conviction that the word of God is revelation.

It is inspired by God so that it's not speculation or simply human invention. But you might very well have the question, or you might have friends with the question, well how can an ancient book be reliable for modern people? How can we trust that it's not been so corrupted over time that it's now irrelevant today? Maybe you're coming from a position of spiritually seeking, and maybe you're asking, well if I want to know God, if I want to know truth, can I have confidence when I read the Bible that truth can be found? Well I have four brief ways initially to think about that, to approach our question, can I trust the Bible? The first is to do with timing or dating, because you'll find the idea perhaps going around that the Gospels are late inventions created by the church much later than the time of Jesus. Maybe you read the Da Vinci Code or watched it. Well Dan Brown, the author, he popularised a view that is still present in the academy and popular writing, that the Bible was actually a late creation by the fourth century church as a tool for power. It served the interests of the church to create the myth of Jesus so that the Gospels that we have are untrustworthy.

So the argument goes in various lines. How do we respond to that? Well we respond I think initially by looking at what scholars say, and scholars agree whether they're Christian or whether they're sceptical to the Christian faith, that the Gospels date to within 40 to 60 years of the life of Jesus, and that's a cautious dating. The letters of Paul that take up a good chunk of the New Testament date to within 15 to 25 years of the life of Jesus, and significantly in those letters you will find facts that agree with what's then written in the Gospels about the life, the death, the resurrection, the teaching, the miracles of Jesus. Scholars recognise if you have something within 40 to 60 years of the life of someone. That's too early for a myth to develop. You can't embellish and add facts at that stage. You go to a letter that Paul wrote like 1 Corinthians chapter 15, and he can write,

[8 : 30] I passed on to you what I received. So there's already teaching within the church that's being passed on, and this is between maybe 10-15 years after the death of Jesus. And those facts that have been passed on around different local churches are about the death, the burial, the resurrection, and the appearances of Jesus to various eyewitnesses. So rather than being late dates, the scholars agree that the dating is actually early. That teaching about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is being circulated around the church very early. That Jesus is being worshipped as God from a very early stage in the life of the Christian church. And it's not just Christian sources that point that way. Also non-Christian and hostile sources point in the same way. And there was a really interesting discovery, some Roman graffiti on a hillside outside of Rome. And on this graffiti, there was a crucifixion scene. And at the centre of this crucifixion scene was Jesus. But Jesus didn't have a human head. He was presented as having a donkey's head. And below the crucified donkey-headed Jesus, there is somebody bowing in worship. And the inscription went, Alexa Menos worships his God. Now that graffiti has been dated to within between 85 AD and the third century AD. So early on. And what it says is, well, first of all, it's clear that there are people within the Roman Empire who are very sceptical and mock the idea that Jesus is God. But it's clearly understood that people are worshipping Jesus as God from that early stage. This isn't a late invention of the church. This isn't some kind of power play. This is historical facts that have led to the worship of Jesus from the beginning. Gary Habermas, who is a professor and scholar of the early church period, the early stage. And the early stage of the early stage of the early stage of the early stage.

The point is this. No serious scholar dates the New Testament documents outside of the time of living eyewitnesses. No serious scholar suggests that there is time for a myth to develop. Rather, at the time, there was opportunity to cross-examine a variety of different witnesses to get to the truth. So in terms of timing and dating, absolutely yes, we can trust the Bible. Sort of building on that, it's important, I think, to briefly think about manuscript evidence. Because another argument runs that will surely, over time, and through a translation process perhaps, the Bible must have been corrupted, embellished or added to over time. Is there any defence against that? When we look at the manuscripts that we have, is there defence against that? Well, for those experts that look at the original manuscripts that have been discovered, what they find is an incredibly high percentage of accuracy in manuscript copies. So remember, this is the day before word processing, day before mass publishing.

So scribes had to hand copy. You get your copy of the gospel, you want to make another one, you have to copy it by hand. Well, the New Testament has 20,000 lines of text.

And as they compare copies of what's available, there are only variations to be found in 40 of those 20,000 lines. And those 40 variations are totally insignificant as to meaning, and no major doctrine hangs on any of those variations. So an astonishingly high percentage of accuracy in terms of transmission.

But then maybe the question is, yeah, but do you have a lot of manuscripts to compare with in order to assess accuracy? And this is where, again, the New Testament does astonishingly well.

[13 : 19] Just to think about how many copies of Greek New Testaments have been found to be in existence. Now, from, you know, the first days of transmission, there are 5,800 Greek copies, Greek manuscripts.

There are 10,000 Latin ones. Now, you compare that with one of the most important histories of the time, the Gallic Wars by Julius Caesar.

How many copies from the same period are available? Only 12. New Testament manuscripts would be a pile a mile high.

Manuscripts of Julius Caesar, a mere four feet. So, again, it's just to say that we can have strong confidence that the original Greek that we have, we can have confidence that it hasn't been corrupted, that it is an accurate New Testament that we have.

Moving on from there, we need to think about the importance of eyewitnesses. Now, when we think about trusting the reliability of the Bible, it's important for us to think about, well, who was writing it?

[14 : 40] Who was transmitting it? And for this, we owe a lot to a scholar by the name of Richard Boecombe, who wrote a book called Jesus and the Eyewitnesses, which has been very influential in sort of academia and scholarship.

And he makes a variety of points, you know, at a basic level, making plain that the Gospels were written at a time when there were many living eyewitnesses, making the point that actually names were being dropped into the Gospels so that you would hear in it, oh, Rufus and Alexander, I know them.

They told me the stories of Jesus. And the Gospel writers are saying they're reliable guides to the teaching about Jesus. You find Paul, as he records resurrection appearances, he'll say Jesus appeared to the disciples and to Peter and to Paul and to James, and he appeared to 500 at one time.

Here are people that you can find to make sure that what you have heard is true and accurate. And of course, the enemies of Jesus would be at great pains to point out any falsehood so that they could be rejected out of hand.

Boecombe is also helpful in thinking about collective memory, research on collective memory and research on eyewitness memory.

[16 : 15] So eyewitnesses typically have selective accounts. Nobody remembers everything. Eyewitnesses typically retain details that might be considered irrelevant.

And you can find those in the Gospels. Jesus provided a miraculous catch of fish and it was so striking to someone that they remembered there was 103 fish. Jesus was asleep in the boat in a storm and it was so striking that someone remembered he was asleep on a pillow.

It's also understood that an eyewitness comes from a limited vantage point. They're not speaking for a whole community. They're speaking for themselves. And so eyewitness testimony has that form.

If we think for a moment about a law court, eyewitness testimony is usually very valuable in criminal cases, but you'd be slightly suspicious if a wide range of eyewitnesses all had exactly the same report because each one is coming from their own position, their own point of view, able to remember selective things, not recalling absolutely everything.

And Bowencombe says that's what you find in the four Gospels. Professor Daniel Wallace tells of the time when a Muslim student came to him.

[17 : 45] He's a New Testament scholar. A Muslim student came to him with six pages of what she considered to be contradictions within the Gospels.

And she said to him, until these contradictions are resolved, I could never trust in the Bible. I could never have faith in Jesus. And what Wallace did was interesting because he simply handed the page back to her, the pages back, and said, look, these supposed contradictions actually stand as proof that the church didn't conspire and they didn't all get together in a cosy huddle to make sure that all the details from all the various perspectives were identical.

Rather, you have true account from people's unique vantage point. And that student who received it continued to explore and eventually came to faith in the Lord Jesus.

But what we have in the Gospels is not late creation and myth. We have eyewitness accounts, eyewitness history being presented. And I think one important way that we know that, the fourth way to approach the question, can I trust the Bible, is to begin to think about the internal evidence and especially to think about embarrassing details that you find within the Gospels which actually serve to point towards them being authentic.

Throughout the Gospels, there are facts included that you would only include because they were true. They are too counter-cultural to be an invention.

[19 : 35] They don't serve to strengthen, initially at least, they don't serve to strengthen the case for Christianity. Rather, they would appear to weaken it.

So those embarrassing details must then point towards them being true. Top three among those would be the way the disciples are presented and the way they present themselves.

Why, if you're trying to establish a new movement, why would you write about your top leaders failing to understand teachings so consistently?

Why would you record them fighting with one another about greatness? Why record the great failures, for example, abandoning Jesus at his point of need and sleeping while he asks for prayer and running away while he is arrested?

There is nothing to gain from presenting failing and flawed leaders except to show that this is true. Another embarrassing detail is the fact that women are included as the first eyewitnesses of the resurrection.

[20 : 50] Now, it's been widely recognised that Jesus and the early Christian church actually had a much higher view of women than prevailing society. But when the evidence of a woman was not accepted in a law court, why would you include as your first eyewitnesses a group of women?

Unless, it's true, surely you would want a key leader, someone with prominence to be the first eyewitness to give it greater gravitas, you might think. And then we think about the crucifixion.

If the gospels are an invention, why have the leader of that movement die the most shameful death imaginable?

Why have him cry out on the cross, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why present a leader who appears in weakness, who is humiliated, who seems to have failed?

And especially when we understand that there was no expectation within Judaism or within any other religious movement or community for a dying and rising Messiah, why the crucifixion?

[22 : 14] Unless, it's true. So those embarrassing details help to point towards authenticity. So hopefully, it's clear that there is evidence for trusting the Bible.

There are various ways to build up that case, ways that we haven't begun to explore with the limited time that we have. But one thing it's important to see about Christian scriptures, the Bible, they are unique in that they are rooted in history, people, places, times.

The Bible encourages historical investigation and it rests on historical facts, principally about the birth, life, and especially the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus.

Paul again could say if Jesus is not raised from the dead of all people in the whole world, Christians are most to be pitied because we built our faith on a fiction when the Gospels are saying it's historical truth.

What we have in the Gospels is eyewitness history. Even a really sceptical professor like Bart Ehrman who really is no friend to the Christian church, he concludes that the four Gospels are the best, oldest, and most reliable guide to the authentic Jesus.

[23 : 48] But you know, there's still one crucial argument to consider, perhaps in some ways the key argument to consider and it's this. How did Jesus read the Bible?

Did Jesus trust the Bible? What did Jesus have to say? And so we began with those three different texts. So we began with Matthew chapter 5, the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus saying not one iota, not one dot will pass from the law, will pass from God's word until it is accomplished.

So Jesus there has the written word of God in view and what he says is all of it is trustworthy, all of it is authoritative.

Jesus had total confidence in the Bible that he had which was the Old Testament. So he would then go on to say in the Sermon on the Mount that the Old Testament sets the ethics for the people of God and that can be trusted.

And then we read that interesting passage in Matthew chapter 12 where among other things Jesus said just as Jonah was three days and nights in the belly of a great fish so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

[25 : 01] So here's Jesus going to one of the hardest stories in the Old Testament to swallow. Pardon the obvious pun. The story of Jonah regarded by many as myth and fable.

How did Jesus read it? He read it as history and we know that because he says just as the historical Jonah was swallowed for three days and three nights so I in history will be buried for three days before rising again.

Jesus draws a straight line connection with the historical facts of Jonah to the historical facts of his own death and resurrection. Jesus read the history of the Bible as history and he trusted it and so therefore can we.

And then that section in John's gospel where Jesus is speaking to his opponents and he said to them those who had grown up studying the scriptures and teaching the scriptures you search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life and it is they that bear witness about me.

So Jesus says something radical there he says the whole Bible is about me. That he is the hero in the story of salvation whether we read the Old Testament that's pointing forward to Jesus or we read the New Testament and it's explaining giving the facts about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and explaining the significance all of it points to him and that's significant because it's in Jesus and understanding the message about him that we can receive eternal life he is the giver of life.

[26 : 38] The problem in Jesus' day with his opponents wasn't the question of historical reliability they had Jesus right there in front of them the problem was his exclusive truth claims his claim to be Lord and King his claim to be able to forgive sins and we're going to think about next week that question of exclusive truth claims in our own day.

Peter Williams who wrote a book called Can We Trust the Gospels he says the Gospels would pass historical tests without question but it's the claims of Jesus' teaching that lead people to want to reject them.

So the challenge is always there we can trust the Bible that we open but will we be open to what we find? To trust the Bible is to share the same viewpoint as Jesus and this is something that matters because to read the Bible then is to hear God's revelation of truth.

Again, it's not human speculation it's not myth. Nothing matters more for us than to hear from our God and our Creator and Jesus says in the Bible that's what you find. And to hear the Bible to read the Bible is to hear God's truth about salvation which centres on Jesus the Son coming into history bringing good news and offering eternal life because Jesus literally died and rose to pay for sin to satisfy God's justice against his broken law and to demonstrate the love of God and the desire to save people so that you and I today we literally have a life and death decision to make.

Do we trust the Bible really matters? Now I'm going to pray briefly and then we will sing a couple of songs to close so let me pray.

[28 : 48] Dear God thank you for a chance to explore your word and thank you that the Bible says the word of God is powerful it's living and active that it is true that it's a guide for life that it's a treasure thank you that the Bible we're told centres on Jesus your son who you sent into the world to be saviour thank you for all the work that people have done to show that the Bible can be trusted that there is evidence for its reliability that matters for us as a church because we want our life together to be centred on what we read and hear in the Bible we don't want it to go in one ear and out the other we don't want to just be hearers we want to be doers and so it's good for us to know that we can rely on its teaching and its truth we pray that you'd make us people that love to read the Bible love to study the Bible that we want to share it together with family and with friends and as a church with our neighbours but it also matters for those of us who are exploring

Christianity to know that what we read can be trusted that when we read it's not words invented by people but it's inspired by you the living God and so we pray for each one of us that you'd help us to think through our own attitude to the Bible that we would open the Bible and that we would be open to it and we pray this in Jesus name Amen