

Reliably Knowing Jesus

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[0:00] Good morning, everyone. Welcome to St Paul's. My name's Steve. I've never met you before.! I'm the lead pastor here. In this last couple of weeks, as you probably realise, maybe, that we've been in our Christmas season here at St Paul's. And I began this season by quoting the late theologian James Packer, who suggested that what Christianity claims regarding Christmas is so outrageous that nothing in all of fiction has anything like it. In other words, what he's saying there is that there is no worldview that comes even close to the outrageous claims of what the Bible declares around Christmas and other things. And so what we've been doing in the last couple of weeks is really exploring some of those claims and whether or not you can actually believe what the Bible says about Christmas, or whether it's just much better just to keep it as a holiday at the end of the year and with a great deal of light and joy and so on. The claim of Christmas in the Christian faith is the claim that the infinite God who made all things became a human being, a limited human being, a Jew, a helpless human baby, unable to do more than lie and stare and wriggle and make noises, needing to be fed and changed and taught to talk like any other child.

And if that wasn't enough in terms of just the claims of Christmas, the claim that the Almighty became a baby, but also the fact that the author of life came into this world to die on a cross for humanity.

It claims, the Bible claims that Jesus performed miracles, that he was raised from the dead, and that he is now present with his followers by his Holy Spirit through his word.

It claims that he will, Jesus will come back to earth one day as universal judge and ruler of all things. Extraordinary claims.

Not just the claims of Christmas, but extraordinary claims. And we need some serious evidence to believe any of those claims. And that's kind of what we've been looking at the last couple of weeks through our Christmas season.

[2:38] And if you've just joined us, there's a couple of really short resources to do with Christmas and whether or not it's believable. Just on the other side of the wall, you can take these and continue on yourself.

Extraordinary claims. And yet, billions of people from all different culture groups and different socioeconomic educational stages of life and other things like that have come to believe those claims.

In fact, some of the smartest people in the world today believe those claims. And throughout history believe that the claims of the Bible are true and that they are, in fact, not just true, but have authority over my life in every aspect of my life.

And so, as we, you know, come to the close of our Christmas season and, you know, if you're already thinking ahead, if you're like me, people with ADHD, you're always thinking of something else forward.

You know, the New Year's there, New Year's resolutions are there. And so, I want to put the claims of the Christian faith and specifically the reliability of the Bible in front of us and an encouragement for you to pick it up and to read it as you look into the year ahead and explore those claims and what they mean for your life.

[4:17] And, in fact, that's really what we're going to be doing as we move into January as well. Just looking a bit more about the reliability of the claims of the Christian faith, why you'd want to believe it in 2026 and why you'd want to shape your life around those claims.

So, what I want to do today really is just really simply, very quickly propose that the Bible is true and reliable for everything in life and faith. And I want to say really that the Bible is historically, culturally and personally reliable.

Okay, so that's kind of our journey today. So, one of the common accusations today is that the Bible and particularly the New Testament accounts about Jesus and what are written there were written by the winners in history, if you like.

The claim that he did miracles, that he was, that Jesus was divine and that he rose again were all written much later in time by church leaders who were trying to get Christianity to spread and to be the dominant religion in the world.

And so, what those church leaders did was they fudged things a little bit to kind of make it, to make it more effective, if you like. They just sort of fudged a little bit of the accusations, prop Jesus up a little bit more to make him what he was than what he wasn't actually.

[5:50] Now, there are many reasons why those accusations, people might want to grab hold of them, but also why they fundamentally are not right at all.

But let me look briefly at three reasons why you can trust what the Bible says about Jesus. And I'm referring here particularly about the New Testament, what it says about Jesus.

Firstly, the New Testament accounts about Jesus were written far too early for them to be legends.

Take the beginning of Luke. The angels read out to us, Luke chapter 1.

Luke was written as a biography of Jesus and he points out to his readers there in verses 2 and 3, So here's Luke.

Luke is writing this gospel that Andrew just read out to us. He's writing it 30 to 40 years, only 30 to 40 years after Jesus.

[7:11] And he makes the point there that lots of people who saw Jesus are still alive right now. And so you can check the facts with those people.

And writing even closer to those events than Luke here was Paul. And Paul wrote his letters only 15 to 20 years after the events of Jesus' life.

And he says this in 1 Corinthians 15 verse 6 about the resurrection of Jesus. He appeared to more than 500 of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living.

So what that means is Paul could not have possibly written a public document promoting Christianity, a statement like that, unless it was in fact the case.

Or in Philippians chapter 2, Paul quotes a hymn of Jesus' divinity. And if Philippians is written so close to the events of Jesus' life, and Paul is quoting something here that's written earlier about Jesus, then what it says in Philippians 2 is that the very earliest Christians worshipped Jesus as God.

[8:37] The very earliest Christians worshipped him as God, which stands opposed to the claims that Christians didn't worship him as God until 300 to 400 years later under Constantine.

Absolute rubbish. They worshipped him as God from the very beginning. The documents of the New Testament are way too early for people to say whatever they wanted about Jesus, while thousands of people who witnessed him in person were still alive.

Secondly, documents of the New Testament are too counterproductive to be legends. Remember, the accusation is that the Bible is what the early, the New Testament is what the early church leaders wanted people to believe had happened, because this helped them to consolidate their power and to grow the Christian faith throughout the Roman Empire.

So imagine you're a church leader living 70 to 80 years after Jesus, and so what you've decided to do to consolidate your power is to make up a heap of stories about him.

Would you put in those stories that Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane asking the Father to get out of his plan?

[10:11] If there's any other way of doing this, please come up with another plan. Would you put that story in it? Not in the Roman Empire,

you wouldn't.

In fact, it was the Garden of Gethsemane and the crucifixion of Jesus on the cross that resulted in the Nazi Party rejecting Christianity because they would not believe in a God who was so weak. That was the fundamental issue for Adolf Hitler. Christianity is about humility and about sacrifice, and that is weak. And that's the Roman Empire.

Would you put Jesus on a cross asking God why he had forsaken him? Jesus looks weak. Would you include in your first century stories that all of your very first eyewitnesses to the historical fact of the resurrection were women at a time when women's evidence was not even permissible, admissible in court because of their low social status?

And all the gospel accounts say that the original eyewitnesses were women. If you're trying to fudge things, why would you put that in there? Not only that, but when you get into the New Testament, you see the apostles don't come across as glowing historic, heroic figures in any way.

[11:51] They're cowardly. They're slow to believe, and they are fundamentally self-interested. So why include any of it if they were in fact making it up?

They are in fact totally counterproductive for consolidating power for the early Christian leaders of the Christian movement. And thirdly, they are too detailed.

The New Testament accounts are too detailed to be legends. Ancient myths and novels were never written like this. Modern novels might have, if you like, familiar characteristics to the New Testament, but not ancient ones.

The New Testament accounts of Jesus don't have the form of legends. They are written too early to be legends, and they are too counterproductive to be legends.

And so you can trust them. Now, that's just really brief. I haven't touched on the Old Testament. I haven't got time to delve into all of that as well. But briefly, if you can trust what the New Testament says about Jesus, then you can trust what Jesus says about the Old Testament.

[13:10] And his view was that the Old Testament, the Jewish Bible, was God's word, it was true, and it had authority. Historically reliable New Testament.

Secondly, it's culturally reliable. Now, I think it's pretty much true to say that modern people care less about the historical reliability of the Bible because, really, in our Western world, particularly at the moment, we're more troubled about the cultural aspects of the Bible.

And in our progressive cultural society at the moment, we consider many aspects of the Bible offensive, primitive, and backward.

The Bible offends Sidneysiders in many ways, in certain ways. Of course, the offense might have a long list, but the offense is a constantly moving offense, and the list constantly changes.

So here's three considerations for any bit of the Bible that you regard offends you right now, that, you know, you want to read it with a pair of scissors and cut that bit out, keep these bits, but cut those bits out.

[14:31] Three considerations. Firstly, consider the possibility it isn't teaching what you think it's teaching. For instance, I could never understand why some of the great spiritual heroes of the Old Testament had so many wives.

until I realized that the Bible in no way was endorsing it. It was recording it, not endorsing it.

And in fact, the Bible in every instance in those moments is actually subverting it. In every case where polygamy was practiced, it goes bad for those people.

Families break down, lives are ruined, physically, spiritually, emotionally, relationally, in every single instance. You see, if the Bible is a recording of history, it doesn't just record the successful bits.

It records all the evil and the carnage and the difficulty and the sin. The Bible shows us, in fact, how bad it is. The Bible wasn't endorsing what I thought it was endorsing.

[15:54] It was simply recording it. Secondly, please consider the possibility that you are misunderstanding what the Bible teaches because of your own cultural blind spots, which we all bring to the Bible.

in Luke 24 verses 20, 21, again, Anne read this out to us. On the road to Emmaus, we see these early disciples had misunderstood the prophecies about the Messiah.

You see, as Jews, they were really only thinking about the redemption of Israel, currently under occupation by the Roman Empire.

They weren't thinking in terms of the redemption of the whole human race. They had a cultural blind spot that meant they misread Scripture and therefore they misread Jesus.

And the modern person does the same. In many ways, for instance, a common one nowadays is that on slavery, one accusation is the Bible condones slavery and we all know nowadays that slavery is wrong.

[17:12] If it is wrong on that moral issue, then it's quite possibly it's wrong on every other moral issue as well. And I've heard that argument played out even in the press over the last five to ten years on multiple occasions whenever a moral issue is raised.

And so does the Bible condone slavery. For instance, there's parts of the New Testament when Paul tells slaves to obey their masters and as soon as we read that we go, well, there you go.

You know, there it is right there. Condoning of slavery. In fact, in one New Testament letter, Paul is addressing a relationship between a master and his slave and it's clear from that letter it's not the kind of relationship that we would in fact call modern slavery at all.

You see, when we read the word slave in the Bible we automatically import 17th, 18th and 19th century thinking, experience, history and modern slavery into the Bible which is in those the 16th through to the 19th century slavery is race-based and ethnic minority slavery.

when we read the Bible with those cultural blinders on we are not understanding what the Bible is teaching and we're not actually allowing it to sit in its historical context.

[18:48] In the Greco-Roman world of the New Testament slaves were not distinguishable from anyone else by their race by the way that they spoke or by the clothing that they wore.

They looked and lived like everyone else and they were not segregated off as a different segment of society. Slaves were often quite well educated and they held high managerial roles.

Slaves also made the same wages as free labourers and therefore over time they were able to pay off the debt that resulted them being into slavery in the first place and to buy themselves out of that scenario.

Much like the very early convicts of Australia who at the end of their day went home to their homes and their families and their houses.

Slavery was never a permanent status. The average slave worked for a master for about 10 years and this is very different than new world slavery of the past 300 years or so.

[20:23] So those who have used the Bible to defend their practice of kidnapping and slavery in the slave trade in the past several hundred years have read the Bible through their cultural blind spots and those who use it today to reject the Bible are you reading it through their cultural blind spots?

Thirdly, consider the possibility that you're being offended by the Bible because of assumption that your cultural moment, our cultural moment, is superior to all other cultural moments.

Often that assumption has actually in fact never been tested or acknowledged. The reason we are offended by some biblical passages is because it's culturally offensive in our own cultural moment. But in other cultural moments today, right, today, in other parts of the world, and also historically in the past, they have absolutely no problem with the same passage of the Bible.

On the other hand, the passages that we think are totally fine for us and appropriate for our cultural moment, others in the past and in other parts of the world are fundamentally appalled by those passages.

[22:09] For instance, in our progressive, individualistic Western society, what the Bible says about sexual relationships, we go, you know, like, that is pre-1950s, it's so narrow-minded, and you get on a plane and you go to the Middle East and they go, yeah, absolutely, what the Bible says about sex, totally appropriate.

That's exactly right, that's exactly how it should be. And yet, we, in our cultural moment here, we read what the Bible says about forgiveness of someone who has wronged you, about doing good for other people, and we go, yes, that is absolutely appropriate, it is good and it's right, and again,

you get on a plane and you fly the Middle East and they say what the Bible says about forgiveness, that is absolutely offensive, totally inappropriate.

We love forgiveness and hate justice, whereas 14 hours away on an airplane, and they love justice and hate forgiveness.

If we are offended by something in the Bible, why should our cultural sensibilities trump everyone else's cultural sensibilities?

Why should we say we've got it right and they've got it wrong? That's a bit arrogant, isn't it? a bit narrow-minded, isn't it? Why get rid of the Bible?

[23:55] Because it offends our culture only at certain points. And if you haven't worked that one out, bear in mind that all of your great grandchildren are going to find a lot of what you think today to be incredibly embarrassing.

where you think your cultural moment is progressive and right, your great grandchildren are going to think, my goodness, my great grandparents were narrow-minded.

don't miss out on all that the Bible and the Christian faith has to offer you just because you can't get over one aspect of your so-called cultural truth, your cultural moment, that in fact, your cultural moment will in fact be considered a joke within 50 years.

If the Bible really is God revealing himself to his creation and it's not just a byproduct of any specific culture, then what that means is it will contradict every culture at some point.

It will offend every culture and every cultural moment at some point. And so if you read it and find some things beautiful and other bits offensive, then it's probably true and it's from God.

[25:41] But lastly, the Bible is personally reliable. A completely, a completely, that is a totally authoritative Bible is in fact the prerequisite for a warm personal relationship with God.

It is not the enemy of it. Have a look there at Luke 24 that Anne read out for us, verse 32. The disciples are reflecting back on their journey over the last previous days as they walk in their road to Emmaus with Jesus and it says, were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the scriptures to us?

So in the Bible, the heart is not the muscle pumping the blood through the system. The heart is the centre of the whole person.

It's the driving centre of the person, not just the emotions, it's the driving centre of the desires of the person. And the hearts burning here means a full life-changing personal encounter with God.

That's what it means here in Luke 24. They experienced something on that road to Emmaus with Jesus that they had never experienced before.

[27:15] When? When did they experience it? when the Bible and its meaning was properly opened up to them. When they understood what it had meant.

And that is the key to this deep personal relationship. Notice how it happens. Verses 20-21, they say Jesus died, but we had hoped that he would be the one who would save us.

that's what they had hoped. Their cultural blinders were on. He's the Messiah of Israel. We had hoped he would save us. And Jesus calls them out for being foolish and so slow to believe the scriptures.

What did they not understand? Keys verse 27. beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the scriptures concerning himself.

That's the key to it right there. What Jesus is saying here is that everything in the Bible is about him. It's all about him.

[28:39] He way too many people have walked away from the Christian faith and ultimately from the Bible because they've misunderstood that crucial central point.

If we think the Bible is about us and what we must do, then what that means is we don't need a saviour.

We don't need a Messiah dying for us. All we need is a bunch of rules and a code of conduct to live by. That's what it means if we think it's about us.

You see, there are only two ways to read the Bible. Read it as if it's all about me and what I must do or we can read every part of it as if it's about him, God, and what he has done for us.

And the whole Bible, the whole lot of it, Old Testament included, points us to Jesus and it explains Jesus and everything that Jesus has achieved for us in dying in our place for our sin.

[30:00] And the Christmas message is exactly that, that God entered history for that purpose. You see, when the Bible is all about Jesus and what he's achieved for us out of purely out of love for us because of our incapability to do it ourselves, that all of a sudden is when it becomes personal, relational.

It's when the Bible starts to become an encounter with him. Now, my conviction from both personal experience over 30-odd years and also from the teaching of the Bible itself, more importantly, is that the most effective means for bolstering confidence in the Bible is not to do what I've just done in the last 20-odd minutes, giving you arguments as to why you should believe it.

They have a place about its authority and its truthfulness and its reliability, but in actual fact, to spend time in the Bible, reading the Bible, with Jesus at the centre of it as a supernatural activity. very simply, God, if you exist and this is your word, then you need to revere yourself to me. Let me put it like this.

I could tell you that honey, which I'm assuming you're all familiar with, honey is a substance that is made by a species of insects called bees, not by all bees, but by several species of bees.

[32:04] Bees produce honey by gathering and then refining the sugary excretions of plants and the secretions, in fact, of other insects.

And this refining process takes place within individual bees through regurgitation and the enzymatic activity that happens in that process where they vomit it and do stuff with it.

I could also tell you that honey is sweet. Like, it's sweet because it's sweet because of its high concentration sugar and sugar.

It's a simple sugar. It's a sugar of fructose and glucose. It's about the same relative sweetness as white sugar interchangeably.

So one standard teaspoon of honey provides around 120 kilojoules of food energy. honey. And I could go on and break down the chemical components that make up honey and tell you from all that information, you should be able to deduce that honey is sweet.

[33:30] If you're a chemist. It's all true. but the best thing I could do for you is not tell you that honey is sweet but to actually get some onto a teaspoon and shove it in your mouth.

That's when you go, oh, I get what you're talking about now. You see, and if in that moment that I put it on a teaspoon and shove it in your mouth, if you don't get it then no amount of explanation, no more argumentation will in any way come through for you at all.

And so as 2025 draws to a close and we move forward into 2026, I want to do, to invite you to do what King David invited others to do and to join him in in Psalm 34 verse 8, to taste and see that the Lord is good in 2026.

You see, the best way for you to build confidence in the reliability of the scriptures is to actually read it.

And to read it regularly and ask God to work in you as you read it, to reveal himself. You see, God himself promises to bless the reading and teaching of his word.

[35:21] The word of God itself is more than enough to accomplish the work of God in the people of God. And there is no better way to understand and to come to embrace the truth of the Bible than, in fact, than to open it up and to let it into your life, as a regular habit in your life.

And so I commend it to you that you might not just know it, but that you might taste and see in 2026 that the Lord is good.

Amen.