

Did Jesus even Exist?

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. My name is James. Nice to see you this morning. As you might be able to tell, I'm incredibly sunburned at the moment, but don't worry, these lights make it seem about as painful as it feels.

Let me pray for us. Dear Heavenly Father, I thank you for your word, and I thank you for this time at Christmas where we get to remember the birth of our Saviour, your Son, Jesus.

Be with us today as we look at your word. Amen. Could Jesus have been real? Was Jesus even real?

So much has happened in the world because of the name Jesus. We're all sitting here today, all watching online, because of a person called Jesus. Our laws are based on a book about him. Some of the most popular names, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, are from the Bible. A study done 10 years ago found that the most famous person in history was Jesus.

[1 : 08] Our calendars are built around him. We're coming up to Christmas, and then in Easter, we have the time we remember his death and resurrection. And he has impacted some people's lives so much that they would even die for him.

But is there any historical evidence for this Jesus? And if there is any evidence, is this Jesus worth all the hype?

In the Bible, this Jesus makes exclusive claims. That he's God. That he is going to die and he's going to come back to life. Should our lives be influenced by him today?

People have a wide range of views on whether he was real. On the one side, there's some people who think Jesus did not exist at all, full stop.

And then there's people here who think, well, maybe he existed, but I don't care. I don't want him to have any influence. And then there's people over here in this camp who think, do you know what? I think he existed.

[2 : 14] I think he was real. And I lack some of the things he said. And then all the way over here, I'll try and say on camera, all the way over here, where's the edge of the camera? All the way over here is there is people who said, yes, he is real.

I believe what he said, that he is the son of God, and I'm going to worship him as God. Today, we are going to dive into the historical evidence and see if there was a real Jesus, to see where we should fit on that scale, to see if he is worth any influence on our lives.

So should we care about this historical figure? Should he influence our culture and our lives? I'm going to see if this click is going to work for me.

So we're going to start by seeing what does history say about this Jesus? Well, the best and most detailed histories are in the books in the Bible called the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. One historian described them as the best and oldest sources we have for knowing about the life of Jesus. And we're going to look at them in a bit. Because some people would say you can't trust the books of the Bible as a history book because they're written by religious fanatics.

[3 : 30] So you've got to put them to the side. You've got to ignore them. Historians don't say that. But we're not going to start there. Where we're going to start today is looking at historical sources of Jesus from outside the Bible.

What proof is there that Jesus existed from outside the Bible, if there is any? And does it line up with what the Bible says? So we're going to have a look at that. We're going to have a look at three historical recordings of Jesus this morning.

One report comes from a Jewish historian called Josephus. Here's Josephus on the screen. He wrote in around AD 93.

And he wrote some reports that had happened 30 years ago. You can see it on the screen. Sorry if it's a little bit small. Let me read briefly. But the younger Ananus, who, as we said, received the high priesthood.

So there's this guy called Ananus, who was the high priest of the Jews, assembled a council of judges and brought before it the brother of Jesus, the so-called Christ, whose name was James, together with some others.

[4 : 39] And having accused them as lawbreakers. He delivered them over to be stoned. And so we have this very old historical report from a historian called Josephus, a Jewish historian, that there was a man called James who was stoned to death because he was a religious fanatic, had moved away from Judaism.

That sounds consistent with what we see, what we know of the Jewish people. They would stone people who were not following the laws. And what it says about James is that he had a brother called Jesus, the so-called Christ.

Now that Christ title is really significant. It tells us of Jesus as being the promised king who would come and save his people. So he's our first character, first piece of historical evidence.

The second is Cornelius Tacitus. He was called the greatest historian of ancient Rome who lived from 55 to 120 AD. He wrote that Christus, another word for Christ, Christus, the founder of the name, was put to death by Pontius Pilate, procurator or governor of Judea in the reign of Tiberius. But the pernicious superstition repressed for a time broke out again, not only through Judea where the mischief originated, but through the city of Rome also. I actually really like his writing.

[6 : 11] It's quite interesting. It's quite exciting. I feel like I want to actually go and read some more of Tacitus. And so Tacitus helpfully speaks of someone called Jesus put to death by Pontius Pilate.

And there were many superstitious beliefs about Jesus. Now, I'd love to know the details. We don't have any more details on what they are. But it could be that Jesus walked on water.

It could be that he turned water into wine. It could be that he died and rose again. It could be that the believers believed that they would also rise again. Our third character this morning, his name is Pliny the Younger.

He was governor in Bithynia in Asia Minor in AD 112. And he wrote to the emperor Trajan. And they were talking about how to deal with Christians and how to kill Christians.

Because this is what the Roman Empire was dealing with at the time. Nero, when Rome burnt down in the early 60s AD, he blamed the cities burning down on Christians.

[7 : 13] They were the scapegoat. And Pliny was asking if you should kill all the people found to be Christians or just some of them. And so he explained that he made the Christians bow down to the statue of the emperor.

He tried to make them curse Christ, which a genuine Christian cannot do. And writing further, he said this. He said that the Christians were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light.

When they sang in alternate verse a hymn to Christ as to a God. And bound themselves to a solemn oath not to do any wicked deeds.

And so Pliny very early records that people were gathering as a church, singing to Jesus, worshipping him as God. This is not something that comes a thousand years later.

Worshipping Jesus as God is very, very, very early. And these Christians were seeking to live different lives. Binding themselves to solemn oaths not to do any wicked deeds.

[8 : 21] Worshipping Jesus as God and trying to live lives influenced by him. And so these three early texts, this is just three of them that I've picked. There's many more.

You can go and follow up yourselves. Pliny, Tacitus and Josephus. They give us a glimpse into how Jesus has been recorded historically. They record that Jesus was an influential Jewish leader.

He claimed to be the Christ. The Christ who would save people from their sins. He was executed around AD 30 by Pontius Pilate. And that Jesus was worshipped as God by his followers.

Before we even move on to analysing these claims. The historical documents of the time showed clear evidence that Jesus was a real person. Now I'd love a photo.

I'd love a grainy photo or one of those shonky grainy videos of the... Who's the guy? The ape? The gorilla? Bigfoot. Thank you, Steve. Bigfoot. I'd love a grainy video of Jesus.

[9 : 24] But that's not... Obviously we don't have that evidence from 2,000 years ago. But all of the historical evidence that we do have shows that Jesus was real. Some claim that he came back to

life.

And all the evidence points that he lived and he died. And some say he came back to life. John Dixon is an ancient historian. A lecturer at Macquarie University and University of Oxford.

And he's also a Christian. And so strong is his belief in the real historical Jesus that in 2014 he made a bet on Twitter. It's probably not the best idea.

But he made this bet on Twitter. Wendy, if you can go to the next slide for me. Thank you. He said, I will eat a page of my Bible if Jesus didn't exist. And he goes on further in this article that you can click on.

He said, if there is any professor of ancient history, of the classics or in New Testament, in the world who would argue that Jesus did not exist, I will eat a page of my Bible.

[10:28] He's already planned it out. He was going to cut the page up into little pieces and put it on his cereal. And this was in 2014. He has never had to do this. Because there is incredible consensus within the academic world that Jesus was a real historical person.

But even if Jesus was real, the Bible asks us to believe so much more than that he was a real person. The Bible asks us to believe that every decision we make should be influenced by this man. And that the way we view the world and our tomorrow should be influenced by a Jewish man who lived 2,000 years ago. Now, if you have a look at these three characters again.

Pliny, Tacitus, Josephus. These were men around 2,000 years ago. Why don't people suggest I wear a wonderful headdress like Josephus?

What makes Jesus' claims so special that we should be influenced by him and be worshipping him as God? And so what we're going to do is we're going to assess the claims of the historical figures.

[11:39] And we're going to have a look at what the Bible says about Jesus. So, second point today. What does the Bible say about him? It says very much.

We're not going to go into all the detail. We'll have a look at some of it. Believing that Jesus is real is a reasonable thing. It makes sense based on the historical documents. Not only that, but the evidence points to his exclusive claims being true too.

The first book of the New Testament is called Matthew. A biography that focuses on the life of Jesus. It introduces us to a young woman called Mary. She's a young Jewish woman living in the first century in Jerusalem.

And she was engaged to marry Joseph. But before they could be married, the author Matthew writes in chapter 1, verse 18, His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph.

But before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Mary was told by an angel that her son Jesus was going to be the promised king who would reign on God's throne forever.

[12:47] Mary was understandably surprised. Matthew also tells us about Joseph and his response. Surprised is probably not the right word to use. When he found out that Mary was pregnant, he assumed the worst.

And he planned to end their engagement. But Joseph met an angel in a dream who told him that the father was God himself. And Joseph is told to call the baby Jesus, which means God is salvation.

Matthew 1, 21. Wendy, if you can go to the next slide for me. Thank you. It says, She will give birth to a son. And you ought to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins. This is a wonderful twist. Jesus, the prophesied baby who would come to save people from their sins. Sin is building our identity, our self-worth, our happiness on anything other than God.

In Jesus' time, just like ours, people had issues of identity, self-worth. And we might build a view of ourselves on our morals, how we are good as people.

[13:57] I'm pretty good. I'm a good and upstanding person. I think highly of myself compared to other people. Or we might see the value that we get from a career or a romantic relationship.

Or the things we've bought ready for Christmas. But as we, as a culture, are beginning to understand, just pursuing a career or romantic relationships or personal, individualistic truth or consuming things, it leads to drivenness and addictions and severe anxiety and obsessiveness and envy of others and then resentment.

All of this drives us away from the God who made us. And he knew this. And he planned our salvation. And that salvation doesn't involve what we would usually do to avoid anxiety.

I need to do a detox from social media. That's how I'll feel better about myself. I'm going to change careers to avoid anxiety from the people at work. Or, you know, it's January now, so there's the seven top tips for a happy 2023.

We need something much bigger than that. According to the angel that spoke to Jesus, to Joseph, sorry, Jesus was Emmanuel. God with us.

[15:13] God in person. Jesus' mission to bring sinful people back to God. Unlike the Star Wars character, Anakin Skywalker, who existed a long, long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, Jesus is a real person who, sure, existed 2,000 years ago, but existed in a very real place.

Emmanuel, God himself dwelling with us. Jesus' birth. The birth of Jesus is pinned to a time and a place. The Gospel of Matthew and Luke both pin it to Jesus being born during the reign of Herod. And the reason for Jesus' birth in the city of Bethlehem was because of a government consensus being taken at the time. Another historical piece of evidence that we can pin that event to. Jesus ends up being born in a rather rough place amongst animals.

And not long after Jesus' birth, people came to visit. There were shepherds that were sent by angels. Wise men came from the east, led by a star.

The wise men go and ask the current king, King Herod, where is this Jesus? Matthew chapter 2, verse 2. Thank you, Wendy. Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?

[16:36] Poor old King Herod. What do you mean? I'm the king of the Jews. We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him. Herod is troubled. Understandably, that there's a competitor to his throne.

And he finds out that the Christ was born in Bethlehem. And so when these wise men come to Jesus, they bring him gifts. But they fall down and worship him as God.

Now there's something just beautiful and touching about this story. It's fit for a Hallmark Christmas movie. I'm not sure if you're a Hallmark Christmas movie type person. But this is a lovely story.

There's a divine child. There's a divine child. There's a child lying in an animal food trough, heralded by angels. It starts with a real rags to riches story.

It does end up in riches. Hated by rulers. Worshipped by rich and poor. By fellow Jews and by foreigners. Worshipped by scholars and shepherds.

[17:35] It's a lovely story for a family at this time of year. But these are not just fanciful tales. They are specific events that happened in real places.

With tests for historical documents. No other religion does that. Christianity is not a religion that revolves around us following a particular path.

Or avoiding and getting rid of suffering. Christianity is not a religion revolved around mystical practices or feelings. It is a historical religion based on three events.

Really. Jesus' birth, his death and his resurrection. It's a historical event based religion. Every year we talk about the same things.

It's Christmas time. So we're going to talk about baby Jesus again. Just because it's cute? No, because it is significant. Jesus was the Christ.

[18:38] The promised son of God who would deal with our sin. Worshipped as the king. The exclusive claims in the Bible about Jesus are acknowledged.

And recorded by the historians of the time. He was the Christ. A leader of his people, yes. But he died for them too. And rose to life.

Worshipped as God. And so what Pliny records is also in the Bible. What Tacitus said of Jesus, called the Christ, is true. The one who would save us from our sin.

The historical event we remember at Easter. Dying but coming back to life three days later. My last big question this morning. Third point. So what?

So what if these historical claims about Jesus were recorded in different places that agree with the Bible? So what if the Bible is true when it talks about Jesus?

[19:38] What does it mean for us today, if anything? Well, the Gospels and these other historic documents point to the exclusive claims of Jesus. He is the leader of humanity.

He is the Christ. He saved us from our sins. He was executed and raised from the dead.

Worshipped as God. Jesus came and died for us.

Now we can attempt to ignore this historical reality, this evidence that it was real. We can admit it was real, but attempt to ignore his significance on our lives.

And even if we want to ignore him, we desperately need him. This Jesus who would save us from our sins.

Even if we don't think that we are that bad as a people and need saving from our sins, we can't help but look around the world and see that there are so many problems. It seems we are only one government crisis away from a nuclear war.

[20 : 41] There are so many issues, so much pain and conflict. We are desperate for the Christ to save us from our sins, to save us from pain and conflict and war of the world around us.

Not only does it make rational sense to believe that Jesus was real, we also need it to be true. We are not so desperate that we are going to try and rewrite history to give us some kind of false sense of hope so we can deal with our problems.

But history stands still and acknowledges all that Jesus has done. He is the Savior who came and died on the cross and came back to life.

Even us self-absorbed, selfish people, falling into distractions in our phones, ignoring those people around us.

We see the pain of the people around us and hope that somebody else would come and fix the problems. It's not going to be Joe Biden. It's not going to be Anthony Albanese. It is the historical Jesus who is still alive today, who reigns on the throne.

[21 : 46] So was Jesus even real? Well, if the answer is no, there is no proof that God loves us.

If Jesus is not real, then we are stuck. We're stuck in a world that is falling apart. We're stuck in damaged relationships. We're stuck with no promises of tomorrow.

There is no hope of a better future unless we're going to put our hope into divided countries and divided mankind. We are stuck with no promise of justice for the hurt and pain inflicted.

If Jesus is not real, then we are stuck with no forgiveness for the pain we inflict on others. If Jesus is not real, then we may as well just pursue the best life.

The one of physical pleasures and empty delights until it all comes crumbling down. And I know I'm chasing those things. Far too often, I'm living like Jesus is not real.

[22 : 52] Generally, I'm an optimistic person. And I think tomorrow is going to be a good day.

Today is going to be a good day. Don't worry, COVID is going to be over soon. I keep thinking to myself.

I'm generally an optimistic person, but my optimism can often just be a vague hope that things will be better. Because if Jesus isn't real, then there's no guarantee that tomorrow will be any better.

And if we think that an economic crisis or a pandemic was bad, a future without Jesus is so much worse. I know, I am sure that there are some of us this morning who are feeling this way.

Is there even a Jesus? Or we act far too often as if there is not. But if he is real, and he is, and oh how good it is that our Jesus is real.

The Bible shows he is. The historical evidence shows that he is. Because Jesus is real, I know that tomorrow it might be good. Tomorrow might be bad. I might be grieving a lost loved one or rejoicing at the birth of a baby.

[24 : 01] I know that because Jesus is real, God is in control. I know he has a plan. I know he is working good in me and through me and in you too.

And because Jesus is real, I have hope for tomorrow. I have hope because he forgives me though I sin. I have hope because he is making me whole again.

I have hope because Jesus has brought me close to him. I have hope because the pain and burdens have been taken away. Because Jesus is real, I know that even when this world fades away, God has something so much better planned for us.

Because this Jesus is real, born at Christmas, died and raised. I know that God loves me. Let me pray.

Heavenly Father, God, we thank you that you came into our world. That you came as a real person.

[25 : 03] Real, historical, flesh and blood person. And that we can know you because Jesus is real. And we thank you that we have documents.

That we have the Bible. That we have your words so we can know you. And not just distantly, but intimately. Father, help us to live a life believing in you each day.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.