

Can we trust the Bible?

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, everyone. My name is James. It's good to be with you today. I really like all of the stories that add up to the colour of Christmas.

The Christmas lights and the decorations, Santa, the elves, the movies and the Christmas carols. Yesterday, my family, we bought a real Christmas tree for the first time in years, and it just smells delightful. I'll bring in a piece of it next week if you just want to smell it.

It's great. I love it. But this week, I thought I would do some investigation into the origin of some of these Christmas stories. So I started with Santa Claus. One author describes the history of Santa...

Let me see if I can get this guy to work this morning. There we go. One author describes the history of Santa as involving a building project by a Byzantine emperor, a story about a father preparing to sell his own daughters into prostitution, a hoard of stolen bones reported to have magical properties, armies of crusading knights, Protestant zealots, the author of *Twas the Night Before Christmas*, a poem you probably read as a child but didn't realise how influential it was, Santa Claus, and Coca-Cola.

All of these different aspects build up to the magic of whatever Santa Claus is. Now, I feel like I could do a deep dive into each of those different aspects of history, but we're going to move on.

[1 : 3 0] What about the elves? Well, they come from German and Scandinavian origins, from folk stories. Our elves were house gnomes with magical powers to protect their homes from evil.

The stories were modernised in the 1800s to look about how we would expect elves to look. There's a story of some classic little fairy pixie-looking elves.

And then what about the Christmas tree? The Christmas tree that I put up in my house yesterday. Well, one article I read suggested that the evergreen tree represents the pagan themes of fertility and new life in the darkness of winter.

And this is why we have... What plant is this representing, Carmen? What is this? Greenery. Okay, thank you. Well, holly, ivy, and mistletoe, these are the Christmas plants.

You know, you have them hanging and you kiss people under them. These are the only plants that flower in winter. And so it's a symbol of new life. But then, as one legend goes, an English monk, Boniface, was doing some missionary work in Germany in the 8th century.

[2 : 4 7] And the story goes that some native Germans were sacrificing to the oak trees because they were pagans. They worshipped the trees. And so Boniface grabbed his axe and he chopped down to the tree to stop the pagans from worshipping it.

And the legend has it that a fir tree, the Christmas-shaped tree, a fir tree grew out of the fallen oak tree. The fir tree has a triangular shape, represents the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And so they brought the fir tree into the house as a sign of their new Christian faith. And then I learned a new one on Thursday night. In recent years, in Chinese culture, in China at least, there's been a new tradition.

Christmas Eve is called Ping An Ye, peace night in Chinese. And it kind of sounds like apple in Chinese, which is Ping Guo.

And so Christmas Eve is called Ping An Guo, which means peace apples. And so in recent years, Christmas Eve, you would give apples to each other until it was banned by the Chinese government.

[4 : 0 0] Christmas just has this long history of strange stories and exaggerations all being amalgamated into each other. And so it's just this mix of pagan worship, ancient folklore, legends, corporate greed, all coming together.

The stories of Christmas seem so far from their origins. But what about that other Christmas story?

The story of God becoming a person, born as a baby, to die on the cross, raised to life so that we might have life ourselves.

Is this just a hodgepodge story? Is this just a hodgepodge of a special baby? And there was another story about a man who could do miracles. And maybe there was another story from another culture about a resurrection.

And then there's another story about a nation waiting for salvation. Is the story of the baby at Christmas and the Christian faith just an exaggeration?

[5 : 0 7] Is it just an amalgamation of stories that we'll never really know the true origin of? Can we trust anything the Bible says? This month we're asking the question, Is Christmas unbelievable?

We're asking some pointed questions. And there is going to be a phone number on the screen texting your questions. We'll answer them straight after the service. Or you can come and ask me straight after church. But the challenge for us today is to question whether we believe the story of Jesus at Christmas just because it's the story we know.

Maybe there's exaggerations. Or is the story of Christmas real? And can we trust the Bible? Is there a truthful core to it that we'll never get to? Or is it true and we can believe it?

Let me pray as we have a look at this. Heavenly Father, I thank you for Christmas, for this time that seems to come quickly every year where our shops sing of your greatness, where Christmas carols are on and Christmas movies are on and we put up decorations.

But Lord, help us to understand whether we can trust your word, especially about Christmas. We pray this in Jesus' name.

[6 : 2 9] Amen. We're going to start by having a look. Oh, there's that great picture. I keep missing that picture. We're going to start with the eyewitnesses to the truth. In John's record of the gospel, there is a character who sits in the same seat as us asking the same question.

Can I trust you? What can I believe? His name is Thomas. And he missed out on seeing the risen Jesus when he appeared to his disciples.

So have a look at verse 24 with me. Wendy's going to push the buttons for me, I think. Thank you, Wendy. Now, Thomas, also known as Didymus, one of the 12, was not with disciples when Jesus came.

So the other disciples told him, we have seen the Lord just like us. Thomas missed out on seeing the risen Jesus. He didn't believe the story. But he said to them, unless I see the nail marks and put my finger where the nails were and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.

He doesn't say, I'm finding this hard to believe. I just really can't believe it. He says, I will not believe. Can you imagine if your 12 or your 11 best friends came up to you and told you, there's a cure for COVID.

[7 : 46] It is over. It's done. And you said, do you know what? I'm not going to believe until I get a PhD in microbiology. I will not believe until I fully investigate everything myself.

Thomas even then was living in a post-truth environment. I don't believe your truth, but only my truth. He's only risen if I have seen that he is risen. Thomas doubted because he hadn't seen it for himself.

He wanted to trust his own senses. And now Jesus, Jesus is good. He is good and generous to Thomas, even though he doubted. Verse 26, a week later, when Thomas is there, Jesus appears to Thomas and he says, peace be with you.

Okay, come on, Thomas, put your finger into my side. Come on, you can do it. I'll let you, here's exactly what you wanted. And Thomas says, he reacts and calls him God, my Lord and my God.

And then Jesus really speaking to us says, because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those, us, who have not seen Jesus and yet have believed.

[8 : 58] And then we get the whole purpose. This is the purpose. This is the point. This is the key part of John 20 for us today. These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

John wrote down the records of the eyewitnesses to be trustworthy with the purpose of believing in Jesus. These are not just a collection of stories. It's not just interesting.

John wasn't hoping for a bestseller for Christmas. These are eyewitness testimony recorded so that we might believe that Jesus is the Messiah. Trusting others is how people have always operated.

Not all of us are experts in science and historians and social scientists. We are always people who have listened to other people's opinion. This is why we pull out our phones in the morning and check the weather and find out it's going to be pretty hot today, I think.

We are people who routinely trust others and the same goes for with history. We trust the eyewitnesses. But if there were eyewitnesses, why is there such a lag between the events happening and the writing?

[10 : 17] Surely that means it's open to exaggeration. Surely it means that they've forgotten the story and they've just written it down and they've written it down wrong.

Jesus is reported to have been crucified around AD 30 and then the first of the books of the Bible of the New Testament, Galatians, was written about AD 50. Mark is written between about 50 and 60 and then John, the most recent gospel, was written around AD 90.

That is a fair time lag, some might say. Can we trust the reports if they were written later? There's a children's game that I remember and fondly remember playing called Telephone.

It has another, a more unhelpful name, Chinese Whispers, but we'll go with Telephone, where you start with one person, I'm going to pick on Nick, I'm going to tell Nick a phrase, I'm going to get back on camera, Nick, the phrase is, you know, yellow jelly bean and then Nick's going to tell people and it's going to get to the line and it's going to get over here and Kel is finally going to be the last one and he's going to tell us what he's heard and it's morphed into potato piano or something like this.

We know this game, this is quite a fun game, I always loved it as a kid. Some think that the story of the Bible starts with that, you know, the phrase was originally Jewish leader and it's retold and told over so many years that the meaning has been completely lost and that Jesus, who was maybe just a guy and influential leader, all of a sudden by the time we get to it being written down, Jesus is now God himself who can walk on water and come back to life.

[12 : 01] Clearly an exaggeration some might say. One historian, Richard Baucom, argues that one of the key reasons that there is a time delay between the events of the writing between the events and the writing is that the eyewitnesses were dying out.

Unlike the game of telephone with kids, the stories were not passed along a single line. They were told to many people. So when Jesus was alive, he proclaimed in synagogues, he preached to thousands of people.

You think about the feeding of the 5,000. Large crowds followed him and he had an intimate group of 12 that followed his every step. And then with the eyewitnesses, there are so many specific people mentioned in the Bible.

Specific eyewitnesses. Mary Magdalene, Peter and Andrew, sons of Jonah. James and John, sons of Zebedee. Even Thomas Didymus here has a specific name.

In the news immediately after Jesus' death and resurrection, you can imagine people would have gone up to Thomas and said, oh, you're the guy who doubted Jesus. Did you really see him?

[13 : 14] And then maybe he would remember his doubt that Jesus was alive and be grieved. But then maybe his face would light up remembering how good Jesus was to him.

And so what do you do as the eyewitnesses who saw Jesus start aging and dying out? You visit them and you write it down and you record it. And if this is true, the Gospels are not like a story passed along many years.

It is the story to the first person. This is what really happened. And the beauty is that when it's written down, there are still people around who are eyewitnesses.

So you could say, hey, I got this letter. Did this really happen? One of my children recently thought it would be a really good idea to start spreading some rumours.

They were at school saying they had COVID and their friends were rightly distressed. And so Alyssa got a call from the school saying, your child is saying that they took a COVID test and that you were eyewitnesses, you saw the test and you let them go to school anyway?

[14 : 26] Yes, they did take a COVID test. No, they don't have COVID. And so there's an exaggeration.

A change in the story got told. It was right to a point but then it was exaggerated. And you could check with the eyewitnesses. Did this happen? No, it didn't. Don't let the facts get in the way of a good story, my child, maybe you would have thought.

The Bible can be trusted because it is not an exaggeration. Written down when eyewitnesses were still alive. Written very early.

We might think it is a time lag but there is no time lag there. The Bible was written very early with eyewitnesses still around so it could be checked. It was written very early and if it wasn't real, people would have called it out.

No, don't be silly. Jesus didn't really walk on water. It was just low tide that day. Eyewitnesses like Thomas were around long after they were written.

[15 : 32] So what we have recorded is history and the Bible can be trusted. But not only that, the Bible has embarrassing truth to it.

There is a phrase called the ring of truth. It is a test to see whether a story sounds like a fanciful tale and an exaggerated story or real history. The idea of it says that when people lie or make up a story, they don't add material to make them lose credibility.

I know a man who broke his leg. Now, he could have said that he had just fallen over, but the truth is more embarrassing. He was trying to show his son how to do a bike trick on a half pipe that he'd set up, thinking he was much younger than he really was, and he came off it and landed heavily and broke his leg.

One story I fell is true, but the real story is far more embarrassing, far more shameful, and it's not the story you'd choose to tell unless it was true.

If you were going to make up a story to try and convince people that Jesus was real, and not only that he was real, but he'd come back to life and that he is God, you would want to make it the most plausible story ever.

[16 : 55] But the Gospels are actually really embarrassing. Peter, one of Jesus' closest friends, had a key hand in writing Mark's Gospel.

If I were Peter, and I was involved in writing it, I would have made myself look a lot better. Instead, Peter betrays Jesus three times.

His most cowardly and moral failure. Peter was one of the key leaders in the early church. The only way he'd let his betrayal be told was if it was really true.

If I was writing about Jesus' resurrection, I'd want it to be as believable and plausible as possible. And there's two small aspects of the resurrection that are just embarrassing, and lean it to have the ring of truth to it.

And they both involve the first witnesses. John records Mary Magdalene went to Jesus' tomb, but found it empty. Standing there crying, Jesus comes up to her, and Jesus says, if you can go to the next slide, thank you, Wendy.

[18 : 01] Jesus says to Mary, woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for? Thinking he was the gardener, she said, sir, if you've carried him away, tell me where you've put him.

Mary confuses Jesus with a gardener. It's just a small, little note, embarrassing for the future of Mary. I saw Jesus, I thought he was just tidying up the gardens.

In all four gospels about Jesus, the first witnesses to the resurrection are women. Luke 24, it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles.

But the apostles, they did not believe the women because their words seemed to them like nonsense. In the first century Jewish culture, women's testimony wasn't accepted in court.

People didn't listen to them. And even Jesus' friends, the apostles, didn't believe what seemed to them like a ridiculous story.

[19 : 09] Jesus coming back to life. You would not report that. You would not tell that women were the first to see him and were the first to share the good news, unless it actually happened.

It's another deeply embarrassing aspect for the early church leaders. An exaggerated story told by a bunch of women was easily discredited. You're going to trust those women?

That's ridiculous. But again, these women's names were recorded because they were eyewitnesses. They could be trusted and they could be visited to ask if this really happened.

Now, none of this is its own proof. But when it's read, it holds together as a story that has the ring of truth to it. One that clearly suggests that the Gospels are history and they're not an exaggeration.

So the stories about Christmas like Santa and the elves, the Christmas tree and even peace apples, these have been added together into a hodgepodge boiling mess of Germanic, American, Chinese, religious, cultural mishmash.

[20 : 24] But the story at the heart of it, God become man, born and placed in an animal's food trough. raised to be murdered in the most embarrassing, shameful way, crucified on a cross.

This story is true. The Bible can be trusted. My kids have the best conversations with me at the most annoying times.

And that is, just after I've tucked them into bed and just after I've said goodnight, that's when their brains just start ticking. And recently I'd prayed with one of them, we'd read the Bible, saying goodnight, you know, just about to step out the door.

And one of them started asking the question, how can I know? How can I know that it's real? Can Jesus speak to me?

Then I'd know. My heart went out for them. They wanted certainty. In a time where kids are juggling with all the different stories and finding out what is true, what is fairy tale, what can be trusted, my kid wanted certainty.

[21 : 42] I want to know that this magnificent, wonderful, life-changing story is real. Don't let me be disappointed. Not again, not after I believed all these fairy tales.

Don't let me be disappointed again. I want you to have the same comfort that I gave my child. Jesus is real.

God is real. Jesus, God made flesh, came and dwelt with us. It is no mere story or exaggeration. People saw him.

They touched him. They knew him. They ate with him. And just as John 20 said, it was written down so that we might believe. The Bible is no exaggeration, is no fairy tale.

But Jesus came, giving us the comfort that God is with us. He knows us. Because we are in need of him. Because we are people who are prone to exaggeration ourselves.

[22 : 46] We are prone to tell ourselves that we've got everything together. Prone to think that we don't need help from God. that we pretend that we can do it. Effectively, we're telling ourselves fairy tales and we're living in those fairy tales.

Very rarely do we reveal the deep embarrassing and shameful truth of who we are. We might let it slip in front of a good friend. Sometimes the mask of our identity might drop.

But God sees through our exaggerations, the walls and the masks we put on. He knows deeply who we are. He knows our secret sins and our shame.

But despite that, he offers us love and forgiveness. 1 Peter 2 says that we are chosen and precious to God. This is no exaggeration.

Now it sounds like a wild tale that we could be loved and chosen and precious to the God of the universe. But this is the wonderful truth of the gospel.

[23 : 47] we who were once far off are brought close in Jesus. Today, in a minute as we head out to eat, drink coffee, head to the shops to buy Christmas decorations, to buy a Christmas ham.

That's a note for you, Alyssa, buy a Christmas ham. As we head off and to do many different things, we will tell many tales about ourselves that we're okay. Many other people will tell us tales about them.

They will exaggerate. You should buy this. You should trust me. But there is only one God who would shamefully and embarrassingly die on the cross, showing his love for you.

Hold fast to him this Christmas. Let me pray. Heavenly Father, I thank you for your word and that we can indeed trust in you.

We can trust in you because your word was written down. As John 20 said, it was written so that we might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, sent by you to die for us so that we could be precious with you.

[25 : 01] Father, help us to trust in you today. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.