

Purpose: To encourage non-Christians to give the New Testament a fair hearing.

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 15:3-8

Introduction: It is popular today to say the Bible is not reliable. The stories about Jesus are just fairy tales. I hear people say, "I don't believe the Bible!" Most of the time this is said by those who have never even read the New Testament. They saw something on the internet or they heard something in a college class on comparative religions and they decided that they absolutely do not believe what they have never even heard!

If this is where you are, I'm glad you came! It speaks well of you. Not everyone is willing to listen to a perspective they don't agree with. This morning, I want to give you three things to consider:

- ◆ The Historical Accuracy of the New Testament
- ◆ The Close Proximity of the Gospel Claims
- ◆ The Transformation in the Lives of Early Christians

Each of these subjects are worthy of several lessons. The intent of this is to introduce you to these issues. Let's dive into the history...

I. The Historical Accuracy of the New Testament

A. Why Luke-Acts?

1. Luke Timothy Johnson asserts: "The prologue to Luke's Gospel (1:1-4) identifies his entire narrative as a form of historical writing." (Sacra Pagina, Vol. 5, The Acts of the Apostles, p. 3) Luke is writing an historical narrative.
2. The difficulty of getting it right.
 - a. Everything Luke said has been attacked.
 - b. The social, political and geographic landscape was inconsistent and constantly changing.

B. Luke:

1. Lysanias: "Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene," (Luke 3:1)
2. It was asserted that Luke got this wrong. However, an inscription was found vindicating the time and place of Lysanias reign.

C. Acts

1. Politarchs: "When they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities (Politarchs), shouting, "These men who have upset the world have come here also;" (Acts 17:6)
 - a. Politarchs were unknown for a time.

- b. Inscriptions found in Macedonia indicate that this was indeed the form of governanace.
- 2. The “leading man” at Malta.
 - a. Now in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the leading man of the island, named Publius, who welcomed us and entertained us courteously three days. (Acts 28:7)
 - b. Again this title is confirmed by inscriptions found in Malta. (Polhill, The New American Commentary, Acts, p. 533)
- D. Sir William Ramsey, who initially felt that the book of Acts had no historical value, concluded after careful investigation that “...Luke’s history is unsurpassed in respect of its trustworthiness.” (Ramsey, The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament, Chapter 6)

II. The Close Proximity of the Gospel Claims

A. Geographic Proximity

- 1. The facts were presented even earlier that the written documents.
 - a. Dateline: Jerusalem, 33 AD “Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know...” (Acts 2:22)
 - b. Now look at what Peter says...
 - i. “...this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. (Acts 2:23)
 - ii. "Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear. (Acts 2:33)
- 2. The facts were presented before hostile witnesses who would have attacked any error made.
 - a. Fact: The Jews hated Jesus enough to kill Him.
 - b. Fact: Jewish leadership did everything they could to discredit early Christians. (The first Christians were Jews.)
 - c. They were unable to produce any conclusive proof!

B. Historical Proximity

- 1. When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. (Acts 2:1)
 - a. This was in the city where Jesus was crucified.
 - b. It was 51 days after His crucifixion.
 - c. It was 49 days after His resurrection.
 - d. It was 9 days after His final appearance to the disciples.
- 2. 1 Thessalonians (51 AD)

- a. For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews, who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men, (1 Thessalonians 2:14-15)
- b. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. (1 Thessalonians 4:14)
3. 1 Corinthians (56 AD) For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also. (1 Corinthians 15:3-8)
4. Tacitus, the Roman historian, finished his Annals shortly after 115 AD. He wrote this about Nero's persecution of Christians in 64 AD: "To dispel the rumor, Nero substituted as culprits, and treated with the most extreme punishments, some people, popularly known as Christians, whose disgraceful activities were notorious. The originator of that name, Christus, had been executed when Tiberius was emperor by order of the procurator Pontius Pilatus. But the deadly cult, though checked for a time, was now breaking out again not only in Judaea, the birthplace of this evil, but even throughout Rome, where all the nasty and disgusting ideas from all over the world pour in and find a ready following. (Tacitus, *Annals* XV. 44)
 - a. Started in "Judaea."
 - b. Executed by Pontius Pilot.

III. The Transformed Lives of Christians

- A. This may seem counterintuitive today...
- B. Paul - "I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea which were in Christ; but only, they kept hearing, "He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy." (Galatians 1:22-23)
 1. If it were only Paul, it might be explained.
 2. What informed critics have had to acknowledge is that Paul and other early Christians genuinely believed in the death burial and resurrection of Jesus.
 3. Furthermore, they were transformed by this belief.
- C. The Church: "Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation." (1 Peter 2:12)
 1. "They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They

obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives.” (*The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus 5:18-19*, circa 130 AD)

2. The writer and recipient are not known. What was known was the character of Christians!
3. Will Durrant wrote in his work, *Caesar and Christ*, “There is no greater drama in human record than the sight of a few Christians, scorned or oppressed by a succession of emperors, bearing all trials with a fierce tenacity, multiplying quietly, building order while their enemies generated chaos, fighting the sword with the word, brutality with hope, and at last defeating the strongest state that history has known. Caesar and Christ had met in the arena and Christ had won!”

Conclusion: Two thoughts in conclusion:

- ◆ This is only a very small sample of what could be said about each of these issues...
- ◆ This is important because the New Testament contains the greatest, most challenging and transformational story ever told. The New Testament contains the greatest, most challenging and transformational teaching ever heard. I challenge you to read it. It has outlasted great men, great kingdoms and significant efforts to destroy it!