

Can I Know Jesus?

Introduction

- A. We see the titles all the time...on book and magazine covers or as part of a promotion for an upcoming TV documentary...titles like....
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| The search for the real Jesus | The lost gospels | Who was Jesus? |
| The Search for Jesus | The Real Jesus | What did Jesus really say? |
- B. If you watch these documentaries or read the articles and books, most of the time they all say the same thing, that we cannot really know Jesus. We cannot know if He rose from the dead, what He actually taught, or even if He really existed. "Scholars" have written volumes full of speculation...the gospel writers were bias (if not dishonest) when they wrote about Jesus' life. They changed or inflated the story. Scribes who copied scripture altered the text as the copied it. Entire books of scripture were lost or intentionally omitted from the Bible. But in the end, the fundament point is the same. Jesus will forever remain an obscure figure that we will never be able to really know.
- C. It has always been a bit odd to me that criticisms like these do not just come from atheists, but sometimes from men and women who are very spiritual, who assemble with churches every Sunday and sing praises to Jesus. This is odd! If we cannot know Him, what is there to sing about, to praise? In fact, let's just cut to the heart of this. If I cannot know Jesus (what He taught, what He did), then our faith is pointless! There is no Savior, no forgiveness, no hope beyond the grave...certainly nothing to sing about. So it's a really important question, Can I know Jesus?
- D. Throughout this month our lessons will be focused on Jesus. Since this will be our focus, it seemed good to begin such a study with this fundamental question: Can we know Him? Is it really possible to know Jesus? I want to lay out a series of five facts that will help us answer this question.

Jesus lived.

- A. It is interesting to find that there are still people who argue that the Jesus of the Bible never really existed. In their book, *Jesus Mysteries: Was the "Original Jesus" a Pagan God?*, authors Tim Freke and Peter Gandy argue that the Jesus of the New Testament is a mythical figure. R.G. Price in his book, *Jesus: A Very Jewish Myth*, argues that the story of Jesus developed out of existing Jewish messianic and apocalyptic literature and that there is no historical person at the core of the story. You read assertions like these and you wonder what evidence it would take to convince these guys.
- B. The evidence that Jesus is in fact a historical character is overwhelming. We have the four gospels that lay out His life story. If we are fair with the gospels and use the same standards that historians use to determine if any book is historically trustworthy, we find that the gospels are more reliable than any other book from antiquity. My point is that the first four books of the New Testament ought to be enough to prove that Jesus really existed. But this is not the only evidence. In the years that followed, religious leaders wrote about Jesus, mentioning many of the details of His life that are recorded in the gospels. Other writers from the time mention Jesus...Josephus, Tacitus, Pliny the Younger.
- C. Dr. Edwin Yamauchi observed that, even without the "Christian" writings, we would still know these facts about Jesus: "We would know that first, Jesus was a Jewish teacher; second, many people believe that he performed healings and exorcisms; third, some people believe that he was the Messiah; fourth, he was rejected by the Jewish leaders; fifth, he was crucified under Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius; sixth, despite this shameful death, his followers, who believed that he was still alive, spread beyond Palestine so that there were multitudes of them in Rome by A.D. 64; and seventh all kinds of people from the cities and countryside – men and women, slave and free – worshiped him as God." (quoted by Strobel, *The Case For Christ*, pg. 115).

Summary: Bart Ehrman, author of the book, *Did Jesus Exist*, is certainly not a friend of the gospels. He describes them as being "riddled with problems." But he makes this interesting observation "One may well choose to resonate with the concerns of our modern and post-modern cultural despisers of established religion (or not). But surely the best way to promote any such agenda is not to deny what virtually every sane historian on the planet -- Christian, Jewish, Muslim, pagan, agnostic, atheist, what have you -- has come to conclude based on a range of compelling historical evidence. **Whether we like it or not, Jesus certainly existed.**" (Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, Huffington Post, March 21, 2012)

His life was observed.

- A. Jesus lived a public life. He was not a religious hermit who lived an isolated life in a cave on some mountain, only to have His followers later claim that He did great things. His life was put on public display for men to consider (**John 1:14**). Large crowds, sometimes numbering in the thousands, heard His teaching (**Luke 9:11-12**). He performed His miracles in front of these crowds. His life, teaching, claims, miracles...all of it was done in the open.
- B. Even Jesus' enemies knew about His life. This was not some vague knowledge that He was out there. They were intimately acquainted with the most important details of His life. They were in the crowds as He taught (**Luke 9:17-26**). They heard His claims (**v. 20-21**). They witnessed His miracles (**v. 24-25**). They were key players in the most important miracle – the resurrection. They knew of His claim that He would be raised and made sure the tomb was guarded (**Matthew 27:62-66**). When Jesus did rise, they concocted the cover story so they could deny the resurrection (**Matthew 28:11-15**).

Summary: **Acts 2:22**

His life was so open, so known to all – friend an enemy, that people could speak these words on Pentecost. Remember this...it will be important as we press on.

Records were made.

- A. Consider the opening of Luke's gospel (**Luke 1:1-4**).
 - 1. Setting aside for a moment the fact that the gospel were inspired, notice three things this passage tells us about the gospel writers as historians. First, early disciples were concerned with recording the amazing events that surrounded the life of Jesus. Second, they were clearly concerned with accuracy (eyewitness testimony). Third, they were careful and thorough in their work ("having investigated everything carefully").
 - 2. Those who claim that the gospel writers embellished the story of Jesus or made things up to suit their purposes simply ignore what we are told about their care and precision as they recorded these events.
- B. Now, add this fact: the writings were produced shortly after the events took place.
 - 1. It was not as though stories about Jesus circulated among His followers for a hundred years before someone decided to write them down. The entire New Testament was complete by A.D. 100, roughly seventy years after the death of Jesus. Most of the gospels were written much earlier than this, perhaps within twenty or thirty years from Jesus' death.
 - 2. This dating is extremely significant. The more time that passes between an event and someone writing down what happened, the more opportunity there is for the story to change and to be embellished. This could not happen with the gospels. When these accounts were being written, there were still lots of people alive (friends and enemies) who knew the facts of the story. This brings us to our fourth point...

The writers were reliable.

- A. These guys take a lot of heat from Bible critics.
 - 1. Many accuse them of being bias and embellishing the story to make Jesus larger than life.
 - 2. Others suggest that they just made stuff up, particularly the parts about Jesus working miracles and raising the dead.
 - 3. The bottom line is, we cannot trust what the gospels say about Jesus because the men who wrote them were not reliable.
- B. But these accusations are made against all of the evidence to the contrary.
 - 1. Let's return to the point we just made for a moment. The gospels were written within a few decades of the life of Jesus. People who witnessed these events were still alive, friends and enemies. Any effort on the part of the gospel writers to make stuff up or embellish the story would have been repudiated. No one would have believed them. Their writings would have been dismissed as frauds. How would Peter have been received on Pentecost if his claims were not true (**Acts 2:22**)? Would it be any different for the gospel writers if they changed the story?
 - 2. Add to this the fact that we have every indication that these men were honest and careful. Luke does not appear to be a man interested in writing his own version of events (**Luke 1:1-4**). What evidence exist that these guys were not honest? The truth is, they are doubted only because they claim that Jesus worked miracles and Bible critics do not believe in the supernatural. Beyond this, what reward did these men receive for their "fraud"? They did not get rich or enjoy some privileged position. Many of the witnesses who spread the story about Jesus (including some of the gospel writers) lived difficult lives and endured persecution because of their testimony. Some were even killed. I realize that it is not uncommon for men to die for a lie. We see it all the time with the suicide bombers in the Middle East. But if these guys made up the stories, they would KNOW it was all a lie. Men do not give their lives for something they KNOW is not true!

Summary: If men who gave their lives for their message cannot be trusted to tell the truth, who can? There can be no doubt that the writers were reliable.

The records have been accurately preserved.

- A. Of course, critics say all kinds of things about this too.
 - 1. The scribes who copied the Bible by hand made mistakes.
 - 2. Some changed the text to give them an advantage in theological disputes.
 - 3. Entire books of scripture were lost or excluded by men who did not like what they said...etc.
- B. Time does not permit us to pursue this very broad subject now. But let me make two points.
 - 1. First, historians have tests that they use to determine if a book from antiquity has been accurately preserved. When the Bible is subjected to those tests, it does not just pass the test; it's at the head-of-the-class. There is more evidence to prove that the Bible text has been accurately preserved than we have for any other work from antiquity. If we cannot trust the Bible on this point, then no book can be trusted. The truth is, if we removed the miraculous elements from the Bible story, the Bible would be regarded as the greatest, most reliable historical work from its time. The problem is not with the text.
 - 2. Second, if one believes that God is in anyway involved in this process, then we must believe that He would insure that His message was accurately preserved over time. It is illogical to imagine that God would bring about this great plan, have it recorded, and then allow it to be corrupted.

Summary: There can be no doubt that what we read in our Bible today is what the original writers wrote.

Conclusion: So what does it all mean?

As we spend this next month considering again what the gospels say about Jesus, we can know without any doubt that this is what He actually said and did. It means that Jesus was who He claimed to be. He said He was God and He proved it by doing things that only God can do. There can be no doubt about this. It means that I must do what He says (**Luke 6:46**). At the end of the day, this is why men do not believe. It's not because of the evidence, it's because of the implications.