

2. Why trust the gospel accounts? The events were seen and recorded

Introduction

Let me welcome you to Immanuel Church – particularly if you’re new with us.

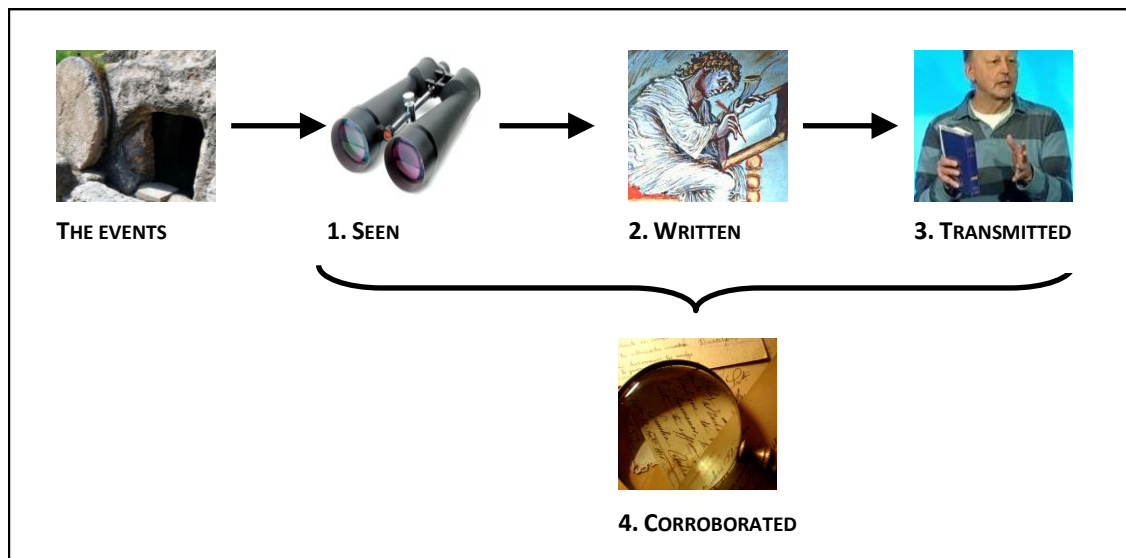
The aim of these three sessions is simply to set out some of the many reasons why we should have confidence in the truthfulness of the Bible. We hope they will be useful to people who are already Christians – and helpful to those sceptical about the Christian faith or just looking in from the outside.

As we begin let me read a verse from the Bible – which is also a prayer. This would be a good prayer for all of us, whether we are Christians (and therefore praying people) or whether we come to the Bible with a whole bunch of questions and scepticism:

Psalm 119:18, “Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law.” Amen.

Last week we looked at what the so-called **New Atheists say about the Bible**. We listened to Richard Dawkins and Philip Pullman claim that the Bible is essentially untrustworthy.

And we also set out the process which we are going to work through – which is set out in this diagram:



What is it that we’re going to test in this:

1. Seen: the gospels contain eyewitness testimony
2. Written: the eyewitnesses’ testimony was quickly accurately recorded
3. Transmitted: the gospels have been reliably transmitted to us (such that when a Christian today speaks from the Gospels he is indeed speaking about those same events which took place in Palestine nearly 2,000 years ago).
4. Corroborated: we’ll see some of the ways in which the gospels are corroborated, both from within the Bible and externally.

Today we look at points 1 and 2. In our next session we turn to point 3 and 4.

1. The gospels contain eyewitness testimony.

Our aim here is to see that the writers of the gospels either were eyewitnesses themselves of the gospel events or recorded the words of people who were eyewitnesses. This is something the NT emphasises:

- Acts 1:21-22, “Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²² beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.”
- Acts 2:22, “Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know.”
- 2 Peter 1:16, “We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eye-witnesses of his majesty.”
- 1 John 1:1-3, “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched-- this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. ² The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. ³ We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.”

(a) The gospel is centered on public history

What do we mean by that? The Christian claim is that the events of the gospel – the life, miracles, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus – were historical. They were facts that happened in real history.

More than that, they happened publicly. As the apostle Peter said to a large crowd in Acts 2:22 – the miracles, wonders and signs that Jesus did “you yourselves know.” Had you or I been in Palestine in around 33AD we could have witnessed ourselves those events on which the gospel message is founded.

The events of the gospels were not hidden away. And at this point we have to say that Christianity is different to almost every other religion. The holy books of other religions are variously myths (and don't pretend to be otherwise), or contain private and unwitnessed events, or simply contain laws and rules to be obeyed that aren't rooted in history and in fact.

(b) The gospel events were seen

The New Testament places great emphasis on the fact that those events were seen. Eyewitness testimony matters to the writers of the NT. Look at those extracts we just heard: “eyewitnesses”... “did not follow cleverly invented stories”.... “eyewitnesses”... “heard” and “seen” and “looked at” and “touched.”

→ Question: why should I trust eyewitness testimony?

Because eyewitness testimony is powerful and valuable. Sometimes folk looking into the Christian faith are sceptical about the value of eyewitness testimony. How do we know they are not making it up? How do we know they're not biased? Those are good questions – and we're going to come to them in a minute. But the sceptic might want to remember a couple of things:

Firstly, *secular historians* know the power of eyewitness testimony. It is not something they dismiss lightly. How can they access the events of the past without having a time machine? Given that you can't do a re-run of the Battle of Waterloo how can you find out about it? One key bit of data is provided by eyewitnesses – in the form of chronicles, letters, and so on.

Secondly, every day of our lives *each one of us* acts on eyewitness testimony. Something is reported to us, and we respond to that testimony; we weigh it and act upon it. If we want to dismiss the gospels because they are based on eyewitness testimony then we ought to apply that same level of proof to all of life and all enquiry. But of course we don't and we can't. We have to rely on eyewitness testimony (be it in a criminal trial or many areas of daily life). We don't apply such skepticism to ourselves or to other areas of knowledge.

2. The eyewitnesses' testimony was accurately recorded

(a) In an oral culture the gospel was written down

What do we mean by an "oral culture." In first century Palestine the practice of reading and writing was much less common than it is now. But that didn't mean that people back then were any less intelligent than us.

One factor in oral cultures is memorisation. Why is memorisation important? Even before the gospel events were written down there is strong evidence of a formal process by which traditions and teachings were handed on. This wasn't *ad hoc* or accidental. (See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the eyewitnesses*, p264ff).

We may think of oral traditions as inherently unreliable. (After all, some of us can't remember our own phone numbers). But it is simply not the base that oral tradition = unreliable. There have been many other cultures and times in human history that do rather better than us when it comes to remembering! For example, in the early church ministers were expected to memorise the entire book of Psalms. It's still fairly common for Moslems to memorise the entire Koran. It's not a problem that gospel events should have been passed on by word of mouth for a few years (and that's not even to mention the superintending work of God the Holy Spirit in that process).

Nevertheless, in a strongly oral culture the gospel narratives *were written down*. In our next session we'll see that those gospels were then copied and distributed in vast numbers. (Christian people will tell you the reason why: these are the words of life, that will bring you to know God and his Son Jesus Christ).

But just for now notice how the NT itself emphasises that what the eyewitnesses saw with their own eyes was written down. For example:

- John 21:24, "This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true."

(b) The gospels were written speedily

It's sometimes said that the NT was written absolutely ages after the events it describes. Dan Brown (he of *The Da Vinci Code*) or Richard Dawkins or some of our friends just assume that is true. It simply is not. Here's some data:

WRITING THE NEW TESTAMENT	
Jesus' death	33AD
Paul's letters	c.48-65AD
Gospels	c.65-90AD
From crucifixion to writing NT	= <u>gap of 15-57 years</u>
OTHER ANCIENT RELIGIOUS TEXTS	
Muhammed dies	632AD
First biography	c.760AD
	= <u>gap of 125 years</u>
Buddha dies	400BC
First writings	c.40BC
	= <u>gap of 350 years</u>

Jesus' died in about 33AD. Paul's letters were written between about 48-65AD. The gospels were almost certainly written between about 65-90AD. So in other words the gap in time between the death of Jesus (and that's the central gospel event) and the writing of the New Testament is about 15-57 years.

Let's think about a contemporary parallel. The Falklands War took place just over 30 years ago. (That's roughly in between 15 and 57 years). If a veteran of the Battle of Goose Green sat down and wrote about the battle it is pretty unlikely that he would have forgotten what it was like. And a historian of the Falklands conflict would be extremely interested in what he had to say.

We're not talking about recording trivial events from 15 years or 30 years ago. We're not talking about recording what you had for dinner. We're talking about extraordinary events that would have seared themselves on the minds and memories of eyewitnesses. (Who, as we've said, were in a culture with strong memorisation traditions. And – we would claim – whose recollections were aided and guaranteed supernaturally by the work of the Holy Spirit).

Some folk ask "why were the gospels written down so late." However, the truth is they were actually written really quite quickly.

So, the apostle Paul, could make reference to the resurrection of Jesus in 1 Corinthians 15:6 – and note that he had appeared to more than 500 Christians on one occasion "most of whom are still alive." The implication is that the readers of Paul's letter could go and ask these eyewitnesses "did you really see Jesus?"

There was not nearly enough time for Chinese whispers and myths to develop. In fact, with living eyewitnesses it was impossible for myths and adornments to develop.

Just by way of comparison notice how speedily the NT was written in comparison with two other religious texts: Muhammed's first biography was written about 125 years after his death. The Buddha's first writings were written down about 350 years after his death.

So, the assertion that the gospels are late in time and cut off from Jesus is incorrect. They written in living reach of Jesus by those who had been his immediate followers or by their associates.

Here's one important implication: lots of other so-called "gospels" were excluded from the Bible and rejected by the church because they written very late on.

Dan Brown in *The Da Vinci Code* peddles the idea that there were loads of gospels floating around and the four that we have were included in the NT for a range of not-very-good reasons. That's a fantasy! Gnostic gospels and the so-called NT apocrypha were rejected for two reasons. First, they were doctrinally unorthodox – they did not fit with the teaching of Jesus and his apostles. Secondly, they were almost all written in the middle of the 2nd century or later.

(c) The gospels were written carefully

We've tried to show so far that corruption was impossible: eyewitness events were written down and were recorded really quite quickly. But what about simple distortion? Couldn't some innocent errors have just crept in?

Our point now is simply this: in the Bible truth matters. The NT itself emphasizes the importance of truth and of accuracy. Listen to the opening words of Luke's gospel:

- Luke 1:1-4, "Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. ³ Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from

the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.”

It mattered to the Bible writers that they accessed the testimony of eyewitnesses. That they should investigate carefully. That they should write an orderly account. Truth mattered. (See also John 21:24).

So when a man called Papias – the Bishop of Hierapolis who died in 130AD – wrote about Peter, Mark, and their writings he said this: “For he was careful of one thing, not to omit any of the things which he had heard, and not to state any of them falsely.”¹ Truth mattered.

→ **Question: didn't they have a different idea of history back then?**

History books in the first century were indeed different to history writing now. But relatively few credible historians think that the NT is basically unreliable.

It's worth noting here that most historians treat the NT in the same sort of way that they treat other historical documents from antiquity. Yes, there are sceptical scholars on one end of the spectrum whose work quite often gets referenced in the popular press – because it's radical. On the other end of the spectrum are Christian apologists or defenders who write from a believing point of view. But in the middle there is a mass of mainstream scholarship on the gospels that never gets reported. These are people who are interested neither in promoting nor debunking the gospels. They write journal articles that are subject to peer review. All they do is analyse the NT in precisely the same sort of way they would analyse the Latin writer Seneca or the Greek writer Plutarch. For our purposes just notice this: for most scholars the NT is a historical source which is treated with as much respect as other sources from antiquity.

People who claim that the Bible will happily play fast-and-loose with truth are very much on the fringes (though they are often the most reported).

For example, last week we looked at Philip Pullman's book *The good man Jesus and the scoundrel Christ*. He claims that there is a difference between “truth” and “history.” History are the facts that really happened, whereas truth is what should have happened – it's a twisting of the truth in order to make a point. The Bible is “truth,” he implies, but not history.

That's a minority opinion. And it's an opinion that the Bible itself won't sustain. If Jesus was not raised from the dead (as a historical fact) then Christian people are to be pitied more than all men. Historicity matters.

→ **Question: weren't they biased?**

In *The God delusion* Richard Dawkins asks this question of the Bible writers: “Were they unbiased observers, or did they have an agenda that coloured their writing.” His implication is that they had an agenda and therefore cannot be trusted.

I have no idea whether Richard Dawkins is a good scientist or not; I observe a wide of opinions about this scientific work, both among skeptics and believers. However, I would say that when Dawkins steps into the realm of history and philosophy he is utterly hopeless. And this area of “bias” is a good example.

¹ The words of Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis (60-130), are cited in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.39.15. (Eusebius died in 339). Here is the full quote: “This also the presbyter said: Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not in order, whatsoever he remembered of the things said or done by Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but afterward, as I said, he followed Peter, who adapted his teaching to the needs of his hearers, but with no intention of giving a connected account of the Lord's discourses, so that Mark committed no error while he thus wrote some things as he remembered them. For he was careful of one thing, not to omit any of the things which he had heard, and not to state any of them falsely.”

The Gospel writers never pretend to be anything other than biased. They never claim to be writing a neutral and un-opinionated story of Jesus. They believe that Jesus Christ is Lord and God. And they want us as we read the Gospels to share their opinion of Jesus. They make no attempt to hide it.

It is basic GCSE history that every historical source is biased. There are no neutral observers of anything. We all have an axe to grind. We all have an agenda. But we don't conclude *automatically* from that fact that every historical document is false and untrustworthy.

It's worth adding, too, that the readers of the New Testament are biased too. That's us. If we're Christians then we come to the Bible with a load of beliefs that shape how we respond. And if we're sceptics we come to the Bible with a loads of beliefs that shape how we will respond. Perhaps we should all ask "Do I trust myself to read the Bible fairly?"

At our recent guest dinner I mentioned a philosopher called Thomas Nagel. He's an atheist, but a massive critic of Dawkins and others who argue that matter (stuff that you can see) is all that there is. But Nagel won't become a Christian and in one book he honestly explained why.

"I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. . . . It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that."

Nagel doesn't use the word "bias." But he does admit that he rejects Christianity (and all ideas about God) because of personal preference and not because of the facts.

When our friends question the Bible there is a time and place for pointing out to them (gently and lovingly) that they are in extreme danger of doing the same: rejecting the Bible because of a personal bias and preference, and not because of the facts.

This brings us to a final challenge:

➔ **A challenge: what other (credible) explanation do we have for the eyewitness evidence?**

Many popular arguments against the trustworthiness of the Bible are genuinely nonsensical. The gospels present us with an array of evidence. And we need gently but insistently to ask this question: what other explanation do you have for this evidence? How do you explain the record of the eyewitnesses – about Jesus' life, teaching, miracles, death, resurrection?

In *The good man Jesus and the scoundrel Christ* Philip Pullman has creative solution. He says that "Jesus" and "Christ" are two different people. Jesus was an ordinary man and simple Palestinian prophet. Christ is his rather twisted brother who distorts history for the sake of his agenda. No-one (including Pullman) actually thinks there were two such people. So the question remains:

- Who met Mary in the Garden on the first Easter Sunday?
- Who appeared to the twelve disciples and to more than 500 people on one occasion?
- Who made sure all the lies in the NT fit together so astonishingly well?
- Why did the instigators of deceit so willingly suffer as missionaries, undergoing persecution and death for the sake of a lie?

It is simply not plausible that the Gospel is an invention. It is much more plausible that the Gospel is truth. True truth. Truth with a capital "t."

But so what if it is? We're going to finish with Jesus' words to his disciple Thomas:

John 20:24-31, "Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand

into his side, I will not believe it." ²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." ²⁸ Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." ³⁰ Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

Jesus says those who are not eyewitnesses themselves (but who trust the eyewitnesses) are blessed. That's we have in the gospels: not necessarily everything we may want, but everything we need in order to meet with Jesus.