

This Is Jesus: Origins
Man or Myth?
December 10, 2017

PRE-SERVICE VIDEO

**Worship Songs – Shout for Joy /
Oh Come All Ye Faithful
Behind the Scenes – Video**

**Feature Song – Strange Way to
Save the World / Offering**

*At that time the Roman
emperor, Augustus,
decreed that a census
should be taken
throughout the Roman
Empire. (This was the first
census taken when*

Quirinius was governor of Syria.) All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census.

And because Joseph was a descendant of King David (who had ruled over Israel during its glory days), he had to go to David's ancient home - Bethlehem in Judea.

He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee, taking with him Mary (to whom he was engaged) who was now expecting a child.

And while they were there,

the time came for her baby to be born; and she gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.

Luke 2:1-7 (NLT)

As Shannon said, today we're continuing in our series *This Is Jesus* – taking an in-depth look at *the man* Jesus of Nazareth.

As I said last week, most everyone – even skeptics and atheists – understand who Christians claim Jesus to be as *the Savior*. Even if they

don't believe it, pretty much everyone much knows how the story goes:

- Jesus died on a cross
- Then He supposedly rose from the dead.
- If you believe in Him, He'll be your savior.

But for most people, Jesus *the man* is a mystery.

- Who was He?
- Where did He come from?
- Where does He fit into the

overall scheme of world history?

- What was He trying to accomplish in His time *before* the cross when He walked the hills and valleys of first-century Palestine?

These are important questions. And the answers are worth knowing for two reasons.

- First, because Christianity is all about Jesus. Without Him there *is* no Christianity, there *is* no Church, there's no reason even

to be here this morning.

- Second (and we'll see this much more fully when we get into part II of this mega-series after the first of the year), it's worth knowing about these things because ...

What Jesus did in His life is just as important as what He did in His death and resurrection.

Would you mind repeating that with me out loud? <repeat>

I want to make sure we all

understand that because, sometimes, with all the focus on the Cross and salvation, we overlook that ... which is tragic because what Jesus was saying and what Jesus was doing *before* the Cross can make all the difference in our world today.

In fact, one of the final things the New Testament writers record Jesus as saying to His disciples is “go into all the world, tell everybody about what I’ve done (on the Cross and in the Resurrection) ... and also *teach them to obey everything I have taught you*. Teach them to live the way I’ve taught you to live because that will

make a difference in the here and now.”

But in order to do that, we have to know about and understand Jesus the man.

Of course, as we discovered last week, to even begin that conversation in our culture these days, we often have to address two “defeater beliefs” ... which are called that because, if true, these beliefs defeat any other belief you’re trying to justify before you can even make your case.

The first Defeater Belief goes like this: “science proves that God doesn’t exist ... therefore, it’s irrational to even talk about Jesus ... because Christianity claims He’s ‘God in the flesh’ ... and there is no God.”

Boom, we’re done.

So, last week, we attempted to defeat that “defeater belief” by showing that it is *quite rational* and *quite reasonable* to believe in a “Supernatural Supreme Being” ... who just-so-happens to look a lot like the God of the Bible.

(By the way, if you were not here and you would like to know what evidence there is for such a belief, as always, you can find the video, audio and text of the message in the media section of our app and our website and on our podcasts).

Today we're going to look at the second defeater belief which says ...

“History shows that Jesus of Nazareth probably didn't exist – at least, not as Christians think of Him.”

“I mean, the idea of Joseph and Mary and Bethlehem and shepherds and

angels and Wise Men – sweet story, pretty songs (like the one we just heard), but there’s no evidence that any of that really happened.

“Therefore, even if there is a Supreme Being, it’s pure speculation to believe that He/She/It is somehow connected to the person you call Jesus.”

So, again, boom: we’re done.

So, in the time we have remaining this morning I want to talk to you about ...

- Why it's rational and reasonable to believe that Jesus *the man* really did exist;
- And why we can trust that what we read in the New Testament gives us an accurate account of what happened long, long ago in that faraway place.

Did He Exist?

And let's start with the question of Jesus' existence.

And let's be clear from the outset

that the claim of classic orthodox Christianity from its earliest days is that Yeshua bar Yosef – Jesus son of Joseph – was a real person who lived in a real place at a real time.

The Apostle John – one of Jesus' closest friends – said it simply and clearly:

If a person claiming to be a prophet acknowledges that Jesus Christ came in a real body, that person has the Spirit of God. But if someone claims to be a prophet and does not acknowledge the truth about Jesus, that person is

*not from God. 1 John
4:2-3 (NLT)*

Jesus was real. He was flesh and blood like us.

Only since “The Enlightenment” (so called) of the 18th century has there been a serious attempt to argue that the first Christians had in mind to invent a “spiritual character” as a way to propagate their new religion. In other words, the theory goes, they knew “Jesus” wasn’t real but, since “every good cause needs a hero,” they made one up.

We'll talk about why that's bogus in a just a bit but *the reason* that classical Christianity claims that Jesus was a real person is that those who have recorded his story claim to be doing history.

For example, in the passage I read at the beginning of this message, Luke sets the birth of Jesus firmly in the time of the reign of Caesar Augustus when Quirinus was governor over Syria.

However, before he gets to that ...

Luke begins his document with

this statement of intent.

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.

With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus (his buddy), so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been

taught.

Luke 1:1-4

(NIV)

Luke says he is writing history that Theophilus can trust.

Of course, just because someone *claims* to be writing an accurate historical account doesn't mean that they are. They could be really good at making things up. I mean, this *could be* FAKE NEWS from the first century!

So what about that? If Jesus really did exist in history, wouldn't

someone as important as He supposedly was have so much evidence there would be no doubt he was real? Why are there no references to Him in secular writings in the time he supposedly lived?

John Dickson, who is a senior research fellow of the Department of Ancient History, Macquarie University and co-director of the Centre for Public Christianity in Australia (which means he has an awesome Aussie accent), gives an answer to both questions.ⁱ

Video Clip 01 – Jesus & Historians (3.5 mins)

(B) Dickson: “So what kind of evidence should we expect to find ...”

(E) Dickson: “No doubt He really lived and died in first-century Palestine.”

Ok, two things from that:

- One, there’s not much in general from the time of Jesus – hardly anything has been found of the greatest leader of Jesus’ time, Emperor Tiberius (who succeeded Augustus).

- Two, there's far more evidence for Jesus which is why professional historians (not Christian!) have no doubt He really did live and die in Palestine.ⁱⁱ

Now, obviously, Dickson is a Christian so it's not surprising he makes that claim.

What is surprising – very surprising in fact – is that Bart Ehrman, a renowned New Testament scholar who is *not* a Christian, agrees. The

historical details in the Gospels [he says] have convinced “virtually every scholar ... in the Western world” that Jesus existed.ⁱⁱⁱ

I’ve been a Christian for a long time, friends, and that’s a major change of opinion among secular historians in just the past decade or so.

Ok, for sake of argument, let’s say that Jesus did exist. But how do we know that the first Christians didn’t get together and decide to embellish the story and make Him out to be more than He really was?

That would mean that somehow Matthew, Mark and John (who all wrote from different parts of the world) would have had to coordinate with Luke. And, since Luke says he and they were going back to the eyewitnesses to write their accounts, all of *those* people would have to also be coordinating *their* story.

So what about that? Could the story of Jesus have been a conspiracy made up well after the fact?

J. Warner Wallace, a former homicide detective with the LAPD –

and also a former atheist who became a Christian after studying these kinds of questions for himself – talks about how conspiracies work and why that is highly unlikely in this case. ^{iv}

Let's watch.

Video Clip 02 – How Conspiracy Works (4.2 mins)

(B) Wallace: “These guys came together and fabricated this story ...”

(E) Wallace: “Which is more reasonable?”

Ok, so maybe there wasn't a conspiracy but what about the criticism that the Gospels were written much later than the events?

Let's let Wallace take a crack at that one, too.^v

Video Clip 03 - Are The Gospels Written By Eyewitnesses (4.2 mins)

(B) Wallace: "So you know that Luke wrote the two books ..."

(E) Wallace: "That issue about is it early enough – it was resolved for me."

That's some pretty impressive

detective work!

The earliest written record of the life of Jesus (the Gospel of Mark) was circulating the Roman world less than 20 years from the events. If that still seems too long, compare it to the earliest written record of Alexander the Great which was 280 years from the time when he lived.

For ancient writings, nothing else compares with the number and proximity (timewise) of the Christian Gospels.

Can We Trust the Gospels?

So, I think it's fair to say that Jesus really did exist. And it's unlikely there was a conspiracy to exaggerate the story. And the story was written down very early after it happened.

However, if you read closely, there are times when Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are writing about the same event – like the resurrection – and the details don't match up. For a lot of people, that's a sure sign that the record we have in the New Testament is unreliable. What about that?

According to Wallace, we feel like that is a problem because most of us don't understand the nature of eyewitness testimony.^{vi}

Video Clip 04 – Inconsistencies are Good (2.3 mins)

(B) Wallace: “Have you guys notice how your Gospels don't match?”

(E) Wallace: “It struck me as I should probably go a little further with this.”

“Ok”, a skeptic might say, “maybe he's right about that. Maybe the fact that there are inconsistencies

actually supports the case that Jesus really did say and do the things we read about.”

But again, we know for a fact that the people who told these stories and wrote this stuff down were biased. I mean, they call these books “the Good News” and these writers are known as the Evangelists. They’re *trying* to convince us to believe in Jesus.

John even says that’s his goal at the end of his Gospel:

These [things] 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 20:31 (NIV)

Good point. What about it?

This is important because in our polarized culture, we have become hyper-sensitive to bias in reporting. I'm sure you've heard people say:

- “You can't trust MSNBC ... they're a bunch of godless liberals.”
- “You can't trust CNN. Fake

news.”

- “You can’t trust FOX NEWS. They’re just shills for Donald Trump.”

As a result, we just don’t have much trust in what anybody says.

But that’s an overreaction when it comes to the Gospels as professor N.T. Wright explains.^{vii}

Video Clip 05 – Bias Doesn’t Negate (1.8 mins)

(B) Wright: “What about the charges that the main sources are biased?”

(E) Wright: “... about stuff that

happens in the real world and carries Divine significance.”

Ok, to this point, we've tried to address some of the criticisms. But let's turn to the positive side and look at one thing that stands out in favor of the authenticity of the Gospels ... which is that they include the strangest things.

For example:

- They don't whitewash the disciples and future leaders of the church. Their failings and

faults are on display. Nothing is hidden.

- They also don't downplay stuff that the average person would think is weird – like the Virgin Birth – as Pastor Andy Stanley explains in this clip.^{viii}

**Video Clip 06 – Making It Up
Doesn't Help (1.6 mins)**

(B) Stanley: “Making this up does not help the story.”

(E) Stanley: “He has been conceived by the Holy Spirit of God.”

So What?

Now, there's so much more that could be said at this point and I really struggled to limit myself to these things.

However, the question at this point is (as always) ... *so what?*

- So what that the man Jesus of Nazareth most likely did exist?
- So what that the New Testament most likely does give an accurate account of His ministry?

I think there are at least four implications.

And all four apply to everyone listening to this message but the first two apply especially to those who are not Christians – whether you're someone who is investigating Christianity or you're a committed skeptic. The final two apply especially to those who *are* Christians – who believe in Jesus and follow Him.

1. First, because of the outlandish nature of His claims

(and the claims of those who knew Him), Jesus of Nazareth demands to be taken seriously.

Once you know that this man really did exist and once you become aware of what He said and did, you have to take Him seriously ... because once you are aware of those things, you are also aware that never in history has there been anyone like Him who has gained such a following.

Not to denigrate Muhammad or the Buddha any other historical spiritual leader, but none of them

ever claimed to be (literally) God in the flesh. And not only did none of *their followers* claim that for them, those followers never claimed that they (literally) rose from the dead.

Even if He is not God, there is no question that the man Jesus of Nazareth is unique and the claims about Him are unique.

Of course, if He *is* God then that changes everything. In either case, He must be taken seriously.

Now, as to what that means for you, personally, at the very least I think

it means you need to investigate this man. I think it means you need to go on your own personal “Jesus quest” – read the Gospels for yourself, watch videos like the ones we’ve been showing, read books about Jesus pro and con. You need to do this because if this is true, it changes everything.

And by the way, we’ll help you with this over the next several months – from now through Easter – as we continue this series. In fact, if you will stick with us during this series, I promise not only will you know more about Jesus the man (and Jesus

the savior) than ever before, you'll know enough to make a decision about Him.

Second, because Jesus existed and we have a trustworthy record of His life it also means ...

**2. Becoming a Christian
(believing in Jesus) is not
dependent on having a
“spiritual experience.”**

Now, you might have that. Some people do.

But for a lot of people (J. Warner Wallace is one of them) it comes

down to reading the record, thinking it through and making a decision.

By the way, this is one of the things that made Christianity unique in comparison to the pagan religions in the first century which required initiates to have experienced a “special revelation” and “transmission of secret spiritual knowledge.”

In Christianity, because Jesus was a real flesh and blood person, John wrote we can believe in Him and begin a relationship with Him by

trusting what has been written about Him.

The third implication of the fact that Jesus was a real person and we know something of what He said and did in a real time and a real place – and this one applies especially to Christians

3. Faith in Jesus is not blind.

We talked about this last week; that Christianity doesn't invite us to believe in spite of the evidence.

We're invited to believe because of the evidence ... last week because of the evidence for the existence of a Supernatural Supreme Being who looks a lot like the God of the Bible and this week because of the evidence concerning the man Jesus of Nazareth.

And, again (just like we saw last week), you may not know how to make the case you heard today but you know that someone – some really smart “someones” somewhere – does. And you can look it up. And you can invite others to look it up with you.

Now, having said *that*, I should also say that the purpose is not so you can win an argument with the skeptics in your life. The purpose is simply for you and them (if they so choose) to have confidence ...

... which takes us back to what Luke wrote to his buddy Theophilus:

... I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

Luke 1:1-4

(NIV)

Theophilus wasn't able to figure it all out for himself but he knew someone who could – his buddy Luke, who researched it and wrote it all down.

So, the implications of all this ...

- Jesus demands to be taken seriously
- The Christian faith does not require some kind of special “spiritual experience.”
- Faith in Jesus is not blind faith

The final implication of the fact that Jesus was a real person who did and said real things in a real time and a real place is that (and this one is HUGE if you're a Christian, especially if you're a Christian who is struggling right now) ...

4. God's faithfulness to us is *not* ultimately measured by our current circumstances.

If you've been a Christian for any time at all you know how it works.

- When things in your life are

going well, it's easy to believe that God is there; that God loves you; that God is *for* you; that God has blessed you.

- But when things are *not* going well (and that can happen in so many ways), it's *not* easy to believe those things. Instead, what's easy is to doubt God's existence. What's easy is to doubt God's love. What's easy is to doubt God's faithfulness and commitment to us.

That's why the Apostles never told

us to evaluate God's faithfulness based on our circumstances or our feelings about our circumstances.

Instead, what they said was just the opposite:

Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death?

Romans 8:35 (NLT)

“No, it doesn't,” Paul wrote. God's love for us is not measured by our circumstances.

In fact, Paul concludes:

*Nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in [who?] ... Christ Jesus our Lord.
Romans 8:39 (NLT)*

If you're a Christian, God's faithfulness to you is ultimately measured by what He did for you ... in history ... in the real person we know as "Jesus of Nazareth."

That's why ...

When all we feel is doubt and

fear

And when we're weak and
tempted

Our faith is more than our
feelings

It's greater even than the
worship songs we sing

There is only one foundation for
our faith

Only one foundation for what
we believe:

Jesus of Nazareth – his words,
his deeds, his death, his
resurrection, the Spirit he sent

to us, the church he created for us. And his promise to return.

Let's pray.

Father in Heaven, thank you so much for leading the first followers of Jesus to write down what we need to know about Him.

I pray that we would take Him seriously; That we would have confidence that our faith is not blind. And that we would always remember that our faith and your faithfulness rests not on

our circumstances but what you
have already done in Him.

In His name we pray, Amen.

Feature Song – We Believe

CLOSING COMMENTS

1. Next week
2. Celebration of Christmas
3. Prayer down front

Endnotes

ⁱ See Life of Jesus Bible Study, John Dickson @
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LvR2Dj85HeU>

ⁱⁱ See <https://jamesbishopblog.com/2015/04/05/extra-biblical-evidence-for-the-historical-jesus/> for a more lengthy treatment of sources.

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/forget-santa-claus-virginia-was-there-a-jesus-christ/2014/12/19/c4528a3a-87c0-11e4-abcf-5a3d7b3b20b8_story.html?utm_term=.82508c0508c7

^{iv} From Christ Revealed Episode 3, at about an hour and seven minutes

^v See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZiiIgC3jfl>

^{vi} See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NPoQIVi4T1k>

^{vii} N.T. Wright, The Jesus We Never Knew, 36:35

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3iTQuM8f8LY>, 36:35-38:20

^{viii} From Stanley's Who Needs Christmas – We Do at about 12 minutes @

<http://northpoint.org/messages/who-needs-christmas/we-do/>