

Do I need to see in order to believe?

Let me get your attention again, and we're going to answer our big question of the week, which is: do I need to see in order to believe? Now, we've already established that the answer to that question is no. We've looked at how Courts of Law operate around the country. We've looked at how juries make big decisions, life-changing decisions, even though they themselves have not seen the crime. But what they do is listen to testimony, they listen to the eyewitnesses. They are convinced that the eyewitnesses are telling the truth, that they are genuine, that they are credible, and on the basis of that they make big, life-changing decisions because of what they've heard, even though they haven't seen.

Now, what does that mean for us? I think that is a helpful way for us to understand how we are to come to our decision about the person of Jesus. So here we are, two thousand years or so later, and if we had been alive at the right time and in the right place we could have seen for ourselves some of these things that were happening.

But we're not, are we? Here we are, two thousand or so years afterwards, and we haven't seen, but other people have seen, and they have written it down. So what are we to do? Well, we are to engage with what the eyewitnesses have said and what they have recorded. So when you come to the Bible, we discover that there are four books – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – that are claiming to give us the reliable, accurate life story of Jesus of Nazareth. They were either written by an eyewitness themselves, or they were based on the eyewitness testimony of someone else. And here we are, confronted with them. And our big decision that we need to make is whether we will believe that what is said in these books is true.

Now, it is such a big decision because if you come to the point in your life when you say, 'I believe that what I read is true,' then the next logical step is to become a Christian. Of course, that's how it works. That is why the decision is so big.

Now, to help us make up our mind I've got two questions to answer tonight. The first question is: can we be sure that what we are reading is what was written down? That's the first question. And the second question is: can we be sure that what was written down, and therefore what we are reading today, actually happened? Okay, two slightly different questions.

The first one is: can we be sure that what we are reading today, in books like this, is actually what was written down? Now, you'll see more information in your booklets. But one of the things I do want to comment on, 'cause it's all a question of reliable transmission through the ages. It's a game called 'The Whisper Game'. Did you ever play that as a child? I think before the days of computers and DVDs, the Whisper Game. What an exciting game that was!

So there you were, you would gather with your friends and you would think, 'What shall we do today? Oh, the Whisper Game. Great!' So you can gather in a circle, someone starts it off, and what do they do? They have a little message: And then that excitedly gets passed on, and someone else: whispers. And it goes round and the last person tells the message, and we all go, 'Ha ha ha ha!' It's amazing computers were invented, 'cause that game is so exciting, isn't it? What else would you want to do?

Now, some people think that the Bible being passed through the centuries was a bit like the Whisper Game. And therefore we can't really rely on what we read today because surely it's been changed over the years.

Well, it's a rubbish illustration, isn't it? Because the very point of the Whisper Game is to do what? Is to do all you can to make it difficult for the next person to hear. So you're gonna whisper, and you might deliberately, if you've ever played it... I don't know if you've played it like this... you kinda deliberately change things, and then the big fun at the end of the day is for the person at the end to look stupid. And you go, 'Yes! Shall we play it again?'

But that's nothing at all of what was happening through the centuries as the Bible was passed on. The big point was to present future generations with the reliable truth about Jesus. This was the most exciting, the most important message ever, about the identity and mission of Jesus, and the big point, at the end of the day, was not to make someone look stupid. It was so that they could read, in generation after generation, what had happened all those years ago.

Now, admittedly, some mistakes were made as things were copied through the century, but the great news is that we have so many copies and so many manuscripts that have been found in different countries and across the centuries, so many copies that when you add it all together? We can be really sure of what was written all those years ago. So you can be confident that when you read books like this, that what you read today is what was written down all those years ago.

Now, what about that second question? Can we be sure that what we are reading actually happened? Well, I just want to share with you a few reasons that convince me that when I read books like this, that I believe what I find inside. Now, the first one I've already mentioned: the honesty. I love it! We've seen it again and again – they just tell the truth. They don't airbrush out the things that are embarrassing, but they put it in. And it's not just Thomas. There are so many examples where they just tell it as it is. And I think that is a great test of authenticity.

They are historically accurate as well. When the Gospels mention people, real historical people and real historical places, again and again they get it exactly right. And you would expect that, wouldn't you? If they got it wrong, well, of course you would have issues with what they said.

Third of all, they're not very neat. Now, what do I mean, 'they're not very neat'? For example, when you read the resurrection account in all the different gospels, they're not exactly the same. Now, they're not contradictory, but they're not neat. That is, you have to sit down and you have to work it out, how they can all fit together. But when you do that, it all does fit together. But they're not neat. And I think that's brilliant. Because if they were too neat, then what you would have thought is that they've all got together and they've all said, 'Right, what's the story that we want to write down?' But it's not what you read. They're not contradictory, but they're not neat.

But the fourth reason, and taken together these are very persuasive to me, but the fourth reason is that what I read in books like this is the most plausible explanation for the transformation of those disciples. Think about what they were like after the death of Jesus: they'd thrown their years into following this man, and now they were fearful, discouraged, their world had collapsed. But what happened? These young men were transformed and became powerful preachers about the physical resurrection of Jesus.

Now, what transformed them from cowards into courageous preachers? Well, some people would say, 'This stuff, it's just made up, and they just made it up as well.' But where's your evidence for that? Why would they make it up? These early Christians, they had nothing to gain in this life. They were persecuted, they suffered, many of them were killed for what they believed.

Now here's my question for you: would you die for a lie? Well, plenty of people around the world die for lies, so let me ask a better question: would you die for a lie that you knew was a lie? Because that's what they would have done if they'd just made it up. They had nothing to gain in this life, and in fact they came from a culture that believed in God, and believed in a God of judgement, so if they had made it up, if they had lied, then not only did they have nothing to gain in this life, they had everything to lose in the next life. You can't simply say they made it up.

Taken together, it's a cumulative case. Taken together, I think these reasons are very persuasive to me, that we should read books like this and believe that the events that they talk about really did happen in the way that they describe.

Well, I don't know what you make of that. Why don't you spend a few moments on your tables and see if you too are convinced that you can believe what is written in books like this?

Identity – Who is God? Who are we?

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