

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL

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Worship Series: *Prepared to Answer*

Service Theme: “*These Stories about Jesus are Myth, Not History.*”

Sermon Theme: *These Things Weren’t Done in a Corner*

October 1, 2023—Genesis 50:15-21

I’ll cut right to the chase. There are very few questions that have bigger implications for the Christian faith than this: Did the things the Bible tells us about Jesus really happen? Or are they just myths or fables? If they’re just myths, then you can decide whether they’re valuable or not. Maybe you can glean some applicable truth from them for your life, like Aesop’s fables. Maybe you find the stories entertaining or exciting like those of Greek, Roman, or Norse mythology. Maybe you’re moved to love like Jesus. But ultimately, if it’s just a myth, then you can take it or leave it, and it won’t impact your life, and especially your eternity.

But if the things the Bible says about Jesus really did happen; if the Bible is real history; if Jesus really was born of a Virgin, lived a perfect life, performed countless miracles, suffered hell on the cross, rose again from the dead, and ascended to the throne of power and glory in Heaven, how could we possibly view Jesus except as the Son of God and Savior of the world? If this is history, how else could we respond to Jesus except give him our whole heart, serve and glorify him with our whole life, and trust in him alone? If these stories about Jesus really are history, then literally everything changes!

I think that’s a big reason so many skeptics are quick to discredit the Bible as myth and fable. Because they don’t like to think about the unavoidable implications, and the necessary changes to their life and worldview if it is. So we as Christians must be prepared to answer the skeptics’ assertion, “*These stories about Jesus are myth, not history.*” Prepared to answer so we can guide the skeptic to give a second thought to the Gospel, and prepared to answer so that we can safeguard our own hearts over an issue like this with so many

detractors, and such massive eternal implications! So, how can we know that these stories about Jesus really happened?

The Apostle Peter, and really the whole Christian church, were faced with the same problem. There were plenty of naysayers both outside and inside the church who claimed Peter and the other Apostles had fabricated or exaggerated these stories about Jesus. Just like we face today, they also needed to prove the historical reality of Jesus.

So Peter writes, “*We did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.*” Peter illustrates his point by retelling the events of Jesus’ Transfiguration. On that day, Jesus brought Peter and the brothers James and John up a mountain. Peter recounts how there they saw with their own eyes the literal majestic glory of God shining forth from Jesus’ face and clothing, while the Old Testament prophets Moses and Elijah looked on. How they heard with their own ears the confirming words of God the Father from Heaven, “*This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.*” Basically, Peter answers the skeptics by declaring, “We were eyewitnesses!”

And that’s true throughout the Bible. By God’s inspiration, Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible as an eyewitness of God’s power, glory, and providence in Egypt, and throughout Israel’s journey to the Promised Land. The prophets recorded the direct messages God gave them to declare to his people. Matthew and John wrote their Gospels as eyewitnesses of Jesus’ teaching, power, and glory. Peter and Paul wrote their letters as eyewitnesses of the same. Paul even references over 500 eyewitnesses who saw Jesus alive after his death and resurrection! Throughout Scripture, God confirms the reality and history of these stories through eyewitnesses, and close contemporaries.

That should mean something, even to the skeptic. Still today, eyewitness testimony is considered the second weightiest type of evidence in court, behind only DNA evidence. To quantify the weight of eyewitness testimony, a scientist once conducted two identical

mock trials. The first one didn't include eyewitness testimony, and only 18% of the mock jury found the defendant guilty. The second one did include eyewitness testimony, and this time 72% of the mock jury found the defendant guilty. That's a 54% swing, just because of eyewitness testimony. Even secular historians agree that the most compelling historical verification is written accounts from contemporary eyewitnesses of the events. Which is exactly what the Gospels are!

But many skeptics point out that eyewitness testimony can be unreliable. A study found that around 50% of false convictions can be traced back to false or faulty eyewitness testimony. So, how can we be sure that Scripture's eyewitnesses are reliable? How can we be sure these stories aren't just fabricated or exaggerated myths intended to fit the writers' agendas about Jesus?

Because **"These Things Weren't Done in a Corner."** In the book of Acts, when the Apostle Paul was being questioned by Felix, the Governor of Judea, and Herod Agrippa II, the King of Judea, Paul said that about all the accounts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection that he'd been proclaiming during his ministry. These things weren't done in a corner! Meaning, everything about Jesus' life was in the public eye and could be verified or refuted by a great number of witnesses.

American historian Dr. Paul Maier referred to it as the "historical advantage" of Christianity. The fact that the Bible's history-long story of salvation intersects secular history at literally thousands of points. Real historical people. Real historical places. Real historical circumstances. Like the secular historical details Luke includes in his precursor to the Christmas story. Or the real people Matthew lists in Jesus' genealogy to trace his historical family line. Neither of which sounds like, "Once upon a time..." All these historical details allow countless opportunities to fact check the historical reliability of Scripture.

Compare that to the teachings of Islam, which the angel Gabriel gave to the prophet Mohammad...when he was alone in a cave. Or the teachings of Mormonism, which came about when Joseph Smith

discovered golden plates buried in a hill in New York, which God helped him translate into the Book of Mormon—again, when no one else was around. Do you see the difference? In both those circumstances, you have to take the author's word for it that these things really happened. You can't fact-check any of it because there were no other witnesses. The beginnings of those religions were "done in a corner." But not the Gospels!

Along with the eyewitness testimony of the Apostles and Evangelists, the historical reality of Scripture is verified in three other ways too. I credit Pastor Timothy Keller's book, *The Reason for God*, for grouping the evidence into three neat categories: **The timing, the content, and the literary forms.**

First, the timing. As we've mentioned, Scripture is woven into secular history at thousands of verifiable points. But the timing verifies in other ways too. The Apostle Paul's letters, which give us insight in the ministry and teaching of Jesus were written and distributed within 15-25 years after Jesus' death. The four Gospels were all written between 20-40 years after Jesus' death. Meaning, these writings about Jesus were all circulated well within the lifetimes of thousands of people who were contemporary witnesses of these events and could verify their authenticity. Including Jesus' enemies who had every reason and ability to refute and disprove them as myth if they'd been made up. But if they'd been able to do that, Christianity would have never gotten off the ground. Even with all those historical witnesses, no one could disprove or discredit that these things really happened! Because these things weren't done in a corner!

Then there's the content. If the Apostles were making up these stories about Jesus for their own power and glory, why would they go out of their way to so often record their own failures? Why so often show themselves looking weak in faith, failing to understand, fleeing in terror, or for Peter, even denying Jesus? And why would they have written that Jesus died on a cross, when the cross was an object of scorn and offense both to Jewish and Greek readers? Why would they have made up that women were the first witnesses of Jesus'

resurrection, when in their day, women weren't even considered valid witnesses in court? And there are countless other examples. None of those details make any sense if the Apostles fabricated these myths. The only way it makes sense to include those details is if...that's what actually happened, and the Gospels are written history! Not to mention, how did the Apostles benefit from refusing to deny a myth they'd made up that produced nothing for them but scorn, ridicule, persecution, and martyrdom?

And finally, the literary form of the Gospels serves as historical verification. When you read the Gospels, you'll find a lot of details included. So what? Authors include those little details in stories all the time, don't they? Today, yes. But not in Jesus' day. Even for millennia after, ancient fiction was written very factually, without any extraneous details to make it seem more realistic. These myths only included what was relevant to the plot or character development. However, Scripture is filled with tons of those unnecessary details that don't add anything to the plot. However, they're the kind of details that eyewitnesses include, because they remember them as they recall the moment in their minds. Author C.S. Lewis comments that if we assume the Apostles and Evangelists made up all these stories about Jesus, we're crediting some relatively ordinary men with inventing a genre of literature, *“realistic historic fiction,”* that doesn't appear anywhere else in the world for another 1,800 years.

When you take all these details from Scripture and put them together, it ought to force the skeptic to wonder, “What if all this really is true? What if the Bible really is history?” As I said in the beginning, the implications are enormous. The implications are eternal!

But that's the beauty of faith. Because of faith, we have no reason to question the reality and historicity of these stories about Jesus. Through the Holy Spirit's power, working through God's Word, we can believe Luke when he tells he writes his Gospel account *“so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.”* Not myth, not fable. Certainty! Because of God's inspiration of Holy Scripture, which Peter refers to when he says, *“Prophets, though*

human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit,” we can have absolute, concrete certainty. Certainty that God brought forth the Savior of the world as a baby, through a long line of real, sinful people—a Savior from those people, and a Savior for those people. The eternal God, who willingly came into human history to save us eternally! A God of history. A God of reality. A God of certainty. God grant us such certainty that these stories about Jesus—are true. And they're true for you, and me.

To watch this sermon on YouTube, go to:

tinyurl.com/ykn36h44