

Isn't the Bible Just a Book of Myths?

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Good Question Series

Luke 1:1-4

I want to begin with a couple of questions for you. How many of you would say that people are not as trusting as they used to be? How many of you would say that honestly you're not as trusting of others as you used to be? There are lots of reasons that our trust levels are at all time lows in America. We have certainly experienced convulsive social changes in the last few years, not the least of which has been the exposure of corruption and self-dealing by so many leaders and so many institutions that we used to trust.

The Gallup organization does an annual survey regarding the confidence level that Americans have in our institutions. According to the Gallup poll taken just this past Summer, there's been a major drop in confidence in institutions in 2022 from the previous all-time low in 2021. Trust in institutions has fallen off a cliff. Did you know right now there's only two institutions the majority of Americans still trust: the military and small businesses? Every other institution in America is below the water line in terms of trust.

[SLIDE #1]

- **Only 38% of the public has a great deal of trust in the medical system**
- **Only 31% of the public has a great deal of trust in the Church or organized religion**
- **Only 23% of the public has a great deal of trust in the Presidency**

Do you know what institution comes in dead last in terms of institutional trust - below newspapers, and TV news, and big tech and banks and the criminal justice system? Dead last in institutional trust is Congress! Only 7% of Americans say they have a great deal of trust in Congress. Some of you are saying, "7%? Seems way too high!" Trust levels are at all time lows because we have had our trust continuously betrayed by leaders and institutions that we used to believe in.

But I think there's something else that's undermining trust. We no longer know how to discern who we should trust! In other words, we don't know how to evaluate who we should listen to about anything. If a movie maker does a film on the assassination of JFK or the moon landing or a supposed CIA operation – many people assume that the movie maker's version is probably the way it happened. Some guy in a lab coat produces a YouTube video in which he claims incredible rates of success in curing obesity or arthritis but big pharma or the medical establishment in collaboration with the fake news media is suppressing his extraordinary results. Maybe they are! Why shouldn't I trust the guy in the lab coat?

Social media has taken away every gatekeeper. You no longer need to get through any kind of peer review in order to publish your so-called research. Regarding Christianity, you can go on TikTok or YouTube and find hundreds of people who call themselves pastors or former pastors saying that Jesus never existed or that the New Testament was written at least a century after the events recorded.

People see these things and they think, “How do I know who to trust? Maybe these people I’m seeing on social media are as credible as my pastor who I know or as credible as folks who have spent their lives studying the historicity of the Bible. How do we know who to trust? What to trust especially when our trust levels are at an all time low?

We’ve been doing this series here this autumn called Good Questions. Through this series we’ve been considering some of the questions that people have concerning the Christian faith. Can a thoughtful person living in the 21st century still rationally, reasonably believe in Jesus? Or to put it put negatively, does a person have to unscrew their head and leave it in the hat rack outside of the church’s door in order to come into church and believe? Are the stories we read in the Bible actually true? Isn’t the Bible just a book of myths?

That’s the title of today’s message. Let’s pray.

[SLIDE #2] Two Problems with the Bible

We really do have two problems facing any conversation these days about the Bible. One is deep ignorance on the part of otherwise well-educated people regarding the Bible.

[SLIDE #3] Ignorance of the Bible

You could be really well educated in American schools, you can have a degree from a highly selective college, you can even have a graduate or professional degree and be otherwise really well read and know almost nothing about the most influential and best-selling book in the history of the world, the Bible. You can be really well educated and know nothing about who wrote the Bible, how the Bible came to be, how the Bible was transmitted over the centuries, or whether the stories in the Bible are completely false or are trust-worthy and true. There's a problem of profound ignorance about the Bible.

And there's a second problem - one that I alluded to in my opening - there's also a profound skepticism especially in the media but also in universities and other elite settings in which being progressive means being liberated from Christian faith.

[SLIDE #4] Skepticism of the Bible

There's a tendency to suppress the really positive contributions of Christianity and the Bible to human flourishing and cultural well-being and to exaggerate the negative aspects of the Bible. In tackling this question about whether the Bible is a book full of myths, I want to focus upon two things today.

[SLIDE #5]

The Transmission of the Bible

The Trustworthiness of the Bible

Let me tackle these in turn. First, the transmission of the Bible and then the trustworthiness of the Bible. What do I mean by the...

[SLIDE #6]

The Transmission of the Bible

How do you know that what you're holding in your hand is anything close to what the Apostle Peter or Matthew or Mark or Luke or John actually wrote 2,000 years ago? I'm going to keep my remarks about transmission brief. This is after all just a sermon. But if you want to dig into this, or if you know someone who has questions about the Bible and its reliability, let me mention 3 books in the order of their difficulty. The simplest book that I can recommend is called,

[SLIDE #7]

The Case for Christ by Lee Strobel

I think this book is great for most of us listening today. The Case for Christ is helpful for anyone who wonders, “how did we get this Bible, and is this Bible that we have trustworthy?” For an intermediate level, you can pick up,

[SLIDE #8]

Is the New Testament Reliable? by Paul Barnett

And if you’re a good reader and really want to dig in, I highly recommend,

[SLIDE #9]

Jesus and the Eyewitnesses by Richard Bauckham

I also want to mention to you that there’s a great podcast here at Vineyard Columbus, hosted by our Senior Pastors, Julia and Eric Pickerill, called The In-Between.

[SLIDE #10] Graphic of In-Between Podcast

I would encourage you to listen to the recent one with Old Testament scholar, Dr. John Walton, in which he discusses the transmission of the Bible. So check out The In-Between podcast!

I personally held in my hands the earliest scrap of the New Testament that we have, just a few decades after the author of the Gospel of John actually wrote it. I was doing a conference in Manchester, England back in the 1990's, and I heard that at the library there, the Rylands Library, they had the oldest scrap of the New Testament. I thought while I'm in Manchester, England, I'm going to go see that! I walked in, went up to the librarian in the front, and said, "I've heard that you have a scrap from the Gospel of John dating back to about 120 A.D." They said, "oh yes, we have it – would you like to see it?" I said, "sure." I thought they would usher me into some back room somewhere and it would be under glass and with security cameras everywhere. They said, "go sit over there at the table and we'll bring it out to you!" "You'll bring it out? Okay!"

So, I sat down and this librarian brought out the oldest scrap of the New Testament, a piece of the gospel of John written about 30-35 years after John the Apostle actually wrote it. The scrap was pressed between two pieces of glass, he handed it to me, and he walked away! I thought, "How does he know that I'm not a crazy person, someone who wouldn't smash the glass and put this in my mouth?" Well, I had a happy time sitting alone with the oldest scrap of the New Testament.

In light of all the ancient manuscripts we have, virtually all scholars, whether they are Christian believers or utterly reject Christian faith, would agree that the Bible that we have in our hands today is in almost all respects identical to the Bible that was written nearly 2,000 years ago. You

can rest assured that the Bible is not the result of a telephone game. The transmission of the Bible has come through loud and clear.

Well, here's the next question. We've talked about the transmission of the Bible, but what about...

[SLIDE #11]

The Trustworthiness of the Bible?

When you pick up a book, any book, the first thing you need to ask yourself is, "what kind of book is this?" We read a cookbook very differently than we read a romance novel. We read a history book differently than a science fiction fantasy.

When I took New Testament at a secular university more than 4 decades ago, I was taught that basically the gospels were like fairy tales handed down over a period of time. Scholars back then compared the gospels to fairytales that circulated in different communities over the centuries in Europe. These fairytales were told and retold and reshaped. Then two German brothers in the 1800s, known as the brothers Grimm, collected these stories and wrote them down, and that's where we get: Cinderella, Hansel and Gretel and Little Red Riding Hood. Of course these stories didn't really didn't happen – they're just fairy tales that were passed along, shaped and re-shaped, and then collected by the brothers Grimm. That's who the Gospel writers were – collectors of fairytales told by the early church about Jesus.

I give you all of this background in order to tell you that most serious scholars today no longer think that the Gospels are fairy tales. New Testament scholars today think that the kind of literature we are reading when we read the Gospels is what we would call biographies. When the earliest readers of the Gospels picked up a Gospel to read it, they thought they were reading a biography, not a fairytale or a sci-fi fantasy.

Back in the 1st century, there were a number of biographies of famous people. They typically were titled, "The Life Of..." Then we'd read about the life of Julius Caesar or the life of Augustus or the life of a great general. The Gospels follow in this tradition. What the gospel writers intended which was to write biographies of Jesus. They intended to write some kind of history about what actually happened.

Now why did the original readers think they were reading something that actually happened, and not a fairy tale? Because this is what the Gospel writers claimed about what they were writing. Let's read together the introduction to the Gospel of Luke.

[SLIDE #12] Luke 1: 1-4 NIV

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, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

Luke is making a claim for the trustworthiness of his gospel. What he's saying in these first 4 verses is that you can trust my account because I have held myself to rigorous standards of research. Look first of all at what Luke claims in verse 1.

[SLIDE #13] Luke 1: 1 NIV

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us...

In other words, you my audience, are familiar with the stories that I'm telling you because they didn't happen long, long ago in a far away place, but these things happened in your midst! They happened within the living memory of many of you who are still alive. In other words, I'm not writing about stuff that happened centuries ago. I'm writing about events that happened in your lifetime. Second, you can trust my account because:

[SLIDE #14] Luke 1:3 NIV

...I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning...

Luke claims, "my account was carefully investigated!" In other words, he engaged in careful research before he wrote. Third, he not only engaged in careful investigation, but he was thorough in his investigation. Let's look at verse 3 again.

[SLIDE #15] Luke 1:3 NIV

With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning...

In other words, Luke investigated all the relevant sources of information about Jesus, written sources and most importantly eyewitness sources. Luke is claiming that he had access to people who were eyewitnesses, people who actually heard what Jesus said, and saw what Jesus did.

And Luke tells us fourth, his purpose in all of this...

[SLIDE #16] Luke 1:3b,4 NIV

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.

Theophilus is a real person who was familiar with the story of Jesus, but Theophilus' name is suggestive of a deeper meaning. Theophilus means, "dear to God" or "beloved of God". Luke is writing to a man who is dear to God, beloved of God, who has heard the story of Jesus, but who needs encouragement. Luke says he's writing so Theophilus can be confident, and can be completely convinced that these things really happened.

And I believe the Gospel writers today would say the same thing to each of you, beloved of God. You, who are dear to God – you, who are loved by God, you may be familiar with stories about Jesus, but you need to know the certainty of these things. You need to be confident that

when you read the Gospels, these things really happened. Your minds have to be convinced that you're not reading a fairytale, but instead that the words we read in the Gospel really did come from the mouth of Jesus, and the things that are recorded are things He did! So how do we know these things happened? Again, Luke says he thoroughly investigated, he investigated everything. And most importantly, he had access to eyewitnesses!

[SLIDE #17] The Testimony of Eyewitnesses

Eyewitnesses guarantee the Bible's trustworthiness. Now what evidence do we have that eyewitnesses were really important to the early Christian movement? What evidence do we have that would lead us to believe that eyewitnesses were behind the Gospel accounts and that these eyewitnesses were accessible to the people who would be reading the Gospels?

Where do we see eyewitnesses in the New Testament? Well, you know the most important claim in the New Testament, the claim that sets Jesus apart from everyone who ever lived, is that He uniquely rose from the dead! The New Testament claims that Jesus wasn't just resuscitated. He didn't die, come back to life, and then die again. Jesus rose from the dead and is alive today! The writers of the New Testament base this claim of Jesus being resurrected on a number of things, but most importantly on eyewitnesses! Here's what we read from the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15.

[SLIDE #18] 1 Corinthians 15: 3-8 NIV

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

The Apostle Paul gives us a list of people to whom the risen Jesus appeared, people who were eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection from the dead. We find both individuals and groups of people in this list. We read about Cephas who is known to us as Peter, and the 12, and we read about James and the Apostles. But sandwiched in the middle of this list is this amazing statement,

[SLIDE #19] 1 Corinthians 15:6 NIV

After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.

Paul is writing 25 years at most, after the resurrection. And the point of Paul's statement about these 500 is there's a very large number of eyewitnesses who are still around, and you Christians can check this out. He's saying that in 55 A.D., there's still a bunch of eyewitnesses

who are living, who can confirm this story of the resurrection. It's not a fairy tale! This is not Cinderella! You Christians can ask the eyewitnesses what they saw.

The reason he mentions the 500 is because he's saying, "some of these people are in your church! They're accessible to you! They have stories to tell you about their own encounter with the risen Jesus." The reason why the Gospel accounts frequently mention an individual is because these people were still alive and in the local church when the gospel was written. And what the writer is essentially doing is he's saying, "Ask them. I'm not making this up."

Let me give you a second reason why we can trust the Bible. This perhaps is most important to those of us who are not followers of Jesus. We can trust the Bible because Jesus trusted the Bible!

[SLIDE #20] The Testimony of Jesus

Jesus regularly quotes from every part of the Old Testament – from the Torah, the first 5 books, from the Prophets and the Writings. But why should Jesus' view of the Bible govern your view of the Bible? There are hundreds of TikTok and YouTube videos telling you to not trust the Bible. Why should you listen to Jesus and what He says about the Bible and not the TikTok and YouTube videos that say don't trust the Bible? Why trust Jesus? Because Jesus has unique authority!

I started this talk by saying that “you know, for every claim you make, there’s a thousand people on the opposite side, that trust is at an absolute all-time low, that people today don’t know how to evaluate authority.” We don’t know who to listen to. Well if there is one person we should listen to, it’s Jesus! Why should we trust what Jesus says about the Bible or anything else? Why do I say Jesus has unique authority? Because Jesus is the only person in the history of the world to have been raised from the dead.

Let me close with 4 reasons why we can know that Jesus rose from the dead, and because he rose from the dead, we should listen to Him about everything, including what Jesus taught about the Bible. How can we know that Jesus rose from the dead? First, because of the empty tomb.

[SLIDE #21] The Empty Tomb

Without the empty tomb, there would be no Christianity. From the earliest days of Christianity, Christians proclaimed that Jesus had been raised from the dead. If Jesus’ body could have been dug out of the grave, the Romans or Jewish authorities would have clearly gone to His tomb, taken His body out and said, “here’s your resurrected Messiah – dead just like we left Him!” But his tomb was empty. Lots of people have pointed out that we have no record of early Christians making a pilgrimage to Jesus’ tomb which was normal for people at that time. Folks would make pilgrimages to the tombs of folks who had some religious significance, but nobody in the

early Church ever made a pilgrimage to Jesus' tomb. Because He wasn't there! Jesus' tomb was empty! The empty tomb is the first reason to believe Jesus rose!

How can we be confident Jesus was raised from the dead? Here's the second reason: because of the eyewitnesses.

[SLIDE #22] The Eyewitnesses

We read the list of eyewitnesses in 1 Corinthians 15. People who were still alive in the churches could be asked by early church members, "tell me what you saw. Tell me what you experienced." And as virtually all historians point out, every Gospel says the first eyewitnesses to the risen Christ were women and this was at a time when the testimony of women was not admissible in court because of their low social status. If the Gospel writers felt free to alter the story, if they were trying to make it more credible than it was, they simply would not have put women in the account. The early pagan writers made fun of Christianity saying, "your eyewitnesses that you put so much stock in are hysterical females – who would trust a woman with something this important?"

We have the empty tomb, we have the eyewitnesses, and here's a 3rd reason to believe Jesus actually rose from the dead. Because of the impact of His resurrection on His followers.

[SLIDE #23] The Impact of Jesus' Resurrection

Historians tell us that in the century before Jesus and in the century after Jesus, there were many Jewish people who claimed to be the Messiah! Now some of these people gathered hundreds of followers, but after they were killed by the Romans, their movements collapsed because no one was going to continue to follow a dead Messiah.

The most famous of these would-be Messiahs was a man whose name was completely forgotten by history until archaeologists dug up some documents in the 1950's. His name was not known for 1800 years. A guy by the name of Bar Koseba. A famous rabbi named Rabbi Akiva declared him to be the Messiah, but then the Romans killed Bar Koseba and no one kept following him.

The only Messianic movement that succeeded after their Messiah was put to death was the Jesus movement! The Jesus movement continued to grow, continued to spread, and eventually took over the Roman Empire after Jesus was crucified and died. The Jesus movement eventually spread across the globe. So the question is, why did the Jesus movement succeed when every other Messianic movement collapsed with the death of their so-called messiah? Because Jesus alone rose from the dead! The impact of His resurrection changed everything! His followers were transformed from a defeated, scattered, frightened little band. They raced across the Roman Empire and were willing to face anything, including their own tortures and death

because they knew what they had seen. Jesus was raised from the dead and His followers knew that they too would be raised from the dead if they were faithful to Him.

Why should we trust the Bible? Because Jesus the risen Lord, whose opinion is the only one who really matters, trusted the Bible! This is not a book of fairy tales. The Bible is a record of what actually happened!

Let me close with this. Part of this reason I've spent so much time today talking about the resurrection is because all of us will encounter in our lives questions about the Bible and questions about God. With the swirl of information that's available online and through podcasts and TikTok and so on, we can find ourselves at times overwhelmed, feeling like, "I don't know what I should believe." Or, if it's not information overload, all of us will face life overload. How can I keep believing in the face of major crisis in life – the loss of a loved one, a bad diagnosis, a major career setback, a broken heart?

At those times where you feel your faith slipping, when you feel overwhelmed by all of the conflicting information or life tragedies, you've got to find a place to plant your flag! You've got to find some place where you say, "I may not be able to answer everything, but here's something I'm really confident about! Here's the hill that I will die on!"

You may not be able to know with certainty whether Noah's flood was a local flood or a universal flood. You may have questions about whether Genesis portrays a literal 6-day creation or whether the creation account is written for a very different reason. You may scratch

your head about the way God treated Job, or be deeply disappointed by the stuff that God has allowed to happen in your own life. You may at times be plagued by doubts – whether they're intellectual or more personal. At times when everything is swirling around, you need a place to plant your flag! And I don't think there's any better place to plant the flag of faith than in the resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ! Jesus rose from the dead and because Jesus rose from the dead, then He is who He said He is, and He's worth following with our whole beings!

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Luke 1:1-4

- I. Two Problems with the Bible
 - a. Ignorance of the Bible
 - b. Skepticism of the Bible
- II. The Transmission of the Bible
- III. The Trustworthiness of the Bible
 - a. The Testimony of Eyewitnesses
 - b. The Testimony of Jesus
 - i. The Empty Tomb
 - ii. The Eyewitnesses
 - iii. The Impact of Jesus' Resurrection