

# He Is Risen: Evidence for the Resurrection of Christ

*Tom Davis presents biblical evidence for why believing in the resurrection of Jesus Christ is reasonable.*

One unique thing about the Christian religion is that it is testable. The most important claim the Christian makes is that Jesus rose physically from the dead. Paul taught, "And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:14). Paul is telling the church at Corinth that if Jesus did not rise from the dead, then Christianity is false. When Jesus cleansed the temple, the Jews asked Him what authority He had to chase the people from the Temple. Jesus answered, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). Jesus was saying that the test to authenticate His authority was if He would be raised from the dead. The claim that Jesus was raised from the dead is testable using the same methodology that a historian would use to determine if Alexander the Great invaded India, or if the Roman Senate murdered Julius Caesar.

## Early Evidence

To evaluate the truth of historical claims it is important to have accurate historical records. The New Testament contains the historical record of the early church. There are over 5,700 Greek New Testament manuscripts. The earliest manuscript is P52, a papyrus containing part of John chapter 18. This manuscript is dated around A.D. 130. The New Testament was written between the late 40's and the mid 90's. The Gospel of John was written sometime between the late 60's and the mid 90's. This means that there are 40 to 70 years from the time John was written to the time of the first manuscript evidence. The ancient literature with the second most manuscript documentation is the works of Homer. The *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*

have 643 manuscripts.[{1}](#)

When compared to other historical writings, the New Testament manuscript evidence is very good. Only ten manuscripts attest to Caesar's Gallic Wars; the oldest manuscript is dated 900 years after the original writing. What we know of the works of Tacitus comes from two manuscripts. The oldest is 800 years after the original writing.[{2}](#) When comparing the manuscript evidence for the New Testament to the rest of the writings of antiquity, the New Testament has more evidence, and the evidence is closer to the dates of the original writings in question. The manuscripts show that what was written by the original authors of the New Testament has been accurately preserved and faithfully passed down through history. There are a few scribal insertions, but today's Bible copies accurately represent what the apostles originally wrote.

Not all the New Testament is relevant to the resurrection of Jesus. The four canonical gospels are relevant to the life of Jesus. Most New Testament scholars agree that Mark was the first gospel and was written in the late 60s. John was the last gospel. He wrote his gospel between A.D. 80 and A.D. 95. Jesus was crucified in A.D. 30 or 33. The gospels were written between 30 and 65 years after the events they describe.

Virtually all scholars agree that there is earlier evidence that must be considered. Paul wrote the book of 1 Corinthians in A.D. 55. Paul writes, "For I passed on to you as of first importance what I also received—that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than 500 of the brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as though to one born at the wrong time, he appeared to me also" (1 Corinthians. 15:3-8). Paul is claiming that this is something that he "received." This is an early

church confession that was given to Paul sometime after his conversion experience.

In Galatians Paul states that after his conversion he went to Arabia, then returned to Damascus. Paul writes, "Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas" (Galatians 1:18). Paul's conversion was a few years after the death of Jesus. Wolfhart Pannenberg claims that "Paul would have been in Jerusalem six to eight years after the events."<sup>[3]</sup> The confession was formulated before Paul visited Peter. N.T. Wright comments, "It was probably formulated within the first two or three years after Easter itself, since it was already in formulaic form when Paul 'received' it."<sup>[4]</sup> The confession that Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 15 was formulated sometime between two and six years after the death of Jesus. There is no time for legendary embellishment.

## The Facts

Several facts can be gleaned from the passage in 1 Corinthians 15:

1. Jesus died.
2. His disciples believed they experienced a resurrected Jesus.
3. Paul had an experience that he thought was the resurrected Jesus.

The gospels and Paul's undisputed letters support these facts.

### 1. Jesus died

*"Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3)*

Jesus died by crucifixion during the Passover celebration. This is attested by all four Gospels (Matthew 27:32-54, Mark 15:21-39, Luke 23:26-49, John 19:16-30). The Talmud also

states that "Jesus of Nazareth was hanged on Passover Eve." {5} At that time, the term "hanged" referred to crucifixion. Jesus' death is well attested in the ancient literature. Michael Licona sums up the evidence: "Jesus' death and/or crucifixion are also abundantly mentioned in non-canonical literature. Moreover, there is no ancient evidence to the contrary." {6}

## 2. His disciples believed they experienced a resurrected Jesus

*"He appeared to Cephas" (1 Corinthians 15:5)*

Jesus' disciples had experiences that they interpreted as seeing the resurrected Jesus. The first person Paul lists in 1 Corinthians 15 is Peter. There is no direct evidence that Jesus appeared to Peter individually. Luke also records an early Christian saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon" (Luke 24:23). We know that Paul met with Peter and James (Galatians 1:18-19; Acts 15:1-21). His knowledge of Jesus' appearance to Peter probably came from them.

*"then to the twelve" (1 Corinthians 15:5)*

Jesus appeared to the twelve (minus Judas). Paul was an associate of the apostles; he would have had knowledge of Jesus appearing to these men. Luke and John record Jesus appearing to the apostles (Luke 24:36-49, John 20:19-20). Together, Paul, Luke, and John give three independent attestations of Jesus appearing to the twelve.

*"Then he appeared to more than 500 of the brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep." (1 Corinthians 15:6-7)*

Jesus appeared to 500 brothers and sisters. There is no other attestation of this appearance. It is unlikely that Paul could have made up this appearance. Paul refers to them as "Most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep" (1

Corinthians 15:6). Paul's statement that most of these people are alive, and that some had died, indicates that he had some knowledge of these individuals. He is saying that these people were available to be questioned about the event.

*"Then he appeared to James" (1 Corinthians 15:7)*

Jesus' brothers did not believe that He was the Messiah before His death. However, Luke claims that after the ascension, the brothers of Jesus were at the upper room (Acts 1:14). Peter thought that it was important for James to be informed of his escape from prison (Acts 12:17). Later, when Paul visits Jerusalem, Paul gives a report to "James, and all the elders" (Acts 21:18). The book of Acts indicates that James rose to a prominent leadership role in the Jerusalem church. Paul also notes the influence of James. When Paul visited Peter in Jerusalem, he said that he "saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother" (Galatians 1:19). James is also referred to as a pillar of the church (Galatians 2:9). The Biblical evidence indicates that James was once an unbeliever who became one of the most influential leaders in the early Jerusalem church. An appearance of the risen Jesus would explain the transition from unbeliever to leader of the church in Jerusalem.

*"then to all the apostles." (1 Corinthians 15:7)*

Jesus appeared to all the apostles. There are no clues to the nature of this appearance. This may refer to the appearance to the disciples in Galilee (Matthew 28:16-20). There is no conclusive way to link that passage to Paul's creedal formula in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8. The reliability of this appearance rests on its early attestation. Paul probably knew the people involved.

### **3. Jesus appeared to Paul**

*"Last of all, as though to one born at the wrong time, he appeared to me also." (1 Corinthians 15:8)*

Paul rhetorically asks the Corinthians, "Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?" (1 Corinthians 9:1). Luke also records Jesus' appearance to Paul (Acts 9, 22, 26). These three passages are consistent in the details of what Paul experienced. However, there are some apparent inconsistencies in the details of what Paul's companions experienced. In Acts 22:9 and 26:13, Paul's companions see the light that blinded Paul. In Acts 9:3-7 there is no mention of them seeing light. Because not mentioning the light does not necessarily contradict the presence of light, it is reasonable to conclude that the men saw the light. There is also a question as to whether Paul's companions heard the voice. The word that Luke uses in Acts 22 is the Greek word *acouo*, which can mean "hearing," "understanding," or "to obey." This means that *acouo* can mean to hear but not understand what a voice is saying. This is why the passage in chapter 22 is translated, "Now those who were with me saw the light, but did not understand the voice (*acouo*) of the one who was speaking with me" (Acts 22:9). There is also the question of whether the men with Paul were standing (Acts 9:7) or if they were on the ground (Acts 26:14). The Greek word used in Acts 22:9 is *istemi*, which can mean "stopped," as in not being able to move. When Luke writes, "The men who were traveling with him stood speechless" (Acts 9:7), this could also be understood as saying that the men did not leave Paul.<sup>[7]</sup> Michael Licona addresses the issue of these translation difficulties:

"It is one thing to note a contradiction between two authors. However, it is another thing to claim that an author is contradicting himself, within his same writing no less. Unless Luke was being careless, it seems to me that it is better to be charitable in our interpretations of surface contradictions within the same work if they do not require too much strain."<sup>[8]</sup>

Licona was specifically addressing the issue of whether the men heard the voice, but this same concept also applies to the

interpretation and understanding of whether the men were standing or on the ground.

## Evaluating Arguments

What can we conclude so far? There are multiple independent attestations that Jesus' followers experienced Jesus appearing to them after He was buried. These experiences occurred with individuals and groups of people. William Lane Craig concludes, "The evidence makes it certain that on separate occasions different individuals and groups had experiences of seeing Jesus alive from the dead."[\[9\]](#)

Marcus Borg (liberal Christian theologian and historian of Jesus and a fellow of the Jesus Seminar) challenges the passage found in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 on two points. First, Borg argues, Paul includes himself in the list of people to whom the risen Christ appeared; implicitly, he regards his own experience as similar to the others.[\[10\]](#) Borg then refers to the record in Acts chapters 9, 22, and 26, claiming that this shows that Paul's experience was a vision. For Borg, this implies that the experience of the other disciples were visions.

There is an important distinction that Borg does not address. The book of Acts begins with Jesus' final appearance to the disciples, which is followed by His ascension into heaven (Acts 1:9). All the appearances to the other disciples took place between the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus. Paul's experience on the road to Damascus occurs well after the ascension of Jesus. This also ignores many details of the appearances recorded in the gospels. Visions do not eat or drink. They cannot be touched. The narratives in the Gospel accounts involve Jesus, in His resurrected body, eating and drinking and being touched. By the time Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, he would have been familiar with at least some of these stories. Because the ascension occurs between the appearances to the disciples and the appearance to Paul, it is

reasonable to expect some differences in the nature of these appearances.

Borg's second challenge is concerned with the last half of 1 Corinthians 15 where Paul discusses the nature of the resurrected body. According to Borg, Paul "explicitly denies that it is a physical body; instead, it is a spiritual body."[\[11\]](#) In 1 Corinthians 15:44, Paul writes: "It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body." Borg takes the term "natural body" to refer to a physical body, while he takes "spiritual body" to mean a body that is not physical. The Greek word that is translated as natural is *psuchikon*. Licona searched the Greek literature and found that *psuchikon* never means physical or material.[\[12\]](#) *Psuchikon* always refers to something natural or unspiritual. *Pnumatikos* is the Greek word translated as spiritual. This word can mean ethereal or refer to something that is not physical. However, *pnumatikos* is not used in the New Testament to refer to a ghost or something ethereal. At the beginning of 1 Corinthians Paul writes, "But I, brothers and sisters, could not address you as spiritual (*pnumatikos*) people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:1). Paul is not referring to people who do not have spiritual bodies here. In chapter 15 he is not claiming that a resurrected body is not physical. In this chapter, Paul makes a similar kind of comparison to what he wrote in verse 3:1. The people are "of the flesh," but when they become spiritual people, they do not lose their physical body. Just as in verses 15:44-49, people do not lose their natural body when they are raised a spiritual body.

A few verses earlier Paul writes, "What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or some other grain" (1 Corinthians 15:36-37). Paul is making an analogy between a seed and the plant that it produces, and a body before and after it has been resurrected. A plant is bigger



and more beautiful than the seed that it comes from, but there is continuity between the two. A plant is the same organism that was once a seed. A resurrected body is more glorious than the body was before it died, but both bodies bear the same identity of the person. There is continuity between a natural body and a spiritual body.

The appearances are not the only things to be considered. The tomb Jesus was buried in was found empty by a group of His women followers. John designates that Mary Magdalene came to the tomb (John 20:1). Matthew records that "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb" (Matthew 28:1). Mark writes that Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome went to the tomb. Luke lists Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and other women as those who went to the tomb. The genre of the Gospels is ancient biography. The writers of ancient biography were not concerned with explaining all the details. They were not overly concerned with exact details. Ancient authors were more concerned with portraying the nature of events. Matthew, Mark and John do not exclude the possibility that other women were present. At that time, women were not viewed as being capable of reasoning well. In the first century, women could be legal witnesses, but they were not trusted to be reliable and reasonable witnesses. If you were looking for witnesses, you found a man if you could. If the evangelists were to make up a story to convince people that Jesus' tomb was found empty, they would have said that the discovery was made by men. Claiming that the empty tomb was found by women would not have been convincing to any first-century audience—unless it really happened. It is highly plausible that the tomb was found empty by a group of Jesus' women followers.

Robert J. Miller raises an interesting point in the resurrection debate concerning Jesus' empty tomb: "The reports that his grave was empty would hardly persuade many. Even if it was confirmed that the grave where they claim he was buried

was empty, what would that prove? Nothing.”{13} Miller is right. An empty tomb alone would not cause anyone to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead. An empty tomb was not an unusual occurrence. When explaining the facts surrounding the beginnings of Christianity, the empty tomb and the appearances of Jesus to His disciples must be explained. Wright observes, “The empty tomb and the ‘meetings’ with Jesus, when combined, present us with not only a *sufficient* condition for the rise of early Christian belief, but also, it seems, a *necessary* one.”{14} Any explanation of the facts surrounding the death of Jesus and the origins of Christianity must explain both the empty tomb and the appearance of Jesus to His disciples after the resurrection. In current scholarship, there is no natural explanation that can explain both the empty tomb and the appearances of Jesus to His apostles.

Eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume raised an objection to the resurrection that is common today. Hume starts by asking that if all the historians and the physicians agreed that Queen Elizabeth died, and was dead for a month, then reappeared and reigned on her throne for three more years, should someone conclude that she was raised from the dead? Hume answers:

“I should be surprised at the concurrence of so many odd circumstances but should not have the least inclination to believe so miraculous an event. I should not doubt of her pretended death and those of other public circumstances that followed it; I should only assert it to have been pretended, and that it neither was, nor possibly could be, real.”{15}

Even though all the people who could know agree, and there is no one who disputes the resurrection of the Queen in this hypothetical situation, Hume says that it could not possibly have happened. Hume argues that because all miracle stories are ridiculous, the effect of education on people would “not only . . . make them reject the fact but even reject it without further examination.”{16} Hume argued that

resurrections do not conform to our knowledge of past experiences. This is a bad argument for two reasons; first, it is a circular argument. Hume claims that resurrections do not happen; therefore, a resurrection did not happen. Second, it is impossible to gain knowledge based on the conformity of past experiences. Many experiences that lead to more knowledge do not conform to past experiences. History is made up of many unique and unrepeatable events. The origin of the universe only happened once. The origin of life only happened once. The life and death of Alexander the Great only happened once. The only reason to reject the resurrection without a careful investigation of the facts is because of a worldview bias against supernatural events.

## Conclusion

A careful examination of the evidence surrounding the claim of the resurrection of Jesus reveals four facts. First, Jesus died of crucifixion under the reign of Pontius Pilot. Second, Jesus' tomb was found empty by a group of His women followers. Third, Jesus' disciples had experiences which they interpreted as seeing a resurrected Jesus. Fourth, Paul had an experience that he interpreted as an encounter with the risen Jesus. Naturalistic explanations have failed to explain these facts. Hallucination hypothesis fails to explain the empty tomb. Stolen body hypothesis fails to explain the appearances. Combining the hypotheses makes the explanation of the facts complex. When formulating historical hypotheses, the simpler explanation is to be preferred. Hallucinations and grave robbers do not provide any illumination for the origins of Christianity. The resurrection provides a simple explanation of the facts and also explains the beginnings of the Christian religion. There are good reasons to believe that Jesus rose physically from the dead.

## Notes

1. Norman L. Geisler, Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith*

- to Be an Atheist* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004), 226.
2. F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1981), 9-15.
  3. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man* (London: SCM Press, 2002), 84.
  4. N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 319.
  5. Normon Solomon, *The Talmud: A Selection* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 505.
  6. Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 305.
  7. Ibid., 382-394.
  8. Ibid., 390.
  9. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics 3rd ed.* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 381.
  10. Marcus Borg, “The Irrelevancy of the Empty Tomb” in *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?* Paul Copan, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 123.
  11. Ibid., 123.
  12. Licona, op. cit., 407.
  13. Robert J. Miller, “What Do Stories about Resurrection(s) Prove?” in *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?* Paul Copan ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 97.
  14. N.T. Wright, op. cit., 706.
  15. David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995), 138.
- Ibid., 139.

# Spiritual Life and the Kingdom of God

*Tom Davis explores how recovering the practice of classic spiritual disciplines can enhance believers' relationship with God and our impact on the world around us.*

There is a loss of spiritual knowledge of the truth of Christianity and how we live in light of that truth. This loss of spiritual knowledge is the result of shifts in cultural attitudes toward faith, happiness, ethics, freedom, and tolerance. The answer to the loss of spiritual knowledge is a return to the practice of spiritual disciplines. After examining the benefits of suffering and the disciplines of study, prayer, and fasting, I will show how these disciplines restore spiritual knowledge in society.

## Loss of Spirituality

Today's society is in spiritual turmoil. Most people are not knowledgeable about spiritual things. The National Study of Youth and Religion indicates that the Church has become less influential in the lives of people. The effects of modernity and post modernity have created a popular culture that is suspicious of any claim to objective religious knowledge and any idea of an authoritative source of information concerning spiritual issues. Christian Smith writes, "In this culture religion lost, at least in theory, any remaining principled, authoritative standing to make truth claims that it has enjoyed in previous eras of history."[\[1\]](#)

Basically, this means that most people have adopted a mindset that says, "You can't know anything for sure about religion. And if you think you do, you're an arrogant bigot."

## Five Steps to Spiritual Death

In his book, *Kingdom Triangle*, Biola professor and theologian J.P. Moreland claims that there are five cultural shifts that have contributed to today's state of spirituality in the culture. The first shift separates knowledge from faith.<sup>{2}</sup> All spiritual beliefs are considered valid because they are not real knowledge. Many people think that all religions lead to the same God. They say that we should not criticize other religions because they call God by a different name or hold different theological beliefs. These things are a matter of faith, not knowledge. This kind of attitude relegates all things spiritual to the subjective arena of faith. The things of the spirit are relegated to the "upper story" of faith. Real knowledge only exists in the "lower story" of the academic disciplines.<sup>{3}</sup> The result of this view of faith is that spirituality becomes something that is neither true nor false. Separating faith and knowledge ultimately leads to a denial of spiritual truth.

The second shift is the definition of happiness.<sup>{4}</sup> In the Bible happiness is portrayed as part of a right relationship with God. To live the good life meant that a person had intellectual and moral virtue. God created people to live well according to what they were created to be. J.P. Moreland explains, "So understood, happiness involves suffering, endurance, and patience because these are important means to becoming a good person."<sup>{5}</sup> The pressure of modernism and postmodernism has changed this view. Happiness is now associated with pleasure. Television commercials promise to deliver happiness through the next fad diet that will increase your sex appeal. Male enhancement drugs promise to give men happiness by giving them back their youth and an increased sex drive. Happiness can be achieved by buying the newest car, toy, accessory, or a trip to an exotic place or amusement park. The good life now means having fun and collecting things so that you can feel good.

The third shift that Moreland notes is a shift from duty and virtue in morality to a minimalist view of ethics.[{6}](#) Previously, moral knowledge was viewed as an objective set of propositions about right or wrong, or good and evil. It used to be that everyone would agree it was always wrong to torture and kill small children. Now moral knowledge is viewed as subjective feelings or opinions. This change can be seen if we look at the language we use when making moral statements. People used to say things like, "I know," or "I think that this is the right thing to do." Now we say, "I felt that it was right for me to do this."

Duty to one's society used to be viewed as an essential part of a moral life. People were expected to help their neighbor. If an old lady was trying to cross the street, young men were expected to help her. Now, as long as they do not push the old lady into traffic, or rob her, the young men are considered to be moral. This change is the result of culture. People are no longer expected to contribute to their society. As long as people are not hurting anyone else, they are now considered to be moral. This view of morality changes a person's view of life. Life is now about having the most fun without harming anyone. Life used to be about living for something bigger than the individual. People used to live for God and country. Now people live for themselves and their own pleasure.

The fourth shift is in how people view freedom.[{7}](#) Freedom used to mean that people could live the way they ought to live. People were free to do what was right without government interference. Now freedom means the right of people to do what they want, when they want. Popular culture says that as long as you do not hurt anyone you can do what you want.

The last shift that Moreland notes is a shift in the meaning of tolerance.[{8}](#) Classic tolerance is when people will allow others to be, do, or believe differently than they do, even though one person thinks that the view of another person is wrong. People were allowed to critique the views of other

people, but respect for the other person was still maintained. Contemporary tolerance is the view that people are not allowed to critique another person's beliefs. People are no longer allowed to say that someone is wrong. This attitude ends all public discussion. Every idea must be tolerated, except ideas that claim that other ideas are wrong. Ironically, the new tolerance fails its own definition of tolerance because they do not tolerate intolerance.

## **Returning to Spiritual Health**

The popular culture has raised five strongholds against the knowledge of God: separation of faith and knowledge, a self-centered view of happiness, a minimal view of ethics, a new view of freedom, and a new view of tolerance. How are Christians to respond to this? Paul writes, "For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God and take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:4-5). Christians must recapture our spiritual disciplines.

## **Theology, the Intellect, and Spirituality**

The first thing that needs to be addressed is that Christians need a renewed interest in theology. J. I. Packer, while discussing the influence of the Puritans in his life, writes, "All theology is also spirituality, in the sense that it has an influence, good or bad, positive or negative, on its recipient's relationship or lack of relationship to God."[\[9\]](#) Theology comes from two Greek words. *Theos* is the Greek word for God; *logos* is the Greek word for logic. Theology can be understood as the logic, or science of God.[\[10\]](#) Spirituality, in the Christian context, is a person's relationship with God. In order to claim to have a relationship with God a person has to have knowledge of who God is. It would be odd to have a man talk about having a relationship with a woman and then say he does not know her and has never met her. The concept of a



relationship presupposes that each party in the relationship has knowledge of the other party.

## **The Bible and Books**

An essential step to gaining spiritual knowledge is a disciplined approach to reading the Bible. Billy Graham addresses the importance of studying the Bible: “Your spiritual life needs food. What kind of food? Spiritual food. Where do you find this spiritual food? In the Bible, the Word of God.”[\[11\]](#) Paul writes, “All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that the person of God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). God gave the Bible to people so that people can learn about God. By studying the Bible a person will gain knowledge about God and strengthen that person’s relationship with God.

Christians should also read other books. The Bible contains essential information for salvation and knowing God. However, the Bible is not exhaustive in its knowledge. Christians can grow intellectually and spiritually by gaining knowledge about God’s creation. David Naugle, head of the philosophy department at Dallas Baptist University, sums up the impact of books on his life: “I have sought and still seek to be a person of the Book and of books, that I might know God and more and more about his world in the context of faith.”[\[12\]](#) The study of the disciplines of theology, philosophy, the humanities, and the sciences helps people develop a coherent worldview. A worldview gives people the ability to understand the world through the corrective lens of the knowledge of God.

The medieval priest Thomas à Kempis advises, “If you would profit from it, therefore, read with humility, simplicity, and faith, and never seek a reputation for being learned. Seek willingly and listen attentively to the words of the saints; do not be displeased with the saying of the ancients, for they

were not made without purpose.”[{13}](#) We grow intellectually and spiritually when we read the books of others. We gain insight to their wisdom. We should humbly read the books written by the ancient teachers. They left their wisdom in writing so that we can learn from them.

## **Suffering**

Contemporary society thinks that suffering should be avoided at all costs. However, suffering can have a good outcome. Paul writes, “More than that, we rejoice in our suffering, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope” (Romans 5:3-4). When we suffer, we can learn to endure. Our endurance produces character—that is, we mature and learn to trust God. God is the only hope that will never fail. Matthew Henry writes, “He who, being thus tried, comes forth as gold, will thereby be encouraged to hope.”[{14}](#) When soldiers train, they punish their body; they suffer. Their suffering in training makes them better soldiers in combat because their suffering has made them stronger and given them more endurance. As a Navy veteran, I know this is true personally.

## **Prayer**

Prayer is the spiritual discipline of talking to God. God speaks to us in the Bible like the way people communicate through writing letters; the communication is one way. Praying is more like a discussion between two people. In prayer we get to talk with God.

Paul told the church at Thessalonica to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). The best way to start a disciplined prayer life is to pray every day. This is easier if we begin each day with prayer. J. P. Moreland writes, “When you get up in the morning, start off with praise and thanksgiving to God for the things you honestly appreciate about him and his dealings with you. Then lift your burdens to him until you have a sense of rest before the Lord.”[{15}](#) By beginning each

day with prayer we turn our minds and our hearts toward God and His will. Each day is a new opportunity to minister to someone in need. Our prayers will give us spiritual discernment so that we can recognize those in need. Our minds will also be turned towards God and the things of heaven, and we can continue to keep these things in our minds throughout the day.

John Calvin used four rules for prayer. First, we must “have our heart and mind framed as becomes those who are entering into converse with God.”[\[16\]](#) We must prepare ourselves to pray. Minds that are distracted do not make for good conversation. This is no ordinary conversation. People prepare themselves for meeting with important people. We should be prepared to open our hearts and minds to God when we pray. We should be aware that we are praying to our God, but that this God loves us and wants to bring our concerns to Him. Paul writes, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your request be made known to God” (Philippians 4:6). We should not be anxious when praying because we know that God cares for us and can do all things. We should pray about all our concerns. Our prayers should be full of worship, thanking God for all that He has done.

One way to prepare to pray is to remember what David Naugle calls the “Three P’s.” These are “(1) my purpose, or what I would live my life for, (2) my profession, or what I would spend my life doing, and (3) my partner, or who I would spend my life with.”[\[17\]](#) David Naugle’s “Three P’s” cover the most important decisions we will make in our lives. Our purpose fills our life with purpose. We should pray for purpose so that God will align what we want our purpose in life to be with what He wants our purpose in life to be. Our profession is where we fulfill our purpose. A car mechanic can glorify God in fulfilling his purpose to be God’s representative in the auto shop. Our spouse is our ministry partner. Husbands

and wives are not separated from each other. They share each other's joys and burdens. Praying for these things will focus our minds on what is important and orient our hearts toward living a life pleasing to God.

John Calvin's second rule is "That in asking we must always truly feel our wants, and seriously considering that we need all the things which we ask, accompany the prayer with a sincere, no, ardent desire of obtaining them."[\[18\]](#) Our requests should be things that we truly want or need. When we pray for the wants and needs of others, we should try to feel their desire for the request so that we can better minister to them through prayer. James tells us, "Is anyone suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise" (James 5:13). We should be honest and sincere in our requests and in our thanksgiving. A sincere prayer would be praying for a loved one to get well when they are sick. An insincere prayer might look like praying for a job promotion when you know that you have not been putting your best effort into the job.

Third, "discard all self-confidence, humbly giving God the whole glory."[\[19\]](#) When we pray, we should realize who we are, and who God is. Jesus said, "And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand in the synagogues and at the street corners so that they may be seen by others" (Matthew 6:5). The hypocrites' motivation to pray in the street corners was so that people would see them and think that these people were righteous. Jesus makes this point with more clarity in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector:

Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and one a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself prayed thus: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortionist, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get." But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast,

saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (Luke 18:10-13)

The Pharisee came to God in prayer thinking that he was righteous and better than other men. He even pointed out his fasting and tithing as if God should be impressed with these things. The tax collector was humbled in the presence of God. He would not look up to heaven because he understood that he was guilty before God. The tax collector prayed sincerely for mercy. Asking God for mercy gives God glory and humbles the person.

John Calvin's fourth rule of prayer is, "We should be animated to pray with the sure hope of succeeding."[{20}](#) God is all powerful, able to meet our every need. Jesus teaches this same principle, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened" (Matthew 7:7-8). By grace we have been made children of God. If we ask, God will give us what we need. When we humble ourselves before God, He will be merciful. God knows what we need and will give us what is good for us. Jesus said, "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him" (Matthew 7:11).

Through our prayer life we should conform to the image of God revealed in Jesus. Andrew Murry taught:

And of all the traits of a life *like Christ* there is none higher and more glorious than conformity to Him in the work that now engages Him without ceasing in the Father's presence His all-prevailing intercession. The more we abide in Him, and grow unto his likeness, will His priestly life work in us mightily, and our life become what His is, a life that ever pleads and prevails for men.[{21}](#)

Our prayers should make us more Christlike. By praying, we

conform to God's will. Christ makes intercessions to the Father for us. We have the privilege of making intercessions to Christ for others.

## **Fasting**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "Strict exercise of self-control is an essential feature of the Christian's life."[{22}](#) One way to exercise self-control is by abstinence (saying no to ourselves by not doing something we want). Fasting is one of the most difficult abstaining disciplines. Calvin defines fasting as "when we retrench somewhat from our accustomed mode of living, either for one day or a certain period, and prescribe to ourselves a stricter and severer restraint in the use of that ordinary food."[{23}](#) In short, fasting is abstaining from food for a short period of time.

Jesus taught:

When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you (Matthew 6:16-18).

Fasting is to be done in secret. Again, Jesus points to the hypocrite, who wants to gain a reputation from his spiritual discipline. Jesus taught that people would be rewarded by not making a spectacle out of their spirituality.

What is the goal of fasting? Augustine taught, "While we live in the temporal order, we must fast and abstain from the enjoyment of what is temporal, for the sake of the eternity in which we desire to live."[{24}](#) Fasting reminds Christians that they do not depend on temporal things. God wants Christians to rely on Him to supply our needs. In a world where tight schedules are kept and frivolous distractions are available

everywhere, it can be easy to forget God. Fasting emphasizes the importance of a right relationship with the world by abstaining from the sustenance of food. John Calvin lists three goals for fasting: “We use it either to mortify and subdue the flesh, that it may not wanton, or to prepare the better for prayer and holy meditation; or to give evidence of humbling ourselves before God, when we would confess our guilt before him.”[\[25\]](#) Many times the flesh (the part of us that operates independently from God, either in active rebellion or passive indifference) will want to rebel against the spirit. Fasting deprives the flesh of sustenance and weakens it. The spirit can then rule the flesh. There are times when a Christian will need to place special focus on prayer and meditation. Fasting is one way to prepare the spirit for these activities.

## Reversing the Shifts

In our contemporary culture faith is viewed as being completely separate from knowledge. This faulty view originates within Christianity with the ideas of some Christian philosophers and theologians. Soren Kierkegaard saw faith as “the highest passion in a human being.”[\[26\]](#) He applies this view to Jesus: “The proofs which Scripture presents for Christ’s divinity—His miracles, His resurrection from the dead, His ascension into heaven—are therefore only for faith, that is, they are not ‘proofs,’ they have no intention of proving that all of this agrees perfectly with reason: on the contrary they would prove that it conflicts with reason and therefore is an object of faith.”[\[27\]](#) Kierkegaard believed that Jesus lived and died and rose from the dead. But he thought that Jesus was unknowable through knowledge and reason. One could only know Jesus through faith, and that meant that faith was opposed to knowledge and reason.

When writing to Theophilus, Luke says, “Just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, to write an



orderly account for you" (Luke 1:2-3). John writes "That which we have seen and heard we proclaim to you" (1 John 1:3). The New Testament authors were writing about what they knew. These men walked, talked, and ate with Christ for three years. These men knew Christ face to face. Wayne Grudem addresses the harmony of faith and reason: "Rather, saving faith is consistent with knowledge and true understanding of facts." {28} Faith is not separate from knowledge, it is trust in knowledge.

Once the facts of the Bible are known, faith in those facts will affect how we experience happiness. Happiness defined as satisfaction of desires is an empty pointless feel-good emotion that lasts only for a moment. But the joy of God does not fade. Jesus said, "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (John 15:11). Christians get joy through meditating on the things of God. Neal Anderson and Robert Saucy state that "Meditation on the Word should produce thoughts that reach our emotions." {29} A relationship with God produces happiness, a deep well-being of the soul, that lasts. The Psalmist writes, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight" (Psalm 19:14). What we study and put into our minds affects our relationship with God. When we have knowledge of God then we can meditate on God. It is impossible to meditate on an object that you have no knowledge of. Meditation on the things of God brings joy.

The cultural shift to a minimalist ethic, the idea of contemporary freedom, and the meaning of tolerance are the result of relativism's effect on the culture. Relativism is the idea that there are no objective moral values, and morality is either decided by each person or each community. There are many problems with this view. Relativism makes it impossible to criticize others. If moral truths are subjective then each person gets to decide for himself what is right or wrong. Relativism cannot place blame for wrong doings. What



people do is neither right nor wrong. Right or wrong is up to each individual. Why should we expect each person to reach the same conclusion? Relativists cannot promote tolerance because any definition of tolerance is an objective definition that, if true, applies to everyone.<sup>{30}</sup> But if morality is objective (meaning that there are things that are right and wrong for all people at all times), then freedom cannot mean that people can do what they want when they want. People will have responsibilities. They will be free to do what is right, and they will be free to do what is wrong. Being free means that we make choices of our own volition.

## Conclusion

The loss of spiritual knowledge has caused a fractured society and people who lead fractured lives. The cultural shifts are a result of people not taking spiritual knowledge seriously. Spiritual knowledge must have absolutes to provide meaning for life. Francis Schaeffer observes, “we need absolutes if our existence is to have meaning—my existence, your existence, man’s existence.”<sup>{31}</sup> Absolutes are learned by practicing the spiritual disciplines. A careful study of the Bible will bring knowledge ABOUT God; heart-surrender to Him, coupled with learning to abide in Him, will bring knowledge OF God. Prayer will keep people in touch with God. Fasting will break down the resistance of the flesh to living a spiritual life. The five shifts of contemporary culture mean death. The spiritual disciplines bring people spiritual life. True spirituality can only be found in Christ. Only meditation and learning about Christ can return wonder to life. I pray that through spiritual disciplines we may retain the wonder of a life given to us by God.

## Notes

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## 5 Things You Need to Know About Jesus

*Tom Davis provides an overview of 5 extremely important aspects of Jesus' life: his birth, baptism, claims to deity, death and resurrection, and ascension.*

### The Birth of Jesus

Knowing about Jesus, who he was, what he did, and what he taught is essential for Christian discipleship. By studying Jesus, we know how we ought to live and what the redemption that he provides for us means. In this article we discuss five things you need to know about Jesus, starting with the meaning of the birth of Jesus.

The story of His birth is found in Matthew chapters 1 and 2, and in Luke chapters 1 and 2. Matthew gives us his understanding of what Jesus' birth meant in the angel Gabriel's proclamation to Joseph and in an Old Testament prophecy.



When the angel appeared to Joseph the angel told him that Jesus will "save his people from their sins."[{1}](#) Jesus left heaven to come down to His people at His birth.

In order for His people to be saved from their sins Jesus must come to His people. The virgin birth of Jesus is directly linked to His death and resurrection.

The first prophecy is, "See, the virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will name him Immanuel."[{2}](#) This prophecy comes from Isaiah 7:14. In Isaiah this prophecy is a promise to King Ahaz of Judah that God will defeat His enemies. Immanuel is an important name because it means "God with us." Matthew is telling us that through the virgin birth of Jesus God is with us, and is a sign that sin and death will be defeated.

In Luke, the praise of a man named Simeon and the proclamation of the heavenly host helps tell us what Jesus' birth means.

When Simeon saw Jesus in the temple he prayed, "For my eyes have seen your salvation. You have prepared it in the presence of all peoples-a light for revelation to the Gentile and glory to your people Israel."[{3}](#) Simeon tells us that Jesus will reveal God to all people. God's salvation is for all people, not only for the Jews.

When the heavenly hosts appeared to the shepherds out in the fields they proclaimed, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to people he favors!"[{4}](#) The proclamation of the angels tells us that the people Jesus favors, those who follow and trust Him, will have peace.

To recap, we see that the birth of Jesus is God coming down to be with us, and to save us from our sins. This salvation is not only for the Jews, but is for all people.

## Jesus' Baptism

Matthew, Mark, and Luke mention that when Jesus was baptized the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove.[{5}](#) A voice from heaven said, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well-pleased."[{6}](#)

Jesus was sinless, so why does he receive baptism from John? Jesus told John it was to fulfill righteousness. Jesus is identifying with Israel, and all mankind, and fulfilling righteousness for our sake. Because Jesus identifies with us and our sins, His baptism is the beginning of His ministry of atonement that is accomplished at His crucifixion.[{7}](#)

All the gospels mention that the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove. Have you ever wondered why in the form of a dove? In Genesis when God created the heavens and the earth the Spirit of God hovered over the waters. This signifies God's presence at creation. Some biblical scholars think that Noah sending the dove out from the ark signifies a kind of new creation after God destroyed the world with a flood. In the same way, the Spirit appearing in the form of a dove and descending on Jesus means that Jesus is the beginning of new creation.[{8}](#)

At Jesus' baptism the Father pronounced, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well-pleased."[{9}](#) What does this mean? Most Bible scholars think this statement references Psalm 2:7[{10}](#) and Isaiah 42:1.[{11}](#) Psalm 2 is a Psalm that was used at the coronation of a new king. Isaiah 42 is about God's suffering servant who will bring "justice to the nations." Biblical Scholar Craig Blomberg concludes, "Therefore it would appear that God is forthrightly declaring Jesus to be both kingly

Messiah and suffering servant.”{12}

Jesus’ baptism means that Jesus identifies with us. Jesus is the beginning of new creation and begins His ministry of atonement for our sins. God’s voice from heaven also declares that Jesus is the kingly Messiah and the suffering servant.

## Jesus’ Claims to Deity

Jesus claimed to be God in several ways. He not only used words to make these claims, but His actions also made a claim to deity.

Jesus’ actions showed that he had authority over evil spirits by repeatedly casting out demons. Jesus commanded the weather. This is something mortal men do not do, but God and heavenly beings do. Jesus was a man, but this event shows that he was more than a man, he was God in human flesh.

But let’s look specifically at how Jesus claimed to be the divine Son of Man during His trial by the Jewish authorities. The night before His trial Jesus was arrested and tried by the Jewish authorities. There were many who accused Jesus of various things. The problem was that the testimony of the witnesses who were accusing Jesus did not match. This led to the high priest asking, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” Jesus answered, “I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power and coming with clouds of heaven.” The Jewish authorities then condemned him for blasphemy.{13} Why?

Jesus was condemned because he identified himself with the Son of Man in Daniel 7. In this chapter the Ancient of Days, God the Father, is sitting in judgment when the Son of Man comes with the “clouds of heaven” and approaches the Ancient of Days. The Son of Man is given dominion, glory, and a kingdom that will not be destroyed. The Son of Man is a human and divine figure who seems to sit in judgment alongside the

Ancient of Days. When Jesus claims to be the Son of Man he is claiming to be a human and divine figure. Jesus is claiming that he will be vindicated and that the Jewish authorities will be condemned by God.[{14}](#)

Jesus claimed to be God by casting out demons, calming a storm, and by claiming to be the Son of Man in Daniel 7.

## **Jesus' Death and Resurrection**

Jesus' death and resurrection is the foundation of Christianity. The death and resurrection of Jesus is a climactic confrontation between God and Satan that involves forgiveness of sin, the abolition of death, and the defeat of evil.

The narratives of this event are found in all four gospels. However, the most important passage that helps us understand the meaning of the resurrection is not in one of the Gospels; it is in one of Paul's letters, 1 Corinthians 15.

In verse 3, Paul states that "Jesus died for our sins." In Hebrews 9 and 10, the author explains that in the Old Testament sacrificial system bulls, goats, and sheep had to be sacrificed every year to purify the people. However, Jesus only had to die once to cover the sins of all people. Therefore, the death of Jesus for our sins is superior to the sacrificial system and makes it obsolete.

Paul states, "For just as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive."[{15}](#) We live life knowing that someday we will die. We live in the shadow of death's approach. Jesus confronts death on the cross, then returns from the grave three days later. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, death has been abolished. New Testament scholar Craig Keener states, "As death in every case is established in Adam, so life in all cases is established in Christ."[{16}](#)

In Colossians 2:15 Paul is addressing the implications of Jesus' resurrection. He writes, "He (Jesus) disarmed the rulers and the authorities and disgraced them publicly; he triumphed over them in him." The rulers and authorities that Paul mentions are Satan and his demons.[{17}](#) Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, Satan and his demons are defeated publicly. When Christians proclaim the resurrection, these rulers and authorities are humiliated publicly for everyone to see.

The death and resurrection of Jesus cleanses us of our sins, pays the penalty for our sins, abolishes death, and defeats Satan and the forces of evil.

## Jesus' Ascension

Jesus' return to heaven is described in Acts 1:9-11. After His resurrection Jesus spent forty days with His disciples. After forty days the disciples watched Jesus ascend into heaven in a cloud. But what does this mean?

In John chapter 16 Jesus told His disciples that he will be leaving them. Jesus said, "It is for your benefit that I go away, because if I don't go away the Counselor will not come to you. If I go, I will send him to you."[{18}](#) The Counselor that Jesus referred to is the Holy Spirit. Jesus' promise to the disciples is fulfilled on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. Jesus told His disciples "When the spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth."[{19}](#) When Jesus ascended into heaven, he sent the Holy Spirit to us. The Holy Spirit does not only counsel us; he guides us to truth and intercedes for us.

Jesus' ascension has other implications as well. Paul tells us, "Christ Jesus is the one who died, but even more, has been raised; he also sits at the right hand of God and intercedes for us."[{20}](#) There are two things to pay attention to in this



verse. First, Jesus now sits at the right hand of the Father. Jesus is on His throne, which means he is ruling now. Second, Jesus also prays for us. There are many other things that could be mentioned in a discussion of things we need to know about Jesus. One example is Jesus' temptation in the desert. When Adam and Eve were tempted in the Garden of Eden, they failed to resist Satan's temptation. Jesus succeeded in resisting Satan.

When we consider Jesus' birth, baptism, claims to deity, temptation, casting out evil spirits, death, resurrection, and ascension, we have an image of a God that became man. God rescues us from our sin and from the evil powers and principalities that are active in this world. Jesus will return and make all things new with the new creation and new Jerusalem in Revelation 20 and 21. The first Christians saw all of this. New Testament scholar N. T. Wright sums things up this way, "The first Christians saw the message and accomplishment of Jesus as the long-awaited arrival of God's kingdom, the final dealing-with sin that would undo the powers of darkness and break through to the 'age to come.'" [\[21\]](#)

## Notes

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4. Luke 2:14
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## The Historical Jesus Matters

*Tom Davis provides several lines of evidence that Jesus was a real, physical person of history.*

# Introduction

Does the historical Jesus matter?

Can Christians get by with purely theological Jesus? Some early Christians asked if faith needed philosophy to function. They used Athens to represent philosophy and Jerusalem to represent faith. In a similar way New Testament scholar Dale Allison asks, “What can the historical Jesus of Athens have to do with the biblical Christ of Jerusalem? Where two or three historians are gathered together, can the biblical Christ be in their midst?”<sup>{1}</sup> Allison thinks that by using historical methodology we cannot connect the historical Jesus to the Biblical Jesus. Faith and historical knowledge cannot be completely reconciled. Is this the case?

While there are many biblical scholars that agree with Allison’s view, there are other scholars that believe that the historical Jesus and the biblical Jesus must be the same Jesus in order for Christianity to be true. N. T Wright states, “The Bible, after all, purports to offer not just ‘spiritual’ or ‘theological’ teachings but to describe events within the ‘natural’ world, not least the public career of Jesus of Nazareth, a first-century Jew who lived and died within the ‘natural’ course of world history.”<sup>{2}</sup> New Testament scholar Ben Witherington also calls out Allison’s way of thinking:

“The problem with this bifurcation is that despite numerous attempts in this century to turn Christianity into a philosophy of life, it is and has always been a historical religion—one that depends on certain foundational events, particularly the death and resurrection of Jesus, as having happened in space and time. A faith that does not ground the Christ of personal experience in the Jesus of history is a form of docetic heresy, for it implies that what actually happened in and during Jesus’ life is inconsequential to Christian faith.”<sup>{3}</sup>

Wright and Witherington think that a methodology that does not allow for the possibility of miracles is flawed. The Old Testament and the New Testament claim that certain events happened. Either these events happened in the real world, or they did not. If these events happened in the real world, then we can know about them using the same methods that historians use to investigate any other historical event. Dale Allison cannot have it both ways.

Craig Blomberg argues:

“An understanding of any religion depends heavily on the historical circumstances surrounding its birth. This is particularly true of Judaism and Christianity because of the uniquely historical nature of these religions. Centered on Scriptures that tell the sacred stories of God’s involvement in space and time with communities called to be his people, the Judeo-Christian claims rise or fall with the truthfulness of those stories. For Christianity, the central story is about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—the story that forms the topic of the four New Testament Gospels.”[\[4\]](#)

Blomberg proposes that all religions should have to deal with historical scrutiny. Among the world’s religions only Islam, Judaism and Christianity claim to be built on a foundation on historical events. This historical foundation makes historical Jesus studies useful for apologetics and theology.[\[5\]](#) The usefulness of this field of study is important for Christian discipleship. N. T. Wright states, “I see the historical task, rather, as part of the appropriate activity of knowledge and love, to get to know even better the one whom we claim to know and follow.”[\[6\]](#) Christians are representatives and disciples of Jesus. This means we should know who Jesus is and what He did. Studying the life of Jesus is a part of necessary discipleship.

In this article I argue that we have evidence outside the

Bible that shows that Jesus existed. Then I argue that the Gospels are ancient biographies, and therefore count as historical evidence for examining the life and teachings of Jesus. Next, I demonstrate that the narratives of the virgin birth of Jesus in Matthew and Luke do not contradict each other. After that I show that the central theme of the teachings and actions of Jesus show that the kingdom of God was coming through his ministry. Finally, I provide evidence that Jesus rose physically from the dead.

## Evidence Outside the Bible

One of the complaints that Christianity's critics have is that Jesus is not mentioned much outside the Bible. These critics claim that if Jesus were as prominent as the Gospels portray Him to be, there would be more evidence to corroborate the claims of the Gospels. Luke Timothy Johnson explains the issue:

"There are a handful of authentic but very brief references to John the Baptist, Jesus, and James in the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus: but from the great ocean of Jewish literature, there are otherwise fragmentary, coded, and oblique references to Jesus and his followers. From the Greco-Roman side we have the cryptic and not completely comprehending observations of the Roman historians Suetonius and Tacitus: the precious firsthand observation reported to the emperor Trajan by his governor in Bithynia, Pliny the Younger: and possible allusions by the philosopher Epictetus." [\[7\]](#)

For some people, this simply is not enough evidence to believe that Jesus existed. We will examine four sources outside the Bible: Josephus, Suetonius, Tacitus, and Pliny the Younger.

## Josephus

Josephus is the most important historical source for Jesus outside the New Testament. He was a Jewish officer that fought in the war against Rome from A.D. 66-70. After surrendering to the Romans, he wrote several important histories. In his "Jewish Antiquities" he mentions Jesus:

"At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus, if indeed one should call him a man. For he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of people who received the truth with pleasure. And he gained a following both among the Jews and among many of Greek origin. He was the messiah. And when Pilate, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him previously did not cease to do so. For he appeared to them on the third day, living again, just as the divine prophets had spoken of these and countless other wonderful things about him. And up until this very day the tribe of Christians, named after him, has not died out."[\[8\]](#)

Most scholars think that this passage was changed by early Christians to add credibility to their claim that Jesus was the Messiah. Several scholars tried to reconstruct the original passage by removing the most flattering sections out of this passage.[\[9\]](#) In 1972 Professor Schlomo Pines released a study of a manuscript written in Arabic. The Arabic manuscript was similar to the reconstructed passage that previous scholars had come to.[\[10\]](#) The original wording is as follows:

At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus. His conduct was good and (he) was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to be crucified and to die. But those who had become his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion, and that he was alive.

Most scholars agree that the reconstruction of the text and the corresponding text from the Arabic manuscript show that this is an authentic reference to Jesus by Josephus.[{11}](#) Josephus was aware that Jesus had a reputation to be a moral person, and that he had Jewish and Gentile followers. He knows that some Jewish leaders brought Jesus to Pilate, and the result was that Pilate executed Jesus by crucifixion. Josephus also tells us the Jesus' disciples claimed that they saw Jesus alive three days after his crucifixion.

## Suetonius

Suetonius was a Roman historian who wrote about the lives of the Caesars and other important men of the first century. Writing early in the second century, he makes one mention of Christus. The context is that during the reign of Claudius the Jews were causing a public disturbance over Christ. This fits with known tensions between Jews and Christians at the time. Most historians are convinced that Christus is a variant spelling or misspelling of Christ. Suetonius writes, "As the Jews were making constant disturbance at the instigation of Christus, he expelled them from Rome."[{12}](#) Suetonius also tells us about Nero persecuting Christians after a fire burned much of Rome. "Punishment was meted out to the Christians, a group of individuals given over to a new and harmful set of superstitions."[{13}](#) While this does not tell us much, it does tell us that Christians in Rome were worshiping Jesus, and that the people of Rome noticed that they had different religious practices concerning Christ.[{14}](#)

## Tacitus

Tacitus was a Roman historian who lived from A.D. 55-120. He mentions Christ in his *Annals*, which covers Roman history from the death of Augustus to the death of Nero (A.D. 14-68). Below is his mention of Christ Christus):

"Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite

tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition broke out.”{15}

While Tacitus does not give us much information to work with, there are a few observations that we can make. First, Jesus was crucified by Pontius Pilate. Second, Second, Jesus’ followers were called Christians by the people. Third, the Christian movement spread to Rome quickly.{16}

## **Pliny the Younger**

Pliny the Younger was the governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor. As governor he interrogated Christians that lived in the area. He wrote a letter to Trajan, the Emperor at the time, to get advice on how to handle the Christians in his province. The relevant part of the letter follows:

“They affirmed, however, that the whole of their guilt, or their error, was that they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verse a hymn to Christ as to a god, and bound themselves to a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft, adultery, never to falsify their word, not to deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food—but food of an ordinary and innocent kind.”{17}

From this letter we find that Christians in Bithynia held themselves to a certain moral code, sang hymns to Christ as if he was a God, and gathered to partake of food. It does not tell us much, but it does tell us that Christians early on worshiped Jesus as God.{18}

What conclusions can be reached from these sources? First, Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate. Second, Some of



Jesus' disciples claimed to see Jesus alive after his crucifixion. Finally, the followers of Jesus worshiped him as if he were a god.[\[19\]](#)

## The Gospels

The gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are the primary sources for the life of Jesus. Many New Testament scholars claim that these Gospels were written anonymously, but there is good reason to think that the traditional authors wrote these gospels. Nonetheless, skeptical scholars do not trust the Gospels as reliable sources.

Skeptical scholars argue that the traditional authors could not have written these Gospels because they were wrong about geographical details, and that they were illiterate. Concerning the geographical details, while there are several good scholarly responses addressing the asserted errors, this simply does not lead to the conclusion that the Gospels were not authored by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The worst-case scenario only shows that they made an error in describing the geography. (I don't think they made an error, I simply do not have to show that they didn't make an error to show who the authors were.)

Matthew was a tax collector, so he would have known how to write, probably in both Aramaic and Greek. Mark was from a wealthy family and easily could have learned to write in Greek. Luke was an educated Gentile that would have been able to write in Greek. Even if John couldn't read or write, he could have had a literate Christian record what John dictated to him as a scribe.

In claiming that we do not know who the authors of the Gospels were, the skeptics also ignore the traditions and the manuscript evidence. The earliest attestation of authorship for the Gospels is a Christian named Papias, a student of John. Papias claims that John wrote a gospel. He

tells us that Mark wrote a gospel based on Peter's teachings. He also tells us that Matthew wrote a sayings gospel in Hebrew. From Papias we can conclude that John and Mark wrote gospels, and that Matthew wrote a sayings gospel that we do not have.[{20}](#)

The next person of importance is Irenaeus, a student of Polycarp, who was a student of John. Irenaeus tells us that the gospels were written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The most reasonable explanation as to how Irenaeus came across this information is that it is what Polycarp taught him.[{21}](#) There are two early sources that the gospels were written by the traditional authors. This means that the tradition is early, and no one challenged it until the Enlightenment.

Most scholars believe that Mark was the first gospels to be written. The majority of scholars think Mark wrote his gospel around A.D. 70, although it could have been earlier. Most scholars believe that John was the last gospel to be written, around A.D. 90. Jesus' death occurred in either A.D. 30 or 33. This means that these gospels were written within living memory of the earthly life of Jesus. The gospels being written within living memory of Jesus means that people who were eyewitnesses to the events were alive and could have provided corrections if they thought that the gospels were in error. This combined with the unanimous traditions and manuscript evidence of who the authors were gives us good reason to say that the information in these gospels is reliable, and that they are good historical sources for examining the life of Jesus.[{22}](#)

## **The Virgin Birth**

In studying the life of Jesus, the first event we come to is his birth. This is a fantastic claim, and it is understandable why people would be skeptical of a claim like this. The question is, where does the evidence lead?

The narratives of the virgin birth are found in Matthew chapter 1 and Luke chapters 1 and 2. When examining these narratives, skeptical scholars like Bart Ehrman point out perceived contradictions in Matthew and Luke.[{23}](#) They see that in Matthew, Joseph and Mary live in Bethlehem; in Luke they lived in Nazareth and moved to Bethlehem. In Matthew the angel appears to Joseph, but in Luke the angel appears to Mary. In Matthew the baby Jesus is visited by magi, in Luke Jesus is visited by shepherds. In Luke Jesus is presented in the temple, in Matthew he is not. In Matthew Joseph takes Mary and Jesus to Egypt to protect them from Herod, in Luke they move to Bethlehem. They conclude that these differences mean that both stories are made up. Is that the right conclusion?

When examined closely the perceived contradictions disappear and the narratives fit together like a puzzle to form one consistent narrative. The following narrative solves all the issues listed above.

Zechariah was burning incense in the temple when an angel appeared and told him that his wife Elizabeth would become pregnant. An angel visits Mary in Nazareth and tells her that she will become pregnant with Jesus. When Elizabeth was six months along, Mary came to visit her. When Mary returns to Nazareth, Joseph sees that she is pregnant and was going to divorce her. An angel appears to Joseph and tells him that Mary's pregnancy is from God and he is to care for Mary and the Child. Due to a Roman census Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem. When Jesus was born angels appeared to shepherds and told them that the Messiah was born and that they could find him in Bethlehem. The shepherds go to Bethlehem and visit Jesus. Joseph and Mary take Jesus to be presented at the temple according to Jewish law. The magi from the east come to visit Jesus. After the magi leave, Joseph is told by an angel to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt because Herod wants to kill Jesus. After living in Egypt, an angel appears to Joseph and tells him to move back to Israel.

This shows that while the narratives in Matthew and Luke are different, they do not contradict each other. This also shows that the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke are not borrowing from each other. These two sources are independent historical sources.

## Jesus Proclaimed the Kingdom

The central theme of the preaching of Jesus is the coming of the kingdom of God, also called the kingdom of heaven. These two phrases appear eighty-three times in the gospels. The kingdom was the central message of Jesus' preaching.

In Luke, when the angel visited Mary, the angel told her that Jesus would “. . . be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”[\[24\]](#) Mark states that Jesus first preached, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel.”[\[25\]](#) John records a conversation Jesus and Nicodemus, a Pharisee, who wanted to learn about what Jesus was doing. Jesus' first statement to Nicodemus was, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”[\[26\]](#) Matthew described the beginning of Jesus ministry: “And he went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.”[\[27\]](#) These quotes, and all the teachings of Jesus, show that proclaiming the kingdom of God was the central theme of His preaching.[\[28\]](#)

Jesus also demonstrated that He was bringing the kingdom of God with his ministry by casting out demons. After one particular instance of casting out a demon the Pharisees said, “It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons.”[\[29\]](#) Jesus' response was, “But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of

God has come upon you.”{30}

We can see that the instances of Jesus casting out demons is proclaiming the kingdom of God and the end of the reign of the ruler of this age through His actions. Orthodox priest Andrew Stephan Damik describes the meaning of Jesus’ exorcisms: “Therefore, the exorcisms Jesus performed in His time on earth were not a mere sideshow to demonstrate his power or an *ad hoc* fix for people’s bodily ailments. Driving out demons was core to His mission. He had come to claim the world for God’s kingdom, so it makes sense that He would spend time driving out the oppressors and false rulers.”{31}

Through His proclamations of the coming kingdom, and by casting out demons, Jesus demonstrated that God was bringing His kingdom to earth. Jesus, and later his apostles, called people to come to God and join His kingdom. The kingdom of God is God’s kingly rule over His people and His creation.{32} The coming of God’s kingdom means that through Jesus, God has begun the work of setting things right.{33}

## The Resurrection of Jesus

The resurrection is the most foundational claim made by the earliest Christians. Jesus is the central person in the New Testament. The central event in the life of Jesus that confirms all His claims about who He is and what He said about the kingdom is the resurrection. Paul states the importance of the resurrection clearly:

“But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised your faith is futile and you are still in your

sins.”[\[34\]](#)

In Paul’s view there is no other event in history that is more important than the resurrection. William Lane Craig, a Christian philosopher, summarizes the importance of the resurrection, “The Christian faith stands or falls on the event of the resurrection. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then Christianity is a myth, and we may as well forget it.”[\[35\]](#) In theology and history, nothing is more important than the resurrection.

What kind of evidence could we have for such an event? Our evidence is the New Testament documents. These sources were written by real people in real time and places. We have already seen that the Gospels are ancient biographies of Jesus that are reliable historical sources. Paul’s letter 1 Corinthians is also an important source of information about the resurrection of Jesus.

How does the evidence for Jesus’ life compare with the evidence we have for other significant historical figures? Alexander the Great died in 323 B.C. The first existing biography we have of Alexander was written by Diodorus of Sicily sometime in the first century B.C. This means there is roughly a 200-year gap between the death of Alexander and the first existing historical literature about his life. While some historians may be skeptical about accuracy on some points of the life of Alexander, no historian says that we cannot learn about Alexander from Diodorus. Muhammad died in A.D. 632. Ibn Shaq wrote the earliest biography of Muhammad 150 years after Muhammad died. What we have of that biography is found in the work of Ibn Hisham. No one doubts that we can learn about the life of Muhammad from these writings. When it comes to Jesus, we have four biographies written about him within 70 years of his death. That means that all four biographies were written while people who were alive when Jesus was crucified were still living. As I argued earlier, two of these biographies were written by people who knew

Jesus. This implies that the Gospels are good sources to take seriously.

What can we learn from the Gospels? First, Jesus died by crucifixion. All the Gospels have a crucifixion narrative in them.[{36}](#) While the Gospels give different minor details, they agree that Jesus was prosecuted by the Sanhedrin in an unjust trial. The Gospels also show that Jesus died of crucifixion under the rule of Pilate. This is supported by evidence from the works of Josephus and Tacitus that were discussed earlier. New Testament Scholar Michael Licona writes, “We have looked carefully at the data pertaining to Jesus’ death by crucifixion and have observed very strong reasons for granting the historicity of this event, and we have observed that it is granted by the overwhelming majority of scholars.”[{37}](#) Given the evidence from the Gospels, Josephus, and Tacitus, we can confidently say that Jesus died of crucifixion.

Second, all the Gospels state that Jesus was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.[{38}](#) Joseph was part of the Sanhedrin, the governing body that just convinced Pilate to execute Jesus. It is unlikely that Jesus’ disciples would invent a story where a member of the Sanhedrin would give him an honorable burial after having him executed as a criminal. Given the early consistent testimony from the Gospels, and that it is unlikely that Jesus’ disciples would invent the story, it is reasonable to believe that Joseph took Jesus’ body and buried Him in the tomb. All the evidence shows that Jesus was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.[{39}](#)

Third, the tomb of Jesus was found empty by a group of Jesus’ women disciples. Once again, this is found in every Gospel.[{40}](#) There are differences in the lists of women who showed up at the grave of Jesus, but there are no contradictions. A variation of details such as who was in the room vary when examining eyewitness testimony. It is unlikely that men would invent a story where they were hiding, and the women were going to Jesus’ grave. N. T. Wright wrote, “If they



could have invented stories of fine, upstanding reliable male witnesses being first at the tomb, they would have done it. That they did not tells us either that everyone in the early church knew that the women, led by Mary Magdalene, were in fact first on the scene, or that the church was not so inventive as critics have routinely imagined, or both.”[\[41\]](#) The evidence shows that it is reasonable that Jesus’ grave was found empty by a group of His women disciples.

Fourth, Jesus appeared to multiple people in multiple settings. Mark does not record a post-resurrection appearance of Jesus. The earliest manuscripts of Mark end at verse 16:8, He records the appearance of an angel to the women who found the tomb empty. Matthew, Luke, and John record Jesus appearing to the women, then several appearances to several people in different settings and even to groups of people. While harmonizing these appearances is difficult, there is enough evidence here to conclude that the apostles believed that they saw the risen Jesus.

While the Gospels are early evidence of the death and resurrection of Jesus, there is earlier evidence. This evidence is a creed found in one of Paul’s letters, 1 Corinthians 15:3-8:

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.”

This creed was designed to be memorized easily and is not Paul’s normal style of writing. The differences and the creedal pattern indicate that this was not originally composed



by Paul. So where did Paul get it?

In his letter to the Galatians Paul provides a clue to where he got this creed. In chapters 1 and 2 Paul gives his “resume” to the church at Galatia. Paul says that after his conversion he went to Arabia, then returned to Damascus. Three years later he visited Peter and James for 15 days. 14 years later Paul met with Peter, James and

John. Both times Paul says that they approved of his ministry.[{42}](#) Most scholars are convinced that Paul got this creed from Peter and James. N. T. Wright states, “It was probably formulated within the first two or three years after Easter itself, since it was already in formulaic form when Paul ‘received’ it. We are here in touch with the earliest Christian tradition, with something that was being said two decades or more before Paul wrote this letter.”[{43}](#)

What information does this creed give us? It tells us that Christ died, that he was buried, that Jesus was raised, and that Jesus appeared to multiple people. This evidence is consistent with the evidence from the Gospels. All the evidence indicates that Jesus rose physically from the dead. William Lane Craig’s conclusion is, “Each of these three great facts—the empty tomb, the appearances, the origin of the Christian faith—is independently established. Together they point with unwavering conviction to the same unavoidable and marvelous conclusion: Jesus actually rose from the dead.”[{44}](#) There are good reasons to believe that Jesus rose from the dead. If Jesus did rise from the dead, his claims about the kingdom of God/Heaven are true.

## Conclusion

Skeptics often say that there is no evidence that Christianity is true. They say that faith is blind, and that Christians only believe because they were raised by Christians. It is true that many Christians were raised by Christians, but this does not show that Christianity has no evidence to support its

claims. These critics say that the Bible, in this case the Gospels, are not allowed as evidence because they are religious books. The academic discipline of natural theology generally excludes the examination as well. They say if we allow the Bible to be examined this way then we have to allow all religious books to be examined this way. I welcome the challenge. N. T. Wright responds to the exclusion of the Bible in natural theology, "But Jesus was a figure of the real world. The Gospels are real documents from the real world. To refuse to treat them as 'natural' evidence because the Christian tradition has seen them as 'revelation,' and to dismiss Jesus similarly because the Christian tradition has confessed him to be God incarnate, looks like the skeptic bribing the judges before the trial."[\[45\]](#) The best and most important evidence for the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is the Gospels. If my arguments are true, then Jesus is who He claimed to be, the Messiah, the world's sovereign King. Studying Jesus is not useful only for apologetics, it is a necessary part of Christian discipleship. When we know what the Gospels teach about Jesus, then we will be better followers of Jesus, we will love Him more, and we will be better at representing Him to those around us.

## Notes

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defending the faith in a society that doubts Jesus' claims: the literary questions are important for preaching, because we want to communicate the same inspired message we find in the text."

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15. Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44

16. Williams, Peter J. *Can We Trust the Gospels?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018) 23. "We may therefore conclude from Tacitus that Christianity spread far and fast and that being a Christian could be very difficult." Yamauchi, " 216. "Note that Tacitus, who despised Christians even more than he despised Jews, knew that they were called after Christ, who had been crucified ("suffered the extreme Penalty") and Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius."

17. Pliny, *Epistles* 10.96-97.

18. Ehrman, 199-200.

19. Yamauchi, 217. "That Christ was crucified under Pilate under the reign of Tiberius, that despite his ignominious

death his followers worshiped him as a god..."

20. Craig Keener, *Christobiography: Memory, History, and the Reliability of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2019), 405-407.

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31. Damek, Andrew Stephan. *Arise O God: The Gospel of Christ's Defeat of Demons, Sin, and Death* (Chesterton: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2021) 91.

32. Morris, Leon, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Gospel According to St. Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1974) 73. "Jesus is thus brought into relation with this kingdom of God, a kingdom that is not to be understood as a temporal kingdom, an earthly realm; rather it is God's kingly rule, as Jesus would in due time make clear."

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human nature that is sick. This means that his mission is about more than just the salvation of individuals, for the coming of the kingdom means a world set right, in the fuller sense of the term world.”

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35. Craig, William Lane, *The Son Rises: The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1981), 7.

36. Matthew 27:32-56; Mark 15:21-41; Luke 23:26-49; John 19:16-37

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38. Matthew 27:57-61; Mark 15:24-42; Luke 50-56; John 19:38-42

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40. Matthew 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1:10-18

41. Wright, N. T. *Christians Origins and the Question of God: The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 608.

42. Galatians 1:11-2:9

43. Wright, N. T. *Christians Origins and the Question of God*, 319.

44. Craig, 134.

45. Wright, *History and Eschatology*, 74.

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## Jesus, American Politics, and

# Bearing God's Name

*Have you ever wondered how to engage in politics as a Christian? How do you filter what our political leaders say through the lens of scripture? How do you determine if someone in a political office just wants your vote and is willing to misuse scripture to do it? Tom Davis addresses the concerns we should have when our political leaders misuse scripture, how to identify their crafty lies, and how to think theologically when listening and evaluating their promises on their political platform.*

I started paying attention to politics around the year 2000. Since then, politics has grown more contentious. The two major parties are suspicious of each other, and the rhetoric has grown even more contentious. Every president elected since 2000 has been declared to be an illegitimate president by some of their opponents. Most political pundits and activists increase the contention, especially during election campaigns. The worst part of this political polarization is that both parties claim Jesus is on their side. How can Jesus be on both sides? What is their evidence that confirms their claim? How should Christians respond?

## The Third Commandment: Taking God's Name in Vain

To help us address how politicians use the name of Jesus, it will help to look at the third commandment. The Ten Commandments are found in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. God leads the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt, and makes a covenant with His people. In Exodus 20, God gives these commandments as the conditions of His covenant with the Hebrews. In Deuteronomy, these commandments are restated as the Hebrews are preparing to go into the promised land. The third commandment is, "You shall not take the name of the Lord

your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.”{1}

These commandments were the foundation for the moral behavior that the Hebrew people were to follow to keep their covenant relationship with God. Sometimes there is a particular confusion over the third commandment. A version of this covenant called “The Redneck Ten Commandments” lists the third commandment as “Watch yer mouth.” While humorous, this fails to capture the essence of the commandment. Dropping a “g\_\_d\_\_\_,” or an “OMG” in a conversation is not at the heart of the third commandment. Paul wrote of Jesus, “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.”{2} This means that Jesus is God incarnate, which means exclaiming “Jesus Christ!” as an expression of disgust or surprise is the same as the expressions just mentioned. These phrases can violate taking God’s name in vain, but are not at the heart of the issue. There are other passages in the Bible that address the use of impure, offensive, or vulgar language.

If vulgar and impious phrases such as GD or OMG are not at the heart of the third commandment, what is this commandment about? I suggest two meanings, both of which we see violated in American politics.

When God gave the Hebrews the Ten Commandments, the people were coming out of Egypt. The people were going into the land promised to them, which was inhabited by the Canaanites. Those people, as well as most people of the Ancient Near East, thought that by invoking a god’s name, that god could be manipulated into doing what the people liked. Old Testament scholar Abel Ndjerareon tells us, “Pagans end up believing that they can easily manipulate both the name and the god represented by the name. The name thus becomes a way of controlling, of mastering, and taming the divinity. But the God of Israel refuses to allow his name to be used in this way. He is not an object to be manipulated.”{3} Unlike the gods of the surrounding nations, Yahweh will not be controlled

or mastered by people simply because they invoke His name. Old Testament scholar John Walton also states, "The third commandment when read as ancient Near Eastern literature concerns how Yahweh's power/authority was not to be perceived—people were to recognize it by refraining from attempts to control or misuse it."[\[4\]](#) In the third commandment Yahweh is telling the Hebrews, with whom He just entered a covenant, that He is not like pagan gods. They cannot manipulate Him by using His name.

Politicians do not use God's name to manipulate God, they use God's name to manipulate people. People will take God's name and attach it to a political party or a politician to convince people to vote for them. Currently "Jesus Saves" is not only a statement of faith, now it is also a political banner. Jesus Saves banners were at the January 6th riots. Why? Were people witnessing to other people during the riot? That is not likely. Politicians use the name of God to gather support for campaigns and political ideas that God does not agree with. While they may not be trying to manipulate God, they are trying to manipulate His people.

There is another aspect to taking God's name in vain. One use of the Hebrew word for "take" could be something like taking up arms, taking things into your own hands, or taking a bag from someone to help them carry groceries.

The word translated as "take" in the third commandment is also translated as "bear" in other parts of the Old Testament. In Exodus 28, God gives Moses the instructions for how to make the priestly garments and how these garments were to be used. One of the garments, like an apron, is called a breastpiece. The breastpiece has twelve stones attached to it. Each stone represents a tribe of Israel. Aaron is to wear this holy garment when entering the tabernacle: "So Aaron shall bear the names of the sons of Israel in the breastpiece of judgment on his heart, when he goes into the Holy Place, to bring them to remembrance before the LORD. And in the breastpiece of



judgment you shall put the Urim and the Thummim, and they shall be on Aaron's heart, when he goes in before the LORD. Thus Aaron shall bear the judgment of the people of Israel on his heart before the LORD." {5}

A few verses later Aaron is instructed to wear a headband with a gold plate with "Yahweh" engraved on it. The instructions are: "It shall be on Aaron's forehead, and Aaron shall bear any guilt from the holy things that the people of Israel consecrate as their holy gifts. It shall regularly be on his forehead, that they may be accepted before the Lord." {6} In this passage we can see that Aaron is bearing, or representing, Israel before God by wearing the breastpiece. The gold plate on Aaron's forehead signifies that he is God's representative to Israel. In light of the third commandment and these instructions given to Aaron when fulfilling his priestly role, Israel is to represent God (bear or take his name) to the nations just as Aaron represents (bears) Israel before God. {7}

We Christians should be involved in politics. There is nothing wrong with Christians running for office, or campaigning for a cause. As Christians we bear God's name. We represent God to other people. This means that how we act, what we say, and how we treat people matters to God. When we take God's name and attach it to a political view that does not accurately represent Him, we bear His name in vain. When we campaign, we must do so in a way that honors God. We must not misrepresent Him.

## **American Politics and God**

Throughout the history of America, people have appealed to God and the Bible to justify different social and political movements. The earliest people to settle in what became the United States were devout Christians. The Bible informed their beliefs and way of life. The Founding Fathers had a variety of religious beliefs ranging from Enlightenment Epicureanism (an

ancient Greek philosophy that believed that gods did not exist, and only physical things exist) and deism to Protestant Christianity. Most of them saw value in the Bible, even if they were not Christians. Different Americans at different times have appealed to God and the Bible to gain support for slavery, the abolition of slavery, Manifest Destiny (a cultural belief in the 19th-century United States that American settlers were destined to expand across North America, per *Wikipedia*), the humane treatment of Native Americans, Prohibition, and many other movements and goals. However, these movements are not equal when evaluated by the teachings of the Bible. Politicians and activists still appeal to the Bible to rally voters and supporters for their goals. How should current appeals to the Bible be evaluated?

Matthew Dowd, a Democrat who once worked as an advisor to the Bush administration, said, "If Jesus Christ was alive today, He would be called a groomer, He would be called woke, and He would be called a socialist if He was alive today and speaking the message He spoke in the gospels today about treating everybody with dignity." Dowd went on to say, "Jesus Christ hung around with prostitutes and tax collectors. He was nailed to a cross because He spoke on behalf of the most marginalized people in the Middle East."[\[8\]](#) He also said that a small segment of conservative activists has corrupted Jesus' message, which Dowd said was "love conquers hate."

What should we think about Dowd's statements during the interview? First, notice that Dowd does not quote the Bible at any time during the interview. He references the gospels in a general way. Given that this was a live interview on a news broadcast, I can understand that because time was limited.

The question remains, how do his claims stand up against biblical scrutiny? Would Jesus be called a groomer (slang for a person who builds relationships with children to manipulate and exploit them)? I think Dowd means that Jesus would be falsely accused of being a groomer. But Dowd seems to

think that Jesus would be teaching that same sex intercourse, transgenderism, and things like that are good. I see no evidence of that in the Bible.

Dowd's claim that Jesus died because He spoke out on behalf of marginalized people completely misses the mark. Jesus did disrupt the cultural norms and class divisions of the Jews of that time. Women traveled with Jesus and His disciples. Jesus spoke with the Samaritans. Jesus touched lepers and other unclean people. He even had a tax collector as one of his closest disciples. But there is no indication that He died because He did these things. Jesus did not die for "love conquers hate." The Apostle John tells us, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."[{9}](#) John also wrote, "He is the propitiation for our sins, and not ours only but also the sins of the whole world."[{10}](#) While Jesus taught that the marginalized should be respected and that the oppressed should be defended, that is not why He died. Jesus did not die for love, He died because He loved the world. His death was not about equality, it was a payment for our sins. Those who confess their sins, oppressors and oppressed, and turn to Jesus as Lord of all creation, will have their sins forgiven.

The latest instance I saw of the Bible being used for politics is California governor Gavin Newsom's campaign billboards promoting the pro-choice position. The bottom of the billboards has Mark 12:31 at the bottom of the poster: "Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no greater commandment than these." Newsom seems to think loving your neighbor means supporting abortion. He also left out the first part of Jesus' answer to the question of which command is the greatest, "The most important is, Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength."[{11}](#) Does Newsom leave this out because he

thinks it would make the billboard cluttered? I don't think so. The question that Newsom needs to answer is, how does promoting the pro-choice position show love for God? Every person bears the image of God. When, in the development of the baby, is the image put in the baby? Because biology, and more importantly, the Bible does not tell us, it seems the most moral and cautious position is to assume that the image of God is in the baby at conception. Let us not forget that the command to love your neighbor is tied to the command to love God. How does abortion show love for God? Every politician or political activist who wants to use passages of the Bible to support their political cause needs to be able to answer these kinds of questions. Leaving these kinds of questions unanswered does not honor the name of God.

During President Trump's campaign in 2016 he was a guest speaker at Liberty University. The thing most people remember about his speech is that he said "Two Corinthians" instead of "Second Corinthians." But why should this matter? Christians in England call the book "Two Corinthians."

The issue in Trump's speech is the verse he quoted and what was implied by its use. Trump said, "I hear this is a major theme right here. ... Two Corinthians 3:17, that's the whole ball game . . . 'Where the spirit of the Lord is,' right? 'Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.' . . . But we are going to protect Christianity."[\[13\]](#) Trump referenced 2 Corinthians 3:17 by quoting part of it, then making the verse about his political campaign, implying that Christian freedom depended on electing him. But what is this verse really about? Here is the verse in context:

"But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is

freedom.”{14}

When viewed in context it is clear that 2 Corinthians is about Christ lifting the veil of sin, and the Spirit of the Lord providing freedom from sin. What does this have to do with Trump, or any other American politician? Nothing.

It is clear that American politicians have used the Bible to gain support from Christians. Most of the time politicians are taking passages out of context so that they can try to gain support from Christians to advance their own agenda. When politicians do this, they are bearing God’s name in vain. When we Christians remain silent, we are bearing God’s name in vain. In order to bear God’s name well we must speak what is true and call out what is false. This includes when people, Christian or otherwise, misrepresent God or the teachings of the Bible.

## How Do We Do Politics

Staying out of politics is not a good option. God calls us to be good stewards of the gifts He gives us, one of which is the opportunity to be salt and light in our culture through government. Christians living under dictatorships do not enjoy this blessing. How should we Christians engage in politics then? Where in the Bible can we find guidance? How can we bear God’s name in a way that honors Him in politics? While there are a lot of places to find principles on specific issues, the beatitudes in Matthew 5 are a good place to find general principles for how to engage in politics and life. The beatitudes describe the characteristics that Christians should practice.

The first beatitude is, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”{15} When we are poor in Spirit, we realize that we “can do no good thing without divine assistance.”{16} We must seek God’s will, not our will, in politics. We are not to be about our political vision, but

about the business of God's kingdom. We must humble ourselves before God and make His priorities our priorities.

The second beatitude is, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." When our political opponents face personal crises, we should not celebrate. We do not honor God by hating our political opponents and finding joy in their misfortunes. We should not celebrate the suffering of the liberals, or the conservatives (whichever one you find more annoying). We should still act in love and mourn with them when they suffer personal loss and misfortune. We should pray for them. We should not cover up the failings of our political allies. We should mourn their failures and encourage them to hold themselves to a higher standard.

The third beatitude is, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." As followers of Christ, we know that we depend on God for what we have. We should not be proud of gaining and wielding political power. Followers of Christ inherit the earth because they are meek (biblical meekness is strength under the control of love), not because they wield political power.

The fourth beatitude is, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." We should not engage in corrupt politics, or tolerate those who do. This means calling out corruption in both parties. We cannot ignore political corruption because it is our guy, or we might lose the next election. We must represent God with integrity.

The fifth beatitude is, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." Jesus was not ruthless. God mercifully offers us forgiveness even though we do not deserve it. How can we refuse to show the same mercy to our political rivals?

The sixth beatitude is, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." We are representatives of God, his

priests. We must be pure, no matter how much it costs or inconveniences us. We serve God, not the world. We oppose tyranny wherever we find it.

The seventh beatitude is, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." We should be known by our love, not by our feuds. We should forgive and make peace with our political rivals as much as we can. We should not hold grudges or try to punish our political opponents when we have the power to do so.

The eighth beatitude is, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." We know that by holding to pure standards and representing God well we will be persecuted. We will be called Bible thumpers, Kool-Aid drinkers, backwards, deniers, and all kinds of other things. When this happens, we take the persecution and look to God, who will bring us into His kingdom.

The ninth beatitude is, "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." When others mock us because we are loyal to Christ, we remain loyal to Christ.

As Christians we bear God's image in every aspect of our lives. We must bear the image of God well in politics as well. This means that we have to treat others as we want them to treat us, pursue mercy, pursue truth, and pursue peace as best we can. We have to do this because we are bearing God's image. We are representing Him in everything we do. May God grant us the courage and integrity to represent Him well.

## Notes

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## Why Bible Study Matters

*Tom Davis builds a case for why we should study the Bible, drawing on both the Old Testament and New Testament scriptures.*

Does it matter if we study the Bible?



I recently encountered an article claiming it doesn't. The author claimed that Christians are not feeding the poor, helping the downtrodden, seeking justice for the persecuted, or evangelizing people, because we are too busy studying our Bibles. (Interestingly, the article has since been removed, but the question remains.)

Is his concern valid? Approximately 16% of people in the United States read their Bible most days during the week.<sup>{1}</sup> A 2014 article in *Christianity Today* states, "The average length of time spent studying the Bible was between 10 and 20 minutes per session."<sup>{2}</sup> According to Probe's 2020 religion survey, "Only one out of five Born Again Christians ages 18 through 29 pray daily, attend church at least monthly, and read the Bible at least weekly."<sup>{3}</sup> The statistics indicate that the average amount of time Christians spend reading their Bible cannot be what is keeping Christians from sharing their faith, helping those in need, or helping the homeless.

Another issue that the author raised is that the early church did not have an authoritative list of New Testament books for more than three hundred years after Jesus' resurrection. I am unsure how these historical facts show that anyone today is spending too much time reading their Bible. Are we better off when we have all the books of the Bible? Would these early Christians have preferred having all the books of the Bible? Would they want to stick with having parts of the Old Testament, a Gospel or two, and a few of the epistles? I think they would be confused why this pastor thinks that Christians are spending too much time studying their Bible.

## **What the Old Testament Says About Reading the Bible**

One way we can figure out the role that studying the Bible should play in the life of the Christian is to look at what the Bible says about reading the Scriptures. We should start

with the Old Testament. The first passage to examine is:

These words I am commanding you today must be kept in mind, and you must teach them to your children and speak of them as you sit in your house, as you walk along the road, as you lie down, and as you get up. You should tie them as a reminder on your forearm and fasten them as symbols on your forehead. Inscribe them on the doorframes of your houses and gates. (Deuteronomy 6:6-9 NET)

God is preparing to lead the Hebrews into the promised land. He tells the people that they are to remember the covenant, teach the covenant to their children, and place inscriptions from the covenant in prominent places in their homes. Knowing and teaching the commands of God is so important that this charge is repeated in Deuteronomy 11:18-23.

Peter Cousins states, "Not only is it to be upon the heart . . . it must take first place in training children, in conversation (at home and outside) from the beginning to the end of the day; it should govern the senses, control behavior, and direct life in the home and community."[\[4\]](#) The words of the covenant between God and the Hebrew people are so important that the words have to be known and understood. That requires study. Knowing the covenant is so important that the Hebrew people are commanded to decorate their walls, doorframes, and gates. The people are even commanded to have the words of the covenant on their clothes. All of this indicates that God intends for His people to know and follow His commands, and that this is done by studying them. Even the people who could not read would memorize the law. (Ancient cultures operated from an oral tradition; people were used to hearing, memorizing, and repeating stories and passages from verbal input alone.) To be fair, few Jews would have been able to recite the first five books of the Bible from memory, but they would have been able to recite long passages of Scripture.

The most common passage that was most often recited was the Shema, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is one! You must love the LORD your God with your whole mind, your whole being, and all your strength" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). Jesus said this is God's greatest commandment (Matthew 22:36-40). Jews would pray the Shema several times a day. This is the passage most often found on doorposts and in houses in archaeological digs.

As the people prepare to enter the land promised to them, God makes provisions for a future King. The responsibilities and conduct of the king are:

When he sits on his royal throne he must make a copy of this law on a scroll given to him by the Levitical priests. It must be with him constantly, and he must read it as long as he lives, so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and observe all the words of this law and these statutes and carry them out. (Deuteronomy 17:18-19 NET)

Here we can see that the king does not make the law. God gave the law to Moses. The Levitical priests were to copy the law and teach it to the people. The priests were also tasked with giving the king a copy of the law so that the king could carry out God's law. The King is under the authority of the priests and of God. The king is not allowed to make his own law, he must be obedient to God.[\[5\]](#)

As Joshua leads the people into the promised land God tells him, "This law scroll must not leave your lips. You must memorize it day and night so you can carefully obey all in it. Then you will prosper and be successful" (Joshua 1:8 NET). Even before a king was installed over the people, the leaders of Israel were to lead God's people according to the law so they could be successful in following God.

As Israel moved into the land God had promised them, they

became corrupt. The priests did not teach the kings or the people. God sent prophets to the people to call them back to living faithfully to the covenant. The people would not keep the covenant they made with God, and the priests would not teach the law to the people. God, in the book of Hosea, tells the priests:

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.  
Because you have rejected knowledge,  
I will reject you from serving as my priest.  
Since you have forgotten the law of your God,  
I will also forget your sons. (Hosea 4:6 CSB)

Despite all of these warnings, Israel was not faithful in following God. David Allan Hubbard summarizes the situation, “The collapse of the priests and prophet, key ministers of law and word, leads inevitably to the disastrous destruction.”[\[6\]](#) The priests were not teaching the people or the kings. This led to God sending the people into exile and the destruction of the Temple in Israel. As a result of a lack of faithfulness and a lack of knowledge of God’s law, Israel was separated from God.

## **What the New Testament Says About Reading the Bible**

The Gospels tell us that after his baptism Jesus has a 40-day fast followed by a confrontation with Satan. This involved Satan tempting Jesus by quoting scripture, and Jesus rebukes him by quoting Scripture (Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). New Testament Scholar Craig Keener gives the following description: “This text also shows that Jesus does not just use Scripture to accommodate contemporary views of its authority; he uses it as his authority and the final word on ethics even when dealing with a supracultural adversary.”[\[7\]](#) While the Bible was written by people living in cultures that existed in real places and real times in the past, the

morality taught within scripture is not restricted by those historical and cultural settings. As Jesus' followers, we need to understand what is expected of us morally. In order to know Christian morality, we must study the Bible.

The Gospels also show that Jesus had debates concerning what was taught in the Scriptures. These debates often included not just morality, but the identity of the Messiah, and the power of God. In one debate Jesus tells the Sadducees, "You are deceived because you don't know the scriptures or the power of God" (Matthew 22:29 NET). The Sadducees did not know the scriptures because they only studied the first five books of the Bible. They didn't know the power of God because they rejected the resurrection. Stanley Horton writes, "Those who do not really know what the scriptures teach, nor God's omnipotent power cannot avoid going astray."[\[8\]](#)

In another debate with the Pharisees Jesus said, "You study the scriptures thoroughly because you think in them you possess eternal life, and it is these same scriptures that testify about me, but you are not willing to come to me so that you may have life" (John 5:39, 40 NET). The Pharisees rejected Jesus because they saw him as a threat. Jesus had undermined their authority and threatened their position in the culture, so they were obstinate. Keener states, "They believed that one had eternal life through the scriptures; but Jesus says that the Scriptures witness to him, hence to reject him is to disobey the Scriptures."[\[9\]](#) By rejecting Jesus, the Pharisees unintentionally rejected the Scriptures. By rejecting Jesus, they could not possess eternal life.

In the book of Acts, we see Jesus' disciples proclaiming to everyone who will listen that Jesus is the Messiah and was raised from the dead. This led to debates and conflicts with the Jewish authorities. In Acts chapter seven Stephen accuses the Jewish council that they failed to follow the scriptures. In chapter eight Philip leads an Ethiopian eunuch to faith by starting with a passage in Isaiah and telling him about the

gospel of Jesus. Later in Acts Paul met repeatedly with a group of Jews. Acts describes the Bereans as “more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they eagerly received the message, examining the scriptures carefully every day to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11 NET). The reaction of the Bereans is not emotional. They investigated the scriptures intellectually to see what was true.{10}

In his letters Paul addresses why God gave us the scriptures. In Romans Paul writes, “For everything that was written in former times was written for our instruction, so that through endurance and through encouragement of the scriptures we may have hope” (Romans 15:4). John Murray comments, “In Paul’s esteem Scripture in all its parts is for our instruction, that the Old Testament was designed to furnish us in these last days with the instruction necessary for the fulfillment of our vocation to the end, and that it is as written it promotes this purpose.”{11} Part of being on fire for Christ is fulfilling our vocation. The primary way we know what our vocation is and how we can fulfill it is through studying our Bible.

In his second letter to Timothy, Paul doubles down on the benefits of studying scripture. Paul reminds Timothy that he was taught the scriptures while he was a child. Then Paul writes, “Every scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the person dedicated to God may be capable and equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Paul is reminding Timothy that scripture has authority because it comes from God. Scripture is good for learning about God and ethics. The Jews have this benefit, but the Christians have a better understanding because Jesus taught the Apostles, which gave them a better understanding of the scriptures than that of the Jews.{12}

The last passage that I would like to examine is in

Revelation. "Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy aloud, and blessed are those who hear and obey the things written in it, because the time is near!" (Revelation 1:3). While this verse is speaking specifically about people who read Revelation, by logical extension we are blessed any time we read any part of the scripture. All scripture is given by God, therefore when you read any part of scripture you will be blessed. What does it mean to be blessed by reading scripture? Earl F. Palmer answers, "It does not express superficial sentiment but instead the rugged and tested assurance that it is a good thing to be walking in the pathway of God's will." [\[13\]](#) Our obedience to scripture brings blessing. We cannot be obedient to scripture without studying the Bible.

## Conclusion

In one sense the author of the article I mentioned was correct. If we spend so much time studying the Bible that Christians never feed the hungry, help the poor, make disciples for Christ, or work to bring justice to the downtrodden then we are neglecting part of what we were commanded to do. But how can we even know that Christ commands us to do those things if we do not study the Bible?

In the examination of what the Bible says about Bible study, we can see that Bible study is an indispensable part of the Christian life. We can see in Deuteronomy that God commanded the Hebrews to memorize and obey the Law. When they failed to do this, they were ultimately exiled by God. Jesus reprimanded the Sadducees and the Pharisees for not knowing and believing the scriptures. Paul and John taught that Christians would be blessed by studying the scriptures.

The reason we are blessed when we study the Bible is that when we study, we develop and form a Christian worldview. The story shapes our values, our morals, and the way we live. The way we think about the people and the world around us is changed by



studying scripture. One other aspect is that when we study the Bible, we enter into the glory of God. When we study the Bible, we are in God's presence in the same way as when we are praying. Studying the Bible is an act of worship.[{14}](#)

Finally, studying the Bible is how we obey the command in Ephesians 5:10 to "find out what pleases the Lord." Since the greatest commandment is to love God (Matthew 22:37) as noted above, how can we love Him without knowing what pleases Him? And since we find that God's love language is obedience (John 14:15), how can we discern what to obey without studying His word? How can we avoid sin if we have never studied the Bible to find out what sin is?

How can Christians implement Bible study into a busy 40-hour work week and taking care of kids and spending time with their spouse? You do not have to spend hours a day studying. Spend ten or fifteen minutes in the morning or at night to read the Bible. Take five minutes of your lunch break to read a chapter. If you are so busy that you cannot study during the work week, find fifteen minutes to study on your day off. Whatever amount of time you spend studying the Bible, God will honor and bless you for that time.

## Notes

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## Why the Stories of the Virgin Birth Fit Together

*Tom Davis answers the charge that the two nativity accounts in the gospels contradict each other, showing how well they complement each other by contributing details from two*

*different perspectives.*

It is December again, the time of year that western culture celebrates Christmas. Historically Christians claimed that Jesus was born on December 25 as early as the late second century.<sup>{1}</sup> The primary biblical and historical sources for Jesus' birth are found in Matthew chapters 1 and 2, and Luke chapters 1 and 2. These chapters tell us the history of God becoming one of us through the virgin conception and birth of Jesus. The birth of Jesus is important because it is the beginning of God fulfilling his promise to send a savior to Israel. Many opponents of Christianity reject these stories as myths or fanciful stories. Their view is that these stories are made up to fulfill prophecy. They claim that these accounts are two completely different stories that are incompatible with each other.

## **Some Alleged Problems**

One skeptic in particular, New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman, claims that "The problem is that some of the differences between Matthew and Luke are very difficult to reconcile with one another."<sup>{2}</sup> When reading objections like this it sounds as if the early Christians were not aware that the four Gospels were not identical in the way that they told the story of the life of Jesus.

However, the early Christians were aware that each Gospel tells us about the life of Jesus from a particular point of view. When these stories are examined, they complement each other and give a more complete account of the birth of Jesus. The end process of examining these issues and giving a complete account is called a harmony. The first harmony, the Diatessaron, was written by a Christian named Titian around A.D. 170. <sup>{3}</sup>

Ehrman raises an issue that he thinks is irreconcilable: "Where was Joseph and Mary's home town?"<sup>{4}</sup> Ehrman points out

that Luke says Joseph and Mary live in Nazareth and have to travel to Bethlehem because of a census, while Matthew does not mention them living in Nazareth before the birth of Jesus. But is this really a contradiction? No! Luke tells us about the things that happened in Nazareth while Matthew chooses not to address those things.

Ehrman points out that there are wise men in Matthew, but there are shepherds in Luke.[{5}](#) But Luke tells us that the shepherds visited Jesus on the night of his birth, while Matthew says that the wise men came some time, probably more than a year, after Jesus was presented at the Temple.

Ehrman also points out that Matthew tells us Herod wants to kill Jesus, while Luke tells us Caesar wants a census taken.[{6}](#) But these are not contradictory claims. There is no reason to say that if one happened the other could not.

We have seen in a brief overview how the claim that the stories of Jesus' birth in Matthew and Luke are not compatible with one another can be resolved. But how do the stories fit together? I will summarize the narratives in Matthew and Luke, then combine the narratives to show that when they are combined they fit together to make one fuller narrative.

## **Matthew's Narrative (Matthew 1:18-2:23)**

As I summarize the birth narrative in Matthew, who is visited by angels? Who is making the decisions? From whose perspective is the story being told? These questions help tell us who is the possible source of the story.

Matthew begins his narrative with Joseph. Joseph and Mary were engaged to be married. In ancient Israel, engagements lasted a year. Mary is pregnant before they are married. Joseph does not want to marry Mary, but also does not want to disgrace her family. He decides to make the divorce private.

While Joseph was thinking these things over, an angel from God

tells him that Mary's pregnancy is an act of God. Joseph will have a son, and the son's name will be Jesus. Jesus will save his people from their sins.

When Joseph wakes up he changes his mind and marries Mary. Joseph and Mary do not have sexual relations and she is a virgin when her son is born. They named their son Jesus as the angel instructed Joseph. Matthew tells us that Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

Later, some Magi, probably from Persia, show up looking for the one who was born King of the Jews. These Magi claim to have seen this king's star, so they came to worship him.

King Herod does not like the news that the Magi bring. He is the king and there is no room for another king. So Herod goes to the chief priests and the scribes to find out where the Christ is supposed to be born. They search the scripture and tell Herod that the Christ will be born in Bethlehem. Herod tells the Magi that the new king was born in Bethlehem. Herod asks the Magi to stop by on their way back to Persia and tell him where the new king will be found so he can go and worship him too. However, Herod wants to kill this new king, because he is the king and there will not be another king.

As the Magi are approaching Bethlehem they see the star again. The star leads them to the house where Mary, Joseph, and Jesus are staying. The Magi worship Jesus and give him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The Magi are warned in a dream not to go back to see Herod, so they go back to Persia without stopping in Jerusalem.

An Angel appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him that Herod wants to kill Jesus, and that he needs to go to Egypt to escape Herod. Joseph wakes up and takes Mary and Jesus to Egypt.

Herod realizes that the Magi went back to Persia without telling him where the new king was born. Herod is furious! He

sends soldiers into Bethlehem with orders to kill every boy under the age of two.

Joseph, Mary, and Jesus live in Egypt until Herod dies. Then, an angel appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him to return to Israel. Joseph wants to return to Judea, but he is afraid the new ruler, Archelaus, will kill Jesus so he moves to Nazareth.

Notice that in Matthew the narrative focuses on Joseph's role in the events surrounding Jesus' birth. Matthew 1 gives Jesus' genealogy through Joseph's lineage. The narrative begins with Joseph having to decide whether he should divorce Mary, or continue with their engagement and marriage. Joseph is visited by an angel in his dreams three times. This focus on Joseph suggests that this narrative is told from Joseph's point of view. Next I will summarize Luke's narrative.

## **Luke's Narrative (Luke 1:5-2:52)**

As we did with Matthew, ask, who is the main character in the story? Who does the story focus on?

Zechariah, a priest faithful to God, had no children because his wife, Elizabeth, could not have children. Zechariah was selected to enter the sanctuary of the Temple to burn incense when the angel Gabriel appeared to him. Gabriel tells Zechariah that Elizabeth will become pregnant and they will have a son who is to be named John. Zachariah is skeptical, so Gabriel makes him unable to speak. As Gabriel said, Elizabeth becomes pregnant.

Six months later Gabriel is sent to Nazareth to visit a virgin, Mary. Mary is engaged to Joseph. Gabriel tells Mary that she has found favor with God and she will conceive and have a boy who is to be named Jesus. Mary does not understand how this can be. Gabriel explains that it is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Mary goes to visit Elizabeth, who happens to be Mary's cousin. When Mary arrives John, who is not yet born, recognizes that Mary's child, Jesus, is the coming Messiah. Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and recognizes that Mary's child will be blessed.

Elizabeth gives birth to John. After John was circumcised her neighbors and relatives wanted to name the child after Zechariah. Elizabeth tells them the child is to be named John. This causes an argument among the people because he has no ancestor named John. Zechariah regains his speech and ends the discussion by proclaiming that his son's name is John. This amazes the people and news of this spread throughout Judea.

Mary is back in Nazareth when Caesar calls for a census. Joseph, her husband, is from the lineage of David, who is from Bethlehem. This means that Joseph and Mary have to travel to Bethlehem for the census. While they are there, Mary gives birth to Jesus. Mary wraps Jesus in blankets and lays him in a manger because there is no room in the guest room.

There were shepherds in the area who were watching over their flocks of sheep. Suddenly an angel from God appeared to them. This frightened the shepherds. The Angel told them not to be afraid. He brought them good news, the Messiah was born in Bethlehem. Then a group of angels appeared proclaiming, "Glory to God in the highest heaven and peace on earth to people he favored."

When the angels leave, the shepherds decide to go to Bethlehem to see the child. When they arrive, they find Mary, Joseph, and the baby in a manger just like the angels told them they would. The shepherds tell Joseph and Mary about the visit of the angels and what they said about the child. The shepherds leave praising God. Mary continues to think about these things.

After eight days Joseph and Mary take Jesus to the Temple to

be circumcised. While at the Temple Joseph and Mary are approached by Simeon, who has been told by the Holy Spirit that he would see the Messiah before he died. Simeon shares this with Mary and Joseph, telling them that Jesus would be a light to the Gentiles and would bring glory to Israel. Then Anna, a prophetess, comes to see Jesus in the Temple. Anna thanks God and tells the people about Jesus.

After all the requirements of the law were fulfilled, Mary and Joseph return to Nazareth.

Notice that in Luke, the angels appear to Mary. Luke includes Mary's journey to visit Elizabeth, and that John and Jesus are relatives on Mary's side of the family. The genealogy in Luke 3 goes through Heli, who is Mary's father. Luke's account of the birth of Jesus seems to come from Mary's perspective.

## **Combining the Stories**

Finally I will place the two stories together to make one story. Do the transitions from Luke to Matthew, or from Matthew to Luke, flow smoothly? Are there any contradictions or irreconcilable differences?

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When we combine both narratives we can see that we have two narratives that are told from two different perspectives. These differing perspectives lead to an emphasis on different details. When the accounts are harmonized we can see that these details are not contradictory, they are complementary. The narratives fit nicely together, like the pieces of a puzzle, to make a more complete larger picture of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus.

## **Conclusion**

God became one of us. God did what he promised he would do in the Old Testament. The conception and birth of Jesus is the beginning of the defeat of death and sin. Jesus' birth is directly tied to His death and resurrection. The power of sin, death, and Satan is broken. This is the reason that Christians celebrate this event every year. As the angels said, "Glory to

God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to people he favors.” (Luke 2:14 SCB)

## Notes

1. “The traditional date for the birth of Christ from as early as Hippolytus (ca. A.D. 165-235) has been December 25th.” Hoehner, Harold W. *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 25.
2. Ehrman, Bart. *Jesus: The Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*. (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 1999), 36.
3. Thomas, Robert, L. *A Harmony of the Gospels with Explanations and Essays*. (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1978), 269.
4. Ehrman, 37.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.