

Is Jesus Real?

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Date: 07 April 2019

Preacher: Thomas Davis

[0 : 00] I'm going to read this morning from Luke's Gospel. It's a very short reading, and it's just from the beginning of Luke's Gospel.

The Gospel of Luke is the third of the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. And each of these gospels tell us the story about Jesus from a different angle.

Luke was a doctor, and so it's slightly shorter, it's slightly more compact, and it's very factual, as you would expect a medical doctor's account to be.

I guess we'd written it himself, no one would have been able to read it, because doctors are like that with their writing. But we're glad that it's been recorded for us.

And I often think when people ask about why the gospels give us different accounts and different bits of Jesus, I'm sorry I'm going to use this illustration, but if I put four people at different ends of a football ground to give an account, or any sporting event, to give their own account of that event, you would find that each four of them would be different, because of the people they were with, the angle they were watching, their own background themselves and what they wanted to emphasise.

[1 : 14] So it's no surprise for us that the gospels themselves are very different. So it's just a very short introductory section from Luke's Gospel chapter one.

Even as much as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, 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, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you've been taught.

Amen, we believe this to be the Word of God that He's given to us, which tells us about Himself and about the gospel.

Thank you, Derek. We're going to turn to God's Word together, and as we do so, let's just pray for a moment. Dear God our Father, as we turn to look at your Word now, we pray that you would draw near to us and help us to understand more about ourselves and about you, and help us to see the amazing hope that you give us through your Son Jesus Christ.

[2 : 28] We pray in His name, amen.

Christianity is grounded on the claim that Jesus Christ is utterly unique. It is all completely and totally about Jesus and His uniqueness.

So when you look at what Christianity says, it says that Jesus is a human, but He's also divine. He's a God-man. So Christians identify with Him as one of us, and yet at the same time bow down in worship before Him as God alone.

Jesus is said to have given us teaching that is exclusively true, and yet at the same time universally authoritative.

And for that reason, He gives Christians a worldview that shapes every single part of our lives. Jesus is said to have performed miracles which attested to His mission and His status.

[3 : 35] He said to have died on a cross on a Friday and then the following Sunday to have risen again. He's claimed to be the only savior of a broken humanity, and one day He will return.

Absolutely no one else has made the same sort of claims and gone on to have the same impact upon the world.

And yet for a lot of people today, these claims seem very hard to believe.

And that's the question we're going to look at together over the next three weeks. Is it all unbelievable? And today we're going to focus in particular on one question.

Is Jesus real? So in order to do that, we're going to start with that preliminary question. And that first question is, was Jesus real?

[4 : 36] In other words, did Jesus actually exist? Now that probably seems like a wee bit of a strange question, particularly because I think it's safe to say that the entire Western civilization of the world for the past 1700 years or so has been profoundly shaped by the belief that He did exist.

But despite this, there are a lot of people today who will argue that Jesus is a kind of mythical figure. And you just have to do a quick Google search to find a sample of this kind of view.

And the general gist of that argument is as follows. They will say that the New Testament writers were biased. So Derek was talking about Luke who wrote this Gospel from which we read.

That argument is, well, these guys are biased. So you can't believe them. Alongside the biblical record of Jesus, there are also non-biblical references to Jesus. So there's a Jewish historian called Josephus.

He lived in the first century. He mentions Jesus. There are two Roman historians, one called Tacitus, one called Suetonius. They also mentioned Jesus.

[5 : 46] But the argument that you'll find on Google is that these references to Jesus are fakes. They're forgeries that have been added. And the kind of whole argument, by the way, that should say one, two, three, not one, one, one, but anyway, never mind.

One, two, three, just use your imagination. Number three should say, if there's no evidence, then there's no existence. So that's the general gist of what you'll find in the wonderful world of Google.

Now, these arguments can seem convincing at first glance, but they're really not academically strong. The question of bias is a really interesting one.

It's true that the New Testament was written by Christians. We shouldn't really expect anything else. But you have to ask, does having a bias or a connection to something mean that everything that you are going to write about that topic is a lie?

So if that was true, it would be a bit like saying, if you had a historian who worked at Edinburgh University who wrote a history of Edinburgh University, you'd say, well, you can't trust him because he works there.

[6 : 50] He's connected there. It doesn't really work. You can't really say that. A bias or a connection doesn't make you write, but it most certainly does not make you wrong.

If you look at what should be number two, and if you say that any evidence against your conclusion is just made up, then you can pretty much say whatever you like.

Interestingly, a similar approach is used by people who deny the Holocaust. A similar approach is used by the people who claim that the earth is flat. Again, you can go to Google to find some wonderful examples of these.

The third point is also very interesting. The idea that if there's no definite evidence for someone's existence, then you should assume that they don't exist. That's what you'll see in some of these claims about Jesus.

They'll say, well, if there's no definite evidence, then we assume that the person doesn't exist. Now, I don't think that that works.

[7 : 53] Because for example, it's estimated that in the year zero, 2019 years ago, the world's population was 170 million.

That's the general assumption estimate. Now, ask yourself the question, how many of these 170 million people do we have cast iron evidence for?

Maybe maybe 100, maybe 1,000, maybe 10,000. Supposing it was even a million that we had absolutely cast iron evidence for, that would still leave 169 million people for whom we don't have cast iron evidence for their existence.

Do we conclude that they didn't exist? Of course we don't. These arguments are not strong. What's even more interesting is that there are historians who are openly not sympathetic to Christianity, who still argue very strongly that Jesus was a historical figure.

An example of that is Bart Ehrman, who is a professor in the religious studies department at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He wrote the following.

[9 : 02] He's not a Christian and not that sympathetic towards Christianity. He wrote, with respect to Jesus, we have numerous independent accounts of his life in the Sorceress line behind the Gospels and the writings of Paul, sources that originated in Jesus' native tongue, Aramaic, and that can be dated to within just a year or two of his life before the religion moved to convert pagans in droves.

Historical sources like that is pretty outstanding for an ancient figure of any kind. Moreover, the claim that Jesus was simply made up falters on every ground.

One may well choose to resonate with the concerns of our modern and postmodern cultural despisers of established religion or not. But surely the best way to promote any such agenda is not to deny what virtually every sane historian on the planet, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, pagan, agnostic, atheist, what have you, has come to conclude based on a range of compelling historical evidence.

Whether we like it or not, Jesus certainly existed. So was Jesus real, the answer has to be yes.

But the bigger and more important question is, is Jesus real? If Jesus wasn't a historical figure, then Christianity falls down.

[10 : 28] But Christianity also falls if Jesus is just an historical figure. Because as we said at the start, the claims of Christianity are far, far bigger than simply saying that Jesus existed.

Christians claim that Jesus is not simply a human. They say that Jesus is and always has been the Son of God. And so Christians are not claiming that Jesus was real.

We are claiming that Jesus is real. And the great message of Easter is that Jesus is alive. The Christian claim is that he rose from the dead and is now in heaven, actively ruling over the universe and caring for his people.

So that's why Christians will talk to Jesus when they pray. Christians gather together on the first day of the week, the day that he rose again to worship him with their praise. Christians see themselves as a family who are united together through the connection that they have to Jesus.

And Christians seek to base their lives on their relationship with him. That's what we do as a church here. That's really what we're all about.

[11 : 43] And so Christians will say absolutely, Jesus is real. You might want to ask yourself the question, how do they know that?

Well, I think there's three ways that we can answer that question that we're going to look at together. The first is historical, second is philosophical, and the third is personal.

And we'll just go through these one by one briefly. So first of all, historical. The Bible's record of Jesus' life that we can read in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the first four books of the New Testament.

They don't just tell us that Jesus existed. These books also tell us that Jesus did certain remarkable things. He performed miracles. He healed people.

He even rose from the dead. We talk about these things, and yet we have to ask ourselves, how do we know that these things happened?

[12 : 44] Well that brings us back to the passage of the Bible that Derek read for us in Luke's Gospel. As Derek said, Luke was a doctor, and he traveled around with some of the early Christian leaders in the Jewish Church.

And in doing so, he gathered a lot of information, and he used that information to write two books that make up part of the New Testament.

The whole Bible, although it comes in one book, it's divided into 66 books. First half, or first two thirds is in the Old Testament. The final third is the New Testament. New Testament is made up of various books.

Two of them were written by Luke, the one called Luke, and then the one that comes two books later, the Book of Acts. And in many ways, these are kind of like a two-part series.

In the book called Luke, we are told all about Jesus' life. And then in the book called Acts, Luke records for us the key events in the first 30 years or so of the Christian Church after Jesus' death and resurrection.

[13 : 48] We just read four verses at the beginning, which are Luke's introduction. And in these verses, he tells us something that I think is incredibly important. Let's just read them again.

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning, what I witness and ministers of the Word, have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

Now we don't know 100% who theophilus was, but it was likely that he was a prominent figure somewhere in the Mediterranean world in the first century. And Luke is writing to him and then by implication to others in order to give this account of Jesus' life.

There's a key word in that section. And that's the word, eyewitnesses. Luke's whole purpose was to carefully gather together the various eyewitness statements that have been made about Jesus.

And when you study the book of Luke, you can actually trace out some of the work that he has done. You can see that he's used different eyewitness sources in order to figure out what has happened.

[15 : 16] As Derek said, people can view a football match from different angles, although if you were a Hartz fan yesterday, whatever angle you were at, it was a disaster.

Luke uses these different sources. He probably used the Gospel of Mark, which is the book before this. He probably also had a material that Matthew had access to as well, and he also had access to some sources that only he himself was able to use.

That's why if you read Matthew, Mark and Luke, some bits are virtually identical, some bits are very similar, and some bits are unique to each one. The key point is that Luke is not actually trying to write a religious document.

He is trying to write history. And whether you believe him or not is up to you, but you cannot deny his intention.

He is aiming at writing down an accurate, permanent record of what the eyewitnesses of Jesus actually saw.

[16 : 29] And the eyewitness record of Jesus' life points us to the conclusion that he is far, far more than just a mere man, because if you read through the rest of Luke, if you don't have a Bible, you can download one for free at the App Store, and you can read through Luke and you can see that Jesus did astonishing things.

He cured people who were blind. He healed those who were sick. He restored people who were crippled. He even raised the dead, and all Luke is trying to do is say, here's a record of what happened.

Here's a record of what people saw. This reminds us of an incredibly important thing regarding Christianity. From day one, Christianity has been exposed to historical scrutiny.

Christianity is not a mystery religion. It's not based on some mysterious revelation that just appeared to an individual. It's not as though Jesus appeared from nowhere and said, oh, here's this book, this complete book that I have written, and that's God's message to humanity.

If he appeared like that with this book, you'd have no way of knowing whether his claim was valid or not. You might believe it. You might not. Many of the world's other religions are based on that kind of source or approach.

[17 : 47] Christianity is not like that, because the whole of the Bible is grounded in history. It's real people, real events, real eyewitnesses.

And that means that it is completely open to public scrutiny. And the fascinating thing is that when you look at the remarkable events surrounding Jesus' life, even his opponents did not deny that he did remarkable things.

If you read later on through Luke, you'll come to chapter 11, and there Jesus is accused by his opponents of being a servant of the devil. They were saying, that's how he's doing these miracles. He's a kind of demon evil spirit's kind of person.

In other words, those who opposed Jesus, they didn't say these miracles never happened. They said, even though these miracles are taking place, even though Jesus is doing these amazing things, we still don't trust him or believe that he is the Son of God.

And behind all this lies the wider question, which is, how do you account for the unique? We said at the start that Christianity is grounded on the belief that Jesus Christ is utterly unique.

[19 : 03] But if something or someone is unique, if it's the only one in the whole of history, how do you realistically account for that? If something happened in here that was utterly unique, how would you account for that?

Well, you would want eyewitnesses, you would want a written record, you would want historical evidence, and you look at the Gospel of Luke, that's exactly what you have.

Jesus did many astonishing things to show us that he is real. Now, you might say, well, these miracles don't happen now. These miracles are impossible.

Ultimately, that's not a question of history. It's a question of philosophy. And so we have to ask the question again, is Jesus real in terms of philosophy?

Now when we say that word philosophy, it can sound very complicated. It's not really. Philosophy is just basically the name that we give to the process of trying to figure out life. Trying to work out what it's all about.

[20 : 16] So philosophy is looking at the whole world, trying to make sense of it. It asks questions like, how do we know anything? What's right and wrong? What's life all about?

What is the ultimate explanation of the universe? And throughout history, philosophers have given us lots of different answers. So some will say that life is all about matter.

It's the material around us where we find meaning. So look around and find your place in the world. Others will say that the explanation of reality is really all about the mind.

So it's our thoughts and our feelings that define reality. So look within and find your identity. Others will say that life is all mechanical.

So the universe is like a machine in a box, and there's nothing outside the box. And within that box, everything just grinds along in a relentless, orderly process.

[21 : 16] And we're just bits of that machine. Others will say that life is mystical. And so true reality is kind of out there somewhere.

There's something bigger, something real, something meaningful, and we're all on a quest to find it. And others will say life's just a myth.

The universe is meaningless. Life is pointless. There's no order, no purpose, no value in anything. And the fascinating thing about philosophy is that you can never prove which one of these is right.

You go down the Royal Mile, you see a statue of David Hume. He lived about 300 years ago. And that was the great truth that he told to the world.

You can't be sure of anything. So is this universe all that exists? Maybe.

[22 : 22] Is your mind reliable? Maybe. Is it possible for there to be something else out there?

Maybe. If I tip this glass over, will it make a mess? Maybe.

I better not try. Is your life a completely pointless dot in the vastness of time and space?

Maybe. We can't prove the answers to any of these questions, which is why philosophy is fascinating and head doing at the same time.

And the result of that is that everybody, absolutely everybody, has to take a philosophical gamble in their lives. In other words, whether you realise you're doing it or not, you have to make a choice about how you understand the world.

[23 : 30] And on your own, you can never be sure if you've made the right choice. So whether we realise it or not, we are constantly making these philosophical gambles when we try to explain life.

So I'll give you a couple of examples. One example is attraction. So you see somebody who you really like. Is that just about matter, their shape, their form, their size, their appearance?

Is it all about the mind and emotional and intellectual connection? Is it just mechanics, the need to procreate and to satisfy chemical impulses?

Is it mystical, is she the one? Or is it just a mess, meaningless and pointless?

Another really relevant example today is gender. How do we understand that? Is it just about matter? Is it just anatomy and chromosomes?

[24 : 42] Is it about the mind, a sense of identity that is more real than anything physical? Is it about mechanics, just nature's way?

Is it mystical, a kind of indefinable spectrum? Or is it a mess, just meaningless and pointless?

In all of these different areas, you might be very, very sure of your own views, but ultimately behind those views lies a philosophical gamble.

Christianity gives you another choice. Christian philosophy says that the ultimate explanation for reality is that life is made.

At the core of the biblical worldview is the claim that God is our Creator and we are His creation. You might argue that that's a gamble too, it's no more or less provable than any of the other philosophical propositions.

[25 : 53] But the reason why I think you should make that your choice is because if you view God as our Creator, being the ultimate explanation for the world, then all of the other philosophical positions make sense too.

Because the reason there is matter in this world is because there is a God who made it and He has the power to do so and He did so. The reason your mind is real is because you're made in the image of God with a consciousness and a rationality that reflects a wise and logical God.

The mechanisms that we see in the universe around us reveal the order and design and intention of our maker. The mysticism that we are all drawn to, one way or another, comes from an awareness that there has got to be more to reality than just atoms and molecules.

And the mess of life comes from the fact that we're pushing back against God and we're turning away from the one who made us.

Christian philosophy is grounded on the view that God is our Creator. That brings a meaning, a value, an order, a coherence and a purpose to life.

[27 : 15] You might choose a different philosophy that's up to you. You might want to gamble somewhere else. But before you do so, all I would ask is that you stop and think.

What does any of this have to do with Jesus? The claim of Christianity is that in Jesus Christ, God, our maker, has come alongside us.

That's why Jesus can perform miracles. That's why he can speak authoritatively. That is why he is utterly unique. That's why it makes perfect sense for us to say that Jesus is real.

But perhaps the most amazing thing of all is that the reason Jesus, our God, our maker, came alongside us is because he cares about us.

And that leads us to the personal answer to this question, is Jesus real? Historically the Bible shows us an eyewitness record telling us that everything that Jesus did is real.

[28 : 34] The Bible also shows that Jesus is real philosophically. He's the one in whom we can make sense of reality. But I also want to say that the Bible shows us that Jesus is real in the sense that he meets us in the reality of life and all of its struggles.

That's the amazing thing about this book that Luke wrote, and this is true of the whole Bible. Luke doesn't give us an airy, fairy story about how life is wonderful for everyone who's a Christian.

Luke doesn't give us some kind of elitist program for self-renovation. He doesn't come across as all idealistic and perfectionist. Luke and the rest of the Bible doesn't do any of these things.

Instead, Luke tells us how Jesus came along to help people who are broken, confused, hurt, lost, and struggling. In other words, it's 100% real to what life is actually like.

So Jesus went and spoke to people who were outcasts from the rest of society. He helped people who were living with chronic disabilities.

[29 : 48] He challenged people who were cruel to others. He ate with people who had made a total mess of their lives.

He taught people who were bewildered and confused, and he was incredibly compassionate towards people who were broken.

So when we say that Jesus is real, we're not just saying that in history God walked on this earth, and we're not just saying that in philosophy he's the ultimate explanation of reality. We're also saying that Jesus makes a massive difference to real life.

It's because he meets people right where they need him, right in the middle of the pressure, stress, loneliness, and brokenness of life.

And the reason he can do that is because if you read through the rest of Luke, or Mark, or Matthew, or John, you will discover that Jesus himself experienced all the pain and sorrow and hurt and battering that life can bring.

[30 : 52] And that's why wherever you are today, whatever real life is like for you today, Jesus will meet you there.

He is real. So was Jesus real? Yes. Is Jesus real? Yes.

Last question, what difference does it make? Well, to answer that question, I want us to go back again to the passage that we read.

Luke is undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that were accomplished among us. He's gathering together information from eyewitnesses, from people who have spoken about what took place, and delivered them and passed them on.

And because he's followed all things closely, he is going to write an orderly account. And then in verse four, he tells us why he's done that.

[31 : 55] To give theophilus and everyone else certainty. And that's a brilliant word.

It's an absolutely brilliant word, because right now we live in a world that is full of uncertainty. Well, that's uncertainty about Brexit, uncertainty about our work, uncertainty about our health, uncertainty about what this week is going to bring.

Life is full of uncertainty, and that is such a hard thing to live with. And over all of these different uncertainties that we face, there's a shadow over every one of our lives that is simultaneously both the greatest certainty and the greatest uncertainty that we will all face.

Do you know what that is? It's death. It's an absolute certainty that it's going to happen.

It's a complete uncertainty as to what lies beyond it. And that is what Jesus has come to change.

[33 : 17] Jesus has come to give us hope of eternal life. Jesus died and rose again so that he could give eternal life to all who trust in him.

And he has promised to love us, to defend us, to protect us, and to be with us forever. Ultimately, that is what Christianity is all about.

Jesus has come to give us a new certainty, a certainty that we are safe, a certainty that we are loved, a certainty that we're secure, a certainty that we are precious to him, a certainty that death will be the doorway to eternal life.

I spoke about how the fact that one of our dear friends, Dorin, passed away this weekend. About two months ago, Dorin had a big heart attack, but she recovered from it really well and she was back in church last week.

But while she was recovering, I went to visit her and she said, was talking about how she had had this heart attack and how she'd been resuscitated. And she said something absolutely astonishing.

[34 : 30] She said, why did they have to resuscitate me? I was quite happy to go and be with the Lord.

That is certainty. And to have that certainty in your life, all Jesus asks us to do is put our trust in him.

So it's not about keeping commandments. It's not about earning God's favor and trying to work your way up to him. It's not about sorting yourself out. It's not even about being a good person.

None of these things are what Christianity is about. It is simply about trusting Jesus Christ. And that means saying to him, Jesus, I'm sorry that I've pushed you away.

I need you to save me and I want to follow you. I trust you to save me because I can't save myself.

[35 : 40] And the Bible's promise is that everyone who comes and asks him to be saved will be saved.

You might think that that's unbelievable, I think it's absolutely amazing. Let's pray.

Dear God, our Father, we thank you so much for your Son, Jesus Christ, for everything that He is, our Savior, our King, our teacher, our friend.

And we pray that for every one of us, we would see that Jesus is unique and that He gives us a hope that no one else does.

And we pray that every one of us would hear your voice calling us to come to you and to trust in you. We pray that we would all have that certainty in our lives that only you can bring.

[36 : 53] Amen.