

THINKING FAITH

Part 1: 22nd March 2015

At a time when people are increasingly demanding proof if they are to believe in something, is there a place for faith in Jesus Christ? Over the next four weeks we look at the evidence, starting with the crucifixion.

Background facts

- Jesus is referred to outside the Bible. For example, the Roman historian Tacitus, writing in about 116 AD, records that a group of people called “Christians” took their name from a man he refers to as Christus. Tacitus says Christus “suffered the extreme penalty” - that is, the Roman death penalty of crucifixion, at the hands of Pontius Pilate.
- There is strong evidence to show that the New Testament gospels - the biographies of Jesus - were written in the first century AD. For example, there are places where the gospels refer to eyewitnesses in a way that indicates they were still living at the time of writing. The New Testament is also quoted many times in early church letters.
- We have over 5,000 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. This allows us to cross-check to see what the originals were like. After looking across the manuscripts, and eliminating trivial variations (like spelling mistakes), it has been calculated that the texts we have today are 98.33 percent pure. None of the variations cause confusion about the essential meaning of the text.

What does the Bible say?

1. Take a look at the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. How many chapters do the writers devote to the crucifixion and the events leading up to it? What does this suggest about how important this was to them?
2. Read John’s account of the crucifixion in John 19:16-37.
 - What details stand out to you?
 - What does John say about the reliability of his testimony in 19:35?

- Why does he share this testimony with us according to 19:35?
- In what ways does he say the crucifixion of Jesus fulfilled prophecy?

3. Why was Jesus crucified according to Romans 3:21-26? Also see Isaiah 53:4-9.

Reflect & discuss

4. What does the cross mean to you? Talk about this as a life group - how do you feel when you reflect on the cross?

5. How does Jesus' death on the cross provide an example for how God wants us to live and treat others? See Philippians 2:1-11.

6. What encouragement can we take from knowing that the Bible is reliable when we read about the death and resurrection of Jesus?

THINKING FAITH

Part 2: 29th March 2015

At a time when people are increasingly demanding proof if they are to believe in something, is there a place for faith in Jesus Christ? Over the next four weeks we look at the evidence, starting with the crucifixion.

Background facts

- All but four of the major world religions are based on philosophical propositions. Of the four that are based on personalities rather than a philosophical system, only Christianity claims an empty tomb for its founder.
- In first century Palestine, women's low social standing meant they were not regarded as reliable witnesses in a court of law. This makes it significant that the writers of the gospels were willing to record women as the first witnesses of the empty tomb.
- Jewish people at the time of Jesus were sceptical of the idea of resurrection. One of the main religious groups, the Sadducees, didn't believe in an afterlife. The other main group, the Pharisees, only believed in a resurrection at the end of time when a new world is established, not the resurrection of one person in the current fallen world.

What does the Bible say?

1. Read Mark 16:1-8.

- What were the women going to the tomb to do?
- What question were they asking each other as they went?
- What did they find when they got to the tomb?
- How did they feel about their experience?

2. Read Luke 23:50-24:12.

- Do you get any sense that the women who went to the tomb, or the disciples, were expecting Jesus to rise from the dead?
- Why do you think they weren't expecting the resurrection? See Mark 9:30-32 and Luke 18:31-33.

3. The empty tomb is powerful evidence of Jesus' resurrection, just as he prophesied. How important is a belief in the resurrection according to 1 Corinthians 15:12-19?

Reflect & discuss

4. Jesus said: "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die." (John 11:25). What do you think he meant by this? See Luke 9:23-25 and John 12:23-25.

5. The gospel accounts indicate that the women and men who followed Jesus were afraid to believe he had risen from the dead, even after seeing the empty tomb.

- Do you think fear sometimes prevents us from believing God's promises?

- What effect might that have on our lives?

- As a life group, which promises do you think we can take hold of more to strengthen our faith and live for God?

THINKING FAITH

Part 3: 5th April 2015

At a time when people are increasingly demanding proof if they are to believe in something, is there a place for faith in Jesus Christ? Over the next four weeks we look at the evidence, starting with the crucifixion.

Background facts

- In the Jewish faith at the time of Jesus there was no concept of resurrection other than a literal, physical resurrection (and it was believed that this would only happen at the end of time when a new world is established). There was no sense in which you could have a “metaphorical” or “spiritual” resurrection.
- Theologian and historian Carl Braaten writes: “Even the more skeptical historians agree that for primitive [meaning early] Christianity the resurrection of Jesus from the dead was a real event in history, the very foundation of faith, and not a mythical idea arising out of the creative imagination of believers.”

What does the Bible say?

1. What evidence does the Bible provide to show that Jesus had physically risen from the dead? See:
 - Luke 24:36-43.
 - Matthew 28:8-10
 - John 20:11-18 (especially verse 17)
2. We can take a lot of encouragement from the fact that the disciples needed strong proof of the resurrection — for them to be convinced, the evidence must have been overwhelming. Read John 20:19-29.
 - Why do you think Thomas didn't believe?

- What does Jesus tell him to do?

- Who does Jesus say will be blessed?

3. How does Jesus say people will be convinced about who he is, and what he has done, today? See John 16:1-15.

Reflect & discuss

4. How important is it for us to believe that Jesus literally rose from the dead? See 1 Corinthians 15:12-34.

5. What does it mean to have the Spirit of God living in us — the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead? See Romans 8:1-11.

6. Do you think the idea of a physical resurrection is too crazy for people to believe in our day and age? Take a look at how people reacted to the resurrection message in Biblical times (Acts 17:32). What encouragement can we take from Paul's experience?

THINKING FAITH

Part 4: 12th April 2015

At a time when people are increasingly demanding proof if they are to believe in something, is there a place for faith in Jesus Christ? Over the next four weeks we look at the evidence, starting with the crucifixion.

Background facts

- The men who followed Jesus didn't have jobs that would have made them gifted public speakers – some were fishermen, and one was a tax collector! And yet their testimony was powerful enough to lead many others to become followers of Jesus, in spite of the real danger and social stigma they would face.
- At the time of Jesus, the Jewish faith was at the heart of what it meant to be a Jew. But becoming a follower of Jesus required the disciples to take a radically different perspective on the Jewish faith – in particular, by recognising Jesus as God come in human form! Taking on a new set of identity-defining beliefs was a massive change.

Into the Bible

1. Take a look at what Jesus said would happen to his followers when he was arrested and sentenced to death - read Mark 14:27-31.
 - What did Jesus say would happen? (Verse 27)
 - What was Peter's response? (Verses 29 and 31)
 - What did Jesus say to him? (Verse 30)
2. What actually happened? Read Mark 14:66-72.
3. Read Acts chapter two. How has Peter changed?

4. The religious authorities were very concerned about the impact of the disciples' teaching. But how are Peter and John described in Acts 4:13, and what do the priests take note of?

Reflect & discuss

Paul was perhaps the most successful evangelist who ever lived — but even he felt intimidated at times, and he knew his abilities were limited. So how did he have such an impact? Read 1 Corinthians 2:1-5.

5. How did Paul feel when he first came to Corinth?

6. Do you ever feel this way?

7. What does Paul say about his speaking abilities?

8. Can you relate to him in this sense?

9. What was Paul's central message?

10. What did he rely on to persuade people?

11. Why was this important to the faith of the Corinthians?

Describe the effectiveness of your personal witness to those around you. Then pray for one another — that your daily witness would contain the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.