

# The Historical Accuracy of the Bible

By Travis Dickinson

**Scripture to Memorize** *“Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”* Hebrews 12:1

**Session Goal** Consistent with God’s Word and in the power of the Holy Spirit—by the end of this session, disciples will be able to state several reasons for taking the central claims of the gospel as historically accurate.

## It's in the Book

Let’s say you go fishing with some friends and catch a fish, but it is a scrawny little six-incher. Imagine later that day you claim to have caught a six-foot marlin prize fish. What would your fishing buddies say? This is never going to fly (or swim!) with your buddies. As eyewitnesses, they would instantly discredit your claim.

What if you began talking about your six-incher and then, sometime later, you start talking about your fish as a seven-incher. Could it, before long, become a six-foot marlin? This is precisely what many critics claim about Scripture, the four Gospels, in particular.

## Legends

Of course, some legendary development of a story can happen over time. But there are limits to this. In the fishing story your six-inch fish becoming a six-foot fish—especially when your fishing buddies are still around—is not going to work.

Three things help us know that a claim is historically reliable and not a legend. First, the claim should be significant and verifiable, not some minor detail. Second, eyewitnesses should have recorded their experiences at the time of the event. Finally, a good record should still exist that goes back to the time of the eyewitness reports.

## Discussion Question

Suppose you had four fishing buddies who actually witnessed your catching the big marlin and even confirmed it to a local newspaper. How does this new scenario square with the three aspects of historical reliability above? Would others then have good reason to believe you caught a six-foot marlin?

## Are the Gospel Claims Significant?

We regularly forget things. But when an event is important to us, we often remember the event even down to the smallest details. Few people can remember what they had for breakfast six months ago. But they can remember exactly where they were on September 11, 2001, when they first heard the World Trade Center came down. What we had for breakfast is just not significant or worth remembering.

## Discussion Question

What are some major events that happened a long time ago about which we still have clear memories?

## Were There Eyewitnesses?

**Read** Luke 1:1–4 out loud.

## Studying the Passage, v. 2

**Verse 2. who from the beginning were eyewitnesses.** Luke explicitly says that the accounts about Jesus’s life came from eyewitness testimony.

Read **1 Corinthians 15:1–11** out loud.

### **Studying the Passage, 1 Corinthians 15:3–8**

We see in these verses a clear statement of the gospel grounded in eyewitness testimony.

Eyewitnesses were important. However, this is persuasive only to those who already believe these passages are historically accurate. Do we have other reasons for thinking there were eyewitnesses to the central claims of the gospel? To answer this we must look more closely at 1 Corinthians 15 and its dating.

Scholars tell us that 1 Corinthians 15:3–6 is an early creed. A creed is a statement of key doctrine set in a memorable and summarized fashion. Creeds date earlier than the overall passage, since a creed would already be in use.

**Verse 3. I delivered to you . . . what I also received.** Paul began by indicating that what he was about to say was something he received and was now passing on to them. **Verses 3–4. according to the Scriptures.** Notice that the phrase repeats in verses 3 and 4. This is meant to give the passage a certain rhythm.

**Verse 3. for our sins.** Jesus's death was for this purpose. So we see a theological understanding of His death already present in this early creed. **Verse 4. He was raised on the third day.** This is a clear affirmation of Jesus's resurrection. Paul then proceeds to list multiple eyewitnesses of the truths of this creed in verses 5 through 8.

So the big question is, When did Paul receive this creed? A majority of scholars date this creed to within two to seven years after Jesus's death! Plenty of eyewitnesses would, no doubt, have been present after this short time.

**Is There a Record?** Another important question is this: Do we have a record that goes back to the time of the eyewitnesses?

Dr. Norman Geisler has compared the evidence for the manuscripts of Scripture to other ancient works:

No other book is even a close second to the Bible on either the *number* or early dating of the copies. The average secular work from antiquity survives on only a handful of manuscripts; the New Testament boasts thousands. The average *gap* between the original composition and the earliest copy is over 1,000 years for other books. The New Testament has a fragment within one generation from its original composition, whole books within about 100 years from the time of the autograph [original copy], most of the New Testament in less than 200 years, and the entire New Testament within 250 years from the date of its completion. The degree of *accuracy* of the copies is greater for the New Testament than for any other books that can be compared. . . . The records for the New Testament are vastly more abundant, clearly more ancient, and considerably more accurate in their text. (Norman Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 1988, 307–8)

We have good reasons to consider the central claims of Christianity as historically accurate.

**At Home: Nail It Down** The Bible makes a lot of radical claims. How do we know these claims are true? We focus our attention on the central claims of the gospel and look at what would indicate historical accuracy.

A historically reliable account has three characteristics. First, the account must make a significant claim that, if true, could be verified. Second, eyewitnesses must have been present to confirm these claims. Third, a record that goes back to these eyewitnesses must exist. The central claims of the gospel pass these criteria with flying colors.

Significant claims made by Scripture make those claims verifiable. That is, given the nature of these claims, we would expect to see lots of evidence for them. Second, the New Testament itself places great weight on eyewitness testimony. Moreover, the central claims of the gospel date within just a few years after the events making it virtually certain that eyewitnesses were present who could confirm or disconfirm these claims. Lastly, the manuscript evidence for the New Testament is simply extraordinary.

No ancient book, secular or sacred, has evidence like the Bible. Given all of this, we have good reason to think the Bible is historically accurate.