

What is truth? . . .and how historical truth relates to religious truth

Your Notes

Before we begin, this lesson is part of a 4-part foundational series:

How Truth & History confirm that we can trust the Christian Bible

Though each lesson is useful on its own, all four lessons in this series go together for a complete understanding of the topic

- The 4 lessons in this series are:
- **#1 What is Truth?**
... *and how historical truth relates to religious truth*
- **#2 How do historians determine Truth?**
... *why geography, archeology, artifacts, and documents matter*
- **#3 How is the historical truth of the Christian Bible unique? part one**
... *a comparison with the Hindu and Buddhist scriptures*
- **#4 How is the historical truth of the Christian Bible unique? part two**
... *a comparison with Muslim and Mormon scriptures*

Please plan to listen to or watch all for a full understanding of the topic of why we can trust the Christian Bible.

The foundational question—What is truth? It's more important than ever

- Fake news, conflicting viewpoints, frightening world events, how do we know what to believe?
- On one level if the confusion over truth were just confined to the political realm or whatever tragedy consumes the news, one option would be to block the media noise and hope things will get better.
- But we can't do that in all of life.
- Some areas matter much more than the latest political outrage, media event, because....

In spiritual realities, truth matters!

- The Bible says, "God put eternity in our hearts."
- We can't help but think spiritual thoughts so, we ask questions like this:
- *We know we will live forever—but the question is in which neighborhood? A neighborhood of joy? Or sorrow or darkness?*
- *Is there a God who watches us and will someday judge us?*
- *Where do we go for forgiveness?*
- *And how can we live this life now with peace and purpose?*
- It's hard enough to find truthful answers to these questions, but we have one more problem. . . .

We start at a disadvantage, because we have an enemy working against us

- **Finding spiritual truth is never easy because in reality—**
- *Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Eph. 6:12*
- **And our enemy doesn't play fair**
- *Satan masquerades as an **angel of light**" 2 Cor. 11:14*
- *"He is a **liar** and the father of lies." John 8:44*
- **In addition, his lies are not always obvious and may be extremely appealing.**
- **That is why we need a source outside ourselves to determine truth.**

Truth is not easy to define but it is essential we do for life now and forever

- “Facts do not cease to exist because they are ignored.”
— *Aldous Huxley*
- Spiritual truth doesn’t change because we don’t want to look at it.

In our exploration of truth, we will look at:

- **What truth is not—there are many false beliefs commonly accepted about truth**
- **Then we will define truth** and I’ll share my journey and search for it.
- **Then we’ll look at how history makes a finding out what is true practical and how religious truth can be found using history.**
- The end of this lesson is a brief introduction of the tie between religion and history, the next lessons in this series will go into more detail.
- Be assured this is not a hard-to-understand philosophical argument.
- Many of the really important issues in life are very easy to understand if you simply take a little time and think them through and that’s what we will be doing.
- Citation for what follows—some of the definitions of what truth is and isn’t come from *The Baker Encyclopedia of Apologetics*, ed. Norman Geisler

Truth is not “what works”

- *Many believe along with Wm. James that “A statement is known to be true if it brings the right results.”* William James
- But brief consideration shows that isn’t the case.
- In life, lies, cheating, and adultery can all bring about short-term, seemingly positive results.
But long-term tragedy often follows.
- In religion, to say all religions are true and all lead to the same place, may accomplish a short-term goal of peace with others and may sound kind and tolerant. But ultimately it is unkind because—

Not sharing consequences doesn’t make them go away

- It is like not telling someone they have cancer because you don’t want them to feel bad.
- But if you don’t tell them the truth, regardless of how they will feel, they can’t make appropriate decisions about their future.
- It’s similar if we assert that “all religions are true” because if they aren’t, it can have eternally disastrous results for people who believe in a false religion.

Truth is not what is internally consistent

- One of the best illustrations of how this works is in the internally consistent world of a science fiction movie.
- **For example, whether it is the Marvel universe, Star Trek, or Star Wars, their movies are based on a belief system that is internally consistent *within* that universe.**
- ***But being consistent within a fictional world doesn’t make that world true.***
- We all know or should know, that “the Force” in Star Wars is an invention of George Lucas and not a true spiritual entity.
- We know Spiderman won’t swoop in to save someone in real life even though we totally believe he will do that in the world of the movie.

But that is how some people evaluate a religion

- A religious system might make sense internally—the stories within it might be consistent with the belief system on which it is founded.
- I'll be giving you examples of this practice in the 3rd and 4th lessons of this series on the scriptures of various.
- But any belief system, no matter how ancient or revered, if it is not based on reality in the physical, historical world, if instead it's based on fables and legends – it makes about as much sense to trust it for eternal salvation as it would to “Trust the Force.”

Truth is not what feels good

- In religion, many people believe things because it makes them feel good or they “have a good feeling about it.”
- It really feels good to think that you can live your life however you want and at the end of it, everyone gets to step into the light to waiting loved ones. This view is much more comforting than having to think about guilt or sin or any penalties for it from a God who will judge our lives.
- But just because this belief feels good does not make it true.
- I can have wonderful, positive feelings towards a huge bowl of popcorn dripping with butter and with a bag of M&Ms sprinkled in, but my positive feelings of that treat don't negate the consequences of the weight I'd gain if I ate popcorn and M&Ms as a snack every night.
- Feelings do not validate objective reality. Feelings don't define truth, no matter how good they feel.

Truth is not relative. There are not different “truths” for different people

- This is a very popular view today.
- But it violates the basic logic of the law of non-contradiction.
- In life, either you have two red shoes on, or you don't; you either have blue eyes or you don't.
- In religion, either Jesus died on the cross or he didn't.
- Either Jesus is God, or he isn't.
- Truth determines the answer—so, what is truth?

Before we answer, to review—

- Truth is not what works.
- Truth is not what is internally consistent.
- Truth is not what feels good.
- Truth is not relative. There are not different “truths” for different people.
- If TRUTH isn't these things, what is it?

Truth has a simple definition

- Definition of truth: ***“the body of real things, events, and facts; the property of being in accord with fact or reality”***
Merriam-Webster Dictionary
- Norm Geisler expands this definition: “Truth is ‘telling it like it is.’ . . . Falsehood, then, is what does not. . . [falsehood] tells it like it is not, misrepresenting the way things are. The intent behind the statement is irrelevant. If it lacks proper correspondence, it is false.”
- Summary definition:
Truth is what corresponds to reality.

But that's not enough.

- ***Though that brief definition sounds good and it is,***
- ***It also brings up more questions, especially when we evaluate things that happened in the past.***

- ***How do we find out what corresponds to reality as regards our religion? Not in a large philosophical sense, but what corresponds to reality in a spiritual sense when it is founded on what we can't see?***
- To answer that, I want to share my story of researching the answer to the question of truth in spiritual matters and then I'll share conclusions I think are useful for all of us.

My search for truth

- This is not an apologetic or philosophical or sci-fi argument; there are many good resources for those online.
- This is simply my story. I'm not a professional theologian or philosopher. I'm one follower of Jesus sharing how I answered my questions about the truth of the Christian faith with the hopes that it might help others. We all must answer ultimate questions at some time and here is how I did it.....
- I grew up in the church, was involved in the church, taught Sunday school literally all my life, and loved it.
- But then I got to a place where I questioned—
- ***Is the Christian faith really true?***
- I come from a strong faith background, but I wondered if my faith was only an emotional response to people I loved. I had to know.

Here is what I decided to do to find out

- I honestly don't know where this came from, though I believe now it was God's leading.
- As I questioned my faith, the way I decided to answer whether it was true or not was to get a master's degree in History, majoring on the history of the church.
- I thought if I could examine what was true in the Christian faith throughout all of history, if I could find out if the basic facts it claimed really happened that would be good evidence that it was foundationally true.
- I also decided to do my studies at a secular university because I didn't want what I studied to be influenced by Christian bias.

Several years and lots of study later—my hopes were not disappointed.

- Figuring out what was true, what were the historical facts in the Christian faith throughout the centuries was easy when studied objectively.
- I'd heard accusations that many events in the Bible didn't happen and it was a great relief, particularly since I studied at a secular university and under a master professor who was antagonistic to Christianity, that the historical events and people I learned about in the Bible were true.
- The people, places, events existed as I'd been taught.
- The evidence was clear, and I accomplished my goal on verifying historical foundation of the Christian faith.
- I'll share much of that as we go along in other lessons.
- As important as learning about the specifics of dates, people, and events, I learned something much more valuable and that was ***I learned to think like a historian.***

What thinking like a historian means

- I learned how important it is to look at events in their historical setting to fully understand them. I learned to look at a variety of sources and how to evaluate the validity of the source, I learned how to prevent bias in my study, and fight conclusions based on unconscious or under-lying bias—mine or others.

- In my teaching (Sunday school class, Bible study, teaching online), I found myself constantly going back to what I'd learned as a historian to evaluate the truth of what I was teaching because ***I believe history is a valid way to determine what corresponds with reality and I wanted to teach truth.***
- In the next lesson we will go into detail on how historians determine truth through looking at geography, archeology, artifacts, and documents.
- With the importance of history in mind, let's leave my story and talk about. . . .

How determining historical truth ties into the search for religious truth

- It seems to me (and some might disagree) that for a religion to be true theologically, it should also have a true, factual, historical basis.
- Of course, in any religion, there are intangibles that can't be "proven"
- At some point it requires a "leap of faith" to participate in a religion and though every religion requires a response of the will that is more than acknowledgement of facts, I believe that God, as the Creator of reality left us discoverable, verifiable evidence of His work and words.
- For a simple example, if the Bible says Jesus was born in Bethlehem, there ought to be a real Bethlehem and of course there is.
- That is why the Christian faith claims that it is—

The Christian faith claims it is— Historical & Evidential

- This claim is extraordinarily important—and far more unique than you'd imagine—which we will discuss in lessons #3 and #4 in this series.
- Being "historical and evidential" means that Christianity believes it is founded on ***true history*** based on ***true evidence***.
- So, how does Christianity prove that it is founded on true history and true evidence?
- This is such a foundational aspect of the Christian faith, we often don't think about it, but it is key to determining if our faith is true.
- I'll go into how history provides true evidence for the Christian faith much more in coming lessons but let me share a couple of examples of truth written in the Bible that are easily proven to be "historical and evidential."

The Bible is full of historical statements that can be externally verified when it says things like this

- **In the New Testament:** *"In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. Luke 2:1"*
- **In the Old Testament it says:** *"In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah's reign, Sennacherib king of Assyria attacked all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them. 2 Kings 18:13"*
- We'd expect these events to correspond to historical fact if indeed the Christian faith is based on true history.

And they do!

- Every student of history from high school on knows who Caesar Augustus was and that he lived from 63 BC to 14 AD.
- We have coins and statues with his image; we have written histories about him from many sources.
- Historians have no doubts about his life, about what he did, about this historical decree that was the reason Mary and Joseph had to go to Bethlehem for Jesus' birth.
- Bethlehem was where it was prophesied the Messiah would be born,

and it took the decree of Rome to get a pregnant woman and her husband to walk the 90 brutal, dangerous, and cold miles to get there.

- And you can visit Bethlehem today—more in the next lessons on the importance of geography, of things happening in tangible, identifiable locations.

The OT examples is a little more unfamiliar, but as true and significant

- Not as many have heard about **Sennacherib** (an Assyrian ruler), but we have extensive historical verification about events in his life that are also mentioned in the Bible.
- This verification is found on Sennacherib's Prisms—clay pillars on which he wrote his history. And we have several of them, **Taylor Prism** is in the [British Museum](#), the **Oriental Institute Prism** in the [Oriental Institute of Chicago](#), and the **Jerusalem Prism** is in the [Israel Museum](#) in [Jerusalem](#).
- We have fragments of at least 6 more and all agree in content.
- On the prism, one passage says this of Hezekiah: *"As for the king of Judah, Hezekiah, who had not submitted to my authority, I besieged and captured forty-six of his fortified cities, along with many smaller towns, taken in battle with my battering rams . . . As for Hezekiah, I shut him up like a caged bird in his royal city of Jerusalem."*
- Extraordinary historical evidence from, almost 3,000 years ago that tells the Assyrian view of the biblical account in 2nd Chronicles 32.
- Archeologists also discovered Sennacherib's palace (in modern-day Mosul, Iraq) with additional verification of the historical events talked about in the Bible
- I'll share many more historical anchors when we get to that passage and other passages in our tour through the Bible.

The limits of truth & history

- We must acknowledge that just because you can trust the historical veracity of the Bible doesn't mean you automatically will trust the God of the Bible.
- But it's a good foundation. If the truth of the Christian faith claims to be historical and evidential, we must start there.
- Committing to a faith will require more than checking off a list verifying the documents and geography of a faith, **but it shouldn't be less** if it claims to be a faith that promises to forgive sins, give meaning and purpose to life, and grant eternal salvation.
- That is why it is so important to understand the place of history in determining truth and that is what we are going to talk about in the rest of this series.

To REVIEW, this lesson is part of:

4 Part Series: How Truth & History confirm that we can trust the Christian Bible

- In the next lesson we will look at:
- **Part #2 How do historians determine Truth?
. . . why geography, archeology, artifacts, and documents matter**
- I promise it will be an exciting lesson and you'll learn some things about Biblical history you most likely never considered before!

Questions for **What is truth?**

. . .and how historical truth relates to religious truth

1. Why is it important to determine what is true? How hard is it to do that?
2. Why is truth “not what works?” Why is truth “Not what is internally consistent?”
3. Why is truth “not what feels good?” Why is truth “not relative?”
4. How is truth defined?
5. What makes history a good tool for determining truth? What does it mean to say that the Christian faith is “historical and evidential?”
6. What does it mean to say that the Christian faith is “historical and evidential?” Give an example from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament.
7. What are the limits of truth and history? Will these proofs alone help anyone believe in Jesus? How have they been useful to you?