

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

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Bible805

YOUR Notes

Before we begin, this lesson is part of a 5-part foundational series:

Why We Can Trust the Bible

Though each lesson is useful on its own, all five lessons in this series go together for a complete understanding of the topic, The 5 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 and challenges from them*
- #4 How is the historical truth of the Christian Bible unique? part two
... *a comparison with Muslim scriptures and challenges from them*
- #5 How is the historical truth of the Christian Bible unique? part three
... *a comparison with Mormon and Jehovah Witness scriptures and challenges from them*

Schedule Specifics for CPC, Gather Group, Fall 2025

Sept. 25—*What is truth?*

Oct. 2—*How do historians determine truth?*

Oct. 9—*Bible compared to Hindu and Buddhist scriptures*

Oct. 16—*Bible compared to Muslim scriptures*

Oct. 23—*No class—Yvon at West Coast Writer's Conference in Orange County*

Oct. 30—*Bible compared to Mormon and Jehovah Witness scriptures Plus******

TWO BONUS LESSONS—

Nov. 6—*One on Bible interpretation*--the issues of inerrancy, infallibility, how people don't understand the varieties in ancient history telling, documents, etc., how many seemingly controversial, challenging issues can be understood, if not resolved to everyone's satisfaction.

Nov 13—*Two, The Bible as ONE Story*--this is one of my favorite lessons, as I demonstrate how most people look at the Bible as a collection of short stories, written by various authors, loosely tied together under similar topics. Interesting and useful, but little divine power in this view. In contrast, this lesson demonstrates that the Bible is in reality ONE STORY--much more like a novel, with ONE Author, and that (and this is really fun) how the whole book, the Bible demonstrates the classic pattern of •Exposition •Rising action •Climax •Falling action •Denouement To tell us the great story of the rescue and restoration of our world by the saving work of Jesus.

PLUS—*POTLUCKS!!!!!!!!!! Oct. 10; Nov.14; Dec.12*

Yvon's home, 36 Whitman Ct., 93003, 6 pm, main dish provided, bring whatever!

Today's Lesson

The foundational question—

What is truth?

It's more important than ever

- Fake news, conflicting viewpoints, frightening world events, personal tragedies, how do we know what to believe?

- On one level if the confusion over truth were just confined to the political realm or whatever drama 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 or 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?*
- *What happens after we die?*
- *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 define and determine truth.
 - The Bible is that needed source, and this series will show you why you can trust it—to do that, let's start with the basic question—

What is truth? What we will look at—

- What truth is not—there are many false beliefs commonly accepted about truth. We will look at four of them.
- Then we will define a working definition of truth, and I'll share my journey and search for it.
- Then we'll look at how history makes finding out what is true practical and how religious truth can be found using history.
- The second lesson will expand on this, and we'll then apply it to evaluating the scriptures of other faith systems.

Citations and approach

- Some of the definitions of what truth is and isn't come from *The Baker Encyclopedia of Apologetics*, ed. Norman Geisler. I reword and add my comments to them.
- I'll give you other citations as we go along, but the majority of this series of lessons comes from my personal study and conclusions on the topic.
- ***Be assured this series of lessons is not a hard-to-understand philosophical arguments—I trust it will be practical and useful.***
- Many of the really important issues in life are very easy to understand if you simply take a little time, read what the Bible says, and think them through—that's what we will be doing together.
- So, finally.....let's get to it!

1. 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 even a brief consideration shows that isn't the case.
- In life, lies, cheating, and adultery can all bring about short-term, sometimes 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 or get the treatment they need to solve their problem.
- 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.
- Heaven and hell (or however you choose to define eternity with or separated from God) are real and no one accidentally ends up in either place.

2. Truth is not what is internally consistent

- This is key to understanding why people live in false faith systems, because one inside it, it can seem to make sense, can seem to be true.
- One of the best illustrations of why people believe like this is in the internally consistent world of science fiction.
- **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 (or within a false religious system or ethical realm) 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.
- ***But some people do believe it is*** and sadly.....

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 and what the authorities of that religion have taught for many years.
- I'll be giving you examples of this practice in the 3rd, 4th and 5th lessons of this series on the scriptures of the Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Mormon, and JW religions.
- ***This internal consistency, enforced by a community, is a primary reason of why it is so hard to see outside them, if you are in them—much compassion needed here.***
- But any belief system, no matter how ancient or revered, no matter how internally consistent and socially encompassing it might be, 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.”

3. 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. And bad feelings (such as about the judgment of God) don't make something false because it feels bad.

4. 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 as he demonstrated by raising from the dead.
- Truth determines the answer—so, what is truth?

Before we define truth, to review, TRUTH is not these

4 things—

- 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, (or it wasn't for me...)

- Though that brief definition sounds good and it is,
- That correspondence between what really is in the realm of religions for me, brought up more questions
- E.g. what is reality when we evaluate what we can't see here and now, what happened in the past? Especially since the foundation of most religions is in the past.
- How do we find out what corresponds to reality as regards our religion at its foundation? 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 for how to find truth; there are many good resources for them.
- 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. Was it because I loved my grandma? I had to know.

I was deconstructing....

- As I look back, I was doing what many are doing today—going through the process of deconstructing and then rebuilding my faith before it was the thing to do.
- Some of you may be quite familiar with this topic today and some of you may be asking when the term “deconstruction” is used, what are you talking about?
- Though there are many definitions of “deconstructing the faith,” it is basically the idea of taking apart, examining what you believe.
- It is often used currently by people who were raised in the church and who have questions about many areas of faith, authority, the Bible, and their church.
- The results and responses from others to this process have varied from condemnation from authority figures, to compassionate exploration, to a quiet floundering and walking away.

Regardless of how you look at it or define it,

- The issue, the process of deconstructing the Christian faith is affecting many, as someone close to me said, “My friends in the faith are dropping away like flies.”
- My prayer is that this series of lessons will help you regardless of whether you know and care for someone who is in the process of questioning the faith they were raised in or....
- If in the quietness of your heart and life you experience a “dark night of the soul” and have haunting questions,
- Or if you simply aren’t quite sure why you can trust the Bible to be the foundation of your life.
- As I said, I got to the place where I questioned it all....

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 masters 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. (to put it negatively, I didn’t want more of “the party line.”)

Several years and lots of study later—

My hopes were not disappointed

- Figuring out what was true, what were the solid, trustworthy historical facts that formed the foundation of 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, timelines, 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, based on reality—not just my opinions or what I hoped was true.***
- 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, ***at the same time, 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—

Historical & Evidential

- This claim is extraordinarily important—and this claim is far more unique than you'd imagine—which we will discuss in lessons #3, #4, and #5 in this series, when we look at the faith claims of other religions.
- 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 –

- **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, and yet there are questions as to whether

he actually made the decree or if the Roman governor under him made it, and the exact dates of it, but no doubt historically that Augustus was in charge at that time.

- A detailed analysis of the details can be found at: <https://crossexamined.org/really-census-time-caesar-augustus/>
- This article verifies in detail the facts of the verse****BUT at the same time, we need to understand the sometime lack of modern precision in the Biblical record. BONUS LESSON #1 will go into detail on how we evaluate Biblical and historical records on this and related issues, but I digress....
- For now, the main point is.....

The main point

- Is that the primary characters truly existed, when, and where the Bible said they did.
- Nor is there any doubt that Bethlehem was and is a real place.
- And you can visit Bethlehem today—more in the next lessons on the importance of geography, of things happening in tangible, identifiable locations, but we know this statement from Luke has a tangible basis—**our Bibles have maps.**
- Though we can debate details, the main characters and places are real—and **this is in great contrast to the supposed historical data in, for example, the Book of Mormon, wherein The city of Zarahemla, supposedly a major capital of Nephites from about 200 B.C. to A.D. 200 and characters Heleman, Cezoram, or Korihor cannot be verified in any geography ancient or modern or any historical documents outside the imagination of Joseph Smith.**

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.
- This verification is found in part 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 "*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.*"
- This is extraordinary historical evidence from almost 3,000 years ago that tells the Assyrian view of the biblical account in 2nd Chronicles 32. And it agrees with the Biblical account—though again, details can vary.
- 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 be sharing pictures, in the next lesson!

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.

Finally, the most important thing about TRUTH, above all the data is that.....

- Truth is ultimately **A PERSON—Jesus**, who said—

- *"I am the way and **the truth** and the life. John 14:6"*
- ***To know the truth means to know Jesus.***
- Just like those who determine what is counterfeit money and what isn't study the real thing because when you know that is genuine and true well, the fake is easily apparent.
- The final challenge to us in this study and always, is to know Jesus, our Savior and Lord so well, that what is and isn't truth will be peacefully, joyfully, and abundantly clear as we walk closely with Jesus, our Lord and Friend now and forever.

To REVIEW, this lesson is part of:

5-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!

For more and for video and podcast versions of the lesson, go to:

www.Youtube.com/Bible805

www.Bible805.com

Questions for Lesson #1 What is Truth?

... and how historical truth relates to religious truth

1. Have you had (or have) doubts about your faith and what do you do when you have them?
2. Why is knowing truth important?
3. What definitions of truth are not valid?
4. What is a correct definition of truth?
5. What does it mean that the Christian faith is ***Historical and Evidential?***
6. What difference does it make to YOU, personally to know that the Christian faith is based on truth—be honest in your sharing.

LAST: Think up ONE question for Yvon, either from the lesson, the Bible, or the Christian life in general.