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Matthew Introduction (Part 2)



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg discusses the importance of acknowledging the truth of the Gospels and the life of Jesus, despite potential doubts and skepticism. He acknowledges the potential disbelief in miracles but highlights that nothing in the Gospels is impossible to believe or historically inaccurate. Gregg encourages a willingness to be open-minded and to study the historical narratives of the Gospels to gain a better understanding of Jesus Christ and his significance.

Transcript

We're going to continue our studies in the life of Jesus, so with the mind of eventually studying through the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John individually as separate books. But before getting into the Gospel of Matthew, I wanted to give you some information that many people don't know that is helpful in an introductory sense to understanding Jesus, to understanding the Gospels. And last time I was talking about the sources of information to which we must look if we want to know about this historical man.

And of course the Gospels, the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, that are found in the Bible, are the very best sources of information. And the reason is because they are first-hand accounts, or in the case of Luke, second-hand. He got his information from first-hand accounts.

And that's much closer to the actual person of Jesus than any of the other material that's available to us would be. You know, there are many people trying to reconstruct the life and teachings of Jesus from their own imaginations. You may have heard, for example, of the work of the Jesus Seminar and other liberal scholars who have doubted whether the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John really do present valid, reliable histories of the life of Jesus.

And when people begin to doubt this, of course they either have to throw the Gospels out entirely, or else they have to cut and chop and pick and choose and try to decide on usually a very subjective basis without any objective reality in it, what things they think

Jesus really said and did and what things he didn't. It's much easier to look at the Gospels without a prejudice. And when I say without a prejudice, I mean that.

A lot of people say, oh yeah, you're Christians, you come to the Gospels with a prejudice. And your prejudice is that Jesus is the Son of God, and your prejudice is that the Gospels are inspired writings and so forth and so on. Well, let me suggest to you that if you are a skeptic, that you come to these documents without any such prejudice.

Do not assume that Jesus is the Son of God from the outset. Do not even assume that the Gospels are the Word of God. After all, none of them claim that they are inspired.

And if they were not, they would serve us just as well, although I believe in the inspiration of the New Testament. What I'm saying is that even if the Gospels were not inspired documents, they still claim to be historically reliable documents. And if a person wished to find out about who this man Jesus of Nazareth was, he could do no better than to go to historical documents written by people who knew him.

And that is exactly what I recognize the Gospels to be. I do not believe that we should come to them with a bias. I don't think we don't come to the Book of Mormon, those of us who are not Mormons, we don't come without a bias there, of course.

We come to the Book of Mormon and we say, well, I don't believe in Mormonism. Or what if we do? What if we say, well, I'm willing to believe in Mormonism. Let me take a look at that Book of Mormon.

Yet, if we come with a bias or without a bias, looking at a document like the Book of Mormon is not like looking at the histories found in the Gospels. Because the Book of Mormon was not written by eyewitnesses. It is, in fact, a fiction.

It's not a true story at all, but it claims to be true. But it doesn't have the kind of historical veracity and confirmation available to it that the Gospels do. The Gospels are historical accounts of the first order.

And whether or not they were inspired documents, a person, with or without the assumption that he's reading inspired Scripture, could just look at them on their own terms for what they claim to be. Straightforward histories about this man, Jesus, written by people, in most cases, who knew him. And we should not reject them until we find something in them to reject.

I suspect that people who reject the Gospels do not do so because they have found anything in them really worthy of rejection, but simply because they do not wish to assume they are written under inspiration. What I'm saying to you is this. The basis of the Christian faith is not the belief that the Gospels were written under inspiration.

The basis of the Christian faith is that the person of whom the Gospels wrote was truly

the person that is described there. Namely, the Son of God who came to die for our sins and to rise from the dead so that he could give his life to us through the Spirit and that we could know him and continue his life through the Spirit of God. That is really what the Gospels present.

And whether or not you believe they are inspired Scripture, they certainly cannot be discredited as reliable histories. At least not on any rational, unbiased basis. Now, there are people who do reject the Gospels as reliable history, of course, and those who do so, I would say, are the ones with the prejudice.

Because, really, those who reject the Gospels are not historians. Historians who look at the Gospels have seen how many ways the Gospels themselves, the information in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, coincides with what is known from history from other sources. And all historians who have done studies on it have come away with a tremendous respect for the historical accuracy of the Gospels.

There may be some suspicion as to, say, the miracles that Jesus did, but in terms of general history, most historians do not reject the Gospels as good witnesses to historical information. Those who reject the Gospels as history are, therefore, not the historians, but usually are theologians, people who have a theological axe to grind. Now, when you think about it, if you found the Gospels laying around, and they were not found inside the covers of the Bible, they were just what they are, just what they were when they were first written, documents written by individuals.

And you knew nothing about them, and you simply read them, you would recognize immediately that you were reading something that purports to be historical. In that sense, reading it would be very parallel to reading any other historical document about any other person. And the information in it, you might be interested to read and to find out more about this person that somebody thought was important enough to write about.

Well, as you would read, the question is, would you find anything in there that would make it impossible to believe this history that is recorded there? Well, many people have not. When I read the Gospels, I don't find anything in them that make it impossible or even unreasonable to believe that they are historically accurate. There are many people who were skeptical about Christianity, who sat down and read the Bible, read the Gospels.

And I was just hearing a testimony the other day of a friend who got saved because a friend of his told him to read the Gospel of Matthew. And that friend was not even a Christian. That friend was a New Ager who just thought it was kind of cool to study this Jesus guy.

And so my friend, who was not a Christian, read the Gospel of Matthew and became

convinced that this is a historically true document. And this Jesus did these things, and he became a follower of Christ. As a result, he's followed Christ for many years since then.

Twenty, I think. Now, that would be my testimony as well. But what about you? If you read the Gospels, you might say that there are things in there that simply are not reasonable to accept.

Well, like what? Well, like a virgin birth. Or like someone raising from the dead. Or like a man walking on water.

Or, you know, all kinds of things. There's even demons mentioned in there. And modern people don't believe in demons, do they? I mean, aren't these factors in the Gospels reasons to reject them as reliable histories? Well, that depends.

The question is, how do you know that miracles have never occurred? Now, simply because you've never seen one doesn't mean it hasn't occurred. You read all the time in histories of events that you never saw the likes of. Perhaps you've never been to war.

But you read about wars. Do you believe that since you've never seen a war, that those who have seen a war and report it can't be telling the truth because it doesn't fall within your range of experience? I doubt it. But you see, the reason you can accept a report about a war even if you've never seen one, and you have trouble accepting the account of a miracle because you've never seen one, is not because you haven't seen one, but because you have adopted a certain set of assumptions about the world.

The existence of war is not contrary to those assumptions. But the existence of miracles is. You see, you may have adopted, as many people have, the modern secularist, materialist worldview, which indicates that only the material world exists.

There is nothing outside it. As Carl Sagan used to say, there is the cosmos and there is nothing else. And one wonders how Carl Sagan learned this.

How does anyone learn this? That there is nothing else besides the cosmos. You see, there are many people throughout history and up to this present time who believe there are things besides the cosmos. If by the cosmos we mean the physical universe, there is reason to believe, there's still very good reason to believe today, and for centuries people have had experiences that convince them of this, that there is something besides the cosmos.

There is that power behind the cosmos. There is that power that created the cosmos, and that power is invested in the person of God. He is the creator, and he is not a part of the cosmos.

He stands above it. He does not belong to the material realm. He is a spirit.

And he is not limited by laws of nature because he has powers that are not confined to those of nature. And therefore, if such a being exists, and if somebody says, I saw something he did, he made the sun stand still. He raised someone from the dead.

He made a virgin conceive. Now, if someone says that can't happen, that person is assuming that there cannot be such a being as God. Now, let me grant you every right to disbelieve in God, if that's what you choose.

I think you'll be sorry. In fact, I know you'll be sorry if you don't believe in God until the day you die. But the fact of the matter is, you have the right to make your own decision whether you believe in God or not.

But you don't have the right to say that belief in God is irrational. You don't have the right to say that belief in God has been ruled out by common sense or wisdom or science, because no such thing has happened. Belief in God is held among people who know as much about science as anybody knows about science.

Many high-ranking scientists believe in God. That doesn't mean that belief in God is true. But it means that it is not impossible for someone to be very well schooled in science and to still believe there's a God.

Science has never shown us that there's no God. And it may be more honest to say, belief in God today is not fashionable in our society, because for the past, oh, almost 200 years now, Western society has been evolving its worldview. Now, it hasn't evolved biologically in the last 200 years, nor, as far as I know, ever.

But as far as worldviews are concerned, Western civilization has moved in the past 200 years from what was once a theistic worldview, a supernaturalistic worldview, a belief that there is a God who does supernatural things, to a belief that's more atheistic and more materialistic, and that does not believe there is a God who does these things, and that affirms that science and nature are all there are. Now, this affirmation cannot be proven. It is simply a general assumption of our time.

Now, if somebody has adopted that worldview and they read the Gospels, they will be continually confronted with things that seem impossible, because if there is no God, if miracles cannot occur, if only the material world and the natural laws exist, then, of course, you're not going to have a virgin conceived. You're not going to have a man healing sick people with a touch. You're not going to have demons inhabited people and cast out with a word.

You're not going to have a storm stilled by command of an individual. Those things can't happen. A man can't rise from the dead if the natural realm and the laws of science are all there are.

But who says that's all there are? Who has affirmed this? Who has proven this? I

remember hearing the story of a Russian science teacher many years ago saying to her class of young elementary students, our brave Russian cosmonauts went up into space in a space capsule, and they didn't see God anywhere. And a little girl in the classroom raised her hand and said, well, were they pure in heart? I don't know if that story is true or not, but it makes a great story. I've heard it told as if it is a true story.

But whether it is or not, it makes a very good point. So what if you go into space and you don't see God? God is not visible. God is not material, but he can be known.

Jesus said, blessed are the pure in heart. They shall see God. There is a greater obstruction to belief in God than being rational, because very many rational people believe in God.

The obstruction to believe in God is a moral obstruction. People who are not pure in heart do not want to believe in God. And, you know, they don't want to be judged by God.

They don't want there to be a God to whom they must answer. And for this reason, the whole acceptance of the existence of miracles, which point in the direction of there being a God, is simply they reject at the outset. Even though no one has ever proven that miracles don't occur, it simply isn't fashionable today to believe it.

So if a person reads the Gospels and says, these can't be historically reliable, that person is biased. I would dare say bigoted. Bigoted by a presupposition that has never been proven, and which many people say their experience has disproven.

Many people have had encounters with God. Many people have claimed to see miracles. I'm not saying that all those who have said they've met God have really met him.

I'm not saying that all those who claim to have seen miracles have really seen miracles. But I'm saying that there are many people throughout history who have experiences that have convinced them that a completely naturalistic, materialistic, atheistic worldview simply does not explain the phenomenon. And I'm one of those people.

And therefore, I don't share the bigotry. Now, some might say, but you're prejudiced in favor of belief in God. Well, maybe I am.

I don't know if I am or not prejudiced in that way. I guess I am. I'm prejudiced in belief in my parents, too, because without them I couldn't be here.

And without God and the experiences I've had with him, I wouldn't be where I am today either. But the point is, whether I'm prejudiced or not, the important thing is to be open-minded. You see, when a person reads the Gospels, if he's already decided that the miracles in the Gospels can't be historically true, that person is not reading with an open mind.

If no one has ever proven that miracles don't occur, and no one can ever prove that God does not exist, then it's nothing but bigotry to start on the assumption that these things can't happen. You see, one reason that science cannot prove that miracles occur is because science observes regularly occurring repeatable phenomena. That's all that science does.

It's testable phenomena. You see something happen, you can reproduce it in a laboratory. You can make it happen again.

Miracles, by nature, are individual, sovereign, unique events, done not through natural means, but by the sovereign God who does them. Now, as such, they are unique historical events. They can't be repeated for experiment in a laboratory.

And because they are unique events, the best evidence for a miracle is not something that can be done in a laboratory, but simply someone to have seen it happen. If you see an accident occur at an intersection, and you give testimony in court that you saw it, and that these details took place, then you will be taken seriously, because you claim to have seen an actual event occur. Now, if you see something occur that's stupendous and unexplainable in terms of the laws of science, many people will not accept your testimony, although that doesn't mean you didn't see it, and it doesn't mean that it wasn't valid.

It means that those who reject your testimony are prejudiced. And they're not open-minded, in many cases. And so, it is not the Christian who has a closed mind when he reads the Gospels.

It is, although I will argue, some Christians are closed-minded. I mean, certainly narrow-mindedness and closed-mindedness do exist among Christians as well. But I'm saying that one does not need to have a prejudice in order to be impressed with the historical accuracy of the Gospels.

It is those who are prejudiced against it who are not impressed. And the Gospels are wonderful historical narratives that give us all that we really need to know about Jesus Christ. The fact that they were written by Christians does not make them unreliable.

Are we to assume that every time a Christian speaks, he must lie? Are we to assume that we cannot ever believe anything a Christian says? Well, if so, then, of course, we can't believe the Gospels. But if we're not to make such a radical assumption, then there's no reason to reject the Gospel witnesses simply because they were written by people who were Christians. If anything, that might be a better reason to believe them.

Because the fact that they were Christians has to explain somehow, how do people become Christians? These people became convinced by seeing the things they recorded. Furthermore, now that they are Christians, they are compelled by their religion to tell the

truth. And therefore, it would seem to me, the fact that the Gospels were written by Christians, who were, we might say, not unprejudiced, does not mean that they can't tell good history.

People who write biographies of famous men are not necessarily unprejudiced. Many times, they admire those men. And they admire them because of the very things that they write about them.

Because of the things that they did. And that is no doubt true of those who wrote the Gospels as well. But someone might say, but we don't have any evidence for Jesus outside the Gospels.

This isn't true. Not true at all. There is much pagan evidence for Jesus from contemporary sources.

There was a man named Cornelius Tacitus, who was a Roman historian of the first century. And therefore, he was contemporary with the apostles. And he was the greatest Roman historian of the period.

And he mentions this in his histories that he wrote. He says this, Christus, which is a term for Christ, from whom they, the Christians got their name, had been executed by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate when Tiberius was emperor. Now, that's a quote from Cornelius Tacitus, a pagan Roman historian of the first century.

He said that Christ, from whom the Christians got their name, had been executed by Pontius Pilate under Tiberius the emperor. Well, that's exactly what the Bible says. Now, Cornelius Tacitus doesn't tell us much more about Jesus.

He wasn't that interested in Jesus. By the time that he had written it, Jesus had not had the impact on the western world that he has now. Tacitus had no way of knowing how important Jesus would be and how important information about him would be to record.

But what's interesting is what is recorded by this historian who had no interest in confirming the Christian religion. He confirmed that Jesus was a historical character and that he died in essentially the same way that the Bible says he did. Another historical source would be not from the Roman historians of the time, but from the Jewish people of the time who rejected Christ.

These were people who really did not approve of the gospel. They did not approve of the Christian beliefs that Jesus was the son of God. And yet they confirmed in many ways that Jesus lived and that he was unusual.

In one particular passage in the Jewish Talmud, it says, On the eve of the Passover they hanged Yeshu of Nazareth. And that's Jesus. And the herald went before him forty days, saying, Yeshu of Nazareth is going forth to be stoned, and that he practiced sorcery and

beguiled and led astray Israel.

But they found naught in his defense and hanged him on the eve of the Passover, says the Talmud. Now, the Talmud, of course, doesn't have any sympathy for Jesus. It's against Jesus.

But it points out that he was hanged on a cross on the eve of the Passover. That's what the Bible says also. It also says he was accused of sorcery.

The Gospels record that the Jews accused Jesus of sorcery. And, therefore, we find much confirmation of the existence of Jesus through those who are not friendly toward him. Even Josephus, the Jewish historian, who never became a Christian, as far as we know, made three references in his great works.

And he was a first-century Jewish historian to things found in the Scriptures. He confirmed John the Baptist's ministry in terms very similar to that which the Gospels described him. And he mentioned Jesus twice, including mentioning James, the brother of Jesus, and his death.

So we know that Jesus was a historical character, though people who were not Christians in the early days didn't have any idea how important he would become, how much he would change history, and, therefore, they didn't have much interest in giving us a lot of detail about his life. Some of them were hostile toward him and, therefore, only mentioned him with hostility. But the Gospel writers were men who knew him and who were favorable toward him and who were motivated, therefore, to tell us what Jesus said and did.

And it is from studying these writers that we shall find who Jesus was, what he did, and what he said. It is these Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, that we will look to in the following sessions in order to get the straight scoop on who Jesus is and what he said, so that we might not be mistaken by accepting authorities that are less authoritative than the eyewitnesses, and that we might not be deficient in our knowledge by relying only on sources that didn't say enough on the subject. And so I hope you'll be able to join us as we go through the entire Gospels, and we will next time begin to look at the Gospel of Matthew, the first of the Gospels in the canonical Bible, and we will have a bit of an introduction to Matthew, and then we'll start going through that book verse by verse.

I hope you'll be able to join us all the way through in this study. It will be rewarding, and it will be edifying, and you might even come to know this man, Jesus, at least better than you already do.