

The Story: The Historicity of the Gospels

*Heavenly Father, I thank You for the men and women who are here tonight and for their willingness to give us so many hours in this class, driving, and then studying and thinking before and after. I pray that You would consecrate this time. I pray that through my words and through their meditations, through their reading, through their writing, there will be real profit in their lives and for the sake of Your kingdom. I pray Lord, that although this class is large, real friendships might form among the members and that we will get to know each other as best we can given our numbers. So Lord, we give these hours over the next three months to You through Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.*

I would like to begin tonight by telling you a story. It's a story of the life of Jesus. Jesus grew up in a small town, the town of Nazareth. That small town was located fifteen miles west of the Sea of Galilee and thirty miles east of the Mediterranean Sea. Jerusalem is almost a hundred miles to the south. The city of Nazareth is built on a hill, overlooking a wide plain in the northern regions of Israel known as Galilee. Nazareth was a small town, almost a nothing of a town, but it was near some towns that were pretty substantial. On the Sea of Galilee there was a town called Tiberius. A little bit south was a town called Beth Shan, a very impressive place. It had hundreds of enormous Greek style columns lining the main street, which ran from perfect east to almost perfect west. They set that city up on an east/west axis in part so you could get a good last look at the sun before it set at night. They also wanted to make it easy for the many sun worshippers who lived in that town. It was in what we would call Israel, the land of the people of God, but they wanted to make sure life was easy for the sun worshippers there. At one end of the town there was a public bath (men and women did not bathe together) and outside the bath, there was a kind of civic center, where you could buy books, listen to lectures, get some things fixed, and buy and sell things. One of the things you could buy and sell, and everybody knew it, was human flesh. There was a corner area near the bath where you could spend some time with your favorite prostitute if you wanted. That's the town of Beth Shan, not that far from where Jesus grew up.

On the other end of things on the Sea of Galilee is a town called Maritime Caesarea. Maritime Caesarea was a large and beautiful city built by Herod the Great in his heyday, a few decades before Jesus' time. It was a spectacular port and it also had a beautiful Roman style aqueduct carrying water the twenty miles from Mount Carmel (where Elijah fought the Baal prophets) all the way into the city, casting its arched shaped shadows on the sand dunes by the sea. One of the most prominent things you can still see today in that city is the amphitheatre. In that amphitheatre you don't need a microphone—you can whisper on the stage and 5,000 people away, in about row 50 at the top in the back, that whisper can be clearly heard. This was important, especially for their Greek style plays, since they didn't have any amplification then. The city of Sepphoris is not quite so well known, but it was a lot like those two cities, Beth Shan and Maritime Caesarea, cities that were in Israel but were much more like pagan towns. Although Jesus grew up in Israel, the land was almost more Hellenistic, almost more Greek and Roman, than it was Jewish. In the city of Jerusalem, to the south, where there were more Jews, over half the tomb inscriptions were written in Greek. Now, if you would ever want to have something in your native language, wouldn't it be on your tomb? (Like the gravestones you see in the American West, with inscriptions like, "I told you I was sick." You wouldn't put that in Latin unless you knew Latin, would you? You would put it in English.) So the fact that more than half the people put Greek inscriptions on their tombs indicates that more than half the people knew Greek and maybe it was their first language.

Jesus grew up in that environment. "Galilee of the Gentiles," Matthew 4 calls it. He grew up in a small town overlooking it all on a high plateau. He grew up in the home of a carpenter. Jesus' dad probably died when He was somewhere between twelve and thirty years of age. He was a carpenter, an artisan, a small businessman. A Greek would find that to be a demeaning life, one that sapped away energy from

the life of the mind. But a Jew wouldn't have thought so, because by Jewish custom everyone had to have a job by which he could support himself with his hands. No matter how educated, no matter how wealthy, you were supposed to have a job that you could do with your hands. Jesus almost certainly was a carpenter and almost certainly supported his mother and his younger brothers and sisters from the earnings that He made. He grew up and obtained manhood.

A certain man named John the Baptist arrived on the scene in Israel. You need to think about how exciting it would be to live in the day when John the Baptist performed his ministry. It had been 400 years since there had been a certified, bonafide prophet in Israel (For us that would be the equivalent of the year 1600 A.D., twenty years or so before the pilgrims landed). It had been 200 years since the people of Israel had been free (Again, for us, think 1800 A.D. and remember we got our liberation in 1776). Israel had been under foreign domination for 200 years and then John the Baptist appeared. There was no mistaking his voice. He had the voice of a prophet, the carriage of a prophet, and his words were, "Repent for the kingdom is at hand." We've heard those words so many times that we think we know what they mean. But the words, "Repent for the kingdom is at hand," basically mean "for the reign of God is at hand." If the reign of God is at hand, then somebody else's reign is almost going to end, isn't it? Who would that be? Rome, who had been dominating Israel for several decades. And so when people heard John the Baptist they didn't think about the church at hand (we sometimes equate the church and the kingdom). They thought, this means the end of Rome, the judgment of all the world's evildoers, the ascent, at last, of God's people, Israel, our vindication.

The people thronged to see him. He was a wild man; he dressed like a wild man and lived in the wilderness. You had to go to him. You didn't want to hear third hand from the friend of a friend of a traveler about what John was saying. He said, "Repent, the ax is already laid at the root of the trees. Rich or poor, slave or free, Jew or Gentile, priest or soldier, repent," and people came in throngs to hear him. He didn't perform miracles or travel widely and he didn't really have all that broad of a message, so far as we can tell, but near the end of his time, people began to ask him questions. "Are you the one? Are you the one that's going to deliver?" He said, "No, there's one coming after me who is mightier than I. I'm not even worthy to untie His sandals." That one came—it was Jesus. After Jesus' baptism by John, the Spirit descended on Him, with power, so He could start his public ministry.

His ministry started very quietly. He traveled here and there—Galilee, Judea, back and forth a few times. He met with people, performed some small miracles, gathered a few disciples to Himself and He would talk to anybody. He talked to Nicodemus, the teacher of Israel, at night. He would also talk to a quintuple divorcee, a woman, a Samaritan woman, near a well in the middle of nowhere at high noon. He began to gather people to Himself. The Gospels don't say how long that period of quiet ministry lasted, but there was a day when Jesus burst on His world. Suddenly He started to heal many people and teach great throngs, not just quietly one by one, but many. There was no mistaking what happened when somebody met Jesus. People would enter into His presence, roaring and howling and shrieking...and they would leave talking normally. Other times, they would enter His presence unable to say a word...and would leave His presence shouting for joy. Sometimes people would enter Jesus' presence rigid, tight, unable to move properly...and would leave walking normally. Other times they would enter His presence as the epitome of flabbiness, the awful flabbiness of paralyzed limbs...and they would leave with a proper kind of rigidity, the rigidity of muscles that worked again. There was no mistaking what had happened. It unloosed the best possible gossip and people came to hear and to see if it was true and it was.

Jesus' miracles were very exciting but that wasn't all He did. He also did some other interesting, exciting, unusual things. One thing was the company He kept. I told you already that He met with

Nicodemus, the teacher of Israel, and with a quintuple divorcee Samaritan woman. He would dine with the elite. He would eat smoked salmon. But He would also eat three day old salami. He would eat with tax collectors, with sinners, with prostitutes, with outcasts, with nobodies and with the somebodies. The nobodies loved it. The somebodies weren't quite so sure whether they approved of His fellowship with the nobodies of this world or not. The authorities thought that holy men should not associate with unholy people. A holy man should not go down to bars (Jesus didn't go to bars because there weren't any in His day, but if there had been, He would have gone and they would have been upset about that too).

That wasn't the only thing that troubled the authorities. From a Pharisee's standpoint, Jesus acted a little too important. He said things like, "Truly I say to you..." Who gave Him the right to talk like that? All good rabbis quote other rabbis and say, "Well, rabbi so-and-so says, and rabbi so-and-so says, and rabbi so-and-so says, therefore, it's probably true that..." But Jesus said, "I say to you..." The Pharisees also did not like the way Jesus performed miracles. He said, "I am willing. Rise!" as if it were at His own disposal, as if He were the one healing. Some people thought it would be best if He were killed. Maybe it was sincere opposition to His methods; maybe it was also a little bit of envy. But they thought perhaps they should do away with Him. Partly for that reason (it wasn't time for Him to die), but partly also because He had other problems to worry about, Jesus withdrew somewhat from the crowds. He withdrew to spend time with His disciples.

His disciples weren't always getting things the way He would like. Sometimes, His disciples hardly understood any more than the masses did. He told them stories, parables. Stories are easy to remember, so maybe that would help the disciples remember. Stories were also good because they were encoded. They were a little bit cryptic and so Jesus' opponents couldn't be quite sure what He was really saying. But a time came after some months of training His disciples when it became necessary to go back into the public eye. When He did, He went to the land of the south, down to Jerusalem, to the temple districts. Jesus had been to Jerusalem before. He had probably been there a few times, in fact. Maybe His disciples hadn't. It was a really impressive place. The temple court, in Jesus' day, was about 1,500 feet long and about 1,000 feet wide (five times as long as a football field, six times as wide, 35 acres). When Jesus walked on those temple districts, when He walked on those stones, He wasn't walking on dirt but on polished marble. Imagine His cold tough feet on polished marble. The building of the temple itself was gilt with gold and polished so brightly that people said you might not want to look at it at sunset because it could blind you.

Jesus wasn't blinded, but not because His eyes are any different from your eyes or my eyes. He wasn't blinded spiritually. The buildings were most impressive. The temple itself took fifty years to build and vast amounts of money were poured into the construction of this edifice. But He knew what was going on inside. He knew that it was supposed to be a house of prayer, but it had become a den of thieves and so He cleaned it out. I've always wondered how He did it. How did one man go in there and throw over the money tables and drive out the animals? Were they feeling guilty, did they know He was doing the right thing? Or was He just so filled with wrath that God simply blessed His work? I don't know. He didn't just throw some people out; He challenged the legitimacy of the temple's organization and renewed its purpose. Those who had a commercial interest in the temple were angry. In fact, this event, according to the synoptic evangelists, was a motivating factor in Jesus' trial and death. Recall that there were people who wanted to kill Jesus. Some of the Pharisees really thought that He was leading the people astray and they thought the best thing to do would be just to get rid of Him before He deluded many people. But the Pharisees loved to debate and they probably would have kept talking about killing Jesus until He turned eighty. Some of them also liked Jesus. Some of them thought He must be a man of God—"Just look at His wisdom and look at His miracles!" But when Jesus cleaned out the temple He made some real enemies, people that knew how to kill—the high priests. He had stepped on their turf

and they determined that they were going to get Pilate to sign the decree to execute Jesus of Nazareth. They were willing to do whatever it took. They were willing to twist His words, words about a temple being destroyed, about the Messiah, anything would do. They twisted them and Pilate eventually relented.

If you were there on the day that Jesus was killed, even if you were an unbeliever, a Roman soldier or something like that, you would have gone home and told your wife, "It was a strange execution." Executions are always a miserable, bloody, grim business, but this one was different. At this execution, for one thing, the prisoner died awfully fast. Usually it took about three days, even more depending on how they did it. But this fellow died in far less than a day. And then there was the odd darkness that came over the land for about three hours, the earthquake, the opening of tombs, the way that He continued, it seemed, to conduct His ministry even while He was dying on the cross, teaching, talking, converting people. It drove a Roman centurion to say, when Jesus breathed His last, "Surely, surely, this was the Son of God."

His disciples didn't see things so clearly. In fact when Jesus caught up with them about forty-eight hours later, one of them was really sad. Jesus said, "What are you talking about and why are you sad?" They said, "Haven't you heard? The man that we had hoped would redeem Israel has been killed. Now we've heard a report that He may be alive but we don't know about that." Then Jesus appeared to two of them. A little earlier, He appeared to one and then to another one and another. Then He appeared to ten. One who usually went with them wasn't there and didn't believe the ten. A few days later Jesus appeared and said to him, "Stick your fist in My side; see if that convinces you." He was convinced. Five hundred more were convinced when they all saw Him on one day. Although there were still some doubts, they believed enough to receive His commission to go and make disciples throughout all the world. They gave their lives to it. They lived for it and they died for it, because it was really the greatest story ever told.

That's the story of Jesus. Over the next thirty-eight hours, we're going to flesh that story out and examine it in some care and detail. I'm now moving to the topic of the historicity of the Gospels. There are some people that doubt that story, that think that it isn't true. Christianity stands or falls not simply on the story but on the veracity of the story. It's the greatest story ever told, but it's better to say it's the greatest true story ever told, because if it's just a story, then our life is vain, our life in Christ does not exist, it's just a dream, a moral program and a pleasant ideology.

In our secular schools and universities, the historicity of the Gospels is routinely criticized, undermined, and ridiculed. A man named Stephen Mitchell wrote a book called *The Gospel According to Jesus*, in which he wrote, "The whole history of these books, the gospels, is so defective and doubtful that it seems vain to attempt minute inquiry into it. And such tricks have been played with the text and with the other books relating to them that we have the right to entertain great doubt as to which parts are genuine." Mitchell gets this quote from Thomas Jefferson, who he says is his hero. He continues quoting Jefferson, "I am a Christian only in the sense that He would want me to be. That is, to be sincerely attached to His teachings... I have selected only those passages that seem to me to be authentic accounts of Jesus." He says his task could be likened to that of separating diamonds from dung hills; we've got to sift and sift and sift and sift and if we try hard enough, we'll find something that's better than gold, like "turn the other cheek," and "love your neighbor as yourself." But all those miracles and all that kind of stuff needs to be jettisoned. Mitchell says he has good reason to do so since all reputable scholars acknowledge that the Gospels were compiled in Greek many decades after the events that they purport to report by men who never heard Jesus teaching, who never saw the things that they claim to describe.

For example, Mitchell says that no good scholar would call the Christmas story or the account of Jesus' trial anything but a legend or polemical fiction.

You've probably heard of the "Five Gospels" crowd, the "Jesus Seminar," the "Quest for the Authentic Jesus"—a group of about forty scholars, who got together about twice a year and voted on the sayings of Jesus, using variously colored balls. Black meant 'Jesus never could have said such a thing.' Gray meant 'Well, maybe.' Pink meant, 'It sounds pretty good.' Red meant, 'Yes, that's it, that's the real Jesus.' They courted media attention. That was the goal with those little voting balls. It's so reportable, so statistical, so sound bite ready—they knew what they were doing. A little less than 20% of the words of Jesus are considered to be pink or red (probably or certainly authentic), words like: "Love your enemies," "Turn the other cheek," "Blessed are the poor," "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's," and from the Lord's Prayer, only two words, "Our Father." The rest is pink or grey. Now why would anyone want to kill somebody that said "Turn the other cheek," "Blessed are the poor," "Love your neighbor," "Our Father"? The Romans did not like to execute their own citizens. Dead men don't pay taxes. Dead men aren't productive. Executions cut down on the life of the empire. Besides, they upset people. The Jesus that the Jesus Seminar has constructed is extremely amenable to current wisdom, to pacifists, to wise people, but I have no idea who would kill him. I have no idea how saying a few things like that could change the world, do you? That's the problem for these people and it's our challenge to answer them.

C.S. Lewis gave a very famous response to the idea that the Jesus of the Gospels is not the real Jesus. It is sometimes called the trilemma. It works with three 'L's' (I'll tell you a fourth 'L' in a minute): the 'Lord, Lunatic, Liar' idea. Lewis died a few years ago and didn't have an opportunity to hear the Jesus Seminar's criticism of the life of Christ, but he anticipated parts of it. The Gospels and the New Testament consistently show that Jesus claimed to be the Lord. Now either He claimed to be Lord truly or falsely, sincerely or insincerely. If Jesus is not actually Lord, it's a false claim, and there are only two other possibilities. One, He knew that it was false and was a liar, in which case Jesus is one of the most despicable people who ever lived, gathering multitudes to Himself and sending His friends to their deaths for what He knew to be a fabrication. Very few people can stomach the idea that Jesus is one of the most despicable people who ever lived, therefore, this option is gone. Two, it's possible that He falsely claimed to be Lord, but He didn't know it. That is to say, He sincerely claimed to be Lord, even though He wasn't and if that's the case, we should call Him a lunatic, because people who claim to be God, stake their whole life on it, live on that basis their entire lives and die for it and drag their friends to their death for it would have to be called insane. Very few people are able to stomach the idea that Jesus was insane. Now Lewis says there are only three options—Lord, lunatic, or liar. If He wasn't Lord he was either a lunatic or a liar. Both options are repulsive. If He was Lord, then we should bow to Him.

The trilemma is very effective, so effective that people know that they have to come up with another approach to make Jesus' deity impossible. They do it by saying He never claimed to be Lord, by saying that the church put words in His mouth. There's a fourth 'L'—'legend.' It's merely a legend that Jesus claimed to be Lord. The Gospel stories are far separated from the truth. Oh yes, the church in time did begin sincerely to believe that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God, but Jesus never believed it. That's not what He held. They were devoted to Him, they loved Him and slowly they created more and more things and put them all in His mouth. They added stories. They meant well. They wrote 50, 60, 70, 80 years after the events, when no one was really quite sure anymore. We don't hold it against them; we just have to help get to the truth. This is the opinion of Mitchell, the Five Gospels, the Jesus Seminar.

Who wrote the Gospels? This is actually a very important subject. If the Gospels were written 50, or 60, or 70 years after the fact, 500 miles away from the original location, with no research libraries, no records of preservation, by people who weren't present, maybe the 'legend' idea is true. If, on the other

hand, the Gospels were written by people who saw, who heard, who were in community helping each other remember and were writing not so very long after the events, then it's vastly more probable that it's not a legend and that Jesus did indeed claim to be Lord.

We then have to ask the question, "What can we say about the historicity of Jesus?" Pretend that we are at a secular university, in a history seminar, a graduate seminar, filled with historians. What kind of things would they take as proof, as certainty, as trustworthy sources regarding the life of Christ? There are certain things that are indisputable about the life of Christ (who would bother to lie about them?). He existed, grew up in Nazareth, was an itinerant preacher, gathered disciples to Himself, ran into trouble with the authorities and was crucified. Almost anybody would admit to that. He died an ignominious death, but somehow after His death something happened so that His movement didn't end but became far more powerful, to the point that without resources, without any official status, without planning, without money, without any of the advantages we can imagine, it became the dominant world religion within 270-280 years, even though it was at least sporadically persecuted non-stop for those 280 years. For 280 years people tried to stamp out the church and after all that there were seven million Christians (best estimate). Out of fifty million living in the Roman world, there were seven million people who were willing to pay a price to be known as Christians, to suffer the loss of property, the risk of jail, even the risk of death. No secular historian can deny that.

What kind of influence did Jesus have? Did He have the influence of a great thinker, like Plato or Karl Marx? His ideas moved the world; yes, surely that would be part of it. Or did He change history more through force of personality, like Martin Luther or Abraham Lincoln or Alexander the Great? Surely, that would be part of the story as well. But the key thing would have to be the story that I told you first. It's not simply that He was a great man, for there are many great men. It's not simply that He had great ideas, for many people had great ideas. Rather, the key is in His resurrection. That's the centerpiece. That is what changed His disciples from a few dozen cowering, fearful, quivering, disappointed, crushed people into men and women who changed the world because they believed in something and because they knew it was true. You don't die for a lie; I take that back, people do die for lies. But you don't die for what you know to be a lie. There are various Roman sources that will verify this, people like Pliny the Younger, Suetonius, Tacitus, Julius Africanus and some others (you can read about them in F. F. Bruce) that have little references here and there to the life of Jesus and His influence. There are also Jewish sources that refer to Him as a trouble maker and as a wonder worker. These are all helpful—they prove that Jesus existed and that He had an impact on His world.

But the main source that we have for knowing about the life of Christ is the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Are there any other sources for finding out about the life of Christ? The historians I mentioned give you a few lines here and there; Josephus gives maybe a paragraph or two. What about the Gospel of Thomas? The Gospel of Thomas has only the sayings of Jesus and some of them are very close to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Others are very troubling, such as 'if a woman wants to be saved, she first has to become like a man.' That's not so popular in all circles today! Where else could you find out about the life of Christ? Through the Old Testament predictions of Christ, through those that foreshadow Christ.

Did you ever wonder what it would be like to grow up with Jesus? When you were a kid did you ever wonder what it would be like to have Jesus on your baseball team? I always wondered that. I wondered if He would be just another player like everybody else or, being divine, if he would be better than average. What would it be like to be in Jesus' Sunday school class or in His grade school? Would He be annoying? Can you just hear the teachers saying, "Why can't you be more like Jesus?" I wonder what it

would be like to be Jesus' younger brother. Talk about sibling rivalry! People have wondered about that for a long time.

As one early church historian put it, the church has four Gospels, heresy has a great many. There are over 50 fragments or whole stories of parts of the life of Christ. Some of them just have Jesus' words, like the Gospel of Thomas, others have deeds from some part of Jesus' life, like an entirely different book, "The Infancy Gospel of Thomas," that only tells about Jesus' early days. It fills in the blanks for us. For example, it tells us the story of one day when Jesus was playing in the mud as a little boy. He made some sparrows and a rabbi came by, saying, "You're doing what ought not to be done on the Sabbath." Now the evidence was there that He had been fashioning things and it was against the custom of the Jews to work that hard to lift things. In order to avoid trouble He clapped His hands and said, "Off with you!" and away they flew.

The very next paragraph tells about the time that a little boy bumped into Jesus and Jesus said, I paraphrase, "Will you stop bothering me forever!" and so He killed him—struck him dead. The parents came and complained to Joseph and Mary. Joseph said, "What are You doing? I can hardly live in this town because of You." And so Jesus said, "Alright, alright," and He raised him up.

Another day, just a page or two later in this gospel, Jesus was playing again and a boy in his village got up on the roof, fell off, and died. The people from the village all assumed that Jesus had gotten angry at one of His playmates again and had killed him, so they came marching over to Joseph to protest. Joseph said to Jesus, "What have you done again? Would you please stop causing trouble for me?" Jesus said, "I did not kill this boy," but no one believed Him. So Jesus said, "Alright, I'll prove it to you." He said, "Wake up, will you? Come to life again, will you? Did I knock you off the roof or not?" and the boy said, "No, you did not knock me down but you raised me up." So everyone was pleased with Jesus.

The fourth story that I'll relate from the "Infancy Gospel of Thomas" has to do with the carpentry business in the house. As I recall, one day Joseph was making a table (it may have been a bed or something big) and he cut the boards wrong. Wood was not plentiful in Israel in Jesus' day and to cut a board the wrong length was to waste a lot of material. Joseph was fretting about this a little bit and Jesus came by and said to His father (again paraphrasing a little bit), "Don't worry, Father," and He grabbed the board at each end, then just pulled until it fit perfectly with the other.

What do you think of that? What do you think of the "Gospel of the Infancy of Christ" as told by somebody named Thomas? Some might say it sounds farfetched, it doesn't fit with Jesus' character, it seems to lack authority, or it makes His life into something wild and fantastic, undercutting His real humanity. It also has nothing to do with our salvation and our life under the rule of God, whereas the Gospels tell us the way of life, the way of death, faith and so forth. Jesus is portrayed here as powerful, yes, but also selfish, capricious, a man pleaser, especially as self pleaser. Again, gospels like the Gospel of Thomas are just words of Jesus, a lot of them close to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and with some very strange things too, such as the notion that I mentioned before that a woman has to become a man to be saved.

What we are left with, then, are the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. They are the foundation. How can you be sure that you can trust them, that they're reliable, that these things really happened? First, in Bible times, training was largely memory work. That is to say, Jewish students were required to memorize the words of their rabbis. They were ready to graduate when they could quote verbatim the essential teachings of the rabbis under whose training they sat.

Secondly, it was acceptable to paraphrase a story, to condense, to explain, but the standards of historical writing of the time said you may never add to a story. You can summarize it, you can epitomize it, you can condense it, but you can never add to it. There is a book called “The Acts of Paul” which was written much later than the Book of Acts and doesn’t correspond to Paul’s true life. It was never part of the Bible. In the early church the question arose, “If an infant is dying, can people baptize the infant or not? Specifically, can a woman baptize a dying infant or not?” Some appealed to the teaching in “The Acts of Paul” in which a prominent woman named Thekla was teaching and baptizing. The presbyter in Asia who composed the book confessed that he had written it, out of love for Paul and out of a desire to augment Paul’s fame. He was convicted and removed from office. A man named Tertullian said that you can make up an edifying story out of love for the Gospel and love for the apostle Paul, but if you say something that isn’t true, you’re expelled from office. It is against the rules to fabricate.

So, first, memory; second, the rules say no fabrication. Third, people kept written records. Recall Mitchell’s quote saying that nobody really had any records. That’s not true. A great scholar today named E. E. Ellis records the words of a particular rabbi who said, ‘if your rabbi is teaching and you have no paper, write it on your sleeve.’ We’re a bit shocked by that. The average person in this room probably has hundreds and hundreds of garments (including socks, every kind of underwear, t-shirts, suits and ties). But the average person in the ancient world probably had about seven garments total and the rabbi said if you’ve got seven garments and you don’t have a piece of paper, write it on your sleeve. So there certainly was writing in those days.

Fourth, Jesus spoke in memorable ways, using poetry and parables. These stay in people’s memories. Fifth, He did things that were memorable. Memorable events emblazon themselves on our minds the rest of our lives. Aren’t there stories that you can remember that you could not forget if you tried? In 1972 when I was a teenager, I was taken into police custody for murder. Not only was it murder, it was murder of a policeman and the person who had murdered the policeman had just escaped from a high security prison. I didn’t do it, but they thought I was the guy. I will always remember what that cop looked like. I will always remember exactly how long his hair was, because mine was about that long. I will always remember the words that he said to me: “Get your hands on the car, let’s see some ID.” I will always remember the way he held his gun on me. I’ll never forget, even if I tried. It’s been 24 years, but I could still write the story accurately today. And if I were not quite sure about some of the details I could ask my brother who was with me and between the two of us we could remember it exactly. If you saw the lame walk, if you saw demoniacs healed on the spot, if you saw storms stop at a word, instantaneously, do you think you would forget after thirty years? I don’t think so. The Gospel accounts were written by people who gave their lives for them and there’s nothing that would make them forget. They are reliable accounts. Jesus did claim to be Lord and it’s a true story.