

Are the Gospels Reliable? Small Group Guide

Warm-up Question: (Choose one, make up your own, or skip this part all together, depending upon the nature of your group.)

1. If you could interview one figure from the past five hundred years, whom would you choose?
2. If you were going to be a contestant on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, whom would you call for help when you had an opportunity to “phone a friend?”

Read the following passage: Luke 1:1-4.

How do we know the Gospels are not just made up stories about made up people? At a minimum, we can say the following five things. 1) We don't just have one independent source of information about Jesus; we have many sources. 2) The Gospel of Luke explicitly presents itself as dependent on eyewitness testimony. 3) All of the Gospels contain embarrassing material, suggesting that their authors had a high commitment to historical accuracy. 4) The Gospels present a genuinely Jewish Jesus, not a Jesus reconstructed for a Gentile audience. 5) The Gospels include various details, some of which can be confirmed through other means, that suggest they are describing real people, real places, and real events.

Questions for Discussion (Choose several that are relevant for your group):

1. Do you think the Christian faith can stand if the core events in the four Gospels did not actually happen? Explain.
2. Why do you think many people are hesitant to accept the contents of the four Gospels at face value? What would you say to someone who doubts that we can get reliable information about Jesus from the Gospels?
3. Consider the following excerpt from *The Annals* by the Roman historian Tacitus. How does this passage corroborate information we find in the Gospels?

...to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their center and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to

serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired.

4. Some people compare the process by which the Gospels were written with the children's game *Telephone*; that is, one person told another who told another who told another and so on. With each person, changes in the message were introduced so that the final message was completely garbled. But the first-century Christian Papias indicates that some of Jesus' disciples were still telling others about what Jesus had said and done 40 or 50 years after Jesus was crucified, a time by which the Gospels were already being written down. How does this call into question the "Telephone" model of Gospel transmission?
5. What are some examples of "embarrassing" material in the Gospels? Why does the presence of such material suggest that the Gospels are genuinely trustworthy sources of information about Jesus?
6. How would you describe Jesus as he is presented to us in the Gospels?
7. Have you ever read one of the Gospels all the way through? If not, are you willing to do that?

Pray