

Greg climbed the few steps to the stage at the front of the sanctuary. He turned to face his audience and stared out over the crowd for a few moments.

“Man, that’s a lotta people,” Greg finally muttered, almost to himself but it carried very well though the monitors. “You guys ever wanted something for Christmas but then when you got it you weren’t sure what to do with it? My brother told me that when I was about nine, I wanted a bike so bad for Christmas, but when I got it, I didn’t ride it for days. He asked me about it and I told him I was afraid I’d break it.

“I feel kinda like that tonight. I really love talking about God and I really want to do this, but now that I look out over this room and think about the overflow rooms that they tell me are packed, I’m kinda afraid I’m going to ‘break’ this! What if I really mess up? I want to tell you about God because that’s my favorite subject to talk about, but what if I say something wrong, or what if you interpret it wrong even if I say it right? What if I confuse someone instead of enlightening them?”

Wearing a wireless headset microphone and unfettered by a podium, Greg walked freely as he talked, often using his right arm to emphasize points.

“But just like Luke had to remind me all those years ago that the bike was for my pleasure, not to be kept safe and never be damaged, I need to remember that this message is for your growth. I have to focus not on what might go wrong, but on what I can maybe set right. All I need to do is tell the truth as I know it then step back to let God work his miracles in your hearts.

“What God wants you to discover tonight is that Christmas *is* for real. It’s an old story, but do we really know it as well as we think we do? I’d venture to bet most of you here don’t. The bible tells us the truth, but too often we don’t understand what the truth is because we put our own understanding on it instead of delving deep to understand what the original writer meant.

“Let me give you a contemporary illustration that you might understand. Back in the sixties, there was a real popular kids’ song, ‘Puff the Magic Dragon.’ For thirty years, a persistent rumor claimed that the song was about smoking marijuana. Because of that rumor, even today people don’t listen to this song that I think is pretty cool. Though the authors of that song hotly deny any link to drug use, the rumor just won’t go away. People refuse to see that it’s a Peter Pan kine song. They don’t accept that ‘Puff’ is about growing up. They’ll let their kids watch Disney’s *Peter Pan*, which by the way isn’t nearly as good as the book. A St. Bernard? For goodness sake, couldn’t they find a Newfoundlander to play the role? Try wait, it was a cartoon! All they had to do was draw it in!”

Greg grinned down at the seats in front of the stage. “My wife is about to warn me that I digress, but I’m not really. What I’m trying to show you is that

so often what you think you know is not the original intent of the author or creator. Did Da Vinci ever say that he drew the apostle Peter wanting to chop off Mary Magdalene's head in his Last Supper painting like some claim? Or did someone else put that interpretation on it long after Da Vinci and all his friends were too dead to complain?

"Did the bible really say that Jesus was born in a stable? You say yes, but I say no," Greg shrugged his right shoulder and grinned at his audience.

"Tonight I'm going to try to show three things to you," Greg counted on his hand, starting with his thumb. "One, a lot of things you might believe aren't true. Two, the way to know the truth is to look for the source, not just believe something because someone with some authority claimed it was true. Those two points are gonna be blended together, but the third one, that's the really good one. It's when I introduce you to some truths about the bible itself."

Greg raised his hand in caution. "But let me warn you. You won't get enough tonight. You're going to have to do some studying after tonight, see if I really know what I'm talking about. Some of it's really going to challenge you. Like when I said Jesus wasn't born in a stable. Why did I say that?"

"The word 'stable' never occurs in most of the major English translations of the bible. In the English Standard Version, it appears in Colossians 1:23 and is used in conjunction with 'steadfast.' It's used similarly in 1 Chronicles 16:30 in the King James Version – the world will be stable, it will not be moved. The only time 'stable' is ever used in any English bible to mean a place where animals live, is in Ezekiel 25:5 in both the Contemporary English Version and the King James Version – 'I will make Rabbah a stable for camels.' And yet we keep talking about how Jesus was born in a stable. Why do we do that?"

Greg gazed across the congregation, his eyebrows raised, his right hand palm up and extended slightly.

"Matthew and Luke are the only two gospels to address the nativity. Matthew didn't refer to the actual birth of Jesus at all. He skips from God telling Joseph to keep Mary as his wife right to the wise men. He merely mentions that Mary was still a virgin when the baby was born and they named him Jesus. Luke is the gospel writer who does tell about Jesus' birth but he doesn't say what we too often think he does – that Jesus was born in a stable. Let's look first at where Mary and Joseph expected to stay in Bethlehem. Was it an inn, a Motel 6?"

"The actual word that Luke used for the place where there was no room was 'katalyma.' This word is used three times in the New Testament, only in Luke 2:7 is it translated as 'inn.' The other two times it's translated as 'guest room' which was the most common use of the word in first century Judea."

Greg suddenly stopped and frowned at the congregation. "I'm sorry. I'm probably confusing most of you right now. You're probably wondering why I'm going on about debunking a Christmas myth when I'm supposed to be talking about 'Christmas Is For Real,' but bear with me, please. I'm going to

prove a point here. It's part of those first two points, about a lot of the things you might believe aren't true but you can learn the truth.

"So, back to the katalyma which is part of the source I said you need to go to if you want the truth. Katalyma is found three times in the Greek New Testament. It's translated as 'inn' in the nativity story and as 'guest room' the other two times. Luke 2:7 tells us that Mary placed her baby in a manger 'because there was no room for them in the katalyma.'

"Why do English bibles translate that as 'inn,' not 'guest room'? The simple answer to that is that as readers became less familiar with first century Judea, they lost the author's original intent. They had their own understanding of a manger. It was a bin that animals ate out of. It was in a stable, a barn. That was easy to understand but the story didn't tell the later readers how Mary and Joseph got into a barn, so they had to figure it out, based upon their own understanding of course. How? Well, Mary and Joseph traveled from Nazareth. Where do travelers go when they arrive in town? They go to an inn! In ancient days, every inn had a stable. So it was quite obvious that the innkeeper, when he couldn't give Joseph and Mary a room inside, let them crash in the barn. Perfectly logical!"

Greg stared at the crowd and shrugged. "Except that's not what Luke originally intended to portray to his readers. Because archaeology has given us a much better understanding of life in first century Judea, we now know that in Judea most peasants' homes had mangers in their main room because at night they kept their sheep and goats right in the house in an entryway slightly lower than the living area. Back when Luke wrote his Gospel, all of his readers would have known that. They would have also known that on the roof peasants' homes usually had a room with its own entry, an upper room, a guest room, a katalyma. Usually newlyweds got to use the katalyma for the first year of their marriage so they'd have privacy. It was also sometimes rented out for banquets. In fact, the two times in the New Testament where the word katalyma is translated as 'guest room' occur in Luke 22:11 and Mark 14:14 when Jesus sent his disciples to rent a 'guest room' for their Passover feast.

"When Luke wrote his gospel, his original audience would have understood that Mary laid her baby in the manger down in the main living area because there was no room for them in the guest room on the roof of Joseph's parents' or grandparents' house."

Greg looked out across the congregation, his head tilted slightly, his right hand raised in a semi-shrug. "That changes our understanding of the Christmas story a lot, doesn't it? Mary and Joseph weren't relegated to a stable, they just didn't get to go upstairs to the private room because the house was too crowded. Mary had her baby downstairs with the animals. When the angels sent the shepherds to look for the baby in the manger, they were telling them that they would find the long awaited Messiah in an overcrowded peasants' home, one where the newlyweds didn't even get to use the guest room.

“This was critical information for Luke’s first century Jewish readers because they had fixated on the ‘king’ parts of the Messianic prophecies. They were looking for a powerful, political deliverer, one who would have obviously been born in a palace – he was, after all, of royal descent, being of the line of David. By mentioning the manger and the upper room, Luke was telling his readers that the Messiah was a peasant, not a prince. Luke’s story had nothing to do with a mean old innkeeper and a drafty stable.”

Greg rubbed the back of his neck as he looked out across the congregation again. “I hope that I’ve shown you that while there are misconceptions about some of our understanding of what’s in the bible, we can know the truth by going to source material. So now, let’s look at some of the misconceptions surrounding our understanding of the bible as a book. I’ve just shown you one example of how the original intent can get lost when we lose sight of the historical context. What if we don’t know enough about the bible itself to fully understand how trustworthy it is? What if you could learn something that made you realize that if the bible is not true, then nothing you believe about ancient history is?”

“Many modern-day atheists like to debunk the bible because they say it’s full of unbelievable stories. But unbelievability is not the same thing as falsehood, nor, as I have just shown you, is belief the same as truth. Belief is a choice. It’s internal to us. Truth is external and is not affected by our belief. Let me give you an example from America today.

“Most Californians wouldn’t believe it if you told them that the most devastating earthquake sequence to ever hit the United States was probably right here in the Midwest, but their unbelief doesn’t change the facts. In the winter of 1811-1812, the New Madrid Fault just south of us went off for months with multiple large quakes and hundreds of smaller ones. The strong quakes toppled chimneys as far away as Cincinnati, Ohio. News reports of the day said that some of the activity was felt from Canada to New Orleans. That’s a huge area!

“That’s pretty unbelievable, especially since it’s been two hundred years and there hasn’t been another major quake on the New Madrid fault. But history says you have to believe it because eyewitnesses reported it. The evidence is there to prove it.”

Greg grinned at the congregation. “It’s the same with the unbelievable stories in the bible. The evidence proves the truth behind them. Scientific historical method assures us that the biblical gospels must be accepted as an accurate representation of events that happened in the first century. That’s what I want you to remember about tonight. That’s what I want you to understand and examine more in depth when you leave here.

“There’s so much that can be said to prove the historical accuracy of the bible, but since I can’t eat before I give these talks, we can’t hang around all night so I can present them all to you. I’m hungry! So tonight, my goal is to make you hungry for the Word, to rouse your appetite by showing you that you

can believe the bible. You're going to have to seek the deeper knowledge later with your youth group leaders.

"Tonight I'm going to show you three simple truths about the bible – first, it is totally unique in its writing, unlike any other; second, the preservation of the bible is miraculous; third, the gospels, the foundation of Christianity, are eyewitness accounts."

Greg paused again, then smiled slightly. "I hate to say this, because I already did it once in this message, but those first two points are going to run together. The third one is going to be much more distinct. It's the one that will most strongly show our theme 'Christmas Is For Real.'

"So, about the bible itself. There is no book like it in the history of the world. It took more than a thousand years for fifty different authors to write it. The internal evidence – the writing styles, the words used, the types of literature – that evidence proves that it wasn't written by some really clever guy who was able to fake like he was writing for a bunch of different people over a really long time. I'll explain that more in a little bit when I talk about the gospels themselves. Right now, let's concentrated on the bible in general.

"The bible wasn't put together in its current form until about four hundred years after the last individual book was written. That should give it a huge margin of error, and yet *every* ancient copy, whether it's complete or a fragment of a scroll, is fundamentally the same as all other copies of that book. There is a one half of one percent margin of error between all ancient copies of all books of the bible. That'll be too much information for some of you, so let me see if I can simplify it a little. That means that though thousands, maybe even tens of thousands of people copied the books of the bible over and over again, *they got it right every time*. There may be some things we would call typos, especially with numbers, but they are all in manini details that do not affect the deeper truths. There are thousands of copies or fragments of copies that predate the invention of the printing press, which means that they were all handwritten, and yet they remain virtually error free. No other book can make that claim. Good grief, my computer doesn't get it right that many times!

"Another claim that no other book can make is the bible's extreme popularity, not just today, but in the ancient world. There are over five hundred manuscripts of the bible that were copied before 500 AD, which is a little over four hundred years after the last book was written. The *Iliad* by Homer is one of the oldest historic documents that still exists. It's generally accepted that it was written around 900 BC but there are only fifty manuscripts that can be dated to 400 BC which is five hundred years after its original writing. In their first few hundred years, we find five hundred copies for the bible, fifty for the *Iliad*." Greg raised his hand shoulder high as if measuring something, then dropped to one knee to bring his hand close to the floor. "In fact, there are only six hundred something ancient copies of the *Iliad* in existence today. There are

well over five *thousand* ancient copies of the bible! No other ancient document comes close to the *Iliad*, much less to the bible.

“There’s so much more that I could say, but the information I’ve already given you will be confusing to some of you. Study this in the days to come. Find out if I did tell the truth. Discover what truths time didn’t permit me to present – there are lots of them. For now, let’s briefly examine the gospels.

“As I said earlier, the biblical gospels are the documents upon which Christianity rests. They are eyewitness accounts of the actual events that happened in and around Jerusalem in the early days of the first century. Internal and external evidence tells us that. That’s important because a fundamental rule for studying history is that the closer to the event that the original document is written, the more reliable it is.

“How do we know the biblical gospels are eyewitness accounts? Internally, the gospels present a very accurate portrayal of life in Judea in the first century. We know that from archeological evidence and other ancient documents that have survived. There isn’t anything that rings false as if someone were writing a hundred years later and trying to pretend like they were eyewitnesses.

“If you’ve ever read historical fiction you might easily understand this, especially if you read non-fiction history too. Sometimes a writer of historical fiction will explain something in a way that his contemporary readers can understand, using words and phrases that wouldn’t have been used in the period he’s writing about. You don’t see any of that in the New Testament gospels.

“Additionally, we have to consider the claims the gospels make about Jesus. As I mentioned earlier when I talked about the angels telling the shepherds the Messiah was a peasant, that was not a commonly accepted belief about who he would be. Jesus failed miserably in meeting the first century Jewish religious expectations. They did not imagine that God himself would come in the flesh and they certainly didn’t expect him to be killed on a Roman cross. The Messiah was supposed to restore the glory of the united Israeli kingdom under David and Solomon. Instead he was crucified and Israel remained enslaved to Rome. There was no reason to tell that story – unless the resurrection was true!

“If the biblical gospels were clever fiction, they were really, really clever because then they were written for future generations who would only believe what they believed because the biblical gospels had been written.”

Greg ran a hand through his hair and frowned thoughtfully at the floor. “Was that too hard to follow? Let me see if I can make it easier to understand. You may have heard of a guy named Jules Verne. He was a Frenchman who wrote science fiction in the late 1800s. Some of the books he wrote that you might have seen as movies are *Around the World in Eighty Days*, *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, and *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. In that last one, Verne tells the story of a submarine. Suppose that his submarine was a nuclear submarine, an idea that hadn’t even been imagined yet because nuclear



science didn't exist. But imagine for a moment that Jules Verne wrote about a nuclear submarine in such detail that he actually founded nuclear science as scientists tried to prove or disprove his theories!"

Greg stared at his audience in astonishment. "If the biblical gospels were fiction, they would have been like Jules Verne writing about a nuclear submarine. Most of the ideas about religion in the New Testament go well beyond any religion that existed at that time. If the gospels were clever fiction, they would have driven people to try to prove or disprove the religious theories that they presented. It would have been the greatest act of life imitating art in the history of the world.

"Only one of two things could've happened to establish a religion so radically different from anything that had ever existed. Either the cleverest man to ever live dreamt up a story about a series of events that could theoretically divide time in half, then convinced four other guys to write the story, and over five hundred people to believe they actually saw it happen, *or* God himself came down, altered the nature of man, and established a new religion of *his* design. Which choice is really more fantastical?

"See, what the biblical gospels were saying was this, 'Hey, you lolos, your religion is wacked out because you missed the fulfillment of the Messiah, the very heart of your religion! Get with it! Get on board with Jesus because he's the real deal.' As fiction it was really stupid because it got them beaten, imprisoned and executed. If it was the truth, then the followers of the biblical gospels were way smart because that put them squarely in the corner of their Creator God and gave them security for all eternity.

"In fact, think about this – why *logically* would people who believed in a religion that said they were *the* chosen people of *the* one true God and that they were going to rule the world, why would they abandon that belief for a dude who says, 'Hey, I willingly went to a Roman cross and now I want you to do it too'? There had to be a *big* payoff that had *lots* of evidence of its truth for any Jewish person to follow Christianity. It was way too radical for that time to be accepted without good solid proof."

Greg shook his head slowly as he paced before his congregation. "That was the evidence of the gospels themselves. The internal evidence that proves that they were eyewitness accounts. External to the bible, in the first century, no one raised a big stink about all the stories being told about this Jesus fellow, the peasant who was crucified but didn't stay dead. There's extra-biblical evidence that tells us that people didn't like the Jewish cult that sprang up trying to say that there was only one God and that he had walked among us! They didn't like the cult, but in the first century, when there were lots of people still alive who could deny the claims of the resurrection, no one gave any reliable evidence that the story of Jesus was a lie, *even though they hated the religion that sprang from those stories*. If they could've disproved the stories,

they darn sure would have! The reason that Christianity spread so rapidly and so strongly is because eyewitnesses testified to the truth about Jesus and they couldn't be shut up without killing them. Eyewitnesses wrote biographies – also known as gospels – about what Jesus did and no other eyewitnesses came forward to deny those claims.

“There is not even one other ancient person who had even one biography written about him by an eyewitness. Jesus had four. Even Alexander the Great, one of the most influential historical world leaders, did not have any eyewitness testimonies written about him. In fact, the first biography about Alexander was written four hundred years after he died. And yet, historical scholars don't seriously doubt the accuracy of that biography.

“There really are a lot more things to be said about the historical accuracy of the bible, but I don't think you need more right now. Anyone who wants to argue against the historicity of the bible is not free to call himself an unbiased, rational adherent to scientific method – he can't claim to seek the truth. If he does,” Greg shrugged and shook his head slowly, “he's a liar. The bible is the most historically accurate document that has ever existed or ever will. Since it's historically accurate, you need to read for yourself the claims that it makes.

“Don't take some pompous know-it-all's word for it that you can't believe the bible. Be a true thinker, a logical, rational observer. When you truly step back and consider the world around you, the soul within you and the historical accuracy of the book that claims to be the very Word of God, there's only one logical, rational decision that you can make – Jesus is the divine man who came to live among us so he could die for us and we could live for him.

“Father, you promised that your word would not return void. These hearts have come here tonight searching for the truth or for a logical reason to continue to believe the biblical stories that some fools say are stupid to believe in. Water these seeds that you've planted tonight. Give these people a hunger to go deeper with you, not just in their understanding of you and your word, but in their submission to you to allow your word to change their lives. This Christmas show them the wealth of understanding that they've been missing. Give them the gift of hunger for you. Raise up an army, armed and dangerous and out to defeat the lies of the enemy. Be glorified in us all. We pray in the name of our Savior, who was born in a peasant's home, who died a criminal's death, yet he lives beyond the grave and will one day return as our victorious King. All praise to you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.”