

Parenthetical: Biblical Document History  
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May 18, 2008

Nine months ago we entered into an extended project, and extended study. We decided to do something as a congregation—in a high-tech, very busy world it's a bit unusual. We decided what we were gonna do was take the gospel of Mark and we were gonna read it out loud together, start to finish, as a congregation. We set out to do that nine months ago. The reason was very specific. We want to be a congregation that can speak of Jesus, His words and His works, clearly and accurately any time, any place, anywhere. To do that, you have to read of His words and His works. There's no simple way around it. If you're gonna speak clearly and accurately of Jesus, you need to get a clear picture of Him, and accurate picture. So that's what we've devoted ourselves to these past nine months.

This week and next week we are at the end of the project. We are going to read the final portion of the gospel of Mark. We're gonna do it in two stages. We're gonna read it today, and there's gonna be some material we're gonna cover related to it—very unusual sermon today. Then we're gonna come back next week, read it one more time, and close out the whole study on the gospel of Mark. That's where we're headed today. We're gonna be in Mark chapter 15, and we're gonna start our reading at verse 40, and we're gonna read through chapter 16 verse 8. I'll ask you to follow along as I read, just as we have all the way through this study.

Jesus has breathed His last upon the cross. We finished that out last week. He has died there, on the cross. And we're told, in verse 40 that

*There were also some women looking on from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the Less and Joses, and Salome. When He was in Galilee, they used to follow Him and minister to Him; and there were many other women who came up with Him to Jerusalem.*

They had been part of that large group called His disciples up in Galilee. And they had come with that large group to Jerusalem. And now, from a distance, they watch Him die.

*When evening had already come, because it was the preparation day, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea came, a prominent member of the Council...*

...the Sanhedrin, that had condemned Jesus to death; only Joseph had been one who had voted to let Him live.

*He, himself, was waiting for the kingdom of God; and he gathered up courage and he went before Pilate...*

...the governor who had condemned Jesus...

*...and he asked for the body of Jesus.*

*Pilate wondered if He was dead by this time...*

...it had only been a matter of hours, not days...

*And so summoning the centurion, he questioned him as to whether He was already dead. And ascertaining this from the centurion, he granted to body to Joseph.*

*And Joseph bought a linen cloth, took Him down, wrapped Him in the linen cloth, and laid Him in a tomb which had been hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb.*

*Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses were looking on to see where He was laid.*

*When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the Lesser and Salome, bought spices so that they might come and anoint Him.*

*Very early on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen. And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?"*

*Looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away, although it was extremely large. And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting at the right, wearing a white robe; and they were amazed. And he said to them, "Do not be amazed; you are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who has been crucified. He has risen. He's not here; behold, here is the place where they laid Him. But go, tell His disciples and Peter, 'He has gone ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see Him, just as He told you.'"*

*And they went out and they fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had gripped them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*

We're gonna stop our reading there. Most of your bibles will probably have a little marginal note at this point, a little notation. The New American Study Bible has this note with reference to the verses that follow, verses 9-20 of chapter 16. The New American Study Bible has this statement. It says

Serious doubt exists as to whether these verses belong to the gospel of Mark (verses 9-20). They are absent from important early manuscripts.

And it goes on to say not only absent from early manuscripts...

They display certain peculiarities of vocabulary in the Greek, and of style and theological content, that are unlike the rest of Mark.

It closes with this statement—

His gospel probably ended at verse 8, or its original ending has been lost.

I remember the first time anybody ever told me that. I was a sophomore in college, taking a bible class at a Christian university. I can remember the color of my textbook; I can remember the color of the commentary we had to buy for the gospel of Mark in that course, because they were both on my desk. I remember my room and the slant of the floor. I remember the professor, and I remember his hairstyle. When he told us this, and we read it in our textbooks, he made it clear that it was probably questionable whether we could trust much of Mark at all.

I remember thinking, at that time, "What else did they not tell me in Sunday School?" And even more unsettling, I wondered what else in Mark might not belong. What followed were a number of years that were probably the most extended drift in my spiritual life. What else didn't they tell me in Sunday School? And what else in Mark might not belong?

We're gonna stop in this point in our reading, 'cause I will never read the other verses in Mark—9 through 20—and teach them as scripture. So let's stop our reading here. But as we do so I wanna give you a little lesson. We might be pushed a little bit for time—we started a little bit late today—but we're gonna walk through this. I'm gonna give you a little lesson in document history, a little understanding of how we got the bibles we've got in front of us. There's elements of this I'll leave out; I'm just gonna follow one main track and give you the broad scope of it and the big picture. There's two reasons I wanna do that today.

Number one is it wasn't until I went back and studied document history that I once again regained my confidence in the gospel of Mark and the New Testament. I never did regain any confidence in these last eleven verses. I'm convinced they don't belong. But I gained a stronger grip on the rest of Mark than I ever had before. I want you to be familiar with document history to strengthen your faith. Secondly, this is, I believe, the number one press point in Christian stand for the truth in the present generation. Over the past decade there have been more best-sellers on the New York best seller list than I can ever recall attacking Christianity, and attacking it on one central issue, and that is the reliability of the documents we believe in. And if we think we are gonna reach our culture by debating Christian hairstyles, Christian worship styles, Christian dress codes, Christian events schedules...we are totally mistaken. Because the world around us is saying our book is not true. And if we can not answer to that with diligence and integrity, we've lost our mission, and we've lost our voice to a whole generation. So let's look at it, document history.

The New Testament events happened almost two thousand years ago, and so we're looking at a time line that stretches almost two thousand years, from the actual events we just read of—Jesus Christ crucified, buried, and raised again—we have almost two thousand years from then to now. During that time the transmission of that story, the transmission of the witness and the testimony to those events began with individuals that spoke of them, people who had actually seen the events spoke of them; they talked about them; they went out and explained to others what they saw, what they heard of Jesus. As they presented their testimony and they began to go forward and explain that to people, people began to respond.

And then as the years went by, and those first eyewitnesses were beginning to disappear from the scene, their testimony was put into writing. It was recorded; it was written down in documents so that other generations would have the record. Or they could pass the story on to another area the eyewitness couldn't get to. And they began to spread the story by written words. We don't have any more...any of those written originals left. We do not have a single one of those written originals. What we do have is the copies that began to be made of those. And for almost 1500 years, until we had the printing press developed, the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament were copied by hand, generation by generation by generation, and passed down from generation to generation.

Then, eventually, as we came to people needing to hear the New Testament in the English language, to have it translated in our language, those copies that had been made for generations of generations—hand copies of that Greek manuscript, thousands of 'em—began to be collected, and they were collated, as it were. They were put together and they were compared to one another. And scholars would begin to...and students of the word, and individuals that were desperate to know the truth, would collect these copies. They would put 'em together, they would compare 'em, and they would isolate where there might be differences and try to understand those. And they began to put together what I would call—and it's not a technical term—but they began to put together a master copy that collated all these various copies. And then from that master copy they would make a translation from the Greek to the English, or the Spanish, or whatever language the reader needed it in.

That's the general history in a really simplified form. There's two things I can't show on this chart. And one, to me, is the most fantastic element; it is the most important element, the thing that I can't show on a chart like that. It's what I would call kinda the compressed overlap of the testimony and the writing of those original eyewitness reports. The moment these events occurred, eyewitnesses began to talk about 'em. And they talked about 'em for the next sixty years; maybe even longer, if some of those eyewitnesses lived longer. But we know many of them lived up to sixty years later. And they went out and they told the story of Jesus—buried, crucified, raised from the dead; and they did so as eyewitnesses.

You have to understand this. Those original proclaimers of the gospel message were not moral theorists. They were not ethical teachers. They were not religious philosophers. They were not moral guides. They took a stand; they took a position simply as eyewitnesses, saying, 'We saw this! We saw it! And we heard it.' In fact the requirement, the selection process of the twelve apostles described in the book of Acts, when Judas had betrayed Him and left, and they needed to round out the number to twelve again, the criteria is given. And to be an apostle you had to have been an eyewitness from the beginning to the end. You had to be one who could stand in front of somebody and say 'I saw Him! I saw Him minister; I saw Him work; I heard Him teach; I saw Him crucified, buried, and raised again. I saw it.' And you could be confused about all the ramifications theologically. That was ok. What you had to be sure about was you had seen it. And that's why they don't read like moral teachers and religious philosophers and systematic theologians. These are the documents of eyewitnesses. And they told those stories.

And as they told those stories over the next sixty years, people began to write 'em down. And our gospels were written. The amazing part of that, and the part you need to recognize, is they began writing while the eyewitnesses were still alive! They talked to those eyewitnesses, and they wrote their stories down as those eyewitnesses gave them to them. In fact, if you study the way those gospels are written and you compare it to the way Greek and Romans wrote histories at the time, it follows the same style. These people, these writers, knew they were writing history! And they were doing it the way the classical Romans and Greeks wanted their history written—they wanted it to come from eyewitnesses. The Romans and Greeks were very particular about what history should read like, and what myth should read like. And they wanted eyewitnesses with history. The New Testament writers wrote eyewitness testimony.

It has all the oddities and the differentiations you would expect of eyewitness testimony. They walk in the tomb, and they notice he's on the right—a little detail. It's just the type of thing that eyewitness picks up on. The strange man was on the right, sitting down.

Most importantly as they wrote those eyewitness accounts, and this is so important, they wrote down the names. Mary Magdalene—and when they wrote that name down, they were saying, ‘Go check with her if you want.’ Mary, the mother of James the Lesser and Joses—see, Mary was one of the most common names in Palestine at that time. You had to be specific when you said Mary; so they’d understand who, they’d named her and they made sure you understood who exactly who it was. And then Salome; Joseph of Arimathea...they named names in the lifespan of the eyewitnesses.

You say, ‘Larry, why are you making such a big thing about this?’ It’s because in document history and the development of documents, sixty years—sixty years with an overlap of eyewitness and written document...sixty years with an overlap of eyewitnesses and document with names named is absolutely unheard-of in the way that myth and legends develop. It does not happen that way! You need at least two to three generations for myth and legend to develop. That is a time frame entirely too small for a myth or a legend or a tradition to take hold and grow. And you cannot build myth and legend in a short, compressed time by naming names of people who are eyewitnesses.

If you study the scholars who have gone into the Middle East and studied oral communities and how they pass on oral teaching, and you will understand that this is eyewitness testimony. This isn’t campfire legend. This isn’t the church singing “Kum Ba Ya” around a fire. These are people giving eyewitness testimony, and many of them dying because of it. That, to me, is one of the most astounding things about this. Within sixty years of the events, the eyewitness records were written—with the names named.

The copying process is fascinating also. Just make a quick comment about it. The earliest copies we have date within a hundred years of the originals. You need to understand—in document history that is not only exceptional, it is unique. The closest copy we have of the writings of Moses, the closest copy we have to the originals is almost two thousand years after the original. And we don’t question its accuracy because of the Hebrew copy system, and their tradition of destroying a document after they had copied it. They didn’t want old ones lying around. That’s a two thousand year gap. In the New Testament it is under a hundred years. In fact, the copies were being made while there were still eyewitnesses available to check ‘em.

The copy process that went on for the next fifteen hundred years produced four to five thousand Greek manuscripts. The collation process that goes with them is a fascinating one, of taking those copies and comparing them to one another; some of them very old, some of them more recent; some very early in the copy history, some are copies of copies of copies. But you can compare ‘em. You can put ‘em together and you can understand and see very quickly where the differences are. It is no great task to understand ‘Ok, this copy differs from this copy,’ and you can put ‘em together and you can see the differences, and you can understand why. It is not hard in this text, with what they call textual criticism, to identify what are the passages there’s confusion about. And there’s very few that are significant. Most of the time it’s words that are misspelled, or a word order that gets confused. There are very few passages...in fact I would say there are under five that are like the gospel of Mark 16:9-20. And those are clearly identified and marked in your translations. And if your translation...if your English translation does not note that about Mark 16, I wouldn’t use that translation, or at least that edition that you’re looking at, because it is not hard to find.

A popular writer...on the book jacket...one of the more popular writers recently attacking the textual history of the scriptures...on the back cover of the book jacket the publishers are trying to promote the book, and they describe how this man *reveals* that John 8, the story of the woman in adultery, was not in the original manuscripts. They *reveal* that! As if nobody ever knew it. If you looked at the textual history, it’s very evident that the early manuscripts didn’t have that. And it’s just a matter of integrity to note that in the translation. And there’s only three to five passages like that.

I’ll give you an example of what a...of what I would call that master copy looks like. When I’m preparing a sermon in the New Testament this is a Greek manuscript I work off of [shows picture of a Greek text]. The top part is the Greek manuscript, the text. Right in here is an unusual section. You can’t see it in detail and wouldn’t be able to understand it, probably, if you did, ‘cause it’s kind of technical and lots of abbreviations in this issue. In that little section right there it’ll describe to you where the manuscript variants are, exactly what they are, and then they’ll refer you to another textual commentary that’ll help you follow through and understand exactly how they dealt with those differences among the manuscripts.

People, there is no other document in all of history dealt with like this. And it is easy to understand what sort of text you're dealing with, where the problems are, and how to understand 'em. So when I'm done and I spend time in this like I have for the last thirty years, I walk away and I say, 'You know what? We have a reliable record of eyewitness testimonies to the death, the burial, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Boy, I told you we were going to go over, and we are.

For the Christian, that should be encouraging. I can't say it strong enough—faith should never be afraid of the facts. It should never, ever, be afraid of the facts. You do not hide your head in the sand about this. You get out there and you deal with it. In fact, you demand the facts. You demand the facts when the Mormon stands there and says the New Testament has been hopelessly corrupted and we needed the prophetic translations of Joseph Smith to go back and correct it. And you look at them and you say 'Give me the evidence that they were ever corrupted. Show me when, where, and how.' When a speculative writer produces something like "The DaVinci Code" and talks about conspiracies and manuscript transmission, and does it under the cloak of some sorta historical research, you demand the facts! And when you sit in that classroom and the professor tells you that the assured discoveries of textual criticism tells you that the Bible grew out of oral tradition within the church over a period of centuries, you look at 'em and you say "Prove it!" They can not.

This is really personal to me. I finally entered into the pastorate with a commitment that every generation would have pastors that knew these issues, that go back to the manuscripts, and could deal with these questions. And the reason when I look at the next generation and I recruit someone like Ashley, is because I'm not interested in how powerful a speaker, how well he generates and connects with the younger generation. I wanted an individual who has sat in that classroom and been hammered on this issue and has had his faith survive and is ready to take his stand for the next generation and preach this as the truth.

For the seeker, I wanna say this so strong. I want this to be so encouraging to you. You don't have to take a blind leap of faith to be a Christian. You will have to take a *step* of faith. We all do. But you do not have to check your mind at the door. You do not have to blindly leap. You can ask the hard questions, say "Show me the facts," and give your faith something to grip. But with you there is also a challenge. Don't take the easy way and simply say "It's all a myth. A professor told me that."

Let's stand.

*Our Father in heaven,*

*We began this series with a desire to know Your truth. As we come to the end of it, Father, my prayer and my desire is that we end with a commitment to preserve Your truth, to speak it accurately and clearly, with confidence. Grant us that, Father, in Jesus' name. Amen.*

You're dismissed.