

8-SESSION BIBLE STUDY

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NAVIGATING

A GUIDE TO FAITHFULLY READING

GOSPEL

THE ACCOUNTS OF JESUS'S LIFE

TRUTH

REBECCA McLAUGHLIN

N A V I G A T I N G

A GUIDE TO FAITHFULLY READING

G O S P E L

THE ACCOUNTS OF JESUS'S LIFE

T R U T H

REBECCA McLAUGHLIN

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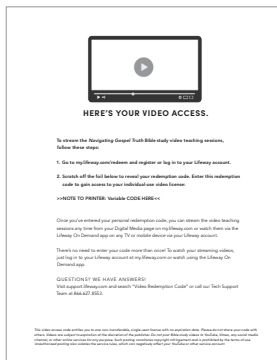
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HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

Welcome to *Navigating Gospel Truth: A Guide to Faithfully Reading the Accounts of Jesus's Life*. This study will expand your understanding and application of Scripture as you explore the different literary genres and devices used by the Gospel writers to communicate the life and teachings of Jesus.

Because we believe discipleship happens best in community, we encourage you to do this study together in a group setting. Or, if you're doing this alone, consider enlisting a friend or two to go through it at the same time. This will give you study friends to pray with and connect with over coffee or through text or email so you can chat about what you're learning.

HOW TO WATCH YOUR VIDEOS



With the purchase of this book, you have access to teaching videos that provide content to help you better understand and apply what you just studied in the previous session. **You'll find detailed information for how to access the teaching videos on the card inserted in the back of your Bible study book.**

WHAT'S **INSIDE**

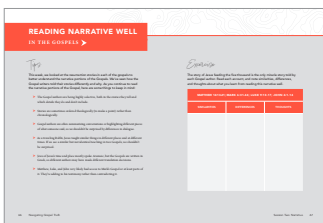
HERE ARE SOME THINGS YOU'RE GOING TO FIND IN THE STUDY:



Group Pages: As you meet with your group each week, these pages provide a place to take notes from the video teaching and discussion questions to debrief the video teaching.



Personal Study: Each week you'll have five days of personal study.



Tips/Exercise: At the conclusion of Sessions Two through Seven, you'll find closing pages that include important highlights of the specific genre or device studied in that session, plus an exercise to help you apply what you've learned.

LEADING A GROUP?

Whether a large or small group, we have what you need to lead women through *Navigating Gospel Truth*. Visit lifeway.com/gospeltruth for free leader downloads, including a Leader Guide PDF, promotional resources, and more.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Rebecca McLaughlin holds a Ph.D. in Renaissance Literature from Cambridge University and a theology degree from Oak Hill College in London. She is the author of *Confronting Christianity: 12 Hard Questions for the World's Largest Religion* (2019), which was named book of the year by *Christianity Today*, and of *10 Questions Every Teen Should Ask (and Answer) about Christianity* (2021), *The Secular Creed: Engaging 5 Contemporary Claims* (2021), *Is Christmas Unbelievable? Four Questions Everyone Should Ask About the World's Most Famous Story* (2021), and *Confronting Jesus: 9 Encounters with the Hero of the Gospels* (2022). She lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with her husband, Bryan, her two daughters, Miranda and Eliza, and her son, Luke.

INTRODUCTION

“Would you leave your mummy if she needed you?”

I was near the top of the ski slope and my nine-year-old Eliza was looking at me intently. Over the last few years, my husband, Bryan, (who can ski backward, forward, sideways, and probably upside down for all I know) has been teaching our girls to ski while I took care of their baby brother. But this year, Luke turned three and was deemed old enough to learn. Bryan undertook his training, while Miranda (eleven) and Eliza (nine) helped me. I’ve only skied for three days in my life, and I’ve spread those days over three decades, so I’m truly terrible. But Eliza was especially patient with me, despite clearly wishing she could go off and have fun with her sister. I told her she should go. She said no. I said, “Really, I’ll be OK.” She said, “No, it’s fine.” I said, “I want you to have fun!” That’s when she asked if I’d abandon my own mother if she needed me, and I shut up. Secretly, I was thankful she hadn’t left.

In one sense, skiing is straightforward. You get lifted up a mountain with long, slippery things on your feet. Then you slide back to the bottom again. But it’s not actually that simple. If you just stand on the mountain and point down, you’ll soon find yourself in a painful and humiliating heap. (Trust me—I’ve been there!) You need to practice balancing on your skis, controlling your speed, and navigating the terrain. There are parts of the run where you can just go straight down and take in the view. But much of the time you need to zigzag back and forth, and sometimes bumps and jumps and icy patches can throw you off. A three-year-old can get the hang of it. But it takes work.

When it comes to reading the Gospel accounts of Jesus’s life, we’re faced with an exhilarating ride and an utterly breathtaking view. But to navigate the Gospels well, we need to get a sense of what the Gospels are, we need to find our feet, and we need to get a grasp of the terrain. This Bible study is designed to help you do just that. We’ll look together at the different kinds of writing that we find in the four Gospels, and we’ll get some practice on the slopes.

In Session One, we’ll ask why we should trust the Gospels as authentic biographies of Jesus in the first place. We’ll get a sense of when they were

written and by whom, and why we should believe they give us access to the actual life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.

Session Two will look at narrative: how the Gospel authors tell us stories about Jesus and what we should make of the differences between the ways that different Gospel authors tell us the same story.

In Session Three, we'll explore metaphor and see that some of the most important and demanding truths the Gospel authors tell us are packaged in non-literal language.

Session Four will focus on the stories Jesus told and how His parables sift His audience: pulling those who have ears to hear in and pushing those who don't really want to hear from Jesus out.

In Session Five, we'll look at five other teaching tools that Jesus used: hyperbole, commandment, blessing, contradiction, and aphorism. Like moguls on the ski slope, these can throw us off if we're not aware of how they work.

Session Six will work through five examples of dialogue in the Gospels. We'll see Jesus laying down challenges to His conversation partners and note how His listeners respond to the push and pull.

In Session Seven, we'll tackle prophecy from different angles, discovering how understanding more of prediction, poetry, personification, and apocalyptic can help us navigate prophecy in the Gospels.

Finally, in Session Eight, we'll reflect on what we've learned and chart the course ahead from here!

On my most recent ski day, I only attempted one green run. I did it a couple of times, and I began to get a sense of the mountain from that slope. At points, it intersected with another run, and I had to be careful to steer toward the "family slope" when the runs diverged again. If I'd grown my skills enough, I could have tried skiing other slopes and gotten to know the mountain more. But one run was all I could handle that day! The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John offer us four distinct-but-connected paths through Jesus's life. They all arrive in the same place, and at times, two Gospels fully intersect. But to read each Gospel

well, we need to get a sense of how the four biographies of Jesus complement each other—even when, at first glance, they might look like they contradict.

I'm terrified much of the time when I'm trying to ski, and there might be times in the coming weeks when the terrain feels scary or disorienting. But as we get better at reading the Gospel accounts, my hope is we'll all become more captivated by the view of Jesus they offer, more confident in our understanding of the Gospel story, and more certain that Jesus really is the Son of God, who came to give His life for us so we could live with Him forevermore.

Just as practicing on one slope helps you when you're faced with others, I hope this time spent in the Gospels will equip you to read other parts of the Bible more faithfully too. Each book in our Bibles is built on the mountain of Christ. So, it's worth tackling the double black diamonds! But in this study, we'll stay on the Gospel slopes and see how different kinds of writing help us understand who Jesus is.

Perhaps when you've finished the course, you can think of someone in your life who might be ready to go through it with you, similar to how Eliza was ready to coach me on the slopes. Like mine, that person's progress might be slow at first. But we all learn faster when we stick together, and sometimes teaching someone else is the best way to really cement what you've learned for yourself.

Let's get started!

Rebecca McLaughlin



SESSION ONE

WHY TRUST
the
Gospels?



When people ask me why I am a Christian, I sometimes answer: “*The Lord of the Rings*.” It’s not the whole story, but my dad read me J. R. R. Tolkien’s unbelievable books when I was a kid, and entering his beautiful, fictional world made me yearn for an even more beautiful reality. The authors of the Gospels welcome us into that much more beautiful world: it’s our world seen through different eyes, with Jesus at the center of it all.

It’s not that the Gospels paint a shiny, happy, sugarcoated picture of reality. Just like in Tolkien’s fictional world, painful, terrible, and heartbreaking things happen in the real world of the Gospels again and again. But Jesus walks right through the heartbreak—even death itself—and comes out on the other side. The authors of the Gospels offer us the opportunity to follow Jesus into what Matthew, Mark, and Luke most often call “the kingdom of heaven” or “the kingdom of God,” and John’s Gospel tends to call “eternal life”—a world where Jesus is the King and all that’s wrong will be put gloriously right.¹ But in order to take their offer seriously, we need to ask ourselves if we can trust these Gospel authors. Are they writing four biographies of one first-century, Jewish man known as Jesus of Nazareth, who lived in history and died upon a Roman cross? Or are they more like Tolkien: creating a beautiful, fictional world?

This week, we’re going to ask some searching questions, like, “Who wrote the Gospels anyway?”; “Weren’t they written too long after Jesus’s life to be trusted?”; “Don’t they contradict each other?”; and “How do we know we even have the right Gospel texts and that their message hasn’t been lost in translation?”

Instead of being unreliable mythologies, as some skeptics suggest, we’ll see that all four Gospels were written well within the lifetimes of the eyewitnesses to Jesus’s life and that they record authentic testimony about historical events. We’ll think about translation and how we can be confident we’re getting access to what Jesus really did and taught. We’ll also take a snapshot of the process used by scholars to determine that the texts in our Bibles reflect the texts the Gospel authors wrote so many centuries ago.

In our study this week, we’ll only be able to scratch the surface of the questions you might have. To learn more, I recommend two recent books: *Can We Trust the Gospels?* (2018) by New Testament scholar Peter J. Williams and *Why I Trust the Bible* (2021) by William D. Mounce. The more I’ve looked into these questions for myself, the more confident I’ve felt that the Gospels are reliable biographies of Jesus. My hope is that after this first week of study you will feel the same.

SESSION *One*



To access the video teaching sessions, use the instructions in the back of your Bible study book.



NOTES

Watch Rebecca's Session One video.

Download the *Navigating Gospel Truth* leader guide at lifeway.com/gospeltruth

GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

Which of the evidences for why we should trust the Gospels is most compelling to you? Why?

What is significant about women being named in the Gospels?

How does the inclusion of embarrassing moments for some characters increase the Gospels' credibility?

Do you feel better equipped to answer someone's doubts about the authenticity of the Gospels? Explain.

What part of the video teaching was most important for you?

DAY 1

THE AUTHORS

When people ask me what my favorite work of fiction is, I'm torn between the aforementioned *The Lord of the Rings* and Jane Austen's *Persuasion*. Both Tolkien and Austen were deeply influenced by their Christian faith. Far from being just a cultural Christian, Austen wrote family devotions for her and her sister, including prayers where she asked the Lord to protect them from missing out on salvation and being "Christians only in name."

Since her death, Jane Austen has become extremely famous. But during her lifetime, her novels were published anonymously. Her first book, *Sense and Sensibility*, simply declared that it was written "By A Lady." Her second, *Pride and Prejudice*, was "By the Author of *Sense and Sensibility*." Her third, *Mansfield Park*, was "By the Author of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*." You might be spotting a theme! When it comes to novels, what matters is the quality of the writing, not who wrote it. We might be very interested to know the author once we've fallen in love with the book. But the book stands on its own two fictional feet.

Biographies are different. If I'm reading a biography, I want to know the author isn't writing fiction. I want to know the author has done his or her research. The identity of the biographer doesn't matter in and of itself. But I need to know the author is a reliable guide to the person he or she is describing, not just someone who is good at making things up. So, what do we know about the authors of the four biographies of Jesus known as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John?

None of the Gospels names its author, and only one of them claims directly that its author was an eyewitness of Jesus's life. A bit like Jane Austen when she called herself "the Author of *Sense and Sensibility*," the author of John's Gospel called himself "the disciple Jesus loved." But the names Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were attached to the four Gospels very early on—very likely as soon as they were being passed around the first- and second-century churches—and we get clues about who those authors were both in our Bibles and in other early Christian writings. Today, we're going to track down some of those clues.

MARK'S GOSPEL

Most experts agree that Mark's Gospel was written first. Even non-Christian scholars date Mark between thirty-five and forty-five years after Jesus's death (i.e., between AD 60 and 70). Some Christian scholars think it was written even earlier. Either way, Mark was written well within the lifetime of eyewitnesses to Jesus. So, who was Mark, and how do we know he was consulting with these witnesses? A Christian leader named Papias, who was writing around the turn of the first century (roughly AD 95–110), recorded the testimony of a man known as John the Elder, who said that Mark based his Gospel on the memories of the apostle Peter, who was one of Jesus's closest friends.

This testimony lines up with what we learn about a man named Mark in Acts 12. That chapter tells how Peter was led out of prison by an angel in the middle of the night. At first, he thought he might be dreaming but then realized he was out of the prison and went to find the other Christians.

READ ACTS 12:11-14. What things do we learn about a man named Mark in verse 12?

How does this story add weight to Papias's claim that Mark wrote his Gospel based on Peter's memories?

We also find a reference to Mark in Peter's first New Testament letter.

READ 1 PETER 5:13. How did Peter describe Mark?

This doesn't mean that Mark was literally Peter's son. But it does mean that Peter was Mark's mentor. So, Mark had lots of opportunities to consult with Peter and other eyewitnesses of Jesus's life. In Acts 12:25, Colossians 4:10, and Philemon 24, we find that Mark was also a close companion of the apostle Paul. Paul did not know Jesus during His earthly ministry, but he was well known to the other apostles and was given specific revelation from God.

How does Mark's relationships with two apostles (Peter and Paul) give us confidence in him as a biographer of Jesus?

MATTHEW'S GOSPEL

Matthew's Gospel is generally agreed to be later than Mark's, with many experts dating it between AD 60 to 80. Papias also mentioned Matthew, suggesting that he may originally have written his Gospel in Hebrew or Aramaic (the common language of Jews of Jesus's time and place). Matthew, Mark, and Luke all include someone named Matthew in their lists of Jesus's twelve apostles (Matt. 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15).

READ MATTHEW 10:2-4. What do we learn about Matthew from these verses?

Like Simon, whose other name was Peter, it seems that Matthew also had another name.

READ MATTHEW 9:9, MARK 2:14, AND LUKE 5:27. What was Matthew's other name?

The apostle Matthew didn't play a big role in any of the Gospels, but our earliest evidence suggests that this Matthew became a biographer of Jesus and wrote the Gospel known by his name.

LUKE'S GOSPEL

Luke's Gospel was likely written at a similar time to Matthew, between AD 60 and 80. But unlike the other Gospel authors, Luke went on to write a sequel, which we know as the book of Acts. Luke was also a companion of Paul's.

READ COLOSSIANS 4:14. What do we learn about Luke from Paul's description?

READ 2 TIMOTHY 4:11. What do we learn about Luke and Mark from these verses?

This verse indicates that both Mark and Luke were part of Paul's inner circle of ministry partners, meaning they probably would have known each other.

Mark is the shortest Gospel. It takes about an hour and a half to read. Luke is the longest and takes about two and a half hours to read. How does the difference in length help us understand why Luke might have wanted to write a Gospel, even if he was already aware of Mark's and had read it?

JOHN'S GOSPEL

Most scholars think that John's Gospel was the last one to be written, around sixty years after the events it records (approximately AD 90–95). But it's also the only Gospel that claims in the text itself to have been written by an eyewitness. The name John was attached to this Gospel from the earliest records we have, and by the end of the second century, its author was being identified with John the son of Zebedee, who was one of Jesus's twelve apostles. Many contemporary scholars follow this identification. Others, like British New Testament scholar Richard Bauckham, argue that John was actually written by another disciple of Jesus: a young, Jerusalem-based disciple, who was later known as John the Elder.² As you may remember from our discussion of Mark, John the Elder was the one who made the connection between Mark and the apostle Peter. In either case, the author of John was a very close disciple of Jesus and an eyewitness to much of what he wrote in his Gospel. He also would have had access to the testimony of other eyewitnesses.

READ JOHN 13:23-25; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7. John referenced an anonymous disciple in all these passages. How did he describe that disciple?

READ JOHN 21:20-24. How did the author reveal in this passage that he is the disciple Jesus loved?

What did this disciple say about his testimony and his book in verse 24?

Perhaps you've heard people claiming that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were chosen from a larger set of early biographies of Jesus for political reasons and that if we look at other so-called Gospels—like the Gospel of Thomas or the Gospel of Mary—we'll find a very different view of Jesus. But none of these other so-called Gospels were written as early or tied as closely to the actual eyewitnesses of Jesus's life as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Also, rather than offering full biographies of Jesus, they tend to be more like mystical collections of His sayings. If you read them for yourself, you'll find they really can't compete with the Gospels in our Bibles. Even New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman, who is a famous skeptic of the Christian faith, assures us that the four New Testament Gospels are, "the oldest and best sources we have for knowing about the life of Jesus," and that this is "the view of all serious historians of antiquity of every kind, from committed evangelical Christians to hard-core atheists."³

We've covered a lot of ground today! Take a few minutes to imagine what it would have been like to be an actual eyewitness of Jesus's life and ministry on earth, or even to talk with people who had been eyewitnesses like the Gospel authors did.

Praise God He's given us not just one but four incredible biographies of Jesus, so that even two-thousand years after His death, we can know so much detail about His life and teachings.

DAY 2

THE EYEWITNESSES

My grandpa was the eldest of seven kids, and he left school at age fourteen so he could work to help support his family. He met my grandma when they were both teenagers, and they married at age twenty. They're now in their eighties. My grandma and grandpa tell many stories from their teens and early twenties, including the story of my mother's birth over sixty years ago. They don't remember everything that happened then, of course. But they remember the highlights.

We saw yesterday that the Gospels were written by people who were either eyewitnesses themselves of Jesus's life or close enough in time to eyewitnesses to gather their testimony. Depending on how old you are, you may be able to remember things from thirty, forty, fifty, or even sixty years ago. But even if you can't, I bet you know people who can!

Today, we'll meet some of the eyewitnesses the Gospel authors point us to. Many of those witnesses traveled with Jesus from place to place, watching His acts and learning His teachings. It was their full-time job. After Jesus's death and resurrection, they spent their time proclaiming what they'd heard and seen. All four Gospels contain testimony of named eyewitnesses, but today, we'll focus in particular on some of the eyewitnesses in Luke's Gospel.

READ LUKE 1:1-3. What did Luke say the original eyewitnesses and servants of the word had done (vv. 1-2)?

What did Luke say he had done (v. 3)?

One of the first eyewitnesses Luke pointed us to is Jesus's mother, Mary. In particular, Luke recorded a private conversation Mary had with an angel, who told her she was going to be the mother of God's own Son (Luke 1:26-38)! Most of the other named witnesses in the first two chapters of Luke—such as Elizabeth, Zechariah, Simeon, or Anna—were already old at the time of Jesus's birth. But Jesus's mother Mary would almost certainly have been a teenager. We know she

was still alive after Jesus's death and resurrection (Acts 1:14). So, Luke may have heard Mary's story of meeting the angel from her own lips!

Have you ever thought about Mary the mother of Jesus as a source of eyewitness testimony for the Gospels? Imagine Mary telling her story of meeting the angel and hearing she'd be the mother of God's Son. How does this change your perspective as you read the beginning of Luke's Gospel?

In Luke 5, Luke introduced us to other named eyewitnesses.

READ LUKE 5:3-11. What are the names of the three fishermen?

How did Simon Peter react when he saw the miraculous catch of fish (v. 8)?

What did Jesus tell them they were going to do from now on (v. 10)?

Simon Peter, James, and John went on to become three of Jesus's closest disciples. But Peter's first response to Jesus was to recognize his own sinfulness. Peter knew he had no business being with someone as holy as Jesus! The next disciple we see Jesus call comes from a category of people well known for their sinfulness. He was a tax collector: a Jewish man conspiring with the Roman oppressors and making money off the backs of his fellow Jews.

READ LUKE 5:27-28. How did Levi's response to Jesus's call mirror Peter, James, and John's response in verse 11?

When Jesus chose to select twelve apostles from among His larger group of disciples, Simon Peter, James and John, and Levi—who was also known as Matthew—were among the twelve.

READ LUKE 6:12-16. Write out the list of names and the descriptions Luke gave.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.
- 11.
- 12.

These twelve Jewish apostles mirror the twelve tribes of Israel. When Matthew and Mark listed the apostles in their Gospels, all the names are the same except for Judas son of James. They list “Thaddeus” instead, which was likely a name given to Judas son of James to differentiate him from Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus. (If I had been called Judas, I’d have gone by a different name too!)

Which other names occur twice in the list of Jesus’s apostles?

You might have thought that Jesus picking twelve guys with different names would have been less confusing. But the frequency of certain names in the Gospels is evidence of their authenticity. From other texts and records from that period, it seems that Simon was the most common name for Jewish men of Jesus’s time and place. Judas was the fourth most common, and James was the eleventh.⁴

Some of the apostles, like Simon Peter, play major roles in the rest of Luke’s Gospel. But most of the apostles are never mentioned by name after Luke 6. Nevertheless, being named here makes them important eyewitnesses of Jesus’s ministry. In the first chapter of Luke’s sequel (the book of Acts), Jesus specifically described them in that way.

READ ACTS 1:8. What did Jesus say His twelve apostles were going to be?

The twelve apostles had an important role. As disciples of Jesus, they would have traveled with Him everywhere to watch what He did and learn what He said. After Jesus's death and resurrection, the apostles traveled around preaching the good news and kick-starting churches. But Luke made it clear these twelve apostles were not Jesus's only disciples. He gave us other named eyewitnesses among that larger group.

READ LUKE 8:1-3. In verses 2 and 3, how did Luke describe the group of women who traveled with Jesus?

What's the name of the first woman Luke highlighted?

Mary was the most common name for Jewish women of that time and place.⁵ What additional name did Luke give us for this Mary, and what else did he say about her?

People in that culture didn't have last names like we do. So, this Mary was distinguished from other women named Mary by adding the place she came from: *Magdala*. For similar reasons, Jesus in the Gospels was sometimes called "Jesus of Nazareth."

What's the name of the second woman Luke mentioned?

Joanna was the fifth most common name for Jewish women of that time and place.⁶ How is this Joanna distinguished from other women with her same name?

The Herod who was Joanna's husband's boss was not the Herod who was King when Jesus was born but one of his sons, Herod Antipas. Herod Antipas ruled over Galilee during Jesus's public ministry. Chuza's role was an important one in Herod's court, so Joanna would have been a wealthy, well-connected woman.

What is the name of the third woman Luke listed among Jesus's female disciples?

Susanna was a relatively uncommon name, which may be why Luke did not give us any more details to distinguish this Susanna from other women with her name. But Luke listed all three women as eyewitnesses of Jesus's ministry. As we'll see next week, two of them were also eyewitnesses of Jesus's resurrection.

Imagine what it would have been like for these women to follow Jesus as He went through cities and villages preaching and healing. How does it change your view of the Gospels to know the authors relied on the eyewitness testimony of both men and women?

After Luke described Jesus ascending into heaven in the book of Acts (Acts 1:9-11), he once more listed the names of the twelve apostles, minus Judas Iscariot who had betrayed Jesus. Then Luke wrote, "All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers" (Acts 1:14, ESV). Jesus's male and female disciples, including His mother Mary, were Luke's eyewitness sources for his Gospel account of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection, and they were praying together again after Jesus's ascension! When Luke came to write his Gospel, many of these first eyewitnesses would still have been alive. They'd been telling their stories for decades, and Luke captured their testimony for us!

Praise God that He worked through the lives of individual men and women who knew Jesus well to enable us to learn about His life, death, and resurrection.

Spend some time praying that the Lord would give you the courage to be a witness to Jesus in your own community.

DAY 3

THE DIFFERENCES

It's Saturday morning as I'm sitting at my desk writing this paragraph. My husband is out with the kids for their Saturday morning routine: swimming lessons followed by shopping. They usually have a good time, but last Saturday, everyone came home grumpy. Luke, our three-year-old, was crying. I picked him up and asked him what was wrong. He said, "Daddy was mean." I asked him, "What did Daddy do that was mean?" He replied, "Eliza said Daddy was mean." I interviewed the four eyewitnesses about what had happened in the car on the way home. Apparently, the girls started fighting in the car. Bryan played referee in Miranda's favor, so Eliza was unhappy with him. Luke sided with Eliza, hence his summary: "Daddy was mean." I found common data but four different perspectives.

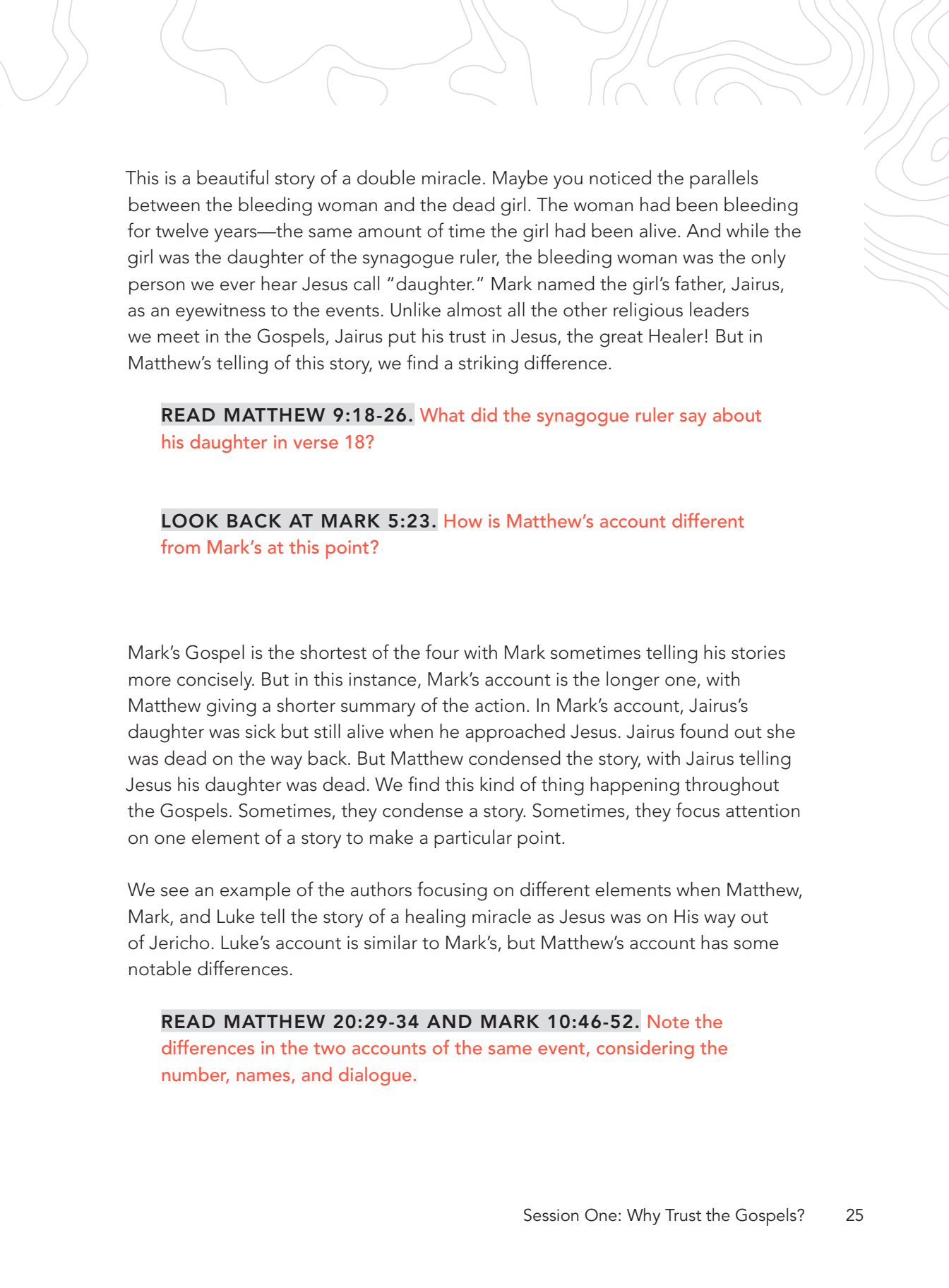
Yesterday, we met some of the eyewitnesses of Jesus's life and ministry and considered how their testimonies about Jesus shaped the Gospels. But if the Gospels are based on eyewitness testimonies, what are we to make of the times when two Gospels tell the same story but seem to contradict each other? That's the question we'll explore today by looking at one of the most beautiful stories of Jesus's healing power in the Bible. The story is told in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. But we'll focus on Matthew and Mark's accounts.

READ MARK 5:21-43. What details did Mark give us about the man who came to Jesus and the man's request (vv. 22-23)?

What event took place on the way to Jairus's house (vv. 25-34)?

What message arrived for Jairus in verse 35?

How did Jesus respond to the message, and what did He accomplish in the rest of the story (vv. 36-43)?



This is a beautiful story of a double miracle. Maybe you noticed the parallels between the bleeding woman and the dead girl. The woman had been bleeding for twelve years—the same amount of time the girl had been alive. And while the girl was the daughter of the synagogue ruler, the bleeding woman was the only person we ever hear Jesus call “daughter.” Mark named the girl’s father, Jairus, as an eyewitness to the events. Unlike almost all the other religious leaders we meet in the Gospels, Jairus put his trust in Jesus, the great Healer! But in Matthew’s telling of this story, we find a striking difference.

READ MATTHEW 9:18-26. What did the synagogue ruler say about his daughter in verse 18?

LOOK BACK AT MARK 5:23. How is Matthew’s account different from Mark’s at this point?

Mark’s Gospel is the shortest of the four with Mark sometimes telling his stories more concisely. But in this instance, Mark’s account is the longer one, with Matthew giving a shorter summary of the action. In Mark’s account, Jairus’s daughter was sick but still alive when he approached Jesus. Jairus found out she was dead on the way back. But Matthew condensed the story, with Jairus telling Jesus his daughter was dead. We find this kind of thing happening throughout the Gospels. Sometimes, they condense a story. Sometimes, they focus attention on one element of a story to make a particular point.

We see an example of the authors focusing on different elements when Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell the story of a healing miracle as Jesus was on His way out of Jericho. Luke’s account is similar to Mark’s, but Matthew’s account has some notable differences.

READ MATTHEW 20:29-34 AND MARK 10:46-52. Note the differences in the two accounts of the same event, considering the number, names, and dialogue.

Rather than mentioning both blind men, Mark focused on one and told us his name—*Bartimaeus*—because this blind man evidently went on to be an eyewitness of Jesus’s ministry. We’ll think more about the languages of the Gospels tomorrow, but note that Mark kept the Aramaic word *Rabboni* from Bartimaeus’s response, while Matthew gave a Greek equivalent, meaning “Lord.” We shouldn’t be surprised or concerned by differences like this.

Sometimes, we find similar sounding teachings in the Gospels in different places or with different details. Again, we shouldn’t be surprised by this. Jesus spent about three years traveling around and preaching. This was long before the time when you could print books, let alone make audio recordings or post videos on social media of someone teaching! When you think about it, it’s obvious that Jesus would have given similar teachings in different towns and villages. The Gospel authors drew from three years’ worth of Jesus’s sermons. They sought to capture His teaching as best they could in the limited space they had so that future generations of Christians could learn from their Savior. There are teachings that one Gospel author summarized that another Gospel author gave us at greater length. At times, we’ll see two Gospel authors drawing from different versions of a sermon, delivered in different places. We can’t know for sure.

What’s more, sometimes the Gospel authors ordered their material to make a theological point, rather than just ordering it chronologically. For instance, right before Jesus had a run-in with the Pharisees about the Sabbath, Matthew recorded Jesus saying, “Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take up my yoke and learn from me, because I am lowly and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:28-30). It’s possible Jesus said those words right before that very Sabbath. But it’s also very possible Matthew put that teaching immediately before the story that ends with Jesus’s claim that He is Lord of the Sabbath (Matt. 12:8).

All the Gospel authors give us faithful access to Jesus’s teachings. But like screenplay writers for a biopic, each Gospel author edited down all the possible stories about Jesus he could tell into a narrative that can be read in an hour and a half to two and a half hours. The message across all the Gospels is the same: the God of all the universe became a man and died for us so we could live eternally with Him. We shouldn’t be surprised by differences.

DAY 4

THE LANGUAGES

Last Sunday, I was chatting with a young woman who has recently started attending our church. She's from China and is here to do a Ph.D. at Harvard. Christianity is completely new to her, but she's keen to know more and has recently joined our weekly Bible study. As she and I were talking, a friend of mine joined the conversation. This friend was born in China too but moved to the United States when she was a kid. She said, "We can talk in Chinese, if you prefer." I was delighted. Our visitor speaks excellent English, but I was so glad she had the option of exploring Christianity with a mature believer who spoke her mother tongue—especially as it would show that Christianity does not belong to Western culture.

At various times in my life, I've tried to learn a bunch of languages. French. German. Latin. Biblical Hebrew and Greek. But despite years of study, my skills are pretty laughable. I find it deeply impressive that so many of my friends can just switch between two languages as easily as I can turn my bathroom faucet from hot to cold! I can hardly even imagine what it's like to have two languages on the tip of your tongue.

The Bible is a mixture of languages.

The Old Testament was written in Hebrew, with some passages in Aramaic, which became the primary language for Jews of Jesus's time and place. The New Testament is written in Greek, which was the most widely spoken language in the Greco-Roman Empire at the time. Most Christians today can't read any of these languages. So, how can we know that what the Gospels are telling us isn't getting lost in translation?

In today's study, we'll examine the languages we find in the Bible. We'll look at what translation does and doesn't mean when it comes to our ability to access Jesus's actual words, and how understanding more about the languages in the Gospels helps us also think better about some of the differences between them.

READ JOHN 19:19-20. What did the sign on the cross say?

In what three languages was the sign written?

As you probably know, Latin was the language spoken by the ancient Romans. So, writing the charge against Jesus in Latin, Greek, and Aramaic would mean that basically everyone could understand. But what exactly did the sign say?

All four Gospels tell us, but the wording is different in each. Read the four verses listed and write down what each tells us the sign said.

MATTHEW 27:37

MARK 15:26

LUKE 23:38

JOHN 19:19

The basic message on the sign is the same in all four Gospels, but the wording is different. Mark's version—like his Gospel—is the shortest. It's possible that the three different languages had slightly different wording and that each Gospel author chose to translate a different language or combine them. Perhaps the Aramaic sign said, "Jesus of Nazareth" while the Greek sign just said, "Jesus." It's also possible that the Gospel authors summarized the sign in different ways. But the message is the same, and we shouldn't worry about differences like this.

So, did Jesus teach in Greek or Aramaic—or both? We don't know for sure. Sometimes, Jesus's teaching seems specially designed for Greek. For instance, New Testament scholar Peter Williams points out that the first four of Jesus's famous blessings in the Sermon on the Mount all begin with the same Greek letter, suggesting that this teaching was originally delivered in Greek (Matt. 5:3-11).⁷ But the Gospels also preserve snatches of Aramaic, showing that Jesus spoke in His mother tongue at least some of the time. We've already come across some words in Aramaic in our study.

REREAD MARK 5:38-41. What two Aramaic words did Jesus say to the dead girl?

Mark translated this into Greek because some of his readers wouldn't have understood Aramaic. Your English Bible translates that Greek into English. What does the English translation say?

NOW READ LUKE 8:54. What did Jesus say to the little girl in Luke's version?

Mark translated what Jesus said in Aramaic with a Greek word meaning *girl* or *young woman*. Luke translated it with a Greek word meaning *child*. Both translations capture the sense of Jesus's words. Knowing that the Gospel authors were probably translating testimonies passed down to them in Aramaic helps us understand why there are some differences between how Jesus's words were recorded in one Gospel versus another. Any time we are translating, we make choices about which words or phrases in one language will be the best equivalents to words or phrases in another. But how do we know that we're not losing a lot in translation between Aramaic and Greek or between the Greek of the Gospels and the English in our Bibles?

In one sense, something is always lost in translation, as there are usually multiple words or phrases in one language that could translate a word or phrase in another. That's why if you open up the same passage in two English Bibles, you'll find some differences. For instance, one of my favorite verses in the Old Testament is Isaiah 49:15.

The New International Version translates it like this:

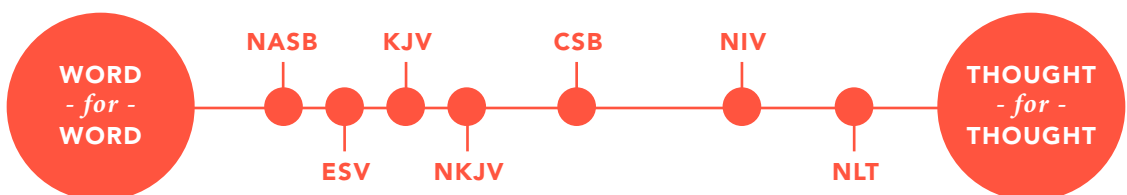
Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!

And the English Standard Version translates it like this:

Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.

Usually—like when Luke picked the Greek word for *child* while Mark picked the one for *girl*—the English word a translator chooses doesn't change the basic meaning of the verse. But sometimes it does. So, it can be useful to look at a couple of different translations to get a sense of the range of possible meanings. For instance, when Jesus was promising to send the Holy Spirit to His disciples, the ESV has Jesus call the Holy Spirit "the Helper" while the NIV translates the same phrase as "the Advocate" and the CSB as "the Counselor." All of them are valid translations of the Greek word. Some translations (like the ESV) seek to translate the Greek and Hebrew of the Bible word-for-word, even if that makes the English version harder to read. Others (like the NLT) translate more thought-for-thought, seeking to make the Bible more readable for modern audiences, even if it's less of a word-for-word translation of the original. Some (like the CSB) seek to find a happy medium between the two. Regardless, we are getting real access to the Gospels' testimony about Jesus. We don't need to know either Greek or Aramaic to know that Jesus told that dead little girl to get up!

People sometimes imagine the process of Bible translation involves multiple cycles over the years, introducing more and more errors. But actually, we have the Greek texts freely available to refer to if we want to take the time to learn the biblical languages. Additionally, as more ancient documents have been discovered, our understanding of the biblical texts and languages has improved to where today's translations are more accurate than they were even a hundred years ago.



One more thought about how language affects our understanding: As Jesus hung on the cross with the sign above His head, He cried out to God in Aramaic.

READ MARK 15:34. What did Jesus say in Aramaic?

How does your English translation translate Mark's Greek translation?

When Jesus cried out to God from the cross, He quoted the first verse of Psalm 22 in Aramaic: His mother tongue. Nearly two thousand years later, many of us can read this in our own heart language—whether that is English or Chinese, Swahili or Portuguese—thanks to expert scholars doing the work of translation for us. We see the gritty reality of Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews, dying for us, abandoned by God so that we could be welcomed and embraced. That message is proclaimed all around the world today, translated into hundreds of different languages, and currently being translated into even more, so that billions of people can put their trust in Jesus.

For more information on Bible translations, go to csbible.com.

DAY 5

THE TEXTS

My Granny Betty made up comic poems. My favorite went like this:

*Wave to the left of us,
Wave to the right of us,
Everyone knows us,
And hates the sight of us!*

At least, that's how I remember it. It's possible that instead of "And hates the sight of us" the last line read "They hate the sight of us." Sadly, Granny Betty died four years ago, so I can't check with her. But I could check with her other grandchildren. My cousins live thousands of miles away from me, and we haven't discussed my granny's verse, so their version would be independent of mine. If they all remembered "And," I'd know my version was correct. But if all my seven cousins remembered "They" while my brother and sister said it was "And," I'd assume my immediate family had remembered it wrong. Maybe our dad misremembered it and passed the variant on to us.

When it comes to the texts of the Gospels, we don't have the original, physical manuscripts (or autographs) that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John wrote. But copies of the Gospels started being made soon after they were written. We actually have many, early Greek manuscripts of all or part of these Gospels. For any given manuscript we have, we can know the approximate date by analyzing the physical material it's written on. The kind of handwriting used is also important, since different ways of writing were used on the biblical manuscripts in different periods. But we don't know whether it was a copy of the autograph, or a copy of a copy, or a copy of a copy of a copy! Manuscripts would typically last 150 to 200 years. So, for example, a copy from the third century could be a copy of the first-century autograph, or a copy of a copy.

The scribes worked very carefully making their copies. But even the most accurate scribe would make occasional mistakes in a long manuscript, and some scribes made intentional changes. So, how can we know what the Gospel authors really wrote? The answer lies in the early spread of Christianity. Because the

Gospels were shared so far and so fast from the very beginning, we have a wealth of early copies that were made independently in different countries. So—like me calling my cousins in England to check what they remember of my Granny’s verse—we can compare manuscripts from one place with manuscripts from another and spot mistakes or changes. Experts can look at the family tree of the copies we have and figure out where mistakes crept in. Because we have so many copies of all or part of the Gospels—far more than we have for other ancient manuscripts—the vast majority of the texts of the Gospels are agreed upon.

In the few places where there is doubt that a passage is original, or where we have different, equally authentic-looking versions of a particular verse from different manuscripts, our Bibles will include a note explaining this. One example of this happens at the very beginning of Mark’s Gospel.

READ MARK 1:1. What does this verse say about Jesus?

If you have a footnote in your Bible at the end of this verse, what does it say about the phrase “the Son of God”?

Many early manuscripts leave out the phrase “the Son of God” from Mark 1:1. This might at first seem like a really big deal. Maybe Mark’s original just said, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ,” and later Christians added “the Son of God.” This seems to back the claim skeptics sometimes make that Jesus was just an inspirational teacher and the idea that He was the Son of God was dreamed up after His death. But let’s assume for a minute that Mark didn’t write “the Son of God” in the opening sentence of his Gospel. Would that actually support the skeptical argument? No!

READ MARK 1:9-11. How does this passage teach that Jesus is the Son of God?

Even if Mark 1:1 doesn't include "the Son of God," we have plenty of evidence from the rest of his Gospel that Mark was presenting Jesus as the Son of God. Our understanding of that truth does not depend on one verse.

Are there any longer passages in the Gospels that are in doubt? Yes, two. One in John and one in Mark.

READ JOHN 7:53–8:11.

I love this story. It fits beautifully with everything we know about Jesus from the rest of the Gospels, and it may well be a true story, passed down by eyewitnesses and eventually included in copies of John's Gospel. But because it doesn't appear in the earliest copies of John that we have, scholars today think that it was not in John's original autograph. Fortunately, nothing of our understanding of who Jesus is depends on this text. Even if that encounter never happened at all, it wouldn't make a difference to Christian belief.

But what about the ending of Mark's Gospel?

If you open your Bible to Mark 16:9-20, you'll likely find a note telling you that some of the earliest manuscripts of Mark do not include these verses. If you read through them, you may notice that they summarize some stories told in other Gospels. As we'll see next week, at first glance, verse 8 seems to leave the story hanging, so it's understandable that people might have wanted to add a conclusion based on other writings about Jesus. But again, nothing of our understanding of who Jesus is depends on verses 9-20.

What's more, if we were to examine all of the texts in the Gospels where there is any significant doubt as to which version of the text is original (most of which are very short) it wouldn't make any real difference to our understanding of who Jesus is. In his excellent discussion of these issues, New Testament scholar William D. Mounce points out that even Bart Ehrman—the most famous current critic of the New Testament—agrees with this analysis.⁸

But even if the few questionable verses or passages in the Gospels don't change our view of Jesus, do they change our view of Scripture? As a Christian, I believe the entire Bible is inspired by God and totally trustworthy. But we need to understand that Christians believe the Bible is inspired by God in its original form

and languages. So, the original autographs written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were inspired by the Spirit. But thankfully, so many copies of these originals were made that we can be confident that the texts in our Bibles today are very, very close to what Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John originally wrote. What's more, many scholars have invested lifetimes of research to translate the Gospels for us into English, so while individual English translations do not come with a guarantee of divine inspiration, we can be confident we're getting the accurate message about Jesus.

REFLECT

What new things have you learned about the Gospels in our studies this week?

After examining the Gospels more closely, do you feel more or less confident that the Gospels are giving us access to Jesus?

What remaining questions do you have?