

How We Got the Bible

Bible 101 · Message 1 of 4 · Kristyn Haddon · Luke 1:1–4

ME

Hey, good morning. I want to start with something that happened at our place a few months ago.

We gave Chelsea a Bible. She's nine.

And it was actually a really lovely moment. Her name printed in the front. And I remember standing there feeling quite pleased with ourselves, you know? Like we'd done a good parenting thing.

And then we gave her absolutely no instructions.

None. We handed a nine-year-old a two-thousand-page book and basically said, off you go, enjoy.

So she opened it somewhere in the middle, like any sensible nine-year-old would. And she read a verse out loud, at the dinner table, in front of everyone.

Now, I'm going to put that verse up on the screen. And I've taken one word out.

"They called to Lot, 'Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have _____ with them.'" Genesis 19:5

Anyone want to guess the word?

Yeah. That one.

And she looked up at us and said, "What does that mean?"

She doesn't even know what that means.

And so I'm standing in my kitchen thinking two things at once.

The first one is, we are not equipped for this conversation tonight.

But the second one is actually worse.

Because she asked a follow-up question. She said, "Why would I start in the middle? It's a book. Shouldn't I start at the beginning?"

And I opened my mouth to answer her, and I realised I didn't have a short answer.

And suddenly the problem wasn't the strange verse.

The problem was that I'd handed her a library and never given her a map.

And here's the bit that got me. I've been a Christian a long time. I've been in ministry a long time.

And my nine-year-old asked me a beginner's question, and I couldn't answer it in one sentence.

WE

Now here's what I've worked out since then.

The problem wasn't that Chelsea was nine.

The problem is that most of us are reading it the way she was.

Because the reality is, almost everyone in this room is an adult holding a book they were last taught to read as a child.

Some of you got it at Sunday school, with a felt board and some very calm-looking sheep. Some of you got it at a school chapel service you didn't ask to be at. Some of you found one in a hotel drawer.

And then you grew up.

Your job got complicated. Your family got complicated. Your questions got harder.

And the book stayed exactly where it was.

So can I have a go at what three different people in this room might be quietly thinking?

Maybe you're not a Christian. Or you're not sure. Or you're here because someone asked you, and we're so glad you came. You might be thinking: everyone keeps talking about this book. It's ancient. Bits of it are strange. Why is anybody still interested?

Or maybe you're newer to following Jesus. Then you're Chelsea. You're thinking: I actually want to read this, and I opened it, and I have no idea what I'm doing.

And if you've been a Christian for thirty years, you might be thinking something you'd rather not say out loud.

Do I really have to read this?

Hey, it's alright. If we're really honest, I've thought it too.

And I don't actually think that's a discipline problem. I don't think you're lazy.

For some of us, we've got an adult faith and a child's map. And for others of us, we've got adult questions and no map at all.

Chris Podlick says it in eleven words, and I can't improve on them.

"It's really hard to trust something that we don't understand."

And Andy Stanley puts his finger on exactly why that matters.

Most of us know some Bible stories. But almost none of us know the story of the Bible. And if you don't know the story of the Bible, it's very easy to discount the stories in the Bible.

So that's what I want to give you this morning. The story of the Bible.

This is not an argument that the Bible is true. I'm not going to ask you to accept one single thing about this book's authority today. Not once.

I'm just going to tell you where it came from.

My only ask is that by the end, you're curious enough to open it.

Three questions.

What is it? How did it get here? And why does it exist at all?

Let's work it out together.

GOD

WHAT IS IT?

So let's start where Chelsea started.

She called it a book. We all call it a book. Right?

It is not a book.

And actually, even the word gives it away. Bible comes from a Greek word meaning "the books". Plural.

Sixty-six documents. More than forty writers. Roughly fifteen hundred years. Kings and shepherds and fishermen and a doctor and at least one man writing from prison.

It's not a book. It's a library.

And you know what a library has? Sections. History. Poetry. Law. Biography. Letters written to specific people about specific problems.

So here's what I love about this.

Chelsea wasn't reading badly. She was reading a library like it was a book.

And most of the time, so are we.

But that raises the harder question.

If it's a collection, who collected it? And why did anybody bother?

HOW DID IT GET HERE?

Now, I could just tell you. But one of the writers has already given us the pattern.

There are four verses at the front of Luke's Gospel that most of us skip, because they look like a preface. And they're the most useful four verses in the New Testament for this conversation.

Luke chapter 1, verses 1 to 4.

"Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught."

Now watch what he does there. He gives us the pattern in four verses.

Something happened. There were people who saw it. What they saw was handed down. People investigated it. And people wrote.

Event. Witnesses. Handed down. Investigated. Written.

And I want you to notice where writing sits in that story.

It comes last.

So let me pull the camera back and show you it happening.

Church history. In three minutes.

Six moments. Are you ready? Here we go.

ONE. THE EVENT.

It does not start with a book. It starts with an empty tomb, and a group of people who could not stop talking about it.

And this is the whole morning in one sentence. I'll say it now, and again at the end.

The Bible didn't create Christianity. Christianity created the Bible.

TWO. THE MOVEMENT.

Because what happens next is not a publishing project. It's people leaving town.

"On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria... Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went." Acts 8:1, 4

And then a few verses later, in a Samaritan city that had nothing to do with any of this:

"So there was great joy in that city." Acts 8:8

Now stop with me here, because this is the bit we skip.

What was spreading?

Not a book. There wasn't one.

It was news.

News of what? A ticket to heaven when you die?

No. Something so much bigger than that.

That the kingdom of heaven is at hand. That God has moved in. That the world is being put back together, starting now.

Dead things come alive.

THREE. THE CHURCH.

So these people start meeting. Organising. Looking after each other's widows and arguing about money, same as us.

And here's a detail I love. They don't even name themselves.

"The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch." Acts 11:26

Somebody in Antioch looked at them and needed a word for what they were.

Jesus didn't hand out a book. Nobody voted on a name.

All of it is downstream of one event.

FOUR. THE DOCUMENTS.

And then, twenty, thirty years in, the people who were actually there start dying.

And it dawns on everyone at once: we need this written down.

And that is exactly where Luke comes in. We've already read him.

He's right in the middle of that moment, doing his homework, writing it all down for one person. A man named Theophilus.

Which means, and I find this amazing, when Luke wrote that, Luke was not writing the Bible.

He had no idea there would ever be such a thing.

He was writing a report for a friend.

FIVE. ROME.

Okay, now fast forward, because we're jumping about two hundred and fifty years.

For most of that time, being one of these people is illegal, and periodically it's fatal.

And then, in the year 313, the emperor Constantine legalises it.

Just sit in that for a second.

The empire that executed Jesus stops trying to kill the movement about him.

Now, one correction, because this is the exact spot where the story usually gets stretched.

Constantine did not decide what went in it. There was no vote at Nicaea about which books are in the Bible. That council argued about who Jesus is, not about what's on the shelf.

SIX. THE LIST.

And then, finally, somebody writes down the list.

In the year 367, a bishop called Athanasius sends out a letter naming twenty-seven documents. No more, no less.

And it's the list you've got in your hands.

Now, you may have heard that this is the bit where powerful men voted which books were in and which were out.

That's actually not what happened.

Long before any final list was written down, churches right across the ancient world were already reading, copying and carrying these writings.

The list didn't make them important.

And here's the part I don't want you to miss.

Luke's account was not trusted because it was in the Bible. It was in the Bible because it was already trusted.

So. Count it with me.

The event. The movement. The church. The documents. Rome. The list.

Three hundred years, from an empty tomb to a bound volume.

Which means, and this is worth saying slowly, for three centuries this thing spread right across the Roman Empire with no Bible.

The Bible didn't create Christianity. Christianity created the Bible.

And this collection was never meant to be the end of the story.

It exists to take you back to the person, and the event, that started it.

Which is where I want to slow right down.

INNER TRANSITION: WHAT IT COST

Because I've just given you three hundred years in about eight minutes, and I know it can come out sounding like a documentary.

It wasn't a documentary. It was people.

In the year 303, the emperor Diocletian issues an edict. Christian meeting places pulled down. The Scriptures burned.

And remember where we are in the story. There is no Bible yet.

So what people are hiding in their houses is fragments.

A copy of Matthew. Two or three Gospels sewn together. Somebody's letters from Paul.

Ordinary people hid pieces of paper, knowing exactly what it would cost if they were found.

They didn't die for a book. There wasn't a book yet.

Twelve hundred years later, a man named William Tyndale decides ordinary English people should be able to read this in their own language. Which, at the time, was illegal. Eleven years on the run. Copies smuggled into England in bales of cloth. And when they caught him, he was strangled, and his body was burned.

And you know what? It is still going.

Right now, there are people giving their working lives to putting this into a language that has never had it. Not for a career. Because they think somebody should get to read this in the language they dream in.

And I have to tell you what all of that has done to me this month.

I've been studying this for weeks. And somewhere in the middle of it, I found myself online, at eleven o'clock at night, shopping for a nice Bible. Because I don't own one. Not a nice one.

I've had one my whole life. I've just never wanted one before.

WHY DOES IT EXIST?

Which brings me to the last question. Honestly, it's the one that matters most.

Why does this exist at all?

Not so you'd have rules. Not so you'd have a self-help manual with a religious accent. And not so anyone could win an argument with you.

It exists because a group of people saw something they could not explain and could not keep to themselves, and they were terrified it would be lost.

So they wrote it down. And other people hid it, and copied it, and carried it, and translated it. And some of them paid for that with their lives.

Not to preserve a book. To make sure you could meet a person.

And can I say something gently to those of us who've been around church a long time?

Some of us have spent years defending this book without ever noticing what the people who preserved it were trying to hand us.

Not a book to win arguments with. A person they wanted us to meet.

That's the why.

It's not a rule book. It's an introduction.

Jesus is not one more story in the Bible. He's the reason there is one.

YOU

So. What are we going to do with that?

One thing. Just one.

Open Luke this week.

That's it. That's the whole ask.

He's the one who went and checked. And he wrote it for one person who already had questions, which makes him a really good place to start if you've got some.

If you need a Bible, or the app, it's all on the microsite.

But don't confuse the resources with the invitation.

There's one invitation. Open Luke.

And hey, if you're not a Christian, I want you to hear this. That ask is exactly the same size for you, and it costs you nothing. You're not agreeing to anything. You're reading a man's careful account of something he investigated, written for someone who wanted the facts straight.

And if you've been following Jesus for thirty years, and you've read Luke fifteen times?

Read it again this week. But read it knowing what you now know.

That this was one man's investigation. That it circulated for three hundred years before anyone bound it into anything. That people hid it in their houses.

Not because you have to. Because you're intrigued.

WE

Let me tell you what I hope for.

I hope the drawer gets opened.

I hope somebody in this room, who has carried a Bible around for twenty years like a family heirloom they were never taught to use, actually opens it. And discovers that all along, these pages have been pointing to a person.

I hope there's a dinner table this week where a kid asks a strange question about a strange verse, and instead of panicking, somebody says, "Good question. Let me tell you what kind of writing that is."

Because here's what I'd love for you. I really would.

Not that you'd read it out of duty. That you'd be curious enough to open it.

And maybe, just maybe, that you'd learn to love it.

The Bible didn't create Christianity. Christianity created the Bible.

People saw something. People told people. People wrote it down. And people would not let it disappear.

All of that, so that a nine-year-old in Sydney could open it at the dinner table and ask what it means.

And so you could too.

Let's pray together.

PRAYER

Jesus.

Thank you that you didn't hand us a book and walk away.

You came. You lived where we live. You died where we're headed. And your friends could not stop telling people you'd been raised.

God, everything we're holding this morning is what happened next.

God, I pray for the person here who has heard all of this for the very first time. For some of us, this is the first time this book has ever sounded like something other than a rule book. Thank you for that.

I pray for those of us still deciding what we think about you. Help us be curious this week. Just curious. That's enough for now.

And God, for those of us who have known this a long time, forgive us for how often we've defended the book and forgotten the person.

We love you.

In your Son's precious name, amen.