

INTERESTING FACTS ABOUT THE BIBLE (5)

In our last lesson we noted that four books are contained in the Bible that record the life, teachings, death, and coming to life again of Jesus. These four books are called "gospels" (good news) because they show how "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). These four books explain how Jesus fulfilled the predictions of the 39 books of the Old Testament and record the eyewitness accounts of his teachings and miracles. Though they could have been much longer to satisfy our curiosity about Jesus, what was written is enough to produce faith in an honest and good heart (John 20:30-31; Luke 8:4-15).

These four accounts (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) were written more than 20 years after the death of Jesus. God gave these writers his Holy Spirit to make them prophets. They were given special powers that enabled them to remember accurately everything Jesus had said and done. Their accuracy did not depend on mere human memory (John 14:26). During the three years that Jesus was with them, there were many things he spoke about that they did not understand. Some things he did not even reveal to them because they were not able to understand it. Therefore, after Jesus left them, His Holy Spirit taught them things that they had not learned while he was on the earth (John 14:26; John 14:5-15).

These men who were given this special ability by God's Spirit went everywhere teaching after Jesus' death and coming back to life (resurrection). Many, in cities all over the Roman Empire, believed their message because it harmonized with the 39 Old Testament books and their Spirit filled message was accompanied with signs and wonders (Mark 16:15-20).

The fifth book of the New Testament (**ACTS**), the book that comes after the four gospels, was written by **LUKE**. He is the same man who wrote the third gospel that bears his name. The name ACTS refers to the "actions" of these men and the Holy Spirit, which was in them as they went to preach. The book of Luke covers the material from the birth of Jesus until forty days after his resurrection (about 33 years). The book of Acts (or Luke's second book) records approximately the next 35 years of history (30-65 A.D.). Acts 1:8 is a summary verse for the whole book. It tells about these special prophets that had been with Jesus, preaching first in Jerusalem (Acts 2-7), then in Judea (The Roman province that contained Jerusalem), then in Samaria (the country just north of Israel who were relatives of Israel), then to the rest of the world (the world being where Jews were living at the time from Spain and Europe, to Africa, to Iran and India).

During the travels of these men, their converts were organized into local groups so they could help and encourage each other in their walk with God. These local groups were called churches (See example in Acts 14:21-23). As the eyewitnesses and prophets moved on to other places, they would often write letters to be delivered and read to the churches they had started in the past or to a church they planned to visit. Sometimes these letters would be addressed to one particular group, on other occasions they were addressed to many groups in a geographical region. These letters were written in order to:

- 1) encourage the Christians to keep their faith,
- 2) answer questions that Christians had written to them about,
- 3) deal with personal and spiritual problems that had arisen in these churches,
- 4) explain the "gospel" in more detail and in theory,
- 5) warn against false teachers

Sometimes these men wrote letters to young preachers or other individuals to help in their growth and service in Jesus Christ. They taught Christians how to organize and function together in their work for Christ. All of these LETTERS or EPISTLES were written either during the history recorded in the book of Acts or shortly thereafter.

Since the men who wrote these letters were workers of miracles and had been given special abilities to speak for God, their writings were copied and treated as the words of God (See 1 Corinthians 14:37). Because of this, when one church received a letter they often made copies and shared it with other churches (Colossians 4:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:27).

Today, as we read these letters it is like reading someone else's mail. We are reading letters that are almost 2000 years old. To fully understand them you must put yourself into their historical background. However, since prophets of God wrote them, they show us what GOD expected of Christians in the first century. They are not merely the opinions of a religious leader, but the very instruction of God. Christians today also use these letters to find encouragement; instruction, correction, and commandments that help them walk closer to God and Jesus Christ.

In our next lesson we will tell a few facts about each of these books. There are 22 letters or books written to individuals or churches in the middle of the first century that Christians now regard as holy. Along with the 39 Old Testament books, the four GOSPELS, and the book of ACTS, they make up the 66 books Christians now call SCRIPTURE or the BIBLE. The word "scripture" originally meant simply "writing", but by the time of Jesus it was used to describe the writings that were HOLY and sent by God. Pay close attention to the following teaching by one of the prophets who had the Holy Spirit:

"All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

QUESTIONS:

1. Did the accuracy of the books of the New Testament depend only on the human memory of the author?
2. When did the eyewitnesses of Jesus finally understand ALL that he taught and did? Before his death or after his death?
3. What made the difference in their understanding and memory?
4. Luke wrote two books of the Bible. He wrote the book that was named after him and what other book?
5. List at least four reasons why the books of the Bible called "letters" or "epistles" were written to individuals and churches by men who were prophets.
6. Why did churches and individuals make copies of the letters they received from these eyewitnesses?
7. "All _____ is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16).