

“Tough Questions: Is the Bible Reliable?”
A sermon preached at First Presbyterian Church
Winston-Salem, NC
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(2 Tim. 3:14-17)

Introduction.

Over the years I’ve had many conversations with people about subjects like God, religion, and faith. And I’ve discovered in those conversations that everyone has some kind of belief system of their own, even if its atheism.

But regardless of the person with whom I’m speaking, I always like to ask them one last question at the end of our conversation – How did you come to these conclusions in your spiritual life? What is the basis for your beliefs? What is your source for truth, and how do you know you’re right and everyone else is wrong with whom you disagree?

Whatever system of belief you may have or whatever you put your faith in, that belief must have a rational foundation, one that is grounded in truth and reality. Otherwise you believe a lie. For the Christian the foundation of their faith is the Bible, and it is on the basis of Christ who is revealed in Scripture the Christian faith stands.

But is the Bible a reliable source of truth today? Because if it isn’t true and if I can’t rely on it, then all my beliefs as a Christian are based on a shaky foundation. However, if indeed the Bible is reliable and if it is in fact true, then I would be a fool not to consider everything it has to say. That is the subject of the next tough question we’ll tackle this morning.

I. The Reliability of the Bible.

The Bible is the best-selling book of all time, and around 6 billion copies have been sold in the last 2,000 years. And the Bible has been translated into more languages than any other book in history. It has been translated into over 4,000 different languages already, and people are working on another 2,000 languages right now. There is even a Klingon version of the Bible. I’m not kidding! It is the most studied, scrutinized, discussed, debated, and cherished book of all time.

But is the Bible reliable? When I was in college many of the professors at my university taught that the Bible is full of errors and contradictions. And because it was written thousands of years ago by many different authors, they said it couldn’t possibly be a reliable source of truth today in our modern-day world.

However, as I began to do my own research firsthand, I was surprised to learn how little evidence there actually was for the historical reconstructions and the

skeptical tone and critical attitude these professors had developed toward the Bible. And I think if you do your own study regarding the historicity of the Bible, the accuracy of the manuscripts, and the trustworthiness of Scripture, you will come away very impressed with the reasonableness of a biblical faith which has a high level of confidence in what the Bible has to say.

Consider the meaning of the word *reliable*. Essentially, it means “something that is trustworthy, or something you can count on.” When it refers to the Bible, it means the trustworthiness and truthfulness of Scripture. And by just about any measure you want to use in the study of ancient literature, the Bible stands up well to honest scrutiny.

The bibliographic test, the quality and quantity of manuscripts available for research, the historical accuracy of the events that are recorded in the Bible, and the corroboration of archeology with the stories in Scripture all point to the trustworthiness of the Bible. Even though it was written over a period of 1,600 years by 40 different authors on three different continents and in three different languages, there is a remarkable consistency to the message of the Bible. And when you read the book from cover to cover, the storyline of Scripture unfolds like a dramatic true story of the love of God and His rescue of humanity.

So a strong case can be made for the reliability of the Bible.

II. The Inspiration of the Bible.

One of the central reasons Christians believe the Bible is reliable is because they are convinced that it not only bears up well under honest scrutiny, but also because it the inspired Word of God. Christians believe that the Bible wasn't just written by people in various times and places. They believe that the authors of Scripture were inspired by God to write what they did. And as a result the Bible is not only the words of humans but it is also the Word of God.

The English verb “inspire” and the noun “inspiration” have many meanings. For example, after the choir or the worship team sings a beautiful and moving song, we might turn to the person next to us and say, “That was really inspiring.” But that's not what the word means when it is used in a theological sense.

In theology inspiration is the supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit upon divinely chosen people in such a way that their writings become trustworthy and authoritative. It isn't just the words of people written down a long time ago. It's a Word from God, and therefore it has relevance for today.

You may wonder, “How did God inspire the writers of Scripture? How is it that words they wrote down are also God's Word to us?” We read in Scripture in both the Old and New Testaments that on many occasions the writers were commanded by God to write down what they saw. We see examples of this in Exodus 17:14; Isaiah 8:1; Jeremiah 25:13; and Revelation 1:11.

In addition, there is a self-authenticating quality to Scripture in that the New Testament quotes passages in the Old Testament as being the words of God or words of the Holy Spirit (Mt. 15:4; Heb. 1:5ff.). And the apostle Paul even speaks of his own writing as Spirit-taught (1Cor. 2:13), and he claims that Jesus was speaking through him (2Cor. 13:3). Jesus Himself quoted the Old Testament, and He referred to it as the Word of God.

But perhaps the best text in the Bible that about this matter of the inspiration of Scripture is the one we've read this morning in 2 Timothy 3:14-17. There the apostle Paul writes, *"But as for you, [Timothy,] continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."*

The crucial word in this passage is the word that is translated "God-breathed." It's the Greek word *theopneustos*. *Theo* means "God", and *pneo* is the verb "to breath." It refers the breath of the Holy Spirit. What Paul was saying to Timothy is that God inspired the writers of Scripture, and as a result the Bible comes from Him. He's the ultimate author. It's His Word. And as a result, it carries the full weight of His authority.

Let me give you an illustration to demonstrate what I'm talking about. I have in my hand a party whistle. It's like the party whistles we used on Christmas Day here at First Pres to celebrate the birth of Christ. (That was a fun time!) By itself, a party whistle just sits there curled up without any life or noise. It's only as I blow into it that it comes alive and creates motion and sound. This helps us to see how the Holy Spirit "breathed into" and animated the writers of Scripture. God filled their minds and hearts just as the air of my lungs fills and animates the party whistle.

So God inspired the writers of the Bible. And what we have in Scripture isn't just the words of people, it's the Word of God. And because it's God's Word, the Bible can be life-changing.

III. The Life-Changing Impact of the Bible.

History is filled with people whose lives have been changed simply by reading the Bible. For example, Augustine experienced a profound change in his life in 386 AD when he was 32-years-old. He was sitting in a garden in Milan, Italy, thinking about his life, when he heard a child singing the words, "Take up and read it. Take up and read it." Augustine found a Bible and began to read the book, and

the first passage he came to was in Romans 13. The words he read convicted him about many things in his life, and it led to his conversion.

I heard of a young man this week who lives in Oregon. When he went away to college he tubed his faith, but during his senior year a friend in his dorm persuaded him to go to church with him. And during the sermon the preacher encouraged everyone to bring their Bibles to worship and read them on a regular basis.

When the young man got back to his dorm room, he remembered he had a Bible in a box in his closet. He dug down to the bottom the box, and there was the Bible his mother had given him when he graduated from high school. He opened it for the first time and found that there was a note from his mother which he had never read before. And in the note she told him what a difference the Bible had made in her own life, and how she hoped it would help her son too.

That young man began to read this Bible every day, and it led to a profound transformation in his life. He's married now, he's an elder in the Presbyterian Church, and he and his wife have had 18 foster kids in their home over the years. He wrote to a friend of mine and said, "It all began when I opened the book and he began read it for myself."

C.S. Lewis is one of the most influential Christian writers of the 20th century, so you may be surprised to learn that he actually became an avowed atheist in his early teens. It wasn't until years later, after WWI and well into his years as a professor at Oxford, before he began a search for a deeper and richer understanding of God.

Lewis writes that there were two events which ultimately led him to the Christian faith. The first was when he read a book by the Catholic writer G.K. Chesterton that made a strong impression on him. But the second involved a conversation with a fellow professor. One night one of the more militant atheists on the faculty at Oxford, a man named T.D. Weldon, came to his room and confided in Lewis that he now believed the historical authenticity of the Gospels appeared to be surprisingly sound.

That conversation deeply disturbed Lewis, because he thought that if such a staunch atheist like Weldon thought the Gospels might be true, where did that leave him? For the first time, he began to wonder if his whole life was headed in the wrong direction.

So Lewis began an investigation. He decided to carefully read the entire New Testament in the original Greek. And as he read the text, he was surprised by what he found. Up to this point in his life, as a professor of English literature Lewis considered the Bible to be just a great myth. He thought it was a fanciful tale that had nothing to do with real history. However, as Lewis read the New Testament he discovered that the Gospels didn't contain the imaginative writing techniques of most ancient mythology. And they didn't have the stylized, carefully-groomed

qualities one would expect in any fiction-making culture. Instead, the Gospels were different from anything else he had ever read in ancient literature.

As an expert in ancient writings and languages, Lewis began to wonder – If these aren't myths and legends, then what are they? Were they truly eyewitness accounts of actual historical events that really took place? Everything changed for C.S. Lewis when he stopped to read the Bible for himself.¹

In his book *Simply Christian*, N.T. Wright says of the Bible, “It’s a big book, full of big stories with big characters. They have big ideas...and make big mistakes. It’s about God and greed and grace; about life, lust, and laughter. It’s about birth, beginnings, and betrayal; about siblings, squabbles, and sex; about power and prayer and prison and passion.

“And that’s only [the book of] Genesis!

“...Picking [the Bible] up, you need to remind yourself that you hold in your hands not only the most famous book in the world, but one which has extraordinary power to change lives, to change communities, and to change the world. It’s done it before. It can do it again.”²

Conclusion.

I began my sermon by asking you, “On what do you base your beliefs about life?” That question was posed to me when I was in college by a fellow student named Robert Jackson. We met our freshman year, and over the course of that fall semester we had many conversations about what each of us believed. Some would have characterized our conversations as arguments, and they are right. Our disagreements were intense.

One night after one of these two-hour debates, I went back to my room, and it was then that I realized what the sticking point in our disagreement was. I was arguing on the basis how I *felt* things should be, and Robert was arguing on the basis of what the Bible said. And the two didn’t match up.

I came to the point where I realized that I needed to study the Bible myself and find out what it says. And then if I wanted to call myself a Christian, I needed to align my life with the truth of what I learned in Scripture, no matter how challenging it might be. So I did, and over the next three months as I studied the Bible my life turned around 180 degrees. And I’ve never been the same since.

Over the years I’ve found the Bible to be not only challenging and correcting like it was back then, but it has also been a remarkable source of comfort and encouragement to me, too. Especially in these last six months leading up to and after my wife Lorie’s death, I can’t tell you how many times I’ve read a passage of the Bible that feels like it was written just for me.

Sometimes these verses have come to me during my regular study of Scripture, and on other occasions they have been verses someone in our church has sent to

me in a letter or an email. In my times of greatest sadness and loss, I've found in the Bible just what I've needed to help me carry on and put one foot in front of the other in these difficult days.

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name, and you are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. When you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel” (Is. 43:1b-3a).

“Fear not for I am with you. Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (Is. 41:10).

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me” (Ps. 23:4-5).

“Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9).

“For I know that my Redeemer lives, and after this body has decayed I shall still see God” (Job 19:25-26).

The Bible isn't just an old book that doesn't have any relevance for your life today. It's the most modern book you could ever read, and it can change your life. Take it up and read it, just like Augustine did, and the Lord will speak to you, if you let Him. His Word is reliable, and you can count on it. Amen.

¹ Adapted from Richard Simmons in his book *Reliable Truth*.

² N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian*, p. 173.