

How Can I Trust the Bible?

Introduction

Interest: Today we are beginning our “You Asked For It” series. We all have questions about God, theology, church, culture, and life in an imperfect world, and sometimes it’s hard to get answers that satisfy our curiosity or our soul. Throughout December, I asked you to send me questions that you wrestle with, are perplexed by, and want further clarity. Thanks for taking the time and effort to send me these questions. I selected the top 8 categories of questions since many of the individual questions really fit within a larger question. And today we’re starting with our first question: “**How can I trust the Bible?**” We’ve got to start here because much of what I will say over the next eight weeks comes from the Bible. And as I wrote in my blog and via eNews this week, here are a couple of ground rules for this series as we move forward:

- 1) We will approach each of these questions and attempts at answers with great humility. When we ponder the things of God, there will always be mystery. We’re limited to a finite perspective because God is infinite and we’re not.
- 2) I cannot and likely will not answer every question to everyone’s satisfaction. I will give what I believe to be an overall theological and biblical “answer” to each question by wrestling through the larger question(s), by taking us to appropriate biblical passages, and by giving us the “boundaries” of what is appropriate for an evangelical theology. I will attempt to address further issues in my blog after each message to share further insight, possibly more questions to wrestle with, and other resources to explore.
- 3) As much as I would like to answer every question that each of you sent me, time does not permit. So if your questions were not picked in the top 8, please be gracious and don’t expect me to individually answer each one.
- 4) Some of you will not agree with the conclusions that I come to... and that’s okay. Once again, each week, I will give what I believe to be the boundaries that are appropriate within an evangelical, theological framework. Another way to say this... we will not split Northshore over any of these issues. There is “room at the table” within the boundaries. I trust that any further dialogue and conversation that extends from each Sunday will be done with respect, civility, and humility... that goes for any discussion in person, in emails, on blogs, and on Facebook.

So today as we ask our first question in the series, “How can I trust the Bible?” I’m going to give you the bottom line up front and then we’ll spend the rest of our time together unpacking this big idea

Big Idea: *God has spoken through His Word & you can fully trust your Bible.*

Overview of Message: Now... up front... this is going to be fast and furious. I’m trying to condense about 10 books and two semesters of pastor school into 40 minutes... so buckle your seatbelts ladies and gentlemen. How I’m going to unpack this big idea is in this way... here’s the order of what we’re going to talk about today:

1. Revelation → 2. Inspiration → 3. Inerrancy → 4. Transmission → 5. Canonicity → 6. Translations

⇒ So let’s begin with the first and most foundational theme as we talk about the Bible and how and why you can trust it...

1. Revelation

A. Explanation: The Bible begins with the foundational and fundamental reality that there is a God who desires to be in relationship with His creation. As we talk about this idea of “revelation” (not the last book of the Bible), we begin with the reality that God has made Himself, His nature, and His plan known to us. If you read a theological textbook on revelation, you’ll find two categories of God’s revelation to us: His general revelation and His special revelation.

1. *General revelation* is God revealing Himself “generally” to all human beings. We would include creation in this and His general providence over creation (“the rain falls on the just and the unjust”). **READ Romans 1:20.**

2. *Special revelation* is God revealing Himself specifically in time and history to specific individuals or specific groups, and in this special revelation, He gives much more specific “detail” about Himself, His character, His will, and His plan. Two aspects of special revelation are (1) *personal* – when God personally and specially shows up (i.e., the incarnation)... Jesus Christ, the God-Man reveals to us the entire character and nature of God; and (2) *propositional* – God communicating to us statements of truth in the form of oral or written, human language. Propositional, special revelation is the category of special revelation that the Bible, the very word of God, falls into. **READ 2 Peter 1:20-21.** We’ll come back to this verse in a moment, but as we begin with the idea that God reveals Himself... He has revealed Himself, His character, His nature, and His plan of salvation specially and specifically through the Bible.

⇒ So we begin with this first theme “Revelation,” the reality and belief that God has specifically revealed Himself and His truth to us in and via human language. Let’s unfold more with our second theme...

2. Inspiration

A. Explanation: We’ll spend a little more time on this theme because all of the themes that follow are dependent upon an understanding of inspiration.

1. As we wrestle through the question of “how can I trust the Bible?” inspiration tells us that the Bible is the very word and revelation of God to humanity... so there is an *inseparable relationship* between God and His Word. If God truly is a God who desires to reveal Himself and to be known by His creation, then how He reveals Himself is important. Let’s look at some important, clarifying Scripture passages that explain what we call inspiration.

a. *2 Timothy 3:16.* **READ 2 Timothy 3:16.** All Scripture is inspired (lit., “God-breathed”). “All Scripture” emphasizes the entirety or the whole of the Bible. And the word “inspired” or “God-breathed” means that God has “breathed out” and brought into existence all of the Bible. The Bible is from God as His Word and the Bible is the very Word of God. It takes us back to the image of God breathing life into Adam in Genesis 2... bringing Him to life.

b. *2 Peter 1:19-21.* **READ 2 Peter 1:19-21.** This “prophetic word” means something that was “spoken forth.” And what was spoken forth is not “man-made” but “men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.” We call this dual authorship. There’s the capital “A” Author, the Holy Spirit, who is the

originating source of the Bible, and the Holy Spirit guided, supervised, and moved the little “a” human authors to write the Bible. As we talk about this idea of “dual authorship” (the Holy Spirit guiding and supervising the human authors), it’s important to clarify that the human authors did not mechanically dictate the Bible from the Holy Spirit. This is evidenced by the use of first person by many biblical authors, the evidence of the human author doing research (i.e., Luke’s gospel), the claim of human authorship (i.e., beginning of Paul’s letters he lets you know who’s writing), the stylistic differences between authors and genres.

c. *1 Corinthians 2:10-13*. **READ 1 Corinthians 2:10-13**. Paul is assuring the Corinthian church that what he is saying is not manufactured in human wisdom... but God Himself, the Holy Spirit, has revealed them... and the words that Paul speaks and writes are from God.

2. *Definition of Inspiration*. From the passages and discussion of inspiration, here’s a good “working definition” from Carl Henry, a well-known evangelical theologian:

Inspiration is that supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit whereby the sacred writers were divinely supervised in their production of Scripture, being restrained from error and guided in the choice of words they used, consistently with their disparate personalities and stylistic peculiarities.

3. *Verbal, Plenary Inspiration*. Lastly, inspiration extends to the very words of Scripture, not just or merely the ideas presented in Scriptures... i.e., every word was “supervised” by the Holy Spirit... so each word matters. And inspiration extends to all of the Scriptures, each of the 66 books of the Bible.

⇒ *So that’s inspiration, grounded in the reality that God desires to reveal Himself to us through His Word. Inspiration leads us to our third theme...*

3. Inerrancy

A. Explanation: Biblical inerrancy is the doctrinal position that, in the original documents, the Bible is totally without error, and free from all contradiction, and this extends to the complete accuracy of historical as well as scientific references.

Here’s the key about inerrancy: *Inerrancy is a necessary deduction of inspiration.*

That’s why we spent more time on inspiration... if God was involved in the “production” of the Bible and He in His character is fully true and trustworthy, then what He “produces” is fully true and trustworthy.

1. *The Character of God as fully truthful*. **READ Titus 1:1-2 & Hebrews 6:18**.

God is fully truthful and does not lie, so therefore the Bible, since it is the very word of God, is fully truthful and does not lie... ultimately meaning it is without error.

2. *2 Timothy 3:8*. Going back to the section which 2 Timothy 3:16 comes from, Paul is addressing false teaching and error that has cropped up within the church at Ephesus where young Timothy is pastoring. **READ 2 Timothy 3:8**. Just like Jannes and Jambres who were Pharaoh’s sorcerers in Exodus 7, these false teachers reject the “truth” of God’s revelation and word... because “all Scripture is God-breathed” and therefore fully truthful.

3. *Definition of Inerrancy.* Here's a good definition that includes inspiration *and* inerrancy:

The inspiration of Scripture is the supernatural operation of the Holy Spirit who, through the different personalities and literary styles of the chosen human authors, invested the very words of the *original books* of holy Scripture, alone and in their entirety, as the very Word of God **without error** in all that they teach and is thereby the infallible rule and final authority for the faith and practice of all believers. In all literally means all, which includes history and science.

4. *The Original Books.* The doctrine of inerrancy extends only to the original books of Scripture... the original parchment and papyrus that the biblical authors actually wrote on.

⇒ *So some of you are rightly thinking, we don't have any of the original documents of Scripture in our possession. This leads us to our fourth theme...*

4. Transmission

A. Explanation: The term "transmission" describes the ancient process of copying the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts to preserve them for future generations and to distribute them for greater use. The 39 books of the OT were written between 1450 – 400 BC, and the 27 books of the NT were written between AD 40 – AD 90. So let's talk about how we get from the original documents that the Holy Spirit and the biblical authors wrote to the Hebrew and Greek texts that we use today to translate our English Bibles (and we'll talk principles of translation in a moment).

1. *Old Testament.* The OT was written originally in Hebrew with a couple of passages written in Aramaic.

a. *Scribes.* During the days of the OT, the primary job of the Scribes was to make copies of OT manuscripts, and the only copies of the Scriptures were kept at the temple. As we near the time of Christ, copies were kept in various Jewish synagogues and in private collections. And there was a very meticulous system and process by which the OT books were copied.

a. *Masoretes.* This meticulous system is evidenced by and found still in operation 500-1000 years after Christ with the Masoretes, Jewish scribes who were in charge of preserving and copying OT manuscripts. The Masoretes had a deep, sacred reverence for the text. They were so meticulous that they counted all the paragraphs, words, and even letters, so they could know by counting if they had done it perfectly. They knew the middle letter of each book so they could count back and see if they missed anything. We still have 4 or 5 significant Masoretic manuscripts made between 900-1000 AD that are the basis of our best Hebrew Bibles available today.

c. *Dead Sea Scrolls.* In 1947 an Arabian shepherd boy discovered the Qumran caves, and in these caves were discovered some of the best well-preserved Hebrew texts, even dating back to 100 BC. And there is virtual agreement between many of these Hebrew texts and the Masoretic manuscripts dated 1000 years later.

d. *Septuagint.* The Septuagint is a Greek translation of the Hebrew OT made in the 2nd and 3rd century BC. We have almost 300 existing copies

- e. With the use of the Masoretic Texts, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Septuagint, the evidence shows that our OT today is an extremely accurate reflection of the original documents.
2. *The New Testament*. The NT was written in Greek, and the reliability of our Greek NT is even more certain than the OT texts. We have fragments of Greek texts that date back to the late 90s through 150 AD. That's only 35-100 years after the original documents were penned by the NT authors... which means the copies that we do have are closely dated to the originals. Another big help to us with our NT is that we have over 4000 partial or complete Greek manuscripts. By comparing many of these copies, scholars can weed out any possible copying mistakes. In the complex field of NT "textual scholarship," we believe that we have a 99.5% accurate NT as compared with the original documents, and no major doctrines of the Christian faith are affected by the discrepancies between the various Greek texts which your NT is based upon.

⇒ *The process of how the Bible was transmitted from the original documents gives us confidence in the Bibles that we have today. The next question you might ask is "how did the books of our Bible get in the Bible?" So our fifth theme is...*

5. Canonicity

A. Explanation: The word "canon" means a measuring rod, much like a ruler. So when we use this word to explain how the books of the Bible were recognized as part of God's Word, there was a rule and a standard that the books had to meet to be *recognized* as Scripture. Note that I say "recognized" and not "decided upon." Semantics are very important here... the early church councils did not decide which books got in and which books didn't. They recognized which biblical books were already recognized affirmed within the community of faith. Here are some of the standards that biblical books had to meet to be recognized as part of the Bible:

1. *Authoritative*. Were they written by a prophet, king, judge or scribe of God in the OT or an apostle or based upon the eyewitness testimony to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in the NT.
2. *Consistent*. Is the book consistent with truth about God presented within the context of what the rest of Scripture teaches?
3. *Dynamic*. Has the book demonstrated God's dynamic life-changing power in the lives of His people?
4. *Received*. Has the book been universally received and accepted by the people of God as Holy Scripture?

These standards were applied as the early church leaders and councils recognized which books were part of the Bible. The 39 books of the OT were officially recognized in AD 90 at the Council of Jamnia. In the mid to late 100s AD, we have several lists from the Church Fathers, one to two generations after the apostles, that include the many of our NT books, especially with only the four gospels (i.e., no Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Judas, or other "Gnostic" gospels... sorry Dan Brown). The Easter letter of Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, in AD 367 is the first list to contain all and only the present 27 books of the NT. Thirty years later in AD 397, the Synod of Carthage, under the influence of the great Augustine, reached a similar

conclusion and formally recognized the 39 books of the OT in addition to the 27 NT books that we have in our Bibles today.

⇒ *So from God's inspired revelation all the way through canonicity, you can trust that the Bible that you have is God's Word and is fully trustworthy. Our last theme is...*

6. Translation

A. Explanation: Your English Bible has been directly translated from the Hebrew and Greek texts, which once again, we believe to be very accurate renderings of the original, inspired and inerrant documents. Here are the different types of translations: (1) *Word for word* translation makes a special effort to carefully interpret each word from the original Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek. The NASB is a word for word translation; (2) *Thought for thought* translation attempts to convey the full nuance and idea of each passage while not paying specific attention to the word for word translation. The NIV is the best thought for thought English translation. (3) *Paraphrase* translations pay even less attention to specific word meanings in an attempt to capture the poetic or narrative essence of a passage. The Living Bible and The Message are good examples of paraphrase translations.

Conclusion & Application

As we conclude our first question in the You Asked for It series, "How can I trust my Bible?" I want to leave you with two final thoughts and applications:

1) *God has spoken through His Word & you can fully trust your Bible.* Even though I haven't been able to go into all of the depth that I would like to go to, rest assured that God has supernaturally spoken His character, His nature, His will, and His plan through His Word, the Bible, and painstaking preservation and scholarship has gone into ensuring that the Hebrew and Greek texts that our English translations are based upon are as accurate as possible to the original texts. Therefore, when you open, study, meditate upon, pray through, and discuss the Bible, God is speaking. His Word is fully authoritative for all of life, faith, and practice. The Bible is the key method in which God has chosen to communicate to us. Therefore, it's imperative in the Christian life that we are in the Word regularly as individuals and in community because His Word is living, active, and transformational for our lives, our church, and our world.

2) *All the Bible points to the person and work of Jesus Christ, the Living Word.* The Bible is so powerful and transformational because all of it points to the person and work of Jesus Christ, God Himself. All of the OT points forward in anticipation of the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and return of Jesus Christ. And the NT more fully explains the historical and theological reality that Jesus Christ came to die in our place and pay the penalty of our sin and rebellion, so that all barriers might be removed in our relationship with the God who loves us. The entire Bible invites us to become children of God who live under His great and loving lordship in our lives. Remember that every time you open the pages of Scripture... it all points to Jesus. **READ Luke 24:32.**

Prayer