

## “I’ve Got Issues: ‘How can you believe the Bible is the Word of God?’”

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April 11, 2010

Psalm 119:97-105, 2 Timothy 3:14-17

### Mem

Psalm 119: 97 Oh, how I love your law!  
 I meditate on it all day long.  
 98 Your commands make me wiser than my enemies,  
 for they are ever with me.  
 99 I have more insight than all my teachers,  
 for I meditate on your statutes.  
 100 I have more understanding than the elders,  
 for I obey your precepts.  
 101 I have kept my feet from every evil path  
 so that I might obey your word.  
 102 I have not departed from your laws,  
 for you yourself have taught me.  
 103 How sweet are your words to my taste,  
 sweeter than honey to my mouth!  
 104 I gain understanding from your precepts;  
 therefore I hate every wrong path.

### ; Nun

105 Your word is a lamp to my feet  
 and a light for my path.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Tim 3:14 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it,<sup>15</sup> and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.<sup>16</sup> All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,<sup>17</sup> so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.<sup>2</sup>

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Everyone recognizes the Bible is an extraordinary book. It is surely the world’s most famous book and a perennial best-seller. Written by dozens of authors in three languages over many centuries, it’s been translated into 2400 languages and has inspired countless works of philosophy, literature, music, and art. In fact, without a basic knowledge of this book, it is impossible to understand Western Civilization.

We refer to it as the *Holy Bible* – “holy” not only in that it is sacred, but in that it is “set apart” from all other books. It’s a book like no other. We Christians believe the Bible is the Word of God written, the primary, unique and authoritative witness to the God who has revealed himself in the incarnate Word: Jesus Christ. Holy Scripture is the church’s charter and constitution. It is the basis of our faith. If it

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (Ps 119:97–105). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

<sup>2</sup> *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (2 Ti 3:14–17). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

wasn't for this book, we would not know what to believe or what God requires of us. To us, the Bible is "a lamp our feet and a light for our path." Without it, we would be groping around in the dark, lost without meaning or purpose or direction in life.

Though written by human beings, we believe it was inspired by the Holy Spirit. "*All Scripture is God-breathed*" says Paul. God speaks to us through this book like no other; he instructs us how to live a good and righteous life- that is a life that is rightly aligned with God's intentions. And that is healthy and life-giving. And so we call the Bible "The Good Book."

But for some, the Bible isn't so good. The Bible has always had its critics. The Bible has been attacked time and time again by unbelievers and skeptics. Perhaps some of our own family members or friends have wondered how we can possibly believe a book that *they say* is so chock full of historical inaccuracies, contradictions, legends and stories that are just downright weird. The new atheists I have mentioned in recent sermons – people like Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and Sam Harris, come right out to say the Good Book is downright bad for you. In fact, they are at a loss as to know why the Bible should be so popular. To them, the Bible portrays a God that is petty, vindictive, and unjust – a cruel tyrant that on one in their right mind would want to follow.

Obviously, I can't address every issue that critics raise about the Bible in twenty minutes. But I can lay out some reasons why we Christians believe the Bible is the Word of God, and why we can trust it. Let's talk about **the Bible's authority, its textual integrity, its historical accuracy, and its transformative power.**

**First – its authority.** Jesus and his disciples were well versed in and lived by the Scriptures – what we call the Old Testament - the ancient law handed down by God to the covenant people and carefully preserved and maintained. Like every Jew, Jesus himself believed the scriptures were the Word of God and appealed to it. He quoted the scriptures constantly and said that he came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it.

As time went on, the apostles recognized they needed to write down and preserve authoritative accounts of Jesus' life and teaching as well as faithful interpretations and implications of these accounts for life and doctrine. Within 20 years of Jesus' death and resurrection this process began and ended up with what we call the New Testament, taking its place beside the Old Testament as authoritative in the church. And as I said last week, we have little reason to doubt the historical reliability of the gospels as they are based on eyewitness evidence.

But according to some skeptics – like Dan Brown for instance - author of the The Da Vinci Code – the New Testament was purely a fabrication of the early Christian church. According to this theory, the original Jesus was actually a great but clearly human teacher who many years after his death was made out to be a resurrected God by church leaders who wanted to gain status and to protect their power in the Roman Empire. These skeptics point to other perfectly good gospels and other writings about Jesus that church leaders chose not to regard essentially because of politics. The New Testament that we have is therefore just one version among many accounts of Jesus' life and teachings – a version that's been tampered with and therefore we can't trust.

There are all kinds of problems with this theory. The fact is, these other gospels and writings about Jesus these skeptics are talking about were excluded from the official list of biblical books recognized by the church because they excluded themselves. Not only were most of them written much later than the New Testament gospels, but as you read them you can immediately tell they are not on the same level as Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. They are products of a pious imagination gone wild. Not only that, contrary to Dan Brown's assertions, they tend to present not a human Jesus but a Jesus that is thoroughly divine. It seems that even those branded as "heretics" by the church considered Jesus to be divine.

The gospels and letters that came to be included in the New Testament in 325 AD were already recognized as authoritative from very early on as they circulated among the churches. And from the earliest time, we know Jesus was proclaimed as Lord and worshiped as divine. It was the core of the earliest preaching. Virtually all mainstream scholars recognize this to be so. The church council in 325 AD merely ratified what the churches had already accepted. Their decision was not arbitrary, nor did it reflect power politics.

In the end we believe the Bible is the Word of God because Jesus believed it to be so, as did Peter and Paul and the earliest Christian church. It is therefore authoritative for us as we seek to know what to believe and how to live. We can trust it, because we believe the Holy Spirit was involved in the process. Skeptics may not believe that – but we do.

**Secondly, the textual integrity and accuracy of the Bible points to its uniqueness and its trustworthiness.** The *coherence and unity* of the Bible is simply amazing when you consider that the Bible was written by so many authors over so much time. There are many different kinds of literary genres in the Bible – history, sagas, poetry, parables, metaphors, prophecies, law and so on. And it was written in different languages. Yet there is a harmony to it and a consistency to it and an overarching story. It's the story of God's loving pursuit to bring wayward, rebellious humanity back into right relationship with himself. The story begins in a garden – the Garden of Eden – and it ends (in the Revelation) with a garden – of paradise restored. In this garden the river of the water of life flows through it and there is a tree of life bearing fruit, and there is the promise of a new earth.

And there is the *textual accuracy* of the documents themselves, which suggests that these accounts have not been tampered with. Scholars have all kinds of ancient documents to work with, far more than any other work from antiquity. We only have 49 ancient manuscripts of Aristotle, the oldest of which was copied 1,100 after Aristotle's death. On the other hand we have 14,000 manuscripts of the Old Testament alone. And new discoveries of manuscripts confirm its textual accuracy.

Some critics used to argue that the Old Testament couldn't be trusted because there was a 1300 year gap between the originals and the existing copies. Up until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the oldest Old Testament manuscript was from 900 AD. Now the oldest scrolls date from the first century BC – a thousand years earlier –confirming the accuracy of the later copies. The Dead Sea Scrolls give us much confidence that the Old Testament we have today is the same as it circulated in antiquity.

As far as the New Testament is concerned we have something like 25,000 ancient manuscripts discovered in many languages... the oldest copy going back to 150 AD. And so we have very good reason to believe in the textual accuracy of the New Testament as well. Scribes and monks have been very careful indeed to preserve the Word of God. And therefore we can have confidence in it.

**Not only does the textual integrity and accuracy of the Bible give us good reason to have confidence in it, but so does its historical accuracy.**

Archaeology continues to confirm the biblical record in a most amazing way. Chuck Colson in his excellent book, The Faith, notes that by the end of the 1950's no less than 25,000 biblical sites had been substantiated by archeological discoveries and there has been no discovery proving the Bible false.<sup>3</sup>

He points out how, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, secular scholars dismissed the Hittite empire because there was no evidence of its existence other than in biblical references. Then archaeologists discovered the ruins of the Hittite empire in what is today Turkey and turns out to have been an advanced civilization, so much so that today a dictionary of the Hittite language has been published by scholars at the University of Chicago.

In modern day Israel a helicopter flying over the Mediterranean coast spotted a great circle on the beach suggesting an ancient city once occupied the site. An archeological dig found Caesarea Maritima – King Herod's summer retreat. A piece of stone was found there inscribed with the name of Pontius Pilate – until then, there was no other evidence outside the Bible that there even was a Pontius Pilate. Again archeology backs up the biblical record.

As Paul Johnson, a well-known British historian and popular author, puts it: it is no longer people of faith but rather the skeptics who should fear the course of further discovery.

**And then there is the transformative power of the Bible.** No other book has changed so many lives. I think of Augustine, who lived a self-indulgent life. One day as he walked in a garden he felt a strange compulsion to read the Bible. He heard this inner voice saying, 'Pick it up and read...pick it up read.' He did, and the Word touched him at his core and utterly transformed his life. He became a bishop in the church, becoming the second greatest theologian of church after St. Paul.

It was the Bible with its admonition to care for the poor that led Francis to sell everything he had and to undertake great acts of mercy.

It was the Bible that led Martin Luther to experience God's grace like he had never experienced it, and caused him to not only want to reform his own life, but that of the church.

It was the Bible that led Albert Schweitzer to leave his position as a theologian and organist and to study medicine at an advanced age, sacrificing everything to offer medical care in the jungle.

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Colson, The Faith, p. 51

The Gideons will tell you story after story of how the Bible transformed a human life, just because someone gave them one and they picked it up and read it.

The Word of God has great power to change lives for the good. As people read the Bible they sense that God is speaking to them and to their need. They find it addresses their own issues, and find it to be a true source of guidance, strength, and hope in tough times. They have found the Word of God to be both comforting and challenging, and always life-affirming and life-giving. They have indeed found it to be “the Good Book.”

To be sure, other books have powerfully influenced people’s lives – but none quite like the Bible. We believe it is the Word of God because of its unusual power to speak to us. There is a self-authenticating quality about it. It just rings true. It truly is inspired in the way that it can encourage us and correct us, and equip us for living a godly life.

**I have spoken of the Bible’s authority, its textual integrity, its historical accuracy, and its transformative power. Nothing that I have said, however, will probably convince skeptics to trust in the Bible as God’s word. So many critics mock the Bible without ever truly reading it or studying it; they approach it with a narrow mind and a closed heart and scoff at what they don’t understand.**

I confess, though, that there is an awful lot in the Bible I don’t understand. Some of the stories in the Bible are very difficult – if downright weird. I am not always sure what God was up to, especially in Old Testament times. The critics major on these difficulties and declare the whole bible barbaric and worthless. They take verses out of context and use interpretive principles that are far from intellectually sound. Though I struggle with many things in the Bible, I choose to major on those things I *do* understand – that God is gracious and merciful, and that wants nothing but the best for humanity. That God is working out his purposes in history, and that the God of the Bible is above all the God I see in Jesus Christ. I seek to interpret the Bible through the lens of Jesus Christ, who is the center of the story.

The Bible will always have its critics. Needless to say, the Book has always managed to survive.

I think of the famous French philosopher Voltaire: if you remember the sought to eradicate all Christian influence at the time of the French Revolution. He predicted that no one would read the Bible within a hundred years. When his home was later auctioned off after his death, it was purchased by the French Bible Society. As somebody said, *“The Bible outlives its pallbearers.”*<sup>44</sup>

**To our critics, some of whom may be people we live with and work with, all we can do is ask them to read the Bible for themselves, and to do so with an open mind.**

Encourage them to read and to find out for themselves. Ask them to test the Bible, to see if they find it to be in any sense the Word of God. Have them to start with a Gospel. And then pray for them, that the Holy Spirit would open up the scriptures to them and speak into their life. It just might change their life for the better. It might open up to them a whole new life – eternal life.

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<sup>44</sup> Colson, p 56

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we can be so grateful that God has spoken to us through his Word. People have literally given their lives to preserve it and to defend it and to share it. What a precious gift!

Let us give ourselves anew to the study of His word. It is completely trustworthy. It is worthy of our confidence. Through its pages we meet the Living Lord himself. *“Speak, O Lord, for your servants are listening!”* Amen.