



## IS THE BIBLE RELIABLE?

Pastor Al Detter II Timothy 3:16

9:30 & 11:00am Grace Church April 22, 2007

If you were here last week, you remember that I said that Joel Osteen, pastor of the largest church in America, does-n't include "reprove" and "rebuke" in his preaching like the Apostle Paul said to do when we preach the Word. I wasn't being critical of his ministry. But I think it's something he and every pastor need to do as they preach the Word.

I also said last week that I want to affirm what Joel does every time he preaches. He has the whole congregation repeat an affirmation about the Bible. Thousands pick up their Bibles and lift them in the air as they say these words together, words which I think are incredibly appropriate to my sermon today.

Let's lift up our Bibles and confess:

*"This is my Bible. I am what it says I am. I have what it says I have. I can do what it says I can do. Today I will be taught by the Word of God.*

*I boldly confess my mind is alert, my heart is receptive. I will never be the same. I am about to receive the incorruptible, indestructible, ever-living seed of the Word of God.*

*I will never be the same. Never, never, never. I will never be the same, in Jesus' name."*

That's the confidence in which I preach today!

I'll never forget the snowstorm that hit the Midwestern to Eastern states in 1979. We had just moved to Erie and hadn't yet sold our home in Chicago. Our house was empty and word got to me that the snow and ice dams were so high on the roof that it was leaking profusely inside the house.

I flew to Chicago to shovel my roof. I couldn't find anyone to help me. The snow was so high that the job seemed impossible. I wasn't quite sure where to jump in. The solitary job was so big, it was a very difficult day.

That's kind of how I feel about our subject today. Volumes and volumes have been written about the reliability of the Bible from every angle. I barely know how to deal with this subject in 1 sermon and do justice to it.

We're in a 4-week series called "Firm Foundations". As we move down the road to our new campus later this year, I want to be sure we understand our theological foundations. As a church, we need to stand on the truths of the Word of God. Many of those truths are being called into question in churches like ours today. I want you to know where we stand in these matters. Today my sermon is—Is the Bible Reliable?

The Bible is under attack. That's nothing new. Recently Pastor Rick Warren and atheist Sam Harris had a debate in Newsweek (4-9-07). Harris said, "Scriptures are the product of human hands and hearts. Scholarship clearly shows us that the texts present historical and literacy problems that would seem to rule out the possibility that they are perfect."

The Newsweek reporter says, "As Harris points out, people who demand evidence for everything else in their lives are somehow all too happy to accept the word of long-dead Biblical authors in a corner of a long-dead empire."

Near the end of the debate, Harris says to Warren, “I think you could use your time and attention better than organiz-ing your life around a belief that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God and the best book we’re ever going to have on every relevant subject.”

Friends, Harris is also describing me. That’s my life in a nutshell. My whole life and ministry are organized around the Word of God and I believe it’s the most relevant book this world will ever see. If that’s a waste of time, I can’t think of any better way to waste it!

Maybe that explains why I think the verse for my sermon text today is the most important verse in the entire Bible. There would be many worthy contenders, but as far as I’m concerned, there’s no more important verse in the Bible than II Timothy 3:16. Actually, it’s not even the complete verse—it’s 6 words. And they will be the 6 words of my text today. You’ll easily have them memorized by the end of the sermon if you haven’t already—“All Scripture is inspired by God.” Let’s repeat it together.

Why is this the most important verse of the Bible? For one simple reason. If these words aren’t true, if this verse is false in any sense, then the truth of the rest of the Bible is compromised. If Paul says that all Scripture came from God and that statement isn’t true, then how can the rest of the Bible be reliable?

So let’s look at today’s text—“All Scripture is inspired by God.” I want to break it down into 2 parts—the extent of Scripture and the origin of Scripture.

## **Part #1—The extent of Scripture.**

The verse says, “All Scripture”. What are the Scriptures in mind here? What do they include? What do they exclude? It depends on when you’re answering this question.

When Paul wrote this to Timothy, it would have been at least the Old Testament. All of the Old Testament was held to be Scripture by the Jews and early church. Plus, there are verses like II Peter 3:15-16 which put Paul’s letters on an equal par with the Old Testament Scriptures. Peter writes that some people distort Paul’s letters as they do also “the rest of the Scriptures”.

There was a growing body of sacred writings from the Apostles and their associates that the early church recognized as Scripture. We must understand, however, that when Timothy was pastoring, not all Scripture had yet been written. But whatever was recognized as Scripture at that point would have been regarded as “all Scripture”.

What is the “all Scripture” for us today? I say without reservation that “all Scripture” means the 66 books in our current Bible. All 66 books of the Bible are Scripture—no more and no less.

That brings us to a very interesting word—“canon”. I’m not talking about a big gun on 2 wheels. That’s spelled “cannon”. The canon simply means the list of all the books that belong in the Bible. You can’t get a more important subject than the canon of the Bible. People like you and me are staking our lives and eternities on the belief that these books are the only books God intended for us to have and no others.

The word “canon” simply” means “rule or standard”. Every book in the Bible had to meet certain criteria by the Jews and early church to be included in the canon of Scripture. For instance, a book had to pass an author test and it had to pass a doctrinal test. By AD 397 at the Council of Carthage, the entire church was unified (cf. 39th Paschal Letter of Athanasius in AD 367) around the list of the 27 New Testament books we have today. I believe that Paul would have endorsed these 27 books and only these books along with the 39 books of the Old Testament as “all Scripture” if he were alive today.

It’s important to say that just as the writing of the Scriptures was the work of the Holy Spirit, so was the historical recognition of what books belong in the Scriptures. What God wrote, He also verified through His church. So for us today, “all Scripture” means the 66 books of our Bible.

## Part #2—The origin of Scripture.

Where did the Scriptures come from? Are they of divine

origin or human origin? Here's what Paul says, "All Scripture is inspired by God." The word "inspire" here doesn't mean that a person was overcome with emotion that compelled him to produce something great—like a great musical piece or work of art. The word means "God-breathed". It means that the Scriptures came directly from God, that the entire Bible is equally inspired, and that the Scriptures are the very words God intended when everything was written down.

There's been lots of discussion on how God did this. This is basically what happened. According to II Peter 1:21, the Biblical authors didn't decide what to write for them-selves. Men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. He used human authors, personalities and all, to produce the very words God wanted us to have.

That's why we call the Scriptures "God's Word" and "the Word of God". They are the words of God delivered by human authors. This is not a manmade book. It has come down from God out of Heaven.

Friends, this is the teaching from which our whole belief system comes. If we didn't believe that the Bible was the very Word of God in its entirety, we wouldn't believe what I'm going to say next. Here's what we believe because all Scripture is God-breathed.

**1) We believe that all Scripture is true.** The starting place of the reliability of the Bible is God. If the Bible came from God, God by very nature can't lie or make mistakes. So there are no lies or errors in the Bible. Everything it affirms to be true is true regardless of what other voices tell us. When the Bible was written, it came from God to the authors completely true and free from error. Of course, mistakes have crept into the millions of copies since the books were first written. We basically know what those mistakes are.

But here's the point. The reliability of the Bible hinges on

where it came from—God who is truth and who can't lie. When something in life claims to be true that's in opposition to what the Bible says, I've got to believe what the Bible says is true over everything else because it came from God.

**2) We believe that all Scripture is authoritative.** Because it comes from God and reveals His character and His will, we are to submit to it in all things. It becomes our only rule of faith and practice for all of life. We are to order what we believe and how we live by its words. There is no other book or sermon or word from man that carries the authority of the Bible for us who believe.

**3) We believe the Bible is essential.** By that, I mean the Bible is absolutely necessary for spiritual life. In these verses surrounding today's text, things happen to people because of the Scriptures that would otherwise be impossible—salvation (Rom. 10:13-17; I Pet. 1:23-25), spiritual growth (I Pet. 2:2), and equipping for ministry (II Tim. 3:17). And that's not to mention what we wouldn't know about God and the spirit world without the Bible.

By now, you can see how much we're staking on the Bible's reliability. If the Bible isn't reliable and trustworthy, we are some of the most benighted people on earth. But if it's true, we'd be foolish to ignore it.

I want to tell you why I believe and teach that all Scripture is inspired by God. I have accepted the Bible's own testimony about itself by faith. That doesn't mean I've buried my brain in the sand somewhere. Actually, there's an incredible synergism between the mind and faith when the Bible is believed. God has the most sensational mind in the universe and when His word is believed, our minds are enlightened by Him.

Here's just a sampling of what the Scriptures say about themselves:

*\*Deut. 8:3: "Man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord."*

*\*Deut. 32:46-47: "Take to heart all the words with which I am warning you today...even all the words of this law. For it is not an idle word for you; indeed it is your life."*

*\*Ps. 119:89: "Forever, O Lord, Your word is settled in heaven."*

*\*Ps. 119:152: "Of old I have known Your testimonies, that You have founded them forever."*

*\*Ps. 119:160: "The sum of Your word is truth, and every one of Your righteous ordinances are everlasting."*

*\*Isa. 40:8: "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever."*

*\*I Thes. 2:13: "When you received from us the word of God's message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe."*

*\*Rom. 10:17: "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ."*

*\*Heb. 4:2: "The word they heard did not profit them because it was not united by faith in those who heard."*

*\*Heb. 4:12: "For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword."*

There's one more feature I want to add to the Bible's testimony about itself. It's the sheer amount of material that claims to have come from the mouth of God Himself especially in the Old Testament. It would be a great project to go through the Bible and isolate all the verses that say something like, "This is the word which the Lord command-ed" or "Thus says the Lord." A remarkable amount of the Bible is the straight words of God directly from His mouth.

I'm staking everything I believe and do that the Bible is reliable. I'm in the ministry because I believe the Bible is reliable. The last thing I'd be doing is to commit myself to something I thought was flawed and deceive people to believe in a human book that was untrustworthy.

Perhaps you've heard of Pascal's wager. Blaise Pascal was a 17th century mathematician and philosopher. He brought his 2 passions together—mathematics and faith into a famous proposition. He said that it's smarter to believe that God exists and to believe in Him because if it turns out to be true, you win everything. If it turns out that He doesn't exist, you lose nothing. BUT, if God is real and you don't believe, you lose everything!

Pascal's Wager is just as valid for believing that the Bible is true and reliable even in the face of intellectual questions and criticism. And that's the direction I want to go for the remainder of the sermon. I want to touch on some questions that cause people problems with believing the Bible as I have presented it today.

Questions:

## **1. Are the 66 books of the Bible the completed Scriptures? Could other Scriptures be written? Could some ancient writings become Scripture?**

I have complete confidence that the 66 books of the Bible are the complete Word of God to human beings on earth. There's more truth than in the Word of God. But what we have in Scripture is sufficient for salvation, our knowledge of God, and for living life. We need nothing else.

The historical confirmation of the 66 books of the Bible is significant. It's the major practical witness that the canon is closed—that no more books will be added or written. Keep in mind that the early church didn't make the books of the Bible to be Scripture. They recognized the divine nature of the Scriptures.

We're hearing more and more about supposed lost and dis-covered books of the Bible like the Gospel of Judas. It would be impossible to get a unified church to make a ruling on a book like that. It wouldn't gain widespread recognition.

We know that Paul wrote other letters than the ones we have in the New Testament. What if one of them was discovered? It would be extremely difficult to understand how God would deprive Scripture from the church for nearly 2 millennia.

What about the Apocrypha, the books in the Catholic Bible between the Old and New Testaments? We don't regard them as Scripture for a number of reasons, none the least of which is that they were not recognized by the Jews as Scripture and they contain doctrinal inconsistencies from the rest of the Bible. The Apocrypha were not declared to be canonical until 1546 at the Council of Trent, kind of late in the game.

God has faithfully overseen the gathering of the books of the Bible and we are not to expect any deletions or additions. In fact, there's a solemn warning in Revelation about adding to or taking away from the words of its prophecies (Rev. 21:18-19). I think those words are applicable to the whole word of God which is in a real sense, the prophecies of God.

## **2. What about the sacred writings of other religions? Are they Scriptures?**

They are sacred writings to the people of that religion. But sacred writings other than the 66 books did not come from God. That's the unique difference. We claim that the only book from God is the Bible.

Take the Koran for instance. It claims to be a revelation on the par of the Scriptures before it. But Jesus is made out to be a prophet who began the work Muhammad was to complete. And so it is with all the other sacred writings that claim to be revelation from God. At many places and in many ways, they contradict the Bible. You can't have a library of sacred writings contradicting each other and at the same time have them come from God as truth.

There are other sacred writings in the world. But only 1 comes from God. Therefore only 1 is reliable—the Bible.

## **3. What about the contradictions in the Bible?**

This has been a hot item for years. Some claim to have isolated 1000's of mistakes and contradictions in the Bible. With the claim that there are errors, mistakes, and contra-dictions in the Bible comes the claim that it isn't really trustworthy in all that it claims. An atheist website says, "What is incredible about the Bible is that such a concoction of contradictory nonsense could be believed by anyone to have been written by an omniscient god."

Yet after hundreds of years, contradictions haven't sunk the Bible. Almost all the contradictions of the Bible have been addressed, obviously not to everyone's satisfaction. The biggest reason we have trouble understanding some of the seeming inconsistencies is because we are so far removed from the culture and the events of antiquity that all we have are puzzle pieces.

I must readily admit, there are some problems that don't seem to have a good explanation. The point I'm making is that as time goes by, the problems keep getting plausible explanations. We can fill in more of the puzzle pieces. For instance, take the myriad of archeological discoveries. Archeology keeps proving the Bible to be right. The presence of problems is not a reason to mistrust the Bible. It has stood the test of time.

## **4. How reliable are the ancient Biblical manuscripts?**

The Bible is rooted in history. It's not a book of fictional stories. There has been great suspicion about many of the historical facts in the Bible especially with the rise of modern liberal scholarship over the past 150 years—things

like the date of the crossing of the Red Sea, and the existence of the Philistines and Pontius Pilate just to name a few.

You need to know that the Bible is the most attested book of antiquity in the world by far. Scholars like F. F. Bruce have shown how incredible the historical witness of the Bible is. He observes that only about 10 good manuscripts of Caesar's Gallic Wars exist, the oldest of which is some 900 years after Caesar lived. The History of Thucydides who lived around 460-400 BC is known from 8 manuscripts, the earliest being about AD 900. The same is true for the History of Herodotus who lived about 480-425 BC. Yet no scholars doubt their historicity with so few manuscripts that exist some 1300 years and more after the originals.

By contrast, the New Testament was basically written in the 2nd half of the 1st century. We have over 5000 varieties of manuscripts that date from the 4th to the 9th centuries AD. We have fragments that go back as early as the 2nd century with many of the Scriptures being quoted by the early church fathers who lived in the 2nd century.

This is such a vast subject, but it deserves one more comment. We had no complete Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament earlier than around AD 900 until 1947. That's when the Dead Sea Scrolls were found in Israel. Those manuscripts date back to about 200 BC. Instantly a 1000-year gap was spanned and we found out how incredibly accurate the AD 900 manuscripts were to the 200 BC ones. It was like God shouting to the world, "You can trust the Bible even in matters of historical accuracy."

## **5. Can I trust the Bible in matters of science and history?**

Some people believe that the faith parts of the Bible are reliable but the science and history parts of the Bible may be inaccurate. The problem is that the faith aspects of the Bible are so intertwined with history and the physical aspects of the universe that it's almost impossible to split them apart. The point is—if the Bible claims to be true about one thing and it's false, how can you have confidence about anything it says?

We can't make the Bible something it was never intended to be—a science book. But a lot of the problems we have arise because historians and scientists and Christians conflict about what they believe the Bible says. Some well-meaning Christians have made the Bible to say things it doesn't say and some historians and scientists interpret facts according to their presuppositions. The conflicts between science, history, and the Bible are often conflicts between interpretations of facts. We're all guilty of this.

My position is that there are no insurmountable problems between true science and history and the Bible. If there really are errors and untruths about science and history, the real problem goes right back to God who claimed to speak directly about those matters when He spoke to Moses, the prophets, and the apostles. Not only would the Bible be unreliable but so would God.

Ask yourself a question. How many revisions of the Bible have there been about matters of science and history? How many revisions have there been in science and history books as new information comes to light? Man's knowledge keeps changing. God's revelation stands the challenge of new information and time.

**6. Doesn't a literal understanding of the Bible cause most of our problems?** If we could take the science and history out of the Bible and make it a collection of sacred stories and allegories, wouldn't that solve our problems?

That's what's going on in the world and in many circles in the church these days. A literal understanding of the Bible is falling into disrepute. We're told that a literal understanding of the Bible won't stand the test of academics.

First, we have to understand what it means to take the Bible literally. It doesn't mean that because God is said to have wings that God is a bird. We're to understand the Bible like we do any other kind of literature. We recognize figures of speech and genres of literature.

The problem is dealing with what looks like straight-forward language when there are no clues to take it in any other way than literally. In those cases, I believe we should take the Bible as literally as we would when reading a newspaper.

The mainstream historic position of the church for centuries was a literal understanding of the Bible. From it comes the heart of what we believe theologically. If we do away with a literal interpretation of the Bible, we will turn on its head what we believe about creation, human beings, sin, death, salvation, prophecies, and miracles for starters.

When I have problems about what is literal or not, I ask myself, "What did the apostles, prophets, and Jesus believe?" The church is built upon the foundation of their beliefs. If Jesus believed that there was a literal Adam and Eve, that Moses wrote the Law, that one Isaiah wrote the book of Isaiah, and that Jonah was in the belly of a great fish, then I'm going to believe it. The same thing goes for the Apostle Paul whose basic theological arguments hang on a literal interpretation of the history of the Bible. I mean, if they got it wrong, we're all in trouble.

## **7. Are we supposed to believe that the miracles of the Bible really happened?**

This is the crux of the matter right here. It gets to the heart of what lies beneath the entire Bible—supernaturalism. The majority of all issues concerning the Bible are about this. Supernaturalism is the major lens of the Bible.

If you believe that God is supernatural and that all things are possible, you have no problem believing all the miracles of the Bible. But if you enthrone the scientific method, miracles and science do not mix. What do you do? If you make science the authority, you have to find a way to explain away the miracles of the Bible. Is modern scholarship ever good at that!

I hope you've seen the progression in the questions—issues of science, history, and literalism. They all go together. If you believe in the miraculous, literal history and science makes sense. Nothing is too hard for God. If you don't believe in the supernatural, you've got to find other explanations and that will be at the expense of the reliability of the Bible.

It all gets down to what you believe about God. If you have a supernatural God, the Bible will make sense. If you don't, it won't. You'll look to other authorities to define reality and reinterpret God and the Bible. It's a collision of worldly reason vs. faith. Paul tells us that the wisdom of God is foolishness to the world (1 Cor. 1).

There's a 50-year old song that actually says it pretty well:

*"I believe in miracles for I believe in God."* That's the heart of the matter. I believe the Bible is reliable because I believe in God.

## **Conclusion**

I might not have been compelling about the reliability of the Bible today. But it's not about how compelling any human being is about the reliability of God's Word. It's about how compelling God is.

In the end, faith must overtake reason. That's the nature of the Bible from cover to cover—from the 1st creation in Genesis to the new creation in Revelation. It goes beyond the mind. It calls for faith in God's very words! The Bible will never make sense to the unconverted rational mind. We have never been called to reason in order to believe. We've been called to believe in order to reason. The reliability of the Bible when so understood is not a leap of faith at all. It's a step of faith.

I take a high view of Scripture and it has become my life. I read it every day. I'm in my 50th complete reading of the Bible since 1981. It all boils down to this—the Bible is our only way of truly knowing God and what reality is. If the Bible is unreliable, we can't truly know God or reality.

Friends, this book is the only true and reliable word of the God. We stand in the tradition of people like Enoch and Moses onward who believed in God and His word. Admittedly, there are times when the Bible and the mind clash. But in the end it all comes down to this. It's by believing God just like they did that righteousness is reckoned to us (Rom. 4:2-3). We're only able to believe God through His word. If we're to believe God, we must believe His word is reliable.

My belief in the Bible goes back to my childhood and it has never changed. It's captured in that preschool song, "The B-I-B-L-E, yes that's the book for me. I stand alone on the word of God, the B-I-B-L-E." That's going to be my belief until I die. I hope it's your belief as well.