

Is the Bible Reliable? Part 1.

II Timothy 3:14-17

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NASTY RUMORS

There are some nasty rumors floating around out there; rumors that besmirch a stellar reputation. Rumors which, if collaborated, could be disastrous. You've probably heard some of this gossip yourself. You may have even wondered if any of it's true.

The rumors are about the Bible.

One rumor is that the Bible was put together by a group of unscrupulous bishops who only chose the books that would build their own power base. Time and again we hear about "lost books of the Bible" being found. The innuendo is that these books *should* have been included in the Bible, but power-hungry prelates censored them. They suppressed the seditious truth because it threatened their self-interests.

A second slice of slander is that the Bible has been copied so many times that it has changed dramatically over the centuries. The word on the street is that we have no idea what the Bible originally said. Which version is right? It's hopeless even to try to find out.

A similar tidbit is that since the Bible has been translated over and over again, and since something is always "lost in translation," we can never know what the Bible really said.

Here's another juicy accusation. The Bible is just one of many holy books. It has some great stories and some wonderful teachings, but so do the Iliad, the Koran and the Bhagavad-Gita. Like the scriptures of all religions, the Bible is a collection of human ideas about God and the universe. When Christians refer to the Bible as "the Word of God" we're either exaggerating or bragging. "My book's better than your book." That attitude isn't even nice!

And have you heard this one? Some people say that the Bible was written so long ago, in cultures so different from ours, that it can't possibly say anything meaningful or helpful to us today. It's just an irrelevant relic.

Others say that if you interpret and apply the Bible literally, you end up with some ridiculous ideas and practices. For example, no one nowadays believes that the stars are really embedded in the "firmament" of heaven, like decorations stuck in a plaster ceiling (Genesis 1:6, 14-18 KJV), or that the sun really runs daily like a champion across the sky. (Psalm 19:4-6) And even the most devout Christians never think twice about wearing a garment made of two kinds of material, though Leviticus 19:19 tells us not to do that. On the other hand, if we interpret the Bible too figuratively, we can make it say anything we want it to say. In that case, we make it say nothing at all.

A CRUCIAL QUESTION

Have you heard any of these rumors? Have you wondered if they're true?

We sing the children's song, "Jesus loves me, this I know for the Bible tells me so." Very sweet. But do we really mean that? Oh, most of us believe Jesus loves us, but is the *reason* we believe the fact that the Bible says so? Can serious minded grown ups like you and me trust what the Bible says? In other words, is the Bible reliable?

That's a crucial question. If the Bible is reliable, we have God-given guidance for our faith and practice. If the Bible is reliable we have a lamp for our feet and a light for our path. But if these rumors are true then we're ships without rudders, being carried by the currents of moral fad or intellectual fashion. If the rumors are true then we're left to grope our way through the dark, grabbing on to any thing that feels like it might be solid or stable.

Or to put it in more practical terms, if the Bible is reliable, then we have a way to teach our children right from wrong. If the Bible is reliable we can get to know what God is like. We can find out who we are and what our purpose in life is. We can love God the way God wants to be loved and experience the joy of living according to His will. But if those rumors are true, then your ideas about God are as good as mine.

So for the next few weeks we're going to look into these rumors, one by one. Are they totally true? Are they malicious lies? Most rumors grow out of a misunderstanding of the truth. There's often a grain of truth behind a rumor, but it has been grossly distorted and blown way out of proportion. Is that what we will find here?

THE BIBLE'S ANSWER

II Timothy 3:16 responds directly to all these rumors. It says, "***All Scripture is God-breathed, and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.***" But what help is that? That answer comes from the Bible. And if the Bible isn't reliable, then that answer is no help at all. It's kind of like the used car salesman saying, "Hey, you can trust me." It's like a defendant pleading not guilty before the evidence is presented.

I'm reminded of the guy who told his friend that he had buried his mother-in-law at sea. "Oh my, I didn't know your mother-in-law was dead," the friend said sympathetically.

"Well," the first man replied, "she insisted she wasn't, but you know how she could lie."

The Bible claims to be reliable, but that only helps if you're already inclined to believe the Bible in the first place.

However, if we unpack the words of this verse carefully and think about what they really mean, I believe we will find an answer to our question.

WAS THE BIBLE A "BACK-ROOM DEAL?"

So let's start with the phrase, "***All Scripture.***" What does that mean? What books are considered scripture and why? And who decided what books made it and what books were left out?

This brings us to our first rumor: that the Bible was a back-room deal brokered by ambitious bishops.

How many of you have read Dan Brown's best selling novel, *The Da Vinci Code*? That book has recently spread this rumor like wildfire. About half way through the story, professor Teabing says to Sophie, "The Bible did not arrive by fax from heaven." Well, that much the author got right. But the rest of what he suggests about the Bible and how it came to be is pure fiction and doesn't fit the facts.

In the novel, Professor Teabing spins a yarn that the emperor Constantine, wanting to shore up the power of the Roman Empire, turned to Christianity as a means of unifying

the Empire. Though in the novel Constantine himself never became a Christian, he elevated Christianity to the level of the official state religion because he thought it would give him more complete control over his subjects.

In order to solidify this power he called all the bishops to convene in Nicea in the year 325 and told them to declare that Jesus was the Son of God – allegedly a novel idea at the time. With a religion whose founder is said to be divine, no one could oppose what that religion said, and if the emperor controlled the Church, the emperor's power would be absolute.

Further the emperor told the bishops to write a creed, which would establish the divinity of Jesus: the Nicene Creed. Then, Teabing says, "Constantine commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ's *human* traits and embellished those gospels that made him godlike. The earlier gospels were outlawed, gathered up, and burned."

A WORK OF FICTION

As I said, *The Da Vinci Code* is fiction, and in this case the author even made up the history on which his plot is based. Unfortunately I'm afraid that many people think that Brown was as careful a researcher as James Mitchner. Many people think that this recasting of history bears any resemblance to what really happened.

But think about it for a moment. Why would Constantine adopt Christianity to strengthen his own power? Because he could claim that Jesus was a god? That would have been a stupid strategy in ancient Rome because, since the time of Augustus Caesar, the emperors had all claimed that they were gods. The religious policy of the Roman Empire had always been that Roman subjects could worship any god or gods they wanted, so long as they worshiped Caesar too. That's why Christians were persecuted. They wouldn't play along. They wouldn't acknowledge Caesar as divine. So they were thrown into prison and burned at the stake and fed to the lions. Further, the worst persecutor of all the emperors was Constantine's immediate predecessor, Diocletian. If Constantine had simply wanted to strengthen the power of the state he would never have done so by declaring that Jesus is Lord. He would have declared that "Caesar is Lord," just as all the other emperors had done. Why should he surrender his power to Jesus?

Further, the portrait this novel paints of the bishops at Nicea is all wrong. We picture the bishops as power hungry politicians out to enhance their own positions. We envision wealthy prelates in rich robes and velvet finery. We think, perhaps of Cardinal Richelieu from *The Three Musketeers*. But these were the very bishops who had suffered for their faith under Diocletian. They had been tortured and beaten and jailed and abused. Many of them came to Nicea crippled and mangled for their faith. They came with eyes gouged out. They came limping and maimed. They came mourning their colleagues, their brothers and sisters who had been killed in the persecution. They were the walking wounded. And they had been persecuted precisely because they refused to deny that Jesus is Lord. The Council of Nicea didn't invent the divinity of Jesus. The bishops who were there had believed that so strongly that they sacrificed their bodies and their families for that great, saving truth.

Finally, I can't find any historical record that says that the bishops at Nicea even talked about which books should be in the Bible. And even if they did that wasn't the

final word, because about seventy years later the councils of Hippo and Carthage published lists of books that were accepted in all the churches.

We can't blame Dan Brown. *The Da Vinci Code* is a work of fiction, so he did what fiction writers do. He made things up. But we should know that the idea that an ambitious body of bishops put together a Bible that would suit their purposes is simply false and doesn't fit the facts.

HOW THE BIBLE CAME TOGETHER

So, if the Bible wasn't faxed down from heaven, and if Constantine didn't commission corrupt clergy to fashion a tool of domination, how did the Bible come to be?

Let's start by admitting that there really are "lost books," some of which have never been found. The Bible itself tells us so several times. For example in the books of First and Second Kings, we come across many verses like I Kings 22:39 *As for the other events of Ahab's reign, including all he did, the palace he built and inlaid with ivory, and the cities he fortified, are they not written in the book of the annals of the kings of Israel?* Or II Kings 20:20 *As for the other events of Hezekiah's reign, all his achievements and how he made the pool and the tunnel by which he brought water into the city, are they not written in the book of the annals of the kings of Judah?*

Now we no longer have *The Annals of the Kings of Israel* or *The Annals of the Kings of Judah*. They're lost. Too bad. They would probably be interesting to read, and they might even shed light on the events recorded in the Bible. But they're lost. The question, however, is *why* are they lost?

Similarly, we know that there were a number of false prophets in the days of Jeremiah. Jeremiah 23:16 says, *This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; they fill you with false hopes. They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD"*. Did any of those prophets record their sayings as Jeremiah did? We don't know because, if they did write books, nobody bothered to preserve them.

First and Second Kings helped the people of God understand how the Lord was working in their situation, so those books were cherished and protected and shared. The *Annals of the Kings* may have been interesting, but the people didn't hear the Word of God in them.

Likewise, the prophecies of Jeremiah proved to be true. They not only "came true," they revealed the truth about God and His purposes and His plans. So the people clung to the book of Jeremiah while other writings were neglected and ignored.

By the time of the apostles, the 39 books that we know as the Old Testament or the Hebrew Scriptures were widely revered as God's Word by Christians and Jews.

We find a similar situation in the New Testament. Some books are lost. In I Corinthians 5:9 the Apostle Paul writes *I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people*. Now of course the point of the verse is about sexual morality in the church. But it also gives us a clue about how the New Testament came together. We don't have the letter where Paul wrote this. It's lost. We don't have any idea what else it said (though, of course, scholars have speculated). But the point I want to make is that Paul says he wrote a letter to the Corinthians *before* the letter we call First Corinthians. We could call that letter Former Corinthians. And it is one of the lost books.

But the plot thickens. In II Corinthians 7:8 we read, *Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it--I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while.* As we read the surrounding verses, we realize that this doesn't sound like a description of I Corinthians. So it looks like Paul wrote yet another letter to the Corinthians between the books we call First and Second Corinthians. It's referred to as "the tearful letter." And where is that letter? There are some very complex theories about that, but the best answer is simply that it's lost. No one bothered to save it.

One more. Now look at Colossians 4:16 *After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea.* Paul wrote a letter to the Laodiceans. But it's lost. We don't have it anymore.

Why are these letters missing? Because no one bothered to preserve them. They didn't "live" in the church. They didn't thrive in the church. They didn't help people understand what it means to be the people of God. People read First and Second Corinthians, people read Colossians, and they said, "Wow, this letter is a keeper!" They copied these letters. They shared them with their friends in other churches. "You gotta read this." In these letters, people heard the Word of God, so these letters were treasured.

II Peter 3:15-16 shows us that even in the lifetime of the apostles, some of Paul's writings were already treasured as scripture. Peter says, *Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. ¹⁶He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.*

The letter to the Laodiceans, on the other hand, was apparently a loser. So it was lost. The people didn't hear God's universal Word there, or in "Former Corinthians" or "the tearful letter." So these books didn't make the cut.

Now look at Luke 1:1-4 *Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ²just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. ³Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.*

Luke tells us that *many* people had written things about the life and teachings of Jesus. But again most of these writings didn't thrive in the Church. They didn't help people encounter the risen, living Christ. So they were dropped by the wayside.

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, these books were beloved by believers. These books helped people grow in their faith. So they were saved and shared and circulated. So they became the four gospels of our Bible.

By the way, we hear a good deal these days about "The Gospel of Thomas" and "The Gospel of Mary Magdalene." In fact some people want to suggest that these books were suppressed. But it's pretty clear from their style and from the ideas we find in them that these weren't even written until a hundred years or more after the accepted New Testament books.

The Gospel of Thomas only has 114 verses, the last one of which says, "Simon Peter said to them: Let Mary go forth from among us, for women are not worthy of the life.

Jesus said: Behold, I shall lead her, that I may make her male, in order that she also may become a living spirit like you males. For every woman who makes herself male shall enter into the kingdom of heaven.”

Parts of the Gospel According to Mary Magdalene are missing, and we only have about 52 verses of that bit of writing.

You can find these online and read them for yourselves. See if you think they’re on a par with Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

After the age of the apostles, the New Testament continued to take shape for two or three centuries. Christians would ask their friends what books were good. Or, as people still do today, they would ask their pastors or bishops which books were recommended. And pastors would talk to each other about it.

This process was pretty fluid. Many of the books were universally recognized by Christians everywhere, but others were more iffy. Books like “The Shepherd of Hermas” and “The Epistle of Barnabas” were very popular and well received, but were finally passed by. Other books, like James, Hebrews and Revelation were often in question.

We have a list of accepted books from around the year 180. It’s called the Muratorian Canon. (The word canon comes from the Greek word for ruler, as in a measuring device. Bible scholars use the word canon to refer to a list of accepted or authoritative writings.) The Muratorian Canon includes most of the New Testament as we know it, but it’s missing Hebrews, James, II Peter and III John. It recommends The Shepherd of Hermas to be read, but not as scripture.

[NOTE: The very beginning of the Muratorian Canon is missing. It starts by referring to Luke as the “Third Gospel.” However, there is ample evidence that the Gospels had already been collected and circulated in the order Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.]

For a more detailed but fascinating account of how the New Testament came to be, I’d encourage you to read chapter 3 of F.F. Bruce’s book, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* In that chapter he says this:

“One thing must be emphatically stated. The New Testament books did not become authoritative for the Church because they were formally included in a canonical list; on the contrary, the Church included them in her canon because she already regarded them as divinely inspired.”

So now we have the big picture of how the Bible came together. Certain writings were recognized over time as the Word of God because they strengthened the faith of believers. They spoke with authority, and so their authority was received. That’s why we have these books and not others.

But what about the details? What about the small picture? How can we know that the versions we have of these precious books are accurate? How can we know the books themselves haven’t been changed? That’s a question we’ll have to take up next week.

For now we can know that these are the books in which the people of God heard the Word of God. And if you and I listen as we read, we will hear it, too.

Is the Bible Reliable? Part 2.

II Timothy 3:14-17

June 5-6, 2004

We're looking into rumors.

Last week we investigated allegations that the Bible was put together as part of a back-room deal, brokered among ambitious bishops who included only those books which they thought would make them more powerful. We looked at the version of that rumor that's included in the popular novel, *The DaVinci Code*. Then we traced the process of how the Bible really came together.

In the weeks ahead we'll hit on other hot topics. We'll talk about the widespread notion that there's really nothing unique about the Bible, that it has no more authority than other religious writings. We'll check out the opinion which says the Bible is such an old relic it can't possibly have anything relevant to say to us today. And finally we'll explore some of those nagging questions about how the Bible is to be interpreted.

In short, we're exploring the question, "Is the Bible Reliable?" Can we trust the Bible as a "lamp for our feet and a light for our path?"

Today we want to answer a very common accusation. Some people say that the Bible has been copied so many times that countless changes must have crept in. Therefore, they say, we can't be sure that the Bible we have is the same as the Bible that was written.

A PARLOR GAME

Have you ever played the game "telephone" or "rumors?" It goes like this. One person writes down a one-sentence message – usually one that has the potential to be misinterpreted in funny ways. That person whispers the message to a second person, who whispers it to a third and so on until everyone playing has heard a version of the message. The last player says the message out loud. Then the first player then reads the original message for all to hear, and everyone is amazed at how different the message has become. It can be a fun game. And it underlines one of the reasons we should never spread or even listen to gossip.

Some people say that this is what happened with the Bible. It was written so very long ago and copied over and over again. We don't have the actual scroll Isaiah wrote on. We don't have David's sheet music. We don't have a "first edition" of Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. We don't have any of Paul's letters on his personal stationary. All we have are copies. Hand-copies at that, since the photocopy machine hadn't been invented yet. So how can we be sure the message of the Bible hasn't been distorted like the messages in that parlor game?

Well, for one thing, the rules of the game "rumors" are designed to encourage mistakes. You only get to hear the message once. You can't ask the person to repeat the message or clarify any details. If you didn't catch part of what the person said, you have to guess what it might have been, and pass that on to the next person. You see, if the message doesn't change, the game's no fun.

The scribes who copied the Bible, on the other hand, made every effort to see to it that the message *didn't* change. Sometimes, of course, they had a copy in front of them. So they didn't have to worry about not hearing clearly something that was whispered in the ear. They could just compare what they copied with what was written, and correct any mistakes.

But sometimes groups of scribes would work together. That was a quicker method for making multiple copies. One person would read out loud the book to be copied, and all the scribes would take dictation. But here you do have a greater opportunity for misunderstandings and mistakes, don't you? So the scribes devised rules that helped them keep mistakes to a minimum. They came up with checks and balances. For example, they would agree always to have a certain number of words or a certain number of letters on each line. They would also agree to have a certain number of lines on each page. At the end of the day they could go back and count the letters or words per line and the lines per page. If they found too many or too few, they would know a mistake had been made and could go back and fix it. They were serious about getting this right. Devout scribes were copying sacred books, and they wanted to preserve the message. They did make mistakes, but not as many as you might think.

THE STORY OF THE SCROLLS

Let me tell you a story. It starts in 1947, 13 miles from Jerusalem. A Bedouin shepherd boy was searching for one of his goats in the Judean dessert. In the process he threw a rock into a cave, hoping to scare his goat out. Instead, he heard a crackling noise, like the shattering of glass. When he went in to check it out, he found a big clay jar with some scrolls in it. He reported what he found, and over the next 9 years archeologists discovered about 850 scrolls in 11 nearby caves. These are the famous "Dead Sea Scrolls."

You've probably heard about the Dead Sea Scrolls, but may have wondered why they're important. One of the main reasons is that among those scrolls they found copies of every book of the Old Testament except for Esther. Further, when they determined the dates of these scrolls by coins that were found near them and other means, they discovered that these scrolls were written between 200 years before Christ and the fall of Jerusalem in the year 70.

Until the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, the earliest copy we had of the Hebrew Scriptures was a version called the Masoretic Text, from roughly the year 900 AD. That's a huge gap between the time the books of Moses and Malachi were written and the time our best copies were made. That's more than 1,300 years. How many corruptions had taken place during those centuries of copying and recopying? How much had the Bible been transformed in transmission? Skeptics were certain the distortions were many. Some people were sure the Bible we had was very different from the Bible that was written.

So when the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, we had an opportunity to compare these very late copies with some fairly early copies. We could see what corruptions had crept in over a thousand years of copying.

The first scroll to be evaluated was a copy of Isaiah. Some folks were sure that the version of Isaiah we had followed for years would be completely discredited. But guess what they discovered. Most good detective stories have a surprise ending, and this is no exception. Instead of showing how much the Old Testament had changed, the Dead Sea

Scrolls showed how little it had changed. The scribes had been very careful. Oh, there were some fascinating and enlightening discoveries that we can't go into here. But by and large what we found in the Dead Sea Scrolls was very close to the copies we had from about a thousand years later.

Instead of proving that the Bible we have is unreliable, the Dead Sea Scrolls emphasize how reliable the Bible is.

AN ELABORATE SCIENCE

Nevertheless, mistakes did slip in. We can't deny that. But scholars have developed a very sophisticated science called "Textual Criticism" or "Lower Criticism" that helps us recognize mistakes – scholars call them "variants" -- and choose which variant is probably best.

This science isn't limited to Biblical studies. All kinds of literary critics use these tools. After all, the plays of Shakespeare were hand-copied, too. The philosophy of Aristotle was hand-copied, too. And variants found their way into all of these works. In fact, compared with most other literature, it's amazing how few the variants are in the Biblical text.

Textual critics are the super-sleuths, sort of the CSI of literary scholars. They know how variants are likely to happen, and that helps them distinguish which readings are better than others. For example, a scribe is more likely to add a couple words to explain an idea than to purposely leave a word out. So the shorter reading is usually to be preferred. It's probably original.

Again, a scribe is more likely to try to clarify a passage than try to make it more confusing. So if one version is harder to understand than the other, the more difficult reading is to be preferred. The easier reading was probably an attempt to fix the original.

If we can see how a scribe's eye might have slipped and he accidentally copied a word from a previous line, we can be fairly confident that's a mistake.

Many of the mistakes are easy to catch: A word or phrase copied twice, misspelled words, transposed words, a word or phrase copied twice. As I said, it's an elaborate and impressive science. And if there are enough good documents to compare, Textual Critics can come up with a pretty reliable version of what an original text said.

A GOLD MINE

Now with the New Testament, we have over 5,600 documents to compare! The next closest piece of ancient literature is the Iliad. (You know, the Brad Pitt story.) We have about 650 copies of that. In addition to these 5,600 New Testament copies, we have thousands of ancient translations of the Bible. We also have innumerable documents where early Christian writers and preachers quoted the New Testament. As a matter of fact Bruce Metzger, who is sort of the Gil Grissom, the chief guru of Textual Criticism, says that we could reconstruct the entire New Testament on the basis of these quotations alone!

What's more, these 5,600 copies of the New Testament, or parts of the New Testament come from all over the ancient world. So we can compare the copies that came from Egypt with the copies that came from Syria with the copies that came from Greece or Palestine or Rome. We can see if local prejudice might have changed a text.

Finally, our earliest copies of the Iliad are from about 900 years after Homer. By contrast, the earliest fragment we have of the Gospel according to John is about from the year 180, less than a century after John's death. And many New Testament manuscripts are from the second and third centuries.

So the New Testament documents are a gold mine for textual critics. We have thousands of them. They come from all over and we have some very old copies. And what happens when we compare all these documents? We find that it's much easier to be sure about the original text of the Bible than it is of any ancient writer, or even most later writers. In other words, although we only have copies of the Bible, not the original manuscripts, we can be confident that the versions of the Bible we have are a very good reflection of the Bible as it was written. Did mistakes creep in? Yes. But we have enough material to see what the mistakes were and correct them.

THREE IMPORTANT VARIANTS

In fact, let's take a look at some of the most important variants in the New Testament. Here's one example. The last twelve verses of the Gospel according to Mark are missing from some of the best manuscripts. Of course most Presbyterians don't mind that because that passage includes the verse about snake handling! Anyway, most modern editions of the Bible have Mark 16:9-20 in brackets. We haven't taken those verses out of the Bible, but we do admit that they aren't in the earliest manuscripts.

Listen to those verses for a moment. They describe what happened after Jesus' resurrection.

When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. ¹⁰She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping. ¹¹When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it.

¹²Afterward Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country. ¹³These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either.

¹⁴Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen.

¹⁵He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. ¹⁶Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. ¹⁷And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; ¹⁸they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well."

¹⁹After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God. ²⁰Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it.

Now, let me point out that virtually everything that's contained in those verses is found somewhere else in the Bible.

In Matthew and in Acts the risen Jesus commissions us to spread the Good News to every nation and to baptize.

Luke tells us about those two disciples to whom Jesus appeared, but they didn't recognize Him on the road to Emmaus.

Matthew and John tell us how some of the disciples doubted, even after the resurrection.

Luke and Acts tell us about Jesus ascending into heaven.

And in Acts we see the miraculous power Christ gives His people to heal, to drive out demons, to speak in tongues. It even shows us a Christian being bitten by a poisonous snake and not being harmed. We see the gospel being preached everywhere, confirmed by God's powerful signs.

So even if we lose Mark 16:9-20, the teaching of Scripture isn't changed.

A second important example comes from the Lord's Prayer. No, it isn't the "debts and debtors" thing. All the manuscripts say "debts" and "debtors." It's the last part of the last verse of the prayer. ***"For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever."*** That's a beautiful and beloved doxology. What wonderful words of praise! But they aren't found in many of the earliest documents. They probably weren't in the Gospel as Matthew wrote it.

However, listen to I Chronicles 29:11.

Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours.

Yours, O LORD, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all.

So even if those wonderful words of praise weren't originally at the end of the Lord's Prayer, they are still Scriptural, and they're still true. The kingdom does belong to God alone. The power and the glory do belong to God alone. And we are right to praise Him for that. And we are right to continually declare those words, "Thine is the Kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen!" Again, the teaching of Scripture is not changed.

One more. In the eighth chapter of John we have the moving story of Jesus and the woman who was caught committing adultery.

³The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group ⁴and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. ⁵In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" ⁶They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

⁷But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." ⁸Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

⁹At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. ¹⁰Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

¹¹"No one, sir," she said.

"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

The story is very old and I have no doubt that it's true. But the story isn't found in some of the best copies of John's Gospel. In fact, one manuscript includes it in Luke! So again, most modern Bibles include this story, but set it apart by brackets or some other means.

However, even without this story, the Bible still tells us how Jesus deals with people like you and me, people who have failed in our righteousness. I think of Romans 8:1 ***Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.***

And the Bible still tells us that Jesus calls us to leave our sinfulness behind. Mark sums up the preaching of Jesus with these words. ***"The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"*** (Mark 1:15)

And the Bible still shows how Jesus responds to self-righteousness. I think of the story of the tax-collector and the Pharisee in Luke 18:9-14. The religious man bragged to God about his own holiness and goodness. The tax-collector simply said, ***"God have mercy on me, a sinner."*** Jesus summed it up by saying, ***"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."*** (Luke 18:14)

So yes, as the Bible was copied over and over, some changes showed up in some manuscripts. There are indeed variant readings. The above three are among the most important. But even those variants don't change the teaching of Scripture. We are still charged to carry the Good News to all creation, just as the end of Mark tells us to. The Kingdom and the power and the glory still belong to God, just as the last verse of the Lord's Prayer proclaims. And the Bible still presents Jesus as the forgiving friend of sinners whom we meet in the eighth chapter of John.

A CLASSIC EXAMPLE

Further, the overwhelming majority of variants aren't nearly as significant as the ones we just examined. One of my favorites is I Timothy 3:16. It says,

Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great:

***He[†] appeared in a body,
was vindicated by the Spirit,
was seen by angels,
was preached among the nations,
was believed on in the world,
was taken up in glory.***

The variant here is on the word "He." The Greek word for he is ΟΣ (hos). That's what most manuscripts have. However, some manuscripts have the word ΘΕΟΣ (theos) meaning God. Which one is right? What does it say? ***"He appeared in a body"*** or ***"God appeared in a body?"***

Some very clever scholars pointed out that a common abbreviation for ΘΕΟΣ (theos) is ΘΣ, the first and last letters of the word.

Now, when we put the abbreviation for theos or God next to the word hos or he, we see how similar the two are. ΟΣ and ΘΣ. Just one little dash distinguishes them. It's easy to imagine how a scribe might have added that dash, or left it out. So again, which is right?

Now, I should tell you that, as clever as that proposal is, we don't have any manuscripts that use the abbreviation ΘΣ here. But let me ask you this. This is the important question. If the correct reading is "He," If the verse really says "**He appeared in a body**" and so on, to Whom does the word He refer? Why to God of course! Who appeared in a body? God appeared in a body.

So regardless of the variant you choose you get the same great truth. In Jesus Christ God became a human being.

The vast majority of the variants are like that. They're interesting. I even think they're fun. But in the final analysis it doesn't matter much which variant you choose. The great truths of the Bible are still intact. Yes the Bible was copied again and again, and now we do not have the original manuscripts. And yes it is true that there are places where a word or a sentence or even a passage has been changed. But let me tell you something that hasn't changed.

***Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great:
He appeared in a body,***

In Jesus Christ God became a human being, with a body of flesh and blood just like yours and mine. And because of His amazing love, He offered that body as a sacrifice to take away our sins. That's why he died on a cross. But that's only the beginning of the story.

He was vindicated by the Spirit. Three days after Jesus was crucified, God raised Him from the dead and declared once and for all that His Son is Savior and Lord. Even the heavenly beings know this because He was seen by angels. He ***was preached among the nations, He was believed on in the world.*** And everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins. Everyone who believes on Him becomes a beloved child of God. Everyone who believes in Him receives eternal life, for ***He was taken up in glory.***

And someday He will come for us, and we will be with Him there forever.

That's what the Bible teaches. And that message has never changed.

Is the Bible Reliable? Part 3.

II Timothy 3:14-17, Genesis 11:1-9

Once a lady who had been visiting the US from another country gave a farewell speech to the group that had hosted her. Though her English was a little shaky, she wanted to express her gratitude for all the kindness that had been shown to her. So she stepped up to the podium and began her remarks by saying, quite sincerely, “I want to thank you all from the heart of my bottom.”

Sometimes things get lost in translation. Has that happened with the Bible?

We’ve been exploring the question, “Is the Bible Reliable?” Two weeks ago we saw how the Bible came together and why these particular books were included while others were left out. Last week we learned why we can be so confident that the original message of the Bible has been preserved through the centuries. But as most of us know, the Bible wasn’t originally written in English. It was written in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. So we have to wonder if much of the Bible’s message hasn’t been twisted and distorted as it passed from one language to another.

SHOULD THE BIBLE BE TRANSLATED?

Did you know that most Muslims say that the Koran can’t be translated? They say even if you’ve read the entire Koran in English (or German or Spanish), you still haven’t read the Koran. According to them, Arabic is the holy language. So if you really want to read the Koran, if you really want to be a good Muslim, you have to learn Arabic and read the Koran in the original language.

Should we say the same thing about the Bible? Should we insist that if you really want to read the Bible you have to learn Hebrew and Greek?

Absolutely not. In fact, the idea of translating the Bible goes back to the Bible itself. You remember that the Old Testament was written mostly in Hebrew while the New Testament was written entirely in Greek. But when the New Testament quotes the Old Testament, which it does hundreds of times, it doesn’t quote it in Hebrew. Instead the New Testament writers either translated the passages into Greek themselves, or quoted some existing translation. The Bible was meant to be translated.

Further, most of the Old Testament, and virtually all of the New Testament were not written not in the formal language of the court or the academies. They were written in the ordinary language of everyday people. The Bible was written for folks like you and me.

And so the Bible has been translated. In fact, today we have so many translations of the Bible into English that it’s almost impossible to keep track of them. There’s the King James Version, the Revised Standard Version, the New American Standard Bible, the New Century Bible, the Contemporary English Version, the New Living Bible, the Message, the New King James Version, the New Revised Standard Version, the New International Version and so many others.

GOOD OLD KING JAMES

You know, sometimes I could almost wish for those simpler days when everyone read the King James Version. In those days we were all literally on the same page. When you memorized a verse of Scripture and I memorized the same verse, we memorized the same words in the same order. There was a kind of unity. It gave us something in common.

And of course, the King James is a beautiful and stately translation. It wasn't surprising to hear its words read in the National Cathedral recently during President Reagan's funeral. The King James Version has a certain beauty and dignity that is unmatched in the English language.

But I don't want to sound like the religious reactionary who said, "If the King James Bible was good enough for Jesus it's good enough for me!" I understand there are drawbacks to the King James Version. For one thing we've discovered a lot of ancient manuscripts since the King James Bible was published in 1611. Many of those "variants" that we talked about last week aren't reflected in the good old King James. And more to the point, our language has changed since 1611. We no longer use all those "thees" and "thous." We speaketh in such a manner no more, and oft times we understandeth it not.

Why even in the Lord's Prayer we have to explain to our children what "**Hallowed be thy name**" means. Some modern translations say it in words we can grasp immediately. The New Century Version says, "**May your name always be kept holy.**" The New Living Translation says, "**May your name be honored.**" That's the way you and I talk.

So nowadays we have a slew of English translations of the Bible. In preparing this sermon, I looked at ten different versions, and there are many other good translations I didn't have time to consider or consult. So which translation should we use? Which translation can be trusted? Have these different versions watered down the Bible's message?

Before we dig in to those questions, there are two things we need to know.

TRANSLATIONS ARE TRANSLATIONS.

First we have to understand that virtually all of the new translations really are translations. That is to say they all go back to the original Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts. Sometimes I get the impression that people think the newer translations are just paraphrases of older ones. They think someone read the King James or some other older version and tried to put it into the language of his or her day. Then someone else came along and paraphrased the paraphrase. And so people suspect that some of the original meaning is lost each time a new version comes out. But that isn't the way it happens.

It is true that some translations try to update earlier versions. And so we have the New King James Version, the New American Standard Bible, the Revised Standard Version, the New Revised Standard Version and so on. But even these didn't just take an older English translation and try to bring it up to date. Skillful scholars worked hard, comparing the translations with the original languages and making sure that the new version is faithful to the Biblical languages.

Other translations, like the New International Version, the New Century Version and the Message go straight back to the Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek and try to translate the Scriptures afresh. But none of these versions is simply a new edition of an earlier edition

of an old edition. They're all translated directly from the original languages. There are no generations in between.

TWO TYPES OF TRANSLATIONS

Second we need to understand something about the types of translations there are. There are essentially two types of translations, representing two different philosophies.

One philosophy says that you should translate the Bible (or any other text) as literally as possible. This group of translators strives for a word-for-word rendering from one language to another. If there are idioms or expressions that make sense in one language but not in the other, the translator trusts the reader to figure out the meaning. A literal translation tries to make as few interpretive decisions as possible. It seeks to let the text speak for itself. The King James Version, the New American Standard Bible and the Revised Standard Version are three excellent literal translations. The New King James Version is in the same category.

The other point of view says that instead of translating a text word-for-word you should translate it idea-for-idea. It's the thought that counts – not the exact words. This produces what's called a dynamic or meaning-based translation. These scholars say that the point of translation is to convey the meaning of a text. A word-for-word rendering can be too wooden and hard to understand. So a dynamic translation will make more interpretive decisions for the reader. The Contemporary English Version, the New Living Translation, the New Century Version and the Message are four of the most recent dynamic translations.

Of course, no translation is entirely literal and no translation is entirely dynamic. In my opinion the New International Version does the best job of steering a middle course between the two and, if you're only going to use one Bible, that's the one I suggest.

SOME EXAMPLES – SLEEP.

Why don't we take a look at some particular verses in the Bible? That way you'll get a better idea of the differences between these two types of translation

In I Kings 2:10, the New American Standard Bible says, ***Then David slept with his fathers, and was buried in the city of David.*** That's a good, literal translation of the verse. And most people would figure out that the expression "slept with his fathers" is a poetic expression. A euphemism. It means he died. And so the Revised Standard Version, the New Revised Standard Version and the King James Version all have the same word there. "David slept."

However, the expression "***David slept with his fathers***" might be misunderstood. A young child, who crawled into bed with his parents last night because he was afraid, might think that when David did the same thing, they buried the poor guy! So a dynamic translation will clear up any confusion. The Contemporary English Version says that David "***died and was buried in Jerusalem.***" You see, it doesn't translate the verse word-for-word but thought-for-thought.

The New International Version tries to steer a middle course and says, "***David rested with his fathers...***" This picks up on our expression, "rest in peace."

We find the same thing in the New Testament. In I Thessalonians 4:13 the Revised Standard Version says, ***But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning***

those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. Again here, the word “asleep” is a poetic expression for “dead.” The literal translations all use some form of “asleep” here. New American Standard Bible, King James Version, New King James Version, and even the New International Version.

By contrast, the meaning-based translations talk about those who have “died.” The New Living Translation, the New Century Version, The Contemporary English Version and even the New Revised Standard Version all translate it “died.”

Which one do you think is better? On the one hand the verse isn’t talking about people who are taking a nap. They aren’t going through the various stages of the sleep cycle. They aren’t dreaming. They aren’t snoring. They’re dead. The Greek word Paul used literally means “asleep,” but the idea is that they’ve breathed their last. So maybe it’s more accurate to translate the idea and not the word. They’re dead.

However, the point of this passage is that Christ, who has already risen from the dead, will one day come back. And believers who have died will be raised again with Him, and will live with Him forever. In other words, the point of the passage is that death is only temporary – like sleep. Someday the dead in Christ will get up! So maybe we should leave it as “asleep.” Maybe a literal translation is better.

-- A GUT FEELING

Another example. There is a great word in the Greek New Testament. *Splangchna*. Literally it means “guts, intestines, bowels.” It’s the word that’s used in Acts 1:18 where it tells us that after Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus, **“he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out.”** (NIV) However, it’s usually used in a poetic sense to express deep felt emotion. A gut-wrenching compassion. *Splangchna*. It almost sounds like what it means. “I have *splangchna* for you.”

However, when we try to translate it literally we can run into problems. For example, in the King James Version of Philippians 1:8 Paul is telling the Christians in Philippi how deeply he cares for them, and he says, **“For God is my record, how greatly I long after you all in the bowels of Jesus Christ.”** Hmm. Maybe that’s a little too literal. Perhaps the New Living Translation renders it best when it says, **“God knows how much I love you and long for you with the tender compassion of Christ Jesus.”** That isn’t as literal, but it makes more sense.

Or again, we find the same word in I John 3:17. The New International Version says, **“If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?”** The word translated “pity” there is *splangchna*. A very literal translation of that verse would say, *“If anyone should have the means of life of this world, and should see his brother having need, yet shuts off his bowels from him, how does the love of God remain in him?”* That’s too literal even for the King James. The King James says, **“But whoso hath this worlds good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?”** The King James adds two words, “of compassion” to make the meaning clear.

The New Revised Standard Version conveys the right idea when it says, **“How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help.”** But the New American Standard Bible, the New King

James Version and the Revised Standard Version are literally closer to the original when they translate *splanchna* as “heart.”

Of course, whichever translation you choose the point is clear. If we close our hearts to those in need, if we don’t have a gut-wrenching compassion for them, then how can we say God’s love is living in us?

-- BROTHERS AND SISTERS

By the way, did you notice the translations I just mentioned talked about a *brother* in need, except the New Revised Standard Version? It talked about *a brother or sister* in need. The New Living Translation, the New Century Version and the Message also say *brother or sister*. And that raises an important question about the new English translations.

Not too long ago it was the custom in English to use a masculine word to refer either to males or to males and females. “He” could sometimes mean “he or she.” “Man” could sometimes mean “human,” man or woman. So when I Timothy 2:4 says that God “**wants all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth**” (NIV), we know that it means “men and women.” That’s why the New Century Version says God wants “**all people to be saved.**” That’s why the New Living Translation, the Contemporary English Version, the Message and the New Revised Standard version say that God wants “**everyone to be saved.**” We all know that’s what the text means. The Greek word is literally the word for “men,” but we all understand that here it means “men and women.” Ancient Greek and Hebrew use masculine words sometimes to refer only to men and other times to refer to all people, just like English did until recently.

Now, however, English has changed. If you mean “he or she” you need to say “he or she.” “He” doesn’t cut both ways nowadays. If you mean “men and women” you need to say “men and women” or “human beings” or something like that. “Man” doesn’t cover it all anymore. You may think that’s a good change or a bad change, but you can’t deny it. It’s how our language is evolving.

This may raise the biggest problems with English translations of the Bible. Sometimes the problems are easy to solve, like we just saw with I Timothy 2:4. But sometimes it gets a little awkward. Consider Matthew 16:24. In the New International Version and the more literal translations, Jesus says something like this. “**If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.**” Now clearly Jesus isn’t only talking about men here. He means anyone. The Greek words are the various forms for the word for “he,” but of course we know it means “he or she.” However, it would be too clumsy to translate it, “*If anyone would come after me, he or she must deny himself or herself and take up his or her cross and follow me.*” That sounds silly.

Yet the meaning changes a little when, for example, the New Century Version says, “**If people want to follow me, they must give up the things they want ...**” Singular becomes plural. “He” becomes “they.” The sense of individual decision is clouded.

Likewise when the Contemporary English Version says, “**If any of you want to be my followers, you must forget about yourself...**” we have a similar problem. This time “he” becomes “you.” That’s more specific than what Matthew tells us Jesus said. Jesus wasn’t talking just about “any of you,” He was talking about anyone at all.

Do those distinctions seem too subtle? Maybe I'm being too picky, too precise. Sometimes precision is important. But after all, all the translations say basically the same thing, even if they differ on the details. The point is that the same Jesus who laid down His life for us calls you and me to take up our crosses and follow Him, no matter what the cost. And that comes through in all the translations.

WHICH TRANSLATION?

But let's get back to our original questions. Which translation should we use? Which translation can be trusted? Have these different versions watered down the Bible's message?

The answer to those questions may surprise you. Maybe we shouldn't use one translation. My friend, if you think that you're going to find "the right translation," read it once, and then you'll have the Word of God down pat, I'm afraid you're in for a disappointment. The Bible is too rich for that. The Bible is too intricate for that. If you want to *know* God's Word, you have to read it over and over. You have to meditate on it day and night. That would be true even if you were fluent enough to read it in the original languages.

So why not use different translations? None of them is perfect, but they're all good. There are differences, but the differences are good. No one of them can fully express the richness of God's message, yet each translation brings out new shades of meaning. Each one sheds new light on God's eternal truth.

I said earlier that if you were only going to use one Bible, I suggest the New International Version. But why use only one? Do you eat only one flavor of ice cream? Do you wear only one color of clothing? I like chocolate, but sometimes I'll pick fudge ripple or rocky road. I'm partial to solid blue, but sometimes I get wild and wear beige or red or even Hawaiian prints! Why should our Bible reading be monotonous and bland? Spice things up a little. Try some variety.

You know, the Bible has been translated into many, many languages. However, there are still about 2,700 people groups who don't have the Bible in their own language. Thank God for people like Wycliffe Bible Translators who are working diligently to provide at least one translation of the Bible in every language on Earth. Sometimes they partner with us Presbyterians and with other denominations, and sometimes they work on their own. But they are doing an important work. Support them with your prayers and encouragement and any ways you can.

At the other end of the spectrum, we who speak English have more translations than we know what to do with. We are rich in Bibles! So I urge you to take advantage of that wealth. Get three or four or more different translations of the Bible and read them. Compare them. Meditate on them. Let God speak to you through them.

Get a couple literal translations and get a couple dynamic translations.

Different kinds of translations are better for different purposes. For example, if you want to read straight through the Bible and get the big picture, use a Bible that's easy for you to read. It's a good idea to read through the whole Bible every two to four years just to keep the whole story fresh in your mind.

When you're reading big chunks of the Bible at a time, the dynamic translations are usually easier to read. The Message, the Contemporary English Version, The New Living Translation, the Good News Bible and others are great for that purpose.

Sometimes, however, you want to do a more detailed study. You want to dig into a passage and think about it a bit more. I think the literal translations are better for that. The New American Standard Bible, the Revised Standard Version, the King James and New Kings James are good for more careful study. (In fact, I'd recommend them in that order.) And again, the New International Version is fine for either use.

And then, when you really want to dig deep into a passage, compare three or four different translations, like we did today. You'll be amazed at the rich texture of truth that unfolds before you as different shades of meaning come to light.

A LOVE AFFAIR

Of course, it doesn't matter which translation we pick if we never read it! But I invite you to fall in love with the Scriptures. I invite you to start a life-long love affair with the Bible. Study it. Read it every day. Take it to bed with you. Have breakfast with it. Take it to lunch. Memorize as much of it as you can. Get tapes or CD's of the Scriptures and listen to them in your car or at other times. (Through the centuries more people have listened to the Bible read aloud than have read it on their own.) Over time you'll be amazed at the way God will speak to you through His Word. You'll be astonished at the wisdom you'll gain. You will see the world and other people in a different light. In fact, you'll become a different person. For through the Scriptures you will enter into a deeper, more intimate relationship with God.

INSPIRATION

Now let's look at one more verse. It's the verse we've really been talking about for the last three weeks. In the New International Version, II Timothy 3:16 says, "**All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.**" But what does it mean to say that Scripture is "God-breathed?" The New American Standard translates it, "**inspired by God**" The New Century Version says, "**All Scripture is given by God.**" The Contemporary English Version says, "**Everything in Scripture is God's Word.**" But what does that mean? How did God inspire the Bible? What does it mean to say the Bible is God's Word? Is the Bible "more inspired" than other writings? And how can all of that help us live life to the fullest?

Oh my goodness, look at the time! We'll have to take up those questions next week.

Is the Bible Reliable? Part 4.

II Timothy 3:14-17

One day a young boy was watching his pastor-father write out his sermon in long hand. “How do you know what to write?” The boy asked.

“God tells me,” the father replied.

The boy tilted his head, quizzically squinted one eye and asked, “Then why do you keep scratchin’ stuff out?”

We believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God. But what do we mean by that? How is the Bible inspired? And does that make it different from other writings?

Artists often talk about their works being inspired. What they mean is that there seems to be some inexplicable, maybe even supernatural process behind their art. James Taylor once said, “I don’t really write songs, I’m just the first one to hear them.” Some artists say they don’t really create, at least not on their own. It’s as if the songs or works of art already “exist” somehow, and the artist simply discovers them, or painstakingly uncovers them.

But is that the same thing as the inspiration of Scripture? Did the Scriptures somehow already exist and the prophets and apostles merely uncovered them? Is the Bible inspired in the sense the artists talk about? If so, is it on the same level as other works of art? I think even James Taylor would agree that the Bible is a few steps above “Fire and Rain,” “You’ve Got a Friend” and “How Sweet It Is to Be Loved By You.”

The Latter Day Saints make an interesting claim about the *Book of Mormon*. They say that in 1822 the angel Maroni told Joseph Smith where to find the *Book of Mormon*, which was written in a form of hieroglyphics on tablets of gold. Later Joseph Smith sat behind a curtain and translated the tablets to a series of several secretaries. By now you know that no one pretends we got the Bible in a similar manner.

Similarly many Muslims believe that the *Koran* is an exact replication of *The Book of Books*, which rests eternally by the side of Allah. The *Koran*, they say, was dictated by the angel Gabriel to the prophet Mohamed over a period of 20 years. Again that’s significantly different from what we know about the Bible.

II Timothy 3:16 says, “**All Scripture is God-breathed ...**” That’s a very literal and accurate translation. The Bible isn’t merely inspired, like many great works of art. The Bible is “God-breathed.” But what does “God-breathed” mean?

MEANS OF INSPIRATION -- DICTATION?

Some people think this means that God whispered His Word to the Bible writers. They believe God dictated the Bible to the Prophets and Apostles.

Now, sometimes that's exactly what happened. In the Book of Revelation, the risen, glorified Jesus speaks to the apostle John in a vision. In chapters 2 and 3 He dictates seven letters to seven churches. ***"To the angel of the church of Ephesus write:"*** (Revelation 2:1) ***"To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:"*** (Revelation 2:8) ***"To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:"*** (Revelation 2:12) and so on. There is no godly reason to doubt that John wrote precisely the words Jesus told him to write. The exact words Jesus spoke.

We find the same thing often in the Old Testament. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos or some other prophet will introduce a message with words like, ***"This is what the Lord says."*** Or they'll interject the phrase, ***"declares the Lord."*** We find a perfect example in Isaiah 55:8-9 ***"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. ⁹ "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."*** The point is clear. That prophecy or pronouncement was dictated to the prophet by God. These are the very words of God.

Other times, however, it doesn't seem that God is dictating the message at all. Remember Luke 1:1-4 ***Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ²just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. ³Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.***

Luke carefully investigated everything from the beginning. Apparently he read what others had written. He talked to eye-witnesses. He did his research. Now why should he go to all of that trouble if the Lord was just going to dictate to him the words of the Gospel and of the Book of Acts, which Luke also wrote? Did all of Luke's hard, historical research count for nothing? Of course not. Luke used it as he wrote. Luke recorded what he had learned.

Does that mean that Luke and Acts are not inspired by God, or that they are somehow less inspired than Revelation or the Prophets? Not at all. It just means that dictation isn't the only means of inspiration God uses. God can do anything. He can even inspire historical research! Luke and Acts are still the inspired Word of God. If you doubt it, read them. They were just inspired in a different fashion from some other parts of Scripture.

You know, there are places where the Bible repeats itself, almost word for word. Sometime compare Psalm 14 with Psalm 53. One almost seems to be a copy, or better and edition of the other. There are passages in the books of Kings and the books of Chronicles that tell the same stories in very nearly the same words. The stories about King Hezekiah are fascinating. When we compare II Kings 18-20 with Isaiah 36-39 we find many places where the two accounts are word for word the same. When we read II Chronicles 29-32 we get a different slant on the same story.

Likewise, when we compare Matthew, Mark and Luke we find great similarities in the wording. In fact one excellent way to study those Gospels and to get a sense of the unique flavor of each one is to compare the similarities and differences in parallel passages.

Sometimes the Bible echoes in one place what it said somewhere else. Are the echoes in any way less inspired? No. Even if the author of II Kings copied and edited passages from Isaiah, even if Luke took his cue from Mark or other early writings, God still guided these authors. After all, those passages were worth repeating! God still gave us His Word through the words of Scripture.

If we take the Bible at face value – and we’ll talk more about that next week – we see that, while all of it is inspired, not all of it was inspired by means of dictation. There is no reason to believe that God whispered in Paul’s ear as he wrote, **“Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes to the church of God in Corinth ...”** (I Corinthians 1:1-2.) If so, then what do we make of verses like I Corinthians 7:12, where Paul said, **“To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord).”** Did God whisper those words in his ear or not? If not, and if inspiration means dictation, how are they inspired Scripture?

The Bible says that all Scripture is God-breathed. But if that doesn’t mean “whispered,” if it doesn’t mean “dictated,” what does it mean?

-- THE BREATH OF LIFE

Think for a moment about other places in the Bible where we are told that God breathed. Listen to Genesis 2:7. ***The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.*** God breathed into Adam, and Adam came to life. Likewise God breathed His life into the authors of Scripture. God breathes life into the Scriptures themselves, and into us as we read them or hear them. Hebrews 4:12 says, ***“For the word of God is living and active.” All Scripture is God-breathed.***

Or consider John 20:22. The risen Jesus appears to His disciples. He sends them out into the world, ***And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”*** The Lord breathed His Spirit into his disciples. The Lord still breathes His Spirit into His people. And the Lord breathes His Spirit into the Scriptures and infuses them with a power and an authority and a holiness infinitely beyond all mere human writings. For these writings are not merely human. Yes, they are written in human words. They’re not written in the words of angels (I Corinthians 13:1) or of dolphins or whales or any other creatures that may be able to communicate. They are written in the words of women and men. But they are not merely human words. For ***all Scripture is God breathed.*** And that makes them the very Word of God.

SEVEN SIGNS OF INSPIRATION

But how can we know the Scriptures are inspired? How can we know the Bible is the Word of God? Let’s look at seven ways we can know that.

-- MAJESTY

First, think about the majesty of the Bible, the sheer quality of the literature itself. Think about the 23rd Psalm, the 90th Psalm, the 103rd Psalm. Think about the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), the great “Love Chapter” in I Corinthians 13 and countless other passages. Is there anything in Shakespeare or Sophocles or Ibsen or Pope that can match the beauty of these? Is there anything in Aristotle or Kant that can compare with the unfathomable depth and soaring grandeur of these? Judge for yourself. Read the

Koran, the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the sayings of Confucius or Lao Tse and see if anything in them has the power to stir your soul like the words of Scripture. Read and compare, and I bet you will say, “Yes! This is the Word of God.”

-- HARMONY

Or consider the harmony of the Scriptures, how all the parts fit together. Dozens of authors wrote over thousands of years, yet through them all, the Lord produced one unified message. This part supporting that part. One passage shedding light on another.

Some people will tell you that the Bible is full of contradictions, but that’s only true on a very superficial level. The better we understand the full scope of Scripture, the more we see how it all congeals. How it “jells.” For example, several times in the Gospels we come across things like Matthew 16:20 *Then [Jesus] warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.* But in Matthew 28:18-20 Jesus says, “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. ...*”

First Jesus says not to tell anyone, then He says to go and tell everyone! Isn’t this a contradiction? Not when we understand these verses in the context of the whole story. The first happens during Jesus “earthly ministry.” This is before He goes to Jerusalem, where He is tried and crucified for claiming to be equal with God. Jesus didn’t want His disciples to have to testify against Him. The second happens after God has raised Jesus from the dead and demonstrated His plan to save the world through Christ. That message must be told.

If you were to go to a piano and play a “middle C” (that’s the white key right before the two black keys) then play a “B” above, or to the right of that (that’s the white key just after the three black keys), it would sound horrible. Dissonant. However, if you were to play those two notes in the context of a C Major 7th chord (for example, every other white key from “middle C” to “B”) you would hear a beautiful, lush harmony.

The Bible is like that. Taken out of context, different parts of the Bible can seem to clash. But when we take the whole thing together, it’s a gorgeous, moving symphony.

That’s why we should never be satisfied treating individual verses of Scripture like the scripts inside a fortune cookie. It’s okay to memorize individual verses of Scripture and to meditate on them. In fact, it’s very good to do that, and I strongly encourage you to do so. But when we understand those verses in the context of the grand sweep of Scripture, each verse becomes more powerful, more meaningful, more beautiful. The Bible fits together as an intricate, harmonious whole.

-- ONE STORY

Similarly, the Bible tells one story. Oh, there are twists and turns and hundreds of sub-plots. There are many intriguing little stories that can stand on their own: the story of Joseph, the stories of David, Elijah and Elisha and so on. But they are all woven together into one rich, textured, multicolored cloth.

And no, it doesn’t read like a novel from cover to cover. Genesis through II Kings tells us the story up to a certain point. I Chronicles through Nehemiah and Esther tell the same story from a different perspective, then carry it a bit farther. Then we have books of

poetry, proverbs and prophecy that bring out some of the details of the story we've heard so far.

Next come the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, telling about the life of Jesus from four points of view. After that the Book of Acts tells us the history of the early church, particularly Peter and Paul. Then we have a collection of early church letters from Paul and Peter and James and John and Jude, the letter to the Hebrews and finally the Revelation of the end of history.

From start to finish, it is all one grand story of God's dealings with humanity. From Genesis to Revelation it's the story of what God has done, is doing, and will do through Jesus Christ.

Yes, even the Old Testament is about Christ. It points to Christ and prophesies Christ. And the Old Testament is incomplete, unfulfilled without the New. Look for example at Psalm 22 and compare it with the records of Jesus' passion in the Gospels. In fact, the Gospel writers go out of their way to quote that psalm and other parts of the Old Testament in order to show how, in Christ, the Old Testament prophecies were fulfilled.

All of Scripture is one epic story. From ***In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth*** (Genesis 1:1) to ***"I am making everything new!"*** (Revelation 21:5) it is the story of God's great salvation for his people in Christ. Again, dozens of authors over thousands of years were used by the Holy Spirit to write one great saga of God's eternal love. Surely this is the word of God.

-- HISTORY

Fourth, consider the historical accuracy of the Bible. Time and again skeptics have doubted that the historical information in the Bible could be trusted. For example, some historians proposed that King David never really existed, but that he was just a mythical figure. Then inscriptions regarding David and dating from about a thousand years before Christ were discovered. So much for that theory.

I've heard of a number of cases where archeological finds confirmed what the Bible said happened, but I've never heard of any that disproved a biblical account. I don't know enough about Archeology to say that that field bolsters the reliability of the Bible as a historical document. But people like William Albright and William Ramsey know Archeology extremely well, and that's exactly what they say. That doesn't surprise me at all. This is the Word of God.

CHANGED LIVES

Or consider the effect the Bible has had on people's lives. How many unbelievers have come to faith through reading the Bible? Who can count the number of people whose lives have been changed for all eternity because of an encounter with the Scriptures?

St. Augustine had fought against becoming a Christian all his life. Then one day as he was sitting in a garden he heard a voice saying in Latin, *Tolle lege. Tolle lege.* "Take and read." It sounded to him like a chant from a children's game. But there was a Bible next to him, so he picked it up and started reading. That very day Augustine gave his life to Christ.

CS Lewis was a professor of Classics at Oxford University. He set out to prove that the Bible was false. But the more he examined it the more he became convinced that this

really is the Word of God. He became a Christian, and perhaps the most insightful Christian writer of the 20th Century.

Josh McDowell has a similar testimony. He too set out to discredit the Bible, but the Bible proved him wrong. Today he leads a ministry that is sharing the Gospel message with people all over the world.

It shouldn't surprise us that the Bible changes people's lives. What John said about the purpose of his Gospel is really true about Scripture as a whole. ***“But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have faith in his name.”*** (John 20:31)

You see, God's Word is creative. God's word accomplishes things. Psalm 33:6 says, ***“By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, all their starry host by the breath of his mouth.”*** Isaiah 55:10-11 say, ***“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”*** God's Word is potent. God's Word changes lives.

MOLDING THE FAITHFUL

And not just the lives of unbelievers. The faithful are also nourished and strengthened by Scripture. God's Word teaches us, guides us and helps us. It comforts us and confronts us. It challenges us and encourages us. When we read it or hear it and follow it, it molds us more and more into the likeness of Christ.

Scripture is majestic. The Bible fits together as one harmonious whole. It is historically accurate. It tells one great story. It changes the lives of unbelievers and strengthens the lives of believers. All of these are evidence that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. All these point to the fact that ***All Scripture is God-breathed.*** But none of these is the main way we know that Scripture is God's Word.

-- THE SPIRIT SAYS SO

The main way we know that Scripture is God-breathed is that the Holy Spirit Himself seals its truth in our hearts. The same Spirit who inspired the Scriptures speaks to our hearts as well, convincing us that this is God's Word. The same Spirit testifies that these words are the bearers of eternal Truth.

That's why we always pray before we read the Bible. We don't want to simply read words on a page. We want to be touched and transformed by the living, creative Word of God. So we ask God to breathe life into the Scriptures that they may come alive to us. We ask God to breathe life into us, so that we can understand His truth in the deepest parts of our souls.

The Holy Spirit alone convinces us that the Scriptures are God's Word. If you doubt that, I simply ask you to try it. Ask the Lord to breathe on you. Ask the Holy Spirit to fill you as you read the Scriptures. Then read. *Tolle lege*. Not just a verse or two. Not just a chapter here or there. Read. Read the Bible expecting God to speak to you. If you've never read the Bible before, you may want to start with the Gospel According to John. Then read the other Gospels and the rest of the New Testament. Read the Psalms. Then

read the whole Old Testament. Read with an open mind, and an open heart. See if the Spirit doesn't convince you. Surely this is the Word of God.

For the last four weeks we've been investigating the question, "Is the Bible reliable?" Reliable? My friend, it's the Word of God! ***All Scripture is God-breathed.***

HOW TO COME TO SCRIPTURE

Now once we know that Scripture is God-breathed, once we understand that the Bible is God's Word, that changes the way we read it or hear it. That changes the way we come to Scripture. First, because this is God's Word, we can only approach it humbly and obediently. We can't change it or ignore the parts we don't like. We can't correct Scripture. It corrects us. We can't cut out the parts of the Bible don't appeal to us. On the contrary, God uses the Bible to cut out of us those things that don't please Him.

Second, because this is God's Word, we come to Scripture full of joy and expectancy. Remember that God loves us and wants us to live life to the fullest. God wants us to know the joy and peace and hope and love that come from living the way He wants us to live, the way He designed us to live. God wants to conform us into the image of His glorious Son. And the God-breathed Scriptures are His favorite tool for getting us in shape.

Last week I invited you to start a love affair with the Bible. I know some of you have done that. Some of you have started reading your Bible more. That's great. Keep it up. God will work wonders in your life through the Scriptures. I know there are things that are hard to understand. It isn't always easy to see how something that was written to people who lived so long ago can be relevant to us today. And we will take up that topic next week. But for now, keep reading. Don't just read it religiously, read it passionately. Lustfully. Insatiably. Marvel at its majesty. Revel in its harmony. Get swept up in its epic story. Let it change you. Let it comfort you. Let it confront you. Let it conform you into the likeness of Jesus. Open yourself to the Holy Spirit and ask Him to fill you, to teach you, to guide you. *Tolle lege*. Take and read. For this, my dear friends, this is the Word of God.



See the *Westminster Larger Catechism*, answer to question 4. "The Scriptures manifest themselves to be the Word of God by their majesty and purity; by the consent of all the parts, and the scope of the whole, which is to give all glory to God; by their light and power to convert sinners, to comfort and build up believers unto salvation. But the Spirit of God, bearing witness by and with the Scriptures in the heart of man, is alone able fully to persuade it that they are the very word of God."



Is the Bible Reliable? Part 5.

II Timothy 3:14-17

“The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it.” Have you ever heard that slogan? Maybe you’ve seen it on a bumper sticker or something. What do you think about it? Is it the pure simple truth, or is it a shallow, simplistic jingle?

On the one hand, I really like what it says about the authority of Scripture. After all, who are you and I to disagree with God? He made the heavens and the earth. He knows our thoughts before we think them. His thoughts are as much higher than our thoughts as the heavens are above the earth. Whenever we disagree with God, it’s pretty clear that He’s going to be right and we’re going to be wrong. And since the Scriptures are the Word of God, as we learned last week, how can we possibly dare to disagree with the Bible?

On the other hand, the Bible was written so long ago, in cultures so different from ours, it’s sometimes hard to see how it can possibly say anything relevant to us today. In a sense, when we read the Bible we’re reading someone else’s mail. Paul wrote to the Galatians and the Romans and the Philippians, not to you and me. Joel, Amos and Obadiah addressed their messages to ancient Israel, Judah and Edom. What does that have to do with us? We might be tempted to say, “The Bible says it, I believe it, but what difference does it make?”

HERMAN WHO?

Scholars have adopted a whole field of study that focuses on how to interpret Scripture and apply it to our day. It’s called “hermeneutics.” There are numerous rules and models for how to do hermeneutics, but the most important ones are really a matter of common sense. Today we’re going to look at four hermeneutical keys. We’re going to look at four ways we can read the Bible that will make it less strange, less mysterious. For despite the fact that they come from cultures that may be very alien to us, the Scriptures still speak to us in powerful and important ways.

LITERAL OR FIGURATIVE?

The first hermeneutical question is this: Should we interpret the Bible literally or figuratively?

Some Christians insist that the Bible should be interpreted literally. But sometimes you have to wonder if they’re really serious about that. For example, in Matthew 5:28-29 Jesus says, ***“But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.”*** Now I’ve met a quite a few men who claim to interpret the Bible literally, but none of them is wearing a patch over his right eye socket. Maybe that’s because these guys have never lusted, even when they were teenagers. Somehow I doubt that. And if my hunch is right about their thought lives, they don’t really interpret the Bible literally. At least not these verses.

Now we can't fault them for that. The fact is that Jesus didn't want us to take that saying literally. Jesus isn't interested in men plucking out their right eyes. That's appalling. Rather, Jesus is interested in us not being slaves to our sexual urges. Jesus doesn't want us to look at precious children of God as mere objects who can gratify our selfish desires. That's even more appalling.

A literal interpretation of these verses would make most men eye donors, but eye gouging isn't the point of the passage. There are places where the Bible shouldn't be taken literally.

At the other extreme there are people who think that almost everything in the Bible should be interpreted figuratively. Paul Tillich is one of many modern theologians who has said that the stories about Jesus rising from the dead are only symbolic expressions of a great spiritual truth. Tillich says that the stories of the resurrection form a symbol of the truth that the new life Christ brings didn't die with Him. For these theologians Jesus is alive in a symbolic sense, in a profound mythic sense. He lives in our hearts, so to speak. But literally, they're sure He's as dead as a doornail.

However, it's hard to imagine that the Bible is talking about a symbolic or mythic resurrection when it tells us that the women who went to the tomb clasped the feet of the risen Jesus and worshiped Him (Matthew 28:9), or when it says that He invited the disciples to touch Him (Luke 24:39) and even gave Thomas permission to feel His wounds (John 20:27).

In I Corinthians 15:14 and 17 we read, *And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. ... ¹⁷And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.* In other words, if Jesus is still dead, if the resurrection is only a symbol, the whole Christian faith is a meaningless sham.

Some parts of the Bible must be interpreted literally. If we interpret everything in the Bible figuratively or symbolically, we can make the Bible say whatever we want it to say. In that case it really says nothing at all.

THE "PLAIN SENSE" OF SCRIPTURE

So what can we do? We can't always read the Bible literally and we can't always read the Bible symbolically. So how should we interpret it? The answer is surprisingly simple. As I said before, it's a matter of common sense. We read the Bible according to the "plain sense" of each passage.

If we're reading a parable we should read it as a parable. When we read that Jesus said, *"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers"* (Luke 10:30), we miss the point if we start asking what the man's name was or try to get a description of the robbers or wonder if they left fingerprints. It's parable, not a newspaper report. Read it like a parable.

Likewise if something is a hyperbole or an exaggeration we need to read it like a hyperbole. Again, Jesus doesn't want us to pluck out our eyes or chop off our hands.

If something is a simile, read it like a simile. If something is a metaphor, read it like a metaphor and so on.

Some parts of the Bible aren't meant to be interpreted literally, and we miss the point if we try to read them that way.

Jesus said, ***“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”*** (Matthew 19:24) But don’t try to build the world’s largest needle or figure out how to reduce a beast of burden to the size of a thread. “Honey, I shrunk the camel!” Instead, check your attachment to material things.

Jesus said, ***“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye but pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?”*** (Matthew 7:3) But He wasn’t only addressing people who really have two-by-fours protruding from below their foreheads. That’s a pretty small group of people. Rather, He was talking to all of us who have a tendency to put other people down when instead we should be paying attention to our own relationships with God.

But of course we all know that. As I said, it’s a matter of common sense.

However other parts of the Bible *are* meant to be read literally. Some parts of the Bible are reports or historical accounts. There are stories of judges and generals, of prophets and kings. There are stories of Jesus and the apostles. There are many stories of amazing miracles, including the resurrection of Jesus. These are told as if they are literally true, and that’s how we’re supposed to read them.

Again, the Bible gives us certain laws and commandments. Some of these apply for all times, like ***“Love your neighbor as yourself”*** (Leviticus 19:18). Others are addressed only to a particular historical situation, like ***Do not set up any wooden Asherah pole beside the altar you build to the LORD your God,*** (Deuteronomy 16:21), or even ***You shall not covet your neighbor’s ... donkey*** (Exodus 20:17). But all of them are to be interpreted literally. If your neighbor gets a really cool donkey, don’t covet it!

Further, the Bible tells us great truths. For example, ***“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*** (John 3:16) and ***God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.*** (I John 4:16). These are straightforward statements that are meant to be taken literally because they are literally true.

Should we interpret the Bible literally? Yes, parts of it. Should we interpret the Bible figuratively? Yes, parts of it. Read the Bible according to the plain sense of what it says. Think about how you read the newspaper. You don’t read the news reports the same way you read the comics and you don’t read the editorials the same way you read classified ads. Read the Bible the same way. Read the Bible according to the plain sense of each passage. That’s just common sense. That’s our first hermeneutical key.

HISTORICAL EXPRESSIONS, ETERNAL PRINCIPLES

But even when we read Scripture according to its plain sense, it isn’t always clear how it applies to us today. What was said to people in one historical situation might not apply directly to another situation.

-- OIL ON YOUR HEAD

For example, in Matthew 6:17-18 Jesus said, ***“But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”***

The point Jesus was making, of course, was that we shouldn’t draw attention to ourselves when we fast. We shouldn’t show off how religious we are. So instead of going

around all unkempt and disheveled when we fast, we should dress nicely. Look our best, so no one will notice or even suspect that we're depriving bodies to strengthen our spiritual lives.

However, what if someone never puts oil on his head *except* when he's fasting? What if he only puts oil on his head to draw attention to the fact that he's fasting? "Good morning Tom. I see your hair's kinda slick and shinny today. You must be fasting." Even though that person would be following Jesus' instructions to a "t," he would be doing exactly the opposite of what Jesus taught.

But that doesn't mean that what Jesus taught doesn't apply to us today. The part about putting oil on our heads, that changes with the fashions. That may not apply to us directly. The principle, however, is that we shouldn't show off our piety. And that principle applies to us today as much as it ever applied to anyone. The principle is timeless.

You see, God's truth is eternal. The principles of God's truth are always relevant. But the ways in which those principles are expressed can change from one situation to another. It's the same song in a different key. It's the same song, but sometimes it's played to a different beat – like the hymns at our 11:00 "blended" service.

-- SLAVES

Lets look at another example. Colossians 3:22 says ***Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything ...*** 150 years ago some people tried to apply this verse directly to life in the United States. Before the Civil War there were those who used this and a few other verses to try to prove that slavery was God's will. After all, if slavery were abolished no one would be able to obey this biblical mandate.

Nowadays we would insist that slavery is not God's will at all. Okay, some kids may think their parents treat them like slaves. But it's obvious to us that slavery is exactly the opposite of the will of God.

And that isn't simply a matter of our tastes. We can point to other passages of Scripture which indicate that slavery isn't God's will. Paul's letter to Philemon was written to encourage Philemon not only to forgive his slave, Onesimus, who had run away to help Paul while he was in prison, it even encourages Philemon to set Onesimus free.

By the same token, I Corinthians 7:21 says to slaves, ***Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you--although if you can gain your freedom, do so.*** You see, slavery was a reality in New Testament times. The Bible acknowledges that. Yet the Bible doesn't endorse slavery. In fact it calls slave owners to free their slaves, and encourages slaves to get their freedom if they can. Further, the Bible never says that slavery is good, or that it's God's will. In fact, Galatians 3:28 says, ***There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.***

The Bible doesn't endorse slavery, it simply recognizes it as a cultural reality of that time. Paul was speaking to a particular historical situation when he said, ***"Slaves, obey your earthly masters."*** But you and I are not slaves. We don't own slaves. We live in a different historical situation. So those words don't apply directly to us.

But again, that doesn't make this passage meaningless to you and me. Listen to the whole paragraph where that verse is found. Colossians 3:22-24. ***Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their***

favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. ²³*Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men,* ²⁴*since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.*

Ah, now that's a different story. Whatever you do, you're serving Christ. If you're a teacher you don't work for the school. You work for Christ. If you're a secretary you don't work for your boss. You work for Christ. If you're a CEO, you don't work for the Board of Directors. You work for Christ. If you're a lawyer or a doctor or a builder or a banker or a student or a homemaker or a retailer or even if you're retired or you're currently unemployed, you work for Christ. Whatever you do, you're serving Christ. So give him your best. Take advantage of every opportunity to please Him, not other people. You don't have to be a slave to do that. That's an eternal principle, and that principle applies to all Christians in every situation.

Further, when the Bible says *There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*, it's teaching us that our differences really don't make any difference. Doctors aren't higher beings than ditch-diggers. Those who are skilled at working with their hands aren't more valuable than those who work with words. There are no superior races, and neither sex is better than the other. We have such a tendency to look for reasons to look down on other people. We try so hard to find reasons why we're better than others. But the fact of the matter is that we are all precious to Christ. And when we see things from His perspective all our attempts at ranking and rating people melt away. We are one in Christ. That is an eternal principle that is true in any historical situation.

Sometimes when we try to apply the Bible to our present day situation we have to look beyond the historical prescription to the eternal principle. When we do we find that God's Word is as alive today as it ever was. When we do we hear the Word of God speaking to you and me just as it spoke to people long ago.

So far we've looked at two important hermeneutical keys. We've looked at two points to remember when we try to apply the Bible to our lives today. First read the Scriptures according to the plain sense of each passage. Second look beyond the historical expression to the eternal principle. Now let's look at a third key.

SCRIPTURE INTERPRETS SCRIPTURE

You may remember that last week we talked about the harmony of the Bible. We saw that the whole Bible fits together to tell one epic story with one essential message. We heard how even passages that seem to clash with one another when taken out of context really compliment and enrich one another when we look at the whole scope of Scripture. And that leads us to our third key. We should always interpret Scripture in light of Scripture. One passage sheds light on another. One passage explains another.

We've already seen an example of that. Colossians 3:22 says *Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything*, but we misinterpret that passage if we take it to mean that slavery is God's will. We know that because I Corinthians 7:21 says, *if you can gain your freedom, do so*, and Galatians 3:28 says that in Christ *There is neither ... slave nor free*. Scripture interprets Scripture. These passages help us understand that passage.

-- SILENT WOMEN

Let's look at another example. This one is a little more controversial, but even the controversy will teach us something valuable.

In I Corinthians 14:34-35 Paul writes, ***As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. ³⁵If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.*** Because of these and a few similar verses some Christians say it's wrong for women to be pastors – or elders or deacons for that matter. And we can see why. The plain sense of these verses says women shouldn't speak in church. It's hard to imagine a pastor who stays silent in church – though some people might like to try.

However, are these verses like the one we just read about slavery? Do they apply to that historical situation but not to us today? After all, they were written to a male dominated society. They were written at a time when women weren't allowed to be educated or hold positions of civic leadership or in many cases even to own property. In fact, women were basically seen as property themselves.

We live in a different situation today. Women are free to take out loans and start their own companies and vote and even run for public office. Should they still be silenced in the church?

Now understand, we can't just say that the historical situation has changed so we can ignore what the Bible says. We can't say that Scripture's teaching doesn't apply to our culture because we like our culture better. There are many areas where our culture should be corrected by Scripture.

But we can and should ask if there are other parts of Scripture that shed light on these verses. And in fact there are. We've already seen Galatians 3:28. ***There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*** That doesn't mean, of course, that there are no anatomical distinctions between Christian women and Christian men. But it does mean that in Christ, unity is more important than hierarchy. Neither male dominance nor female dominance is a Christian value.

Further Acts 2:17-18 says ***“In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. ¹⁸Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.”*** These verses are not only a quotation of Joel 2:28-29 but a declaration that this prophecy is fulfilled in the Church.

Now of course, if God empowers our daughters to prophesy, if God's Spirit compels both men *and women* to prophesy, well they can't very well prophesy and keep silent at the same time, can they?

So some Christians say that the injunction for women to keep silent in the church was addressed to a particular culture and shouldn't be applied to women of today. When we let Scripture interpret Scripture we see that the idea is as outdated as slavery. Neither is God's will. Those Christians freely ordain women as pastors and officers in the church. And they do so because they believe that's what the Bible teaches.

-- TWISTING SCRIPTURE

Now we have to admit something very sad here. Some people refuse to ordain women because they're sexists. They're male chauvinists and they just use Scripture to enforce their own prejudice.

Likewise some people are feminists and they want to ordain women regardless of what the Bible teaches. They, too, use Scripture as a pretext to advance their own agenda.

Both practices are reprehensible. Both parties are twisting the Scriptures to say what they want them to say. And when we do that the Bible becomes meaningless. When we do that we rob the Bible of its authority as the Word of God and turn it into an arsenal to help us bully others into doing what we want. God forgive us.

But on the other hand I know brothers and sisters who do not believe in or practice the ordination of women because they sincerely want to be obedient to what Scripture teaches. ***Women should remain silent in the churches.*** As they see it, that's God's final word on the matter.

I also know brothers and sisters – and I'm one of them – who believe that when we look at the full scope of Scripture we see that God's Spirit empowers both men and women to proclaim His message. And while there were historical situations in which women were to keep quiet, and while there could be situations in which men should keep quiet, God pours out His Spirit on both men and women, both our sons and our daughters. And both are to proclaim His message. These brothers and sisters don't hesitate to ordain women and men, and they are confident that they are doing so in obedience to Scripture.

-- OPEN HEARTS AND MINDS

You probably have Christian friends who don't agree with me on that. You may not agree with me. But that teaches us something very important. We need to be humble in our reading of Scripture. We need to recognize that others might see something in Scripture that we don't see. We need to expect the Spirit to show us things we've never seen before. We need to be willing to change our minds. And we need to be respectful of those who see things in the Bible differently from how we may see them. No Christian can ignore what the Bible teaches, but no Christian has a monopoly on Biblical truth. We need to read the Scriptures with open hearts and minds.

Second, I want to point out something that often isn't mentioned when people debate whether women should be pastors. ***God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy.*** Therefore I think it is Scriptural to ordain either a man or a woman, but only if God's Spirit has been poured out on that person. It's more important for a Christian leader to have the Holy Spirit than to have a Y chromosome. Sometimes we forget that. I would have a hard time refusing to ordain a woman who has been empowered to preach or lead by God's Holy Spirit. But we should never ordain a woman or a man who does not have the power of the Holy Spirit at work in her or his life.

WE NEED THE HOLY SPIRIT

And that leads us to our fourth and most important hermeneutical key. We already talked about this last week, but it's worth saying again. The most important thing we can do when we read the Bible is to ask the Holy Spirit to guide us, to enlighten us. The Bible is the Word of God. The Bible conveys a wisdom beyond what any human mind can comprehend on its own. So we always need the Holy Spirit to teach us what the Bible means and how it applies to our lives.

I said earlier that when we read the Bible there's a sense in which we're reading someone else's mail. Sometimes that can make Bible reading a mysterious, and maybe even a slightly confusing experience.

But there is a greater sense in which the Bible is addressed to you and me. God speaks His Word to us through the Bible. God conveys His eternal truth to us through the Bible. So read the Bible. Read it according to the plain sense of each passage. Look for the eternal principle behind each historical expression. Let Scripture interpret Scripture. And always ask the Holy Spirit to teach us, to help us hear what God wants to say to us in His Word.

Is the Bible Reliable? Part 6.

II Timothy 3:14-17

Psalm 119:1-8

SCRIPTURE IS USEFUL

Let's get real. For five weeks we've explored the question, "Is the Bible Reliable?" We've seen how the Bible came together, why some books were chosen and others were not. We've seen how faithfully the text of the Bible has been preserved through centuries of copying and translating. We've discovered what it means to say that the Bible is "God-breathed," and we've learned principles that help us understand how the Bible applies to us today.

In the process we've looked at such scholarly fields of study as the formation of the canon, Textual Criticism, translation principles, doctrines of inspiration and Hermeneutics. Pretty heady stuff. And in each case we've found good reasons why we can say with confidence that the Bible is reliable. We've dispelled those nasty rumors which imply that the Bible irrelevant for us do day.

But so what? What difference does that make when we walk out of this church building? How does any of that matter when we're at work, or on vacation, or doing things other than reading the Bible? All this has been very interesting in theory, but how is it practical?

So far we've been looking at the first five words in II Timothy 3:16, *All Scripture is God-breathed*. But now let's look at the whole verse. *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness*.

Scripture is useful (the King James and New American Standard Bibles say "profitable") for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness. Let's take a look at each of those.

FOR TEACHING

Scripture is useful for teaching. You see, we're not born with innate knowledge of spiritual truth. People come up with all kinds of strange ideas about spiritual matters – about what God is like and how we should live our lives. We don't know the truth intuitively. We need to be taught. And God teaches us these things in Scripture.

-- SCRIPTURE TEACHES ABOUT REALITY

First, Scripture teaches us essential truths. It tells us who God is and what God is like. It tells us who we are. In other words, the Bible teaches us what reality is like. For example, our Call to Worship this morning says *Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture*. (Psalm 100:3)

Now that verse teaches us some things that are extremely important. First it teaches us that there is a God, and that we can know Him.

Second it teaches that there is only one God. We don't get to make up any gods we'd like. The position is already filled.

Third it teaches us that God made you and me. How significant is that? If you and I randomly evolved from some sort of primordial ooze, as some people teach, then I don't see how life can have any real purpose or meaning. I can see how we might experience

pleasure, but we would never know true, transcendent joy. How can you know joy when you believe your life is a cosmic accident?

However, when we know that the one true God made us, and made us to be His people, life suddenly takes on countless new dimensions. It gains new depth and vibrancy. As the sunrise dispels the darkness splashes breathtaking color across the morning sky, so the knowledge that God made us for Himself colors every aspect of our lives. Suddenly life starts to become everything God intended it to be.

Some people say that this reality in which we live is nothing more than the result of random variation, and that your life is just the luck of the draw. The Bible teaches about a very different reality.

Further, the Bible tells us that ***God is love***. (I John 4:8, 16) Many people don't know that. Many people think that God is wrath. Or God is judgment. Or God is an old fuddy duddy out to spoil our fun. But the Bible teaches a different reality.

It even tells us that ***"God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."*** (John 3:16) The Bible tells us that in Jesus Christ God became a human being. It tells us what He taught about God and human beings. And it tells us how He died on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins, and how he rose from the dead and defeated death. It also tells how you and I are forgiven for our sins and receive eternal life when we put our trust in Him.

We don't know these things instinctively. We only know them because the Bible teaches us that reality.

-- SCRIPTURE TEACHES HOW TO LIVE

But the Bible not only teaches us what reality is truly like, it also tells us the best way to live in this reality. It tells us how to live life to the fullest. The Bible is full of instructions and commandments that teach us how to please God and how to find real joy in life. Jesus said, ***"If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. ¹¹I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹²My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you."*** (John 15:10-12)

Everything the Lord teaches us to do is related to this command to love one another. As Paul said in Romans 13:9-10, ***The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁰Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.***

Of course that makes sense when you think about it. God is love. So the best way to live in God's reality is to live in love. The Bible gives us many specifics on how to do that.

-- A TOKEN OF LOVE

In fact, the Bible itself is a token of God's love. God gave us the Bible because He loves us and wants us to have lives that are joyful and blessed.

Psalm 119:1-2 say ***Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the LORD. ²Blessed are they who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart.***

We're all tempted to do things our own way. But when we do we often wind up in trouble. When we live according to what the Bible teaches, however, that's when we learn what it means to be blessed. God knows how life works best, and in His love He has bothered to tell us. He tells us to curb our sexual appetites because He loves us and wants what is best for us. He tells us to get rid of greed because He loves us and wants what is best for us. He tells us to avoid drunkenness because He loves us and wants what is best for us. He tells us to tithe and be generous because He loves us and wants what is best for us. The list goes on.

Again, we don't know these things intuitively. In fact, most of them are counterintuitive. They are the opposite of what we would naturally believe. We need to be taught. Scripture is useful for teaching. It teaches us about God's reality, and how to live in it.

REBUKING AND CORRECTING

The passage that we've been examining also says that Scripture is useful for rebuking and correcting. These two go together like two sides of a coin. To rebuke simply means to say something is wrong. To correct means to show what is right.

If I say, "Paul was a great prophet in the Old Testament," and you say "No, that's wrong!" That would be a rebuke. If you go on to say, "Paul was an apostle in the New Testament," that would be a correction.

Now again, the Lord rebukes us and corrects us because He loves us. If you see someone you love doing something harmful, you're going to try to get him or her to stop, aren't you? In other words, you're going to rebuke that loved one. In Revelation 3:19 Jesus says, "***Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent.***" Quite often the Lord rebukes us and corrects us through the reading, hearing or preaching of His Word.

By the way, it sometimes happens that when we read the Scriptures or hear a sermon we feel guilty. Most of the time that happens because the Holy Spirit is convicting us. The Lord is rebuking us for something that he knows is harmful for us. However we sometimes get mad at the preacher for "laying a guilt trip on us." But there is a difference between a guilt trip and the conviction of the Holy Spirit. A spouse or child or friend or parent, or even a preacher might very well lay a guilt trip on you or me, and when they do we can ignore it. Guilt trips are a form of negative manipulation and shouldn't be taken seriously. But the conviction of the Holy Spirit is something else. The conviction of the Spirit is a rebuke and a correction that is designed to help us grow. They are proof that the Lord loves us.

Hebrews 4:12 is a great verse that tells us how Scripture rebukes and corrects us. ***For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.***

A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Think of that. God's Word is like a two-edged sword. One thing that means is that it's dangerous. Let's face it; it usually hurts to be rebuked and corrected. We don't like to admit we're wrong. It's like surgery. Ultimately surgery helps us, but it's almost always painful.

But I think this image says something more to us. God's Word isn't just a sharp sword, it's a double-edged sword. It's a sword that cuts both ways.

Sometimes, when we think about tough or controversial issues, the Bible confirms our opinions. It cuts our way. But other times the Bible takes our opinions and prejudices and slashes them. It slices them to shreds. It cuts both ways. If you want to stand firm in your prejudices, stay away from the Bible. It's a double-edged sword.

This is a presidential election year. We are inundated with politics. In fact, I've been tempted to begin or end my sermons by saying, "I'm Rod Pinder, and I approve this message." Anyway, many Christians want to support their political positions by appealing to the Bible. But let's be perfectly clear about this. The Bible is neither Democrat nor Republican. Some people need to hear what the Bible says about life in the womb. Others need to hear that true religion means caring for widows and orphans. Some people need to hear what the Bible teaches about fidelity, marriage and sexual purity. Others need to hear about not judging others. And all of us, all of us need to truly hear what Jesus said about loving our enemies and praying for those who persecute us.

In fact, let me say that when we try to use Scripture to rebuke and correct someone who disagrees with us, someone who isn't doing what we want, we are on very dangerous ground. You might use the Scripture to rebuke and correct me, and sometimes that is good and needed. But it's usually far better if you let the Scripture rebuke and correct you, and I let the Scripture rebuke and correct me.

Let me give you one example. In Ephesians 5:22 the Bible says, "***Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord.***" Now there may be times when my wife isn't doing things exactly the way I want her to, and I might be tempted use this verse as a club to try to bully her into doing what I want. However – and unfortunately she knows this all too well – just a few verses later Ephesians 5:25 says, "***Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.***" Christ died for the church. He gave His life for her. Maybe I'd better not talk to my wife about submitting to my desires until I can show her the scars in my hands and my side and feet.

The Word of God cuts both ways. If she needs to hear the part about submitting to her husband, maybe I should let God rebuke and correct her on that one. I need to work on loving her with Christ-like, sacrificial love. And who knows? Maybe when I learn to love her like that, submission won't even be an issue anymore.

God's Word rebukes and corrects. But it's a double-edged sword. It rebukes and corrects us as well as others. And if we're wise, we will listen more for what God is saying to us than what He is saying to someone else.

SOUL AND SPIRIT.

What's more, this double-edged sword *penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit*. That may seem like a subtle distinction, but it's an important one. There is a difference between the soul and the spirit. The spirit is the part of us that is most open for communication with God's Spirit. Romans 8:16 says, "***The Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.***" The spirit is the part of us that experiences the supernatural dimension.

The soul is different. The soul relates to natural life. The Greek word for soul is *psyche*. It's the root of our word, "Psychology: the study of the soul." There are a couple places where the Bible describes "soulish" life and even compares it with spiritual life.

I Corinthians 2:14 says, ***The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.*** The word translated "without the Spirit" is *psychikos*. Soulsh.

James 3:15 talks about worldly wisdom and says, ***Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil.*** The word translated "unspiritual" is *psychikos*. Soulsh.

Jude 1:19 says, ***These are the men who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit.*** The phrase translated "follow mere natural instincts" is *psychikos*. Soulsh.

Every now and then we hear tragic stories in the news about a mother who murdered her children because God told her to do so. Or we'll hear about some other horrendous act committed because the person thought they were commanded to do it by God. Do you believe God told these people to do such things? Neither do I. It was not God speaking to their spirits. Rather it was perhaps another spiritual force --a demonic force. Or maybe it was some psychosis speaking to the soul. But all such acts are soulsh, not spiritual.

On a lesser scale we've all experienced that same kind of thing. We've all said, "Well, this *feels* like the right thing to do. There was even a popular song several years ago that said, "This feels so right it can't be wrong." But often that message comes from our souls. Many times our souls will lead us to thoughts and attitudes and actions that are very unspiritual. Many times our souls will lead us to thoughts and attitudes and actions that are contrary to what the Spirit of God wants.

So how can we tell the difference between the soul and the spirit? Between what is soulsh and what is spiritual? My friends, that's exactly the point I want to make. God's Word divides between the soul and the spirit. If something feels right to you, but it's against what God teaches in Scripture, you can be sure it's wrong. Trust Scripture, not your soul.

And on the other hand (this cuts both ways) if something just doesn't feel right to you, but God's Word teaches it, you can be sure it is right, in spite of your feelings. That's just your soul going against God's Word.

Listen to your spirit, not your soul. And the better you know God's Word, the better you'll be able to distinguish between the two.

TRAINING IN RIGHTEOUSNESS

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.

Training in righteousness. Learning how to live righteous lives. This is where the rubber meets the road. This is where we really get real. For you see, it doesn't matter how good our doctrine of Scripture may be, it doesn't even matter how well we know what the Bible says if we don't put it into practice.

We've spent five weeks exploring the question, "Is the Bible Reliable." Now, we can talk about Textual Criticism and Hermeneutics and translation principles and all that, but we really won't know if the Bible is reliable until we try to do what it says.

James told us that in James 1:22-25 ***Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.*** ²³*Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror* ²⁴*and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.* ²⁵*But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it--he will be blessed in what he does.*

Jesus says something very similar. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, after Jesus has taught us about prayer, about turning the other cheek and giving to those who ask from us, and not making our religion into a show and all that other great teaching, He says this. ***"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.*** ²⁵*The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.* ²⁶*But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand.* ²⁷*The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."* (Matthew 7:24-27)

Is the Bible reliable? That depends. Reliable for what? ***All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.***

WHEN YOU GET UP

I have a very wise friend, Pastor Sandy Robertson, who was once told about a man who was "slain in the Spirit." At a worship service, the man just fell down before the Lord. Perhaps you've seen that kind of thing happen during one of Benny Hinn's services on television. Maybe it's happened to you. Anyway, someone asked Pastor Sandy what he thought about that guy being slain in the Spirit. I loved Sandy's answer. He said, "I'm more interested in what he was like after he got up."

I have encouraged you to spend time reading the Bible every day, and I hope you're doing that. I hope you sit down with the Word every day and learn it and let God speak to you through Scripture. Bible reading is essential to the Christian life. But really, I'm more interested in what you're like when you get up. Do we take what we learn and put it into practice?

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

You may have heard about the seminary student whose final assignment was to write a thesis on the parable of the Good Samaritan. His professor told him that the paper needed to be turned in between 10:00 and 10:30 on the last Friday of the semester. The student worked hard on the paper because he knew it would be a big part of his final grade. He translated it from the Greek. He read the critical commentaries. He read the classical commentaries. He read the devotional commentaries. He wrote a great thesis.

Finally the day came to turn in the paper, and the student was walking to the professor's office. However, as he turned onto the street in front of the seminary office building, he saw an old jalopy with a flat tire. Standing next to it was a distraught and slightly disheveled woman. She told him she was on her way to see the doctor, and that she was too sick and weak to change the tire herself.

What a dilemma! If the student took time to change this lady's tire for her he knew he would miss the deadline for turning in his paper. And his final grade depended on it. Nevertheless, he took the jack out of the trunk of the woman's car and jacked up the frame. He got a lug wrench and took off all the lugs. They were on good and tight, and he worked up a sweat to get them loose. He removed the tire and got filthy in the process. Then he put the spare tire on, let down the jack and sent the lady on her way. He looked at his watch. 10:35.

From a window on the top floor of the office building the professor had been watching the whole thing. "Thank you, Lord," the professor prayed. "He got it."

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.

I have invited you to start a love affair with the Bible. I've invited you to spend time with the Bible every day. Read it. Study it. Listen to it on tape. Meditate on it. But my dear friends, don't stop there. Don't just read it. Put it into practice. Do what it says. See how God's Word will change your life. Let's get real. When we do, I promise you, we will see just how reliable the Bible really is.