

What Is the Bible?

Writer and poet, Kathleen Norris tells about a time she and her husband were visiting a man named Arlo who was facing terminal cancer. During their visit, Arlo began talking about his grandfather who was a sincere Christian. The grandfather had given Arlo and his bride an expensive, leather bound Bible with their names printed on it as a wedding present. Arlo and his wife weren't really interested in spiritual things at that point of their lives, so they didn't really appreciate the gift and just left it in the box it came in. They sent the grandfather a nice thank you note as a courtesy, of course.

But the grandfather couldn't leave it alone. Every time he spoke with them, he asked, "How do you like the Bible?" They didn't lie, but they didn't read it either. This went on for months.

Finally, Arlo grew curious enough to open the Bible. He said, "The joke was on me. ...I found that granddad had placed a twenty-dollar bill at the beginning of every book ...over thirteen hundred dollars in all. And he knew I'd never find it [without his prompting.]"ⁱ

How are you doing at finding the riches hidden in YOUR Bible? Let's start with this: what do you believe the Bible to be? Do you think of it as a manual for your car – something you only consult when you have an emergency? Or do you think of it as the Official Rule Book of Baseball– something you study to learn how to play the game but then leave it on the shelf until you disagree with a judgment call by the umpire? What is the Bible?

Different Christian denominations have different definitions of the Bible, but most evangelical churches would have a definition something like ours, which says: *We believe that the Bible is the Word of God, fully inspired and without error in the original manuscripts, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and that it has supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct.*

So, the Bible IS like the manual for your car in that it explains how your life works best, but it's MORE than a manual. The Bible IS like a rule book in that it explains what is morally right and morally wrong, but it is MORE than a rule book. The Bible is a special revelation of God. It is second in importance only to Jesus Himself because it reveals what is true about God, this world and you and me. As one anonymous author has said:

I have read many books, but the Bible reads me.

So, if we're going to have a proper view of the Bible, we need to affirm at least three important truths about it. First...

I. We Need to Affirm the Authority of the Bible

The authority of the Bible rests on the fact that we believe that its author is God Himself, speaking through people who were filled with the Holy Spirit. **II Tim. 3:16-17** makes this clear when it says:

All Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God (*anthropos* – servant of God, male or female) may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

The Greek word for ‘God-breathed’ is *theopneustos*, which literally means “breathed-out by God.” This is the only place in the Bible that this word is used. It emphasizes the fact that God did not “breath inspiration into” the Bible after it had been written, but that the Bible itself is “God-breathed,” meaning that it was inspired the very moment it was spoken or written. This correlates with the fact that there are 3,800 times in the Bible where we find phrases like “God said,” or “Thus saith the Lord.” This dispels the idea that various church councils in ancient history “voted inspiration into being.” No, the councils simply were deciding which writings had been inspired from day one.

So, this makes it clear “why” the Bible is our highest authority. As Dr. Wayne Grudem of Phoenix Seminary puts it:

All the words in the Bible are God’s words. Therefore, to disbelieve or disobey them is to disbelieve or disobey God himself. ⁱⁱ

Unfortunately today, there are some Bible scholars who want to stretch the meaning of “authority.” For example, some have tried to redefine the idea of inspiration by saying that the purpose of Scripture was only to lead people to salvation. So, when the Bible speaks on any other topic (like science or geography or relationships), it isn’t necessarily infallible or applicable to our lives today. They say that the authors weren’t intentionally deceiving us, but they just didn’t have the latest knowledge. So, for example, back in the 1800’s some of these scholars said that the story of the walls of Jericho collapsing from trumpets being blown didn’t really happen. It was just a story to dramatize the faith of the Israelites. In fact, they weren’t sure that Jericho ever really existed as a city!

Then archaeologists in 1867, and again in 1908, not only found the city of Jericho but discovered it with its walls all collapsed outward! An amazing physical proof of the Bible story exactly as it was described in Joshua 6. Dr. Norman Geisler points out:

Jesus expected His accuracy in factually testable matters to be proof that He was telling the truth about spiritual matters that cannot be tested... He affirms things like Creation, Adam and Eve, Noah and the Flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, and Jonah and the big fish... if the Bible is the Word of God and God can only speak truth, then there is no way to avoid the conclusion that the Bible contains no errors. Inspiration guarantees inerrancy.” ⁱⁱⁱ

The Bible as configured in 66 books, (39 Old Testament and 27 New Testament) is the fully inspired Word of God. You can bet your life on that! Secondly:

II. We Need to Affirm the Bible’s Necessity.

We touched on this issue in our first week when we explained that, without God’s revelation, the general revelation of the physical world, the special revelation of Jesus and the words of the prophets, we couldn’t know God as our friend. So, revelation is necessary.

Today we’re pointing out that God’s Word, the Bible, IS that special revelation against which all other forms of revelation must be examined. The Bible

is the perfect measurement of truth. If someone has a dream and it isn't in sync with God's Word, then that dream is a deception of Satan. It is not from God.

Satan has been attacking God's Word like that, ever since the Garden of Eden. What was the first thing that the serpent said to the Woman? He said: (Gen. 3:1)

Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?

This is so classic because his question is a lie disguised as a truth. Did God say something to Adam and Eve about not eating some fruit? Yes. Did He say they couldn't eat ANY fruit? No. He only said not to eat from one tree. Satan has been challenging God's Word like this ever since that day and he will continue to challenge it until the day he is thrown in the Lake of Fire.

God's Word is necessary first, because it shows us the way through the deceptions and land mines that Satan has planted in our path. It shows us the safe path. Listen again to how the psalmist explains that: (Ps. 119:89, 91, 98, 105)

Your word, O LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens.

Your laws endure to this day, for all things serve you.

Your commands make me wiser than my enemies,

For they are ever with me.

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Christian pastor during Hitler's reign in Germany, wrote:

Because I am a Christian, therefore, every day in which I do not penetrate more deeply into the knowledge of God's Word... is a lost day for me. I can only move forward with certainty upon the firm ground of the Word of God.^{iv}

You can't know the path or what's true without the Word of God! Heading into your day without spending time in God's Word is like walking into a hundred square mile woods without a map or a compass. Do you understand that?

But God's Word is a necessity to us for a second reason: because of its power! Listen again to the psalmist's description of its practical power in his life:

If your law had not been my delight,

I would have perished in my affliction.

I will never forget your precepts,

for by them you have preserved my life.

My soul is weary with sorrow;

strengthen me according to your word.

My comfort in my suffering is this:

Your promise preserves my life. (Ps. 119:92, 93, 28, 50)

He was "preserved, strengthened and comforted" by the Word of God. Are you in need of any of that? Are you afflicted, weary with sorrow, suffering? Do you feel under attack? Are you applying the balm of the Word of God? Comfort, strength and perseverance are available to you in this book. Are you applying it?

Gordon MacDonald is the former pastor of Grace Chapel in Lexington, Ma. He graduated from Stony Brook School, a Christian prep school on Long Island "back in the day." In his senior year at that school, the headmaster required them to memorize 300 verses from Scripture. If he ever met a senior on campus, the headmaster would say, "Gordon, give me John 13:34, please," and he'd expect you to recite the verse without faltering.

One of the passages he required them to memorize was Ps. 46:1-2

**God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.**

**Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea. (Ps. 46:1, 2)**

Pastor MacDonald, just last August, wrote this:

In the spring of 1957, Senior Bible ended. We put our index cards away, graduated from Stony Brook and went off to college... Now 56 years have passed. A few days ago my doctor called me. "Gordon, I have some difficult news for you. There's a tumor in the back of your head in the lining of the brain. It's not malignant, but it will have to come out." I have spent my whole life helping other people face doctor-call moments like [this.] Now it was my turn and the very first thing that began to surge through my mind was: "*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea...*"

When I was a teenager, a brilliant and godly man pumped my friends and me full of Scripture. Now his effort is paying off. ...I may be concerned and cautious, but I "...will not fear... [The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.]"

We not only need to affirm the authority of Scripture, we also need to affirm its absolute necessity. And lastly...

III. We Need to Affirm Its Complete Sufficiency.

In the world of debate, when you fashion an argument you want it to be as sturdy as possible to be able to withstand the counterarguments of your opponent. It's good to be able to demonstrate the necessity of your argument, but if you can also demonstrate the complete sufficiency of that same argument, then you have a position that will be very hard to take apart.

God argues throughout the Bible that His Word is not only necessary for us to live a satisfying and joyful life, but it is also entirely sufficient. In other words, for you to have a significant and satisfying life, the Bible's truth will be totally sufficient.

Now I can see some of you rolling your eyes already. Yeah, that's right, I can see you guys in Bristol, in the Venue. Yeah, I see you!! You're saying, "Okay, I've got you this time, pastor! The Bible doesn't tell me everything I need to know for a satisfying life. It doesn't give step-by-step instructions for how to do open-heart surgery, if I need it. It doesn't even give step-by-step instructions for how to change the oil in my car! So, how can you say it's entirely sufficient?"

Well, first of all, Ps. 119 gives us a pretty big hint about this when it says:

**I have more insight than all my teachers,
for I meditate on your statutes.**

**I have more understanding than the elders,
for I obey your precepts.**

**I have kept my feet from every evil path
so that I might obey your word.**

**I gain understanding from your precepts;
therefore I hate every wrong path. (Ps. 119: 99-101, 104)**

No, God's Word will not give you step-by-step instructions on how to do open-heart surgery. But what it does do is lay the foundation for all medicine, for all of science, for that matter. How did the early scientists even know to run experiments and look for universal laws? They knew to do it because the Bible described for them that this world is orderly and predictable and designed by and for a purpose. Philosopher and historian of science, Stanley L. Jaki specifies that...

...from Copernicus to Newton it was not deism but Christian theism that served as a principal factor helping the scientific enterprise reach self-sustaining maturity.^v

Physicist, Paul Davies, whom we quoted a few weeks ago, writes:

Science is possible only because we live in an ordered universe which complies with simple mathematical laws. The job of the scientist is to study, catalogue and relate the orderliness in nature, not to question its origin. But theologians have long argued that the order in the physical world is evidence of God. If this is true, then science and religion acquire a common purpose in revealing God's work.^{vi}

Whether it's heady issues like science and philosophy or more practical issues like whether I should cheat on my taxes or how I should parent my child, the basic principles you need are found in God's Word. It's totally sufficient!! And if you still think the Bible is not specific enough, be careful! Jesus ends the book of His Revelation with these words:

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. (Rev. 22:18)

And if you think some of the teaching here is too much – relevant perhaps for Jesus' day but certainly not for our modern world, be careful because Jesus also said:

And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life... (Rev. 22:19)

But how can we know what to do in specific, personal situations today?

"Should I take this job or that job? Should I go to that school or this school? Should I marry this one or that one?" Jesus answered that question too, before He left this earth. In John 15, between verse 4 and 11, Jesus uses one word 11 times. It's the word 'remain.' His central point is in verse 7 where He says:

If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. (John 15:7)

What will be the result of remaining in Christ? Jesus also said:

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth... [He] will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. (John 14:16-17, 26)

What is the Bible? It's your personal link with a holy and loving God. Use it every day and see what happens. Let's pray...

-
- ⁱ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), p. 95
- ⁱⁱ Dr. Wayne Grudem, *Christian Beliefs* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), p. 13
- ⁱⁱⁱ Norman L. Geisler, *When Skeptics Ask* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1990), p. 147, 148, 151
- ^{iv} Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1986)
- ^v David A. Noebel, *Understanding the Times* (Manitou Springs: Summit Press, 1991), p. 318
- ^{vi} *Ibid.*, p. 319