

## **WHY SHOULD I BELIEVE IN THE BIBLE'S AUTHORITY? 2 TIMOTHY 3:16-17; 2 PETER 1:19-21**

I got another lesson last week in how different our culture is from other cultures in our world. No doubt you've heard of the recent and horrific massacre of 17 sleeping Afghan civilians allegedly by a US soldier. Every American in Afghanistan braced for a repeat of nationwide riots across that country. After all that's what happened back in February when it was discovered that several copies of the Koran, the holy book of Muslims, were burned by mistake by US soldiers. The ensuing riots killed three dozen people including four Americans. But after the killing of these 17 people, there were no nationwide riots in Afghanistan. American officials were confused by the lack of reaction. Some of it can be attributed to the unfortunate fact that widespread and deadly violence is commonplace in Afghanistan. But here's what one Islamic religious leader said, "Of course we condemn the massacre. But it was only 17 people. Even if it were 1,000 people, it wouldn't compare to harming one word of the Koran." Wow.... It would be kind of nice for people in our culture to talk about the Bible with that kind of reverence. But that is certainly not the attitude of even American Christians – much less American culture – towards the Bible.

Well, we are nearing the end of a Lenten message series entitled "Why Should I Believe? A Fresh Look at Old Doubts." We've identified maybe the most common questions that many non-Christians in our culture ask about Christianity. These questions express many people's doubts and hang ups about what we believe. Truth be told, many of these questions are also asked by followers of Jesus, too. Yes, we have doubts about our faith – let's admit it. Today we want to think about the Bible and the claim that it's this inspired, authoritative revelation of God Himself to human beings. Many people in our culture consider such a claim to be absurd and ridiculous. "Why should I believe in the Bible's authority?" they ask. Well, what about you? Do you believe the Bible is from God Himself? If so, why do you believe that? Let's get at those questions today by asking and then trying to answer two questions. Here's the first one....

### **WHAT DOES OUR CULTURE THINK ABOUT THE BIBLE?**

Certainly, one prevalent opinion is that the Bible is scientifically impossible. I'm not going to spend a lot of time on this issue, because we did touch on it quite a bit last week when we asked the question if science disproves Christianity. Well, of course, it doesn't, but many people just assume that it does. What is amazing is that while the Bible doesn't claim to be a scientific textbook, its view of reality is often corroborated by the findings of science. Last week we spent some time thinking about the Big Bang theory of how the universe came into being and how the account in Genesis 1 fits right in with that scientific theory. If you admit, as most scientists do now, that the Big Bang is the best explanation for the origin of the universe, you're admitting that everything came out of nothing. That's a miracle by any definition. But, of course, many people don't want to admit that

we live in a universe where miracles are possible. For some people, that's the big hang up: miracles. Since the Bible is full of stories about miracles, it's written off by many as being unscientific. Ultimately, it all goes back to whether you believe in God's existence. If there is a God, why is it so unreasonable to believe that He could suspend His own laws on occasion?

For other people, however, the biggest problem is that they assume the Bible is historically inaccurate. Here's another place we inevitably run into powerful cultural myths about the Bible that sound something like this. "Oh, yes, the New Testament. Well, it evolved into written form over time from these oral traditions passed along by various church communities. As it evolved it picked up all this legendary material. The real Jesus was probably a really inspiring teacher of justice and wisdom who provoked strong opposition that resulted in his execution. The first followers of Jesus had all these different opinions about what Jesus really said and did. As a result, we can't really be sure there was any real agreement back then that Jesus was God, or that He died on the cross for our sins, or that He literally and physically rose from the dead. These are obviously concepts based on legends that gradually evolved over many years."

All that sounds plausible, but it just doesn't hold up. The Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – were written some 40-60 years after Jesus rose from the dead. Literary scholars agree that you need hundreds of years to go by before legends start to affect and change the account of an event. There is ample evidence that the gospels are either eyewitness accounts or are based on eyewitness accounts just like Luke claims at the very beginning of his rendition of Jesus' life, "Many people have set out to write accounts about the events that have been fulfilled among us. They used the eyewitness reports circulating among us from the early disciples. Having carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I also have decided to write a careful account... so you can be certain of the truth of everything you were taught." (Luke 1:1-4 NLT)

There is ample evidence that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John set out to write careful, responsible accounts of what Jesus said and did. For instance, they include material that wasn't particularly complimentary of the first leaders of the church. Over and over again, in the gospel accounts the disciples come across as a kind of petty, jealous and spiritually dimwitted group who constantly misunderstood Jesus. There's the story of Peter's cowardly denial of Jesus and he was recognized as perhaps the key leader of the first Christians. There's even information shared about Jesus that could have been problematic. Jesus admits to not being able to do healing miracles in the town of Nazareth because of the people's lack of faith. That might make Him appear less than powerful to some readers. The gospels report Jesus' cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" That might make Jesus appear to some readers as somehow less than heroic as He died. If your intent is to create a kind of sanitized, free from controversy legend, that's not the way you go about it.

And what about this idea that Christian beliefs about who Jesus is and what He did for us kind of evolved slowly over centuries of time? Paul's letters in the New Testament were all written within 15-25 years of Jesus' resurrection. In those letters, Paul on occasion would include portions of already existing confessions of faith, creeds or hymns that reveal what Christians already believed about Jesus. One of the most important passages like that is 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 (NLT), "I passed on to you what was most important and what had also been passed on to me. Christ died for our sins, just as the Scriptures said. He was buried, and he was raised from the dead on the third day, just as the Scriptures said. He was seen by Peter and then by the Twelve. After that, he was seen by more than 500 of his followers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he was seen by James and later by all the apostles."

The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus happened around 30 A.D. Paul became a convert to Christianity no less than two years later – 32 A.D. His first meeting with the apostles in Jerusalem took place around 35 A.D. At some point in there, he says he was given this creed which had already been formulated and was being used in the church. Here you have the key facts about Jesus dying for our sins and rising from the dead plus a pretty detailed list of those to whom the risen Jesus had appeared. The essential Gospel that we believe and proclaim today some 2,000 years later was already clearly understood and being proclaimed within two to five years of Jesus' actual death and resurrection.

But for still others in our culture, the problem isn't how scientifically or historically lacking the Bible might be. They believe it's culturally regressive. In other words, they read what the Bible says about homosexuality, the role of women or slavery and they find the Bible's position so outrageous, backward, or uninformed that they then have trouble accepting any part of the Bible's message. Three quick responses. One, if you assume that your present understanding of what is culturally good or bad is superior, are you not being narrow and exclusive? Why is our culture's definition better than the Bible's? Why is it better than other cultures today in other countries? Two, if there is a God, is it possible that He might have some views on some issues that could be different than yours and that might upset you? Or do you believe only in a God who agrees with you and is thoroughly manageable? Three, the Bible passage you find offensive might not be teaching what it appears to be teaching.

Here's just one example. Many people are offended by the Bible's seeming support of slavery or, at least, its willingness to go along with it. But slavery in the first century Roman Empire was very different than the kind of slavery we usually think of. During the time the New Testament was written, there was no great difference between a slave and the average free person. You couldn't tell a slave by his or her race, clothing or speech. They weren't segregated; they were paid the same wages as free persons; and they weren't usually poor. Slaves could save up their money to buy themselves out. Very few slaves were slaves for life. Most could expect to be free within 10-15 years. That's very

different than the kind of slavery we're most familiar with which involved the kidnapping, abuse and killing of Africans brought to this country. That slavery was based on race and was slavery for life. That might explain why first century Christians didn't go on a campaign to abolish first century slavery, but Christians were at the forefront of abolishing slavery in this country. Let's move on now to ask another question. If you can get past the objections of our culture to the Bible's authority, are there positive reasons to believe in it? In other words:

### **WHY CAN YOU BELIEVE THE BIBLE IS AUTHORITATIVE?**

Now, please understand that books have been written about each of these five reasons, so we can only skim over them this morning. The first reason that you can believe the Bible is authoritative is its reliability. Everything about Christianity hinges on whether the Bible is true. Fortunately, there is more evidence that the Bible is a reliable source than any other book from the ancient world. It has demonstrated or proven its reliability in three key ways. There is, first of all, the witness of the documents themselves. The story of how the Old Testament has been preserved for us down through the centuries is amazing in its own right, but I just don't have time today to explain it. Many of you know that there are no existing original copies of any New Testament book. Instead, what we have are an unprecedented number of copies that have survived over hundreds of years. We have over 5500 copies of the New Testament – or portions of it - in Greek which was the same language the original books were written in. In addition we have over 24,000 copies of the New Testament in other ancient languages like Latin, Syriac or Coptic. In fact, we have so many copies of the New Testament in other ancient languages that we could still reproduce the entire New Testament even if we lost all the Greek copies of it. And despite all these copies and copies of copies – and all the copying errors that took place over hundreds of years - not one doctrine taught in the New Testament is in jeopardy.

A second witness to the Bible's reliability is archaeology. Why is that important? Well, if you can trust the Bible when it gives you information about earthly stuff that can be verified, then you should be able to trust it about spiritual truth that you can't prove in the same way. There have been thousands of archaeological discoveries in the Middle East that support what we find in the Bible. Independent archaeological investigations have confirmed the existence of King David, the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and various aspects of the Jewish exile and captivity. In addition, hundreds of details from the New Testament have been corroborated, too – seemingly small things like how deep the water is a certain distance from shore, or what kind of disease affected the residents of a particular island or the names of local officials.

Yet another witness to the Bible's reliability is fulfilled prophecies. It's been calculated that there are 191 predictions in the Old Testament about the coming of the Messiah – his ancestry, the city of his birth, that he would be born of virgin, explicit details about his death consistent with crucifixion before it had even been

invented as a means of execution, his sinlessness, his dying for the sins of others – that are all incredibly fulfilled in one Jesus of Nazareth. In addition, we find fulfilled prophecies concerning kings, nations and cities. There are remarkable fulfilled prophecies about the Jewish people, the Israelites.

A second reason to believe the Bible is authoritative is its unity. The Bible is made up of 66 different books written in different genres like historical narrative, law, poetry, prophecy and letters by some 40 different authors over some 1500 years. But you can clearly detect one central message – God's plan to redeem and reclaim a broken, lost world through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Many people think that the Bible is full of all sorts of contradictions. There are indeed apparent contradictions for which there are reasonable answers. One Bible scholar, Norman Geisler, has gathered up of about 800 alleged discrepancies, inaccuracies and conflicting statements and patiently responded to them over 600 pages. As he suggests, if you think you've found a contradiction in the Bible, read up about it. If you still think there's a problem, you'd be wise just to relax and give the Bible the benefit of the doubt. More information may come out later on it that will resolve your dilemma.

A third reason to believe in the Bible's authority is its transforming power. Millions of people can share how knowing the Bible has renewed them spiritually, given them hope, courage, purpose, wisdom, guidance and power. There's a story about an anthropologist who was carrying out research in the Fiji Islands out in the Pacific and he entered into a conversation with a tribal chief. This anthropologist was an atheist and he expressed disappointment that the whole tribe had been powerfully influenced by missionaries to become Christians. He said, "It's a pity that you've allowed yourself to be taken in by these missionaries. No one in our world believes the Bible anymore. We know it's foolishness." The old chief paused for a moment and then answered, "Foolishness? Look at that rock over there. On that rock we used to smash the heads of our enemies. See the furnace next to it. In that furnace we roasted the bodies of our enemies. If not for those missionaries sharing the Word of God with us, you would never leave this place alive. You should thank the Lord for the Word of God; otherwise, you would be our meal tonight!"

A fourth reason to believe in the Bible's authority is Jesus' attitude towards it. Here's what He said about the Old Testament. "Don't misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to accomplish their purpose. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not even the smallest detail of God's law will disappear until its purpose is achieved." (Mt 5:17-18 NLT) What about the New Testament, though? That was written after Jesus returned to Heaven. Well, listen again to what Jesus said to His disciples before He left, "There is so much more I want to tell you, but you can't bear it now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own but will tell you what he has heard. He will tell you about the future." (John 16:12-13 NLT) The New Testament – the

teaching of Jesus' chosen leaders - is the complete and final version of Jesus' own teaching. If you believe in Jesus, you must believe in the Bible's authority. Why? Well, because clearly Jesus believed it to be God's Word. If Jesus is the Lord of your life, then like Jesus you believe that what the Bible says, God says.

There's a final reason to believe in the Bible's authority: its witness to itself. That's not the place to begin our discussion, but it's a good place to end it. In other words, to say you believe the Bible is authoritative just because it claims to be God's Word is an example of circular reasoning. That doesn't hold up! Instead, it's better to say that the Bible claims to be God's Word and that it then provides many internal and external proofs that it is, in fact, God's Word. I want you to see the Bible's claims about itself for yourself. First, turn with me to 2 Timothy 3:16-17. That word "God-breathed" there means that God interacted with human authors in such a way that what they wrote is exactly what God wanted written and passed down to us today. Now, turn with me to 2 Peter 1:19-21. Here we are encouraged to pay close attention to the Bible. Why? Precisely because it is uniquely the Word of God to us. The writers of Scripture said what they said and wrote what they wrote under the direct influence and guidance of the Holy Spirit. What the Bible says, God says. The Bible matters because it's an expression of the authority of God Himself.

How many of you have ever gotten involved with paintball? I never have, but it looks like a lot of fun to me. A few years ago a man by the name of Matt Woodley was watching his 18-year-old son participate in a X-ball paintball tournament. With sophisticated paintball guns that shoot 13 paintballs per second, the matches are quick and exciting. They're also chaotic. The X-ball concept depends on five players from each team shooting at their opponents and working their way up a large outdoor field. The goal is to hit the opposing players with a paintball and ultimately capture the other team's flag. But it's not an easy task. The main problem is that in the midst of thousands of flying paintballs it's tough to spot your opponents. The other team can crouch and dive behind bunkers and barriers. To make matters even worse, as your team's coach shouts the right information about your opponents' locations, the other team's fans start yelling false information. When Matt Woodley heard the other fans intentionally confusing his son's teammates, he was shocked. It sounded like cheating to him! But after the match his son calmly informed him, "O, yeah, that's called 'counter-coaching.' They're trying to distract our players with false information. It's part of the game, Dad. We have to deal with it all the time. It just means that we have to focus on our coach even more and block out all the other distractions."

The Bible clearly warns us that it's not easy to listen for God's voice. There will be plenty of "counter coaching" from the culture, the devil, and from our own distracted hearts. But as Matt Woodley's son said, "That's part of the game. We have to deal with it all the time." And there's only one way to combat spiritual counter-coaching: know the voice of Jesus, hang on to every word as you trust and obey him—even when the crowd tells you to do something else.