

# ***“The Bible, The Book of Books”***

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A few weeks ago I taught a Sunday school class at my church on the subject of the Bible. Since then I have received a request that my notes be put into written form for anyone who may wish to read them. This is an expanded version of these notes. It is my prayer that God would be pleased to use these however He may see fit, that He through Jesus Christ may be glorified and that the saints may be edified.

Let me say at the outset that this lesson was part of a larger Sunday school series based on R. C. Sproul’s book *Now That’s a Good Question*, published in 1996. Even though these notes are mine and come from my own reading, experience and observations, I am heavily indebted to Dr. Sproul’s insights on many of these topics  
Sola Deo Gloria! To God alone the glory, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

## **Scriptural Foundation.**

2 Timothy 3:16-17, ESV. *“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.”*

John 17:17. *“Sanctify them by the truth. Your word is truth.”*

## **Introduction**

The Bible has been and continues to be the perennial best seller of all time. But times seem to have changed, and not necessarily for the better. I can remember, growing up as a baby boomer in the ‘60s, that the Bible was still regarded in American culture with some respect. That no longer seems to be the case. Today, from government officials to intellectual elites, and many others, the Bible is ignored at best, or regarded with disdain and even contempt at worst. For example, Angelina Jolie is reported to have said that the Bible is the worst book ever written.

So what are we to make of the Bible? Obviously a lot has been written about this topic, and we could spend a whole Sunday school quarter and even longer on the subject of the origin of Scripture, biblical inerrancy, proper interpretation of Scripture, etc. So I will just be scratching the surface here, as Dr. Sproul does in his chapter on the subject. Having said that, I would like to examine and attempt to answer ten important questions concerning the Bible, which David the Psalmist says “is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.” Psalms 119:105. So let’s dig in.

## **Questions**

### **Truth, Transmission and Inspiration of Scripture**

#### *1. How do you know the Bible is true?*

This question is frequently asked by a lot of people, particularly in our increasingly secular and skeptical age. Still, it’s an important question. After all, as Dr. Sproul points out, so much is at stake regarding the truthfulness of Scripture. This is because everything we know about Jesus—His Incarnation, ministry, miracles, death, resurrection, ascension,

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etc., and everything that is crucial to our faith, including the gospel itself, comes from the Bible. If the Bible is not true, we might as well just pack up and go home.

I recently listened to excerpts of a sermon from a prominent evangelical pastor. He was primarily addressing those who were no longer attending church and who had seemed to abandon Christianity, a problem that pollsters have noted. Among other things, This pastor said that the truth of Christianity does not rest on the Bible but on the claims of Christ, especially His resurrection. But the problem with this statement is obvious. It is from the four Gospels, The Acts of the Apostles, and the Epistles—in short, from the New Testament—that we get the information about Christ and His resurrection. In addition, many ask, “The Bible claims to be the word of God. So does the Quran and the Book of Mormon, and other so-called ‘holy writings.’ How do we know the Bible is true?”

This is a fair question. I would like to present three strands of evidence that have been used throughout the centuries to vindicate the truthfulness of the Bible. While these do not prove the validity of Scripture, let alone its inerrancy or infallibility, which we will discuss later, they do give compelling evidence for the reliability of the Bible and the trustworthiness of its claims.

### *a. History.*

How do we know the Bible is true? For that matter, how do we know that anything is true? We’re not talking about scientific observation or experimentation here, but historical truth. For example, none of us have ever seen George Washington or Abraham Lincoln, and none of us were around when they were alive. So how do we know they existed? Well, we have the writings either of these people themselves or of their contemporaries, many of whom were eyewitnesses of the events surrounding the lives of these famous historical figures. Even though we go back further in time, the same may be said of Plato or Aristotle.

And so it is with the Bible. The church in its New Testament form has existed for almost two thousand years, and in its Old Testament form for longer than that. How did this come to be? We have people who purport to be eyewitnesses of the events recorded in Scripture, for example, those of the life and ministry of Christ. It is interesting that Luke begins his gospel this way. *“In as much as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.”* Luke 1:1-4.

And in his companion volume, The Acts of the Apostles, Luke writes the following. *“In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day that He was taken up, after He had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles, whom He had chosen. He presented Himself alive to them after His suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.”* Acts 1:1-3. The importance of these historical claims cannot be

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overestimated. This sets the Bible apart from every other book which claims to be the word of God.

On the other hand, to point out the difference, the Quran, for example, is really just a series of disconnected declarations. In fact, there are historical inaccuracies, such as the confusion of Mary the mother of Jesus with Miriam the sister of Moses and Aaron.

### *b. Prophecy.*

Another indication of the reliability of the Bible is fulfilled prophecy. For example, the Babylonian captivity of the Jews in 586 B.C. and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. have been well documented. The Bible predicted these events long before the time of their occurrences. Liberal scholars have attempted to deny this, but their explanations betray their agenda of unbelief. Also, there are approximately 333 prophecies in the Old Testament concerning the birth, birthplace, lineage, ministry, death, resurrection and reign of the Messiah. Again, this sets the Bible apart from other “holy” writings. For example, the Quran has no such prophecies, only a vague self-fulfilling reference concerning Mohammed.

### *c. Consistency.*

The Bible is truly unique in another respect—the unity and consistency of its message. The seventeenth-century Westminster Confession of Faith, in chapter I, Section V, summarizes this very well in my opinion. “We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the church to a high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture, and the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man’s salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it abundantly evidences itself to be the word of God.”

How can it be that forty authors, writing different kinds of literature over a period of approximately sixteen hundred years, with varied backgrounds and occupations, could write such a consistently unified book with one central message and two main themes—the glory, Being and character of God, and man’s creation, fall and redemption in Jesus Christ? The Bible was not dictated to someone looking into golden plates or through an angel. Men with their own personalities and writing styles were used by God to write what we have come to know as the Bible.

While God’s special Biblical revelation is progressive, it is not contradictory. Many have tried to find alleged contradictions, inconsistencies or discrepancies in the Bible. Although the scope of this brief treatise cannot deal with this in detail, let me say that these problems have been dealt with over the centuries. Varying accounts of events, paradoxes and seemingly conflicting passages taken in their proper contexts are not contradictions.

A final word of caution needs to be added. As I said previously, these strands of evidence do not prove the validity, let alone the inerrancy of the Bible. And they will not convince someone who has not been regenerated by the Holy Spirit. The section I quoted

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from the Confession goes on to say, “Yet, notwithstanding, our full persuasion and full assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts.”

James 2:19 says that “*the demons believe—and tremble!*” (NKJV.) Satan knows the Bible better than you, I, or the most learned theologian ever will. And he hates every word of it. Many atheists and unbelieving scholars know the content of the bible better than some Christians, but they aren’t saved because it’s not something they love.

To illustrate, I was talking to a neighbor of mine several years ago. She believed authors she had read who said that the Bible was fiction and tried to give natural explanations for its supernatural occurrences. She said that Jesus never claimed to be God. When I tried to point out to her that indeed Jesus did claim to be God, I asked her if she had ever read the Bible, or at least any of the four Gospels. She said that she hadn’t. I offered to give her one, but she steadfastly refused. Do you get the point? Only the work of the Holy Spirit can produce a heartfelt love for the word of God, and most important, the God of the Word.

*2. How were the books of the Bible selected and compiled, and how were the decisions made as to what would be distributed as the word of God?*

This is also a fair question, and very important. After all, we must acknowledge that the Bible didn’t just drop out of a parachute from heaven. There was a historical sifting process, and certain books were selected and others rejected. This is particularly relevant concerning the New Testament. How did that selection process take place?

About ten years after Dr. Sproul’s book on which this writing is based was published, Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* became a best seller. Though a work of fiction, it was Brown’s contention, expressed through one of his fictitious characters, that the Church suppressed thousands of books that should have been included in the Bible in order to gain power for itself, and that the Canon of Scripture wasn’t determined until the year 325 by the Roman emperor Constantine.

At best, this is a myth, and it is an outright lie at worst. While it is true that there was a question concerning a few of the books, and while it is also true that the official list of books in our Bible was written in the fourth century, due in large part to a heretic named Marcion who formed his own list of books and excluded those he didn’t agree with, it is not true that the Church had to sift through thousands of books. For example, the Gnostic writings, such as the Gospel of Thomas, or other spurious writings claiming to have been written by an apostle, narrating the so-called “lost years” of Christ between his childhood and the beginning of His public ministry, were not even considered.

So what were the factors that determined which books we have in our Bible in general and the New Testament in particular? The most important was *apostolic origin*. In other words, could it be shown that a book of the New Testament was either written by an apostle—(Matthew, John, Peter, Paul), or by an associate or companion of an apostle—Mark or Luke, for instance? These particular books were circulated in the church from the beginning, and there was no dispute about them whatsoever. Many of the writings of

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the early church fathers substantiate this. As a matter of fact, two passages in the New Testament refer to other parts of the New Testament as Scripture.

1 Timothy 5:18, NKJV. *“For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer is worthy of His wages.’”* This second quotation is from Jesus in Luke 10:7.

2 Peter 3:14-16, ESV. *“And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you, according to the wisdom given Him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and the unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.”*

For a short time, there were questions about the remaining books of our New Testament—Hebrews because of the uncertainty of its authorship, James and Jude being siblings of Jesus but not apostles, and Revelation because of its apocalyptic nature. These were quickly settled and entered the Canon of Scripture centuries before the official list was compiled. “The Epistle of Clement” was briefly considered but rejected because Clement acknowledged the superiority of the apostolic writings. As stated above, Gnostic writings, many dating from the second century or later, were never considered.

It is easy to see why. In “The Gospel of Thomas,” for example, Peter asks Jesus how Mary Magdalene could join the apostolic group, since women cannot inherit the kingdom of God. Jesus says that He will turn her into a man. Some of these spurious writings contain outlandish miracle, stories, like the boy Jesus turning clay into pigeons and destroying anyone who got in His way. Clearly, these were never taken seriously by the early Church.

As for the Old Testament Canon, (a word which means measuring stick or standard), this had already been well established for centuries. These were never in dispute at the time of Jesus, the apostles and the early Church. Incidentally, that is why our Protestant Bibles do not contain the Apocrypha, which are writings from the Inter-Testamental period and are included in the Roman Catholic Bible. Neither Jesus, the apostles, nor any Jews of their time referred to these books or regarded them as Scripture.

One more thing needs to be said regarding the transmission of Scripture. The Roman Catholic Church, particularly in the writings of the Council of Trent, states that the church created the Scripture. Protestantism, on the other hand, insist that the early church humbly received the Scriptures, and this terminology is used in early church councils.

*3. We talk of the Bible as being the inspired word of God. Would the men who chose the books to be included in the Bible also have been inspired by God?*

This is really a two-part question. First of all, concerning the Bible, we believe in the inspiration and inerrancy of the original writings, not of manuscript copies and translations. The word *inspired* is often misunderstood. For example, people may be moved by a poem or a stirring piece of music, and they will say that the composer must have been inspired. It would be more accurate to say that the Bible is God-breathed or breathed out by God, emphasizing that every word of Scripture is from God, as He used men through the Holy Spirit to write His word.

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Even though we do not have the original autographs or writings—perhaps we would most likely worship them if we did—through God’s singular providence and preservation, we may confidently assert that we do have God’s word in our possession today. We have approximately 5,500 manuscripts of the New Testament or portions thereof, many dating from as early as the second century. To put it simply, if all of these manuscripts of John’s Gospel say, *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God, and the Word was God,”* (John 1:1), then it is very, very likely that we have John’s Gospel. Even if we didn’t have these manuscripts, we would have allusions and direct Scriptural quotations from many of the early church fathers that would show that these books were in use and regarded as Scripture. Regarding the Old Testament, the Dead Sea Scrolls have also shown the remarkable preservation of the Hebrew manuscripts. The Masoretic text of Isaiah from 900 A.D. and the discovery of ancient manuscripts of Isaiah from 100 B.C. are almost identical word for word.

As for the second question, whether the men who chose the books of the Bible were inspired, the short answer would be no. And this points to a difference between the Roman Catholic view of Scripture and the historic Protestant view. Rome declares that the Bible is an infallible collection of infallible books, because the infallible church put the books together. Those who do not believe in Biblical inerrancy—that the Bible is without error and incapable of error-- speak of a fallible collection of fallible books. Historically, Protestants have stated that the Bible is a fallible collection of infallible books. Don’t let that scare you. The books of the Bible are infallible because God is infallible. The church receives the Scripture as God’s word, but the church is not infallible.

### **Biblical Interpretation**

4. *How can we know that the Bible is the true word of God after so many interpretations?* The short answer is that all of the differing interpretations of Scripture have nothing to do with the question of its origin. Dr. Sproul uses the analogy of the U.S. Constitution, a big issue in our day. This kind of question shows the relativism of our age. Everybody has his/her own interpretation. Who are you to say which one is right? Why can’t we all just get along? Part of the reason that Christians have vehement disagreements at times about the correct interpretation of a Biblical passage is because we believe that it is crucial to interpret and understand the word of God correctly, especially, but not exclusively, concerning matters of salvation.

5. *Why do Christian people filled with the Spirit of truth disagree about what the Bible says?* Dr. Sproul gives three primary reasons.

a. *We are prone to logical errors.*

None of us, even the smartest of us, including scholars, are perfect in our powers of reasoning. We as Christians are not immune to this problem. This often leads to various conclusions about Biblical passages or doctrines, such as disagreements about Baptism or the Lord’s Supper.

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b. *We are prone to errors because of our limitations.*

All of us have varying degrees of intellectual capacity. Many of us do not have the time or the financial wherewithal to study the ancient languages in which the Scripture was written. We have other limitations, and even though we as Christians all have the Holy Spirit living in us, it is inevitable that we will disagree about Biblical passages.

c. *Bias and sin.*

Far and away this is the biggest reason that Christians have differing interpretations of Scripture. We are fallen sinners. To put it bluntly, we do not like what the Bible says to and about us. Mark Twain once said that it wasn't what he didn't understand in the Bible that bothered him, but what he did understand. Many of us are lazy, or more interested, for example, in the Steelers than in the study of Scripture. Even though we have many resources at our disposal in this day and age, Biblical illiteracy in the church is appalling. Add to that the fact that the Bible is not regarded as the inerrant and infallible word of God in many churches, and therefore not preached as such.

6. *There are so many interpretations of what the Bible is saying. How do I know which one is right?*

Various solutions have been offered to this question. Historically, the Roman Catholic Church has believed that their teaching magisterium has the one correct interpretation of the Bible. However, upon closer examination, there are varying interpretations among Catholic scholars. The Protestant reformers believed in the right of private interpretation, that every Christian has the right and the duty to search the Scriptures for himself. The Reformers had a number of principles for valid biblical interpretation. Here are a few of them.

a. When you are listening to a Bible teacher or preacher, or reading a commentary, it is important to ask these questions. Who is giving the interpretation? What does he believe about Scripture as a whole? Is he educated? Does he have a grasp of Biblical truth and the message of the Bible? These questions need to be kept in mind when listening to a message or reading a commentary or purchasing a study Bible.

b. *The analogy of faith.* Scripture interprets Scripture.

c. *Interpret obscure passages by clear ones, not the other way around.* For example, some people will deny the Deity of Christ because Jesus said, *The Father is greater than I.* We have to understand that passage in light of others which clearly teach that Jesus is God, such as 2 Peter 1:1-2.

d. *Generally, we interpret Old Testament passages in light of the New Testament.* For example, Genesis 3 and the account of the fall of man do not really make sense unless we examine it in light of Romans 5:12-20, which expounds the doctrine of original sin and redemption in Christ.

e. *We must distinguish between different kinds of literature and interpret passages accordingly.* History is to be interpreted as history, poetry as poetry, allegory as allegory, and apocalyptic literature, like that of Ezekiel and Revelation, as apocalyptic literature.

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Sometimes this is not always easy. As a matter of fact, blood has been shed over this principle. Jesus, for example, said, in reference to the elements of the Lord’s Supper, “This is my body,” and “This is the new covenant in my blood.” Was He speaking literally or figuratively?

f. *Context is king.* Who wrote a certain book? To whom was the book addressed? What were the circumstances or problems behind the writing of the book? Each passage must be interpreted in its proper context. For example, contrary to popular belief, the phrase in Isaiah 11:6, “*and a little child shall lead them,*” is not Isaiah’s version of “Kids Say the Darndest Things,” but a description of the new heavens and the new earth.

### *7. How do I respond to “that’s your interpretation”?*

When people say this, they usually mean that you have your interpretation and I have mine. Mine is right for me and yours is right for you. This is a common reaction in our age of relativism. We are to read the Bible and interpret it, but we are not to distort it.

The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:15. He said, “*Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.*” This obviously implies that the word of truth may be wrongly handled. Satan did this in the wilderness with Christ. Contrary to popular opinion, there is one and only one correct interpretation of a Scriptural passage, although there are many applications. We should not ask, “What does this passage mean to you?”, but “What does this passage mean?”

## **Translations and Authority of Scripture**

### *8. What about translations?*

It is important to distinguish between Bible translations and paraphrases. Translations, such as the English Standard Version or the New International Version are attempts to translate the Bible from one of the original languages of Hebrew or Greek into another language, such as English. On the other hand, a paraphrase, such as *The Living Bible*, works from English translations and reproduces the text in simple English for easy reading. For study purposes, translations are to be preferred over paraphrases.

There are two types of Bible translations in English. One is *dynamic equivalency*, or a word-for-word translation. These types of translations attempt, as much as possible, to translate the Biblical text from the original Hebrew or Greek word for word. The advantage of these types of translations is a high degree of accuracy. Sometimes, however, it may result in a certain degree of reading difficulty in English. The King James and New King James versions, as well as the English Standard and New American Standard versions fall into this category.

The second type of Bible translation is *thought equivalency*, or thought-for-thought. These types of translations are more interested in communicating the thought or meaning of the text for the sake of readability in English. The advantage of such a translation is its easy reading style, while the disadvantage is that accuracy may be sacrificed. The New International Version is an example of this type of Biblical translation.



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Another reason for the multiplicity of translations is that the meanings of words change through the years. Though the language of the King James Version is beautiful, it is archaic. And words don't mean what they once did. *Cute* used to mean bow-legged, and *gay* used to mean happy. Modern translations take this into account.

Finally, different translations rely on different manuscripts. The King James and New King James use one set of the ancient manuscripts, whereas the English Standard Version, New International Version and New American Standard Version use a different set. This is why there are footnotes indicating variances in these manuscripts, and why some passages are absent altogether, such as the end of Mark's Gospel, or the Trinitarian declaration found in 1 John 5:7.

We need to always remember that people gave their lives and shed their blood for the right to be able to translate the Bible into our language. We must never take our Bibles for granted.

### *9. Does the Bible claim authority over the life of a believer?*

Yes, of course. How could it be otherwise? Our Lord said, *“Your word is truth.”* If Jesus is Lord, and Jesus believed the Bible, and all Scripture is profitable, then it is to be obeyed.

There are those who say, “I believe what Jesus said, but not Paul.” But Jesus never wrote a word of Scripture. All that we have of the words of Jesus is from His apostles, and Paul was one of them. Or some say, “I don't believe the first eleven chapters of Genesis are to be taken as literal fact or history.” But Jesus did. He said, *“He who receives you”*—meaning the doctrine of the apostles—*“receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me.”* If Jesus was wrong about anything, intentionally or unintentionally, he cannot be our sinless Savior, let alone the God-Man.

For unbelievers, though they are not part of the covenant community of believers, the Bible as God's word still has authority over them, whether they acknowledge this or not.

### *10. What can a Christian learn from the Old Testament?*

All Scripture is profitable. At the time Paul wrote 2 Timothy 3:16, the Old Testament was the Scripture of the early church, since the New Testament had not been completed. The Old Testament is just as important as the New. It's like the foundation of a house. We cannot really understand and appreciate the New Testament without having a grasp of the Old Testament. Augustine said that the New is in the Old concealed and the Old is in the New revealed. From the Old Testament, among other things, we learn about the character and attributes of God, the history of God's dealing with His people, the prayers of His ancient saints, and all of the types and shadows pointing to the Person and work of Christ.