

The Bible *Is* Reliable



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 5:17, 18; 24:35; John 10:34, 35; Rom. 8:34; 1 Cor. 15:6, 12-19; Gal. 3:22; 2 Tim. 3:16; James 2:23; 1 Pet. 1:25.*

Memory Text: “Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth” (*John 17:17*).

Key Thought: Why would God give us His Word and not give us evidence that enables us to trust it?

Mark Twain once said that rumors of his death had been greatly exaggerated. One could make the same claim about the Bible. More than once people have declared that the Book one day would be deemed dead, a relic from a bygone era.

The Bible continues to come under attack. Interestingly enough, the critics come and go, but the Bible remains. Critical ideas about the Bible, once deemed cutting edge and revolutionary, have been long forgotten, but the Bible remains. Men deemed great scholars, whose work questioned the authenticity of the writings of Moses or Isaiah, are barely known anymore, while Moses and Isaiah are still being read all over the world.

For the past few weeks we have looked at elements that should give us confidence in the Bible. This week we continue to look at reliability. Thousands of years ago copy machines and digital scanners did not exist. How accurate are the manuscripts we have today? Why do we trust them? Let's find some answers.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 28.*

The Evidence

From the start, Satan always has hated the Bible. After all, it reveals the whole plan of salvation, from start to finish. In it everyone can find the path to eternal life. No wonder Satan hates it.

Many have been his attempts over the centuries to destroy it. When, finally, because of massive circulation, the destruction of the Bible became impossible, Satan tried a new tact: If he couldn't destroy the Scriptures themselves, then he could do the next best thing: destroy their credibility. Hence, the arrival of what's known as higher criticism, which has been very successful in destroying faith in the Bible as the Word of God. For many scholars, the Bible is just another ancient text, a Jewish version of, for instance, the Egyptian Book of the Dead. Full of historical interest, for sure, but not divinely inspired.

Look up Matthew 5:17, 18; 24:35; John 10:34, 35; 1 Peter 1:25. What do they say to us about the reliability of the Bible?

There is, however, one problem here. We are using what the Bible says about itself to verify the reliability of the Bible. That's circular reasoning. How can we use the Bible to verify itself when it's the reliability of the Bible itself that is coming into question? It's like defining by using that word itself in the definition.

On the other hand, God has given us plenty of reasons to trust in the reliability of the Bible. We have been given enough internal and external evidence so that we can trust what it says. We don't have to believe just because it tells us to believe. God gives us reasons to trust in the Bible as His Word, even though, in the end, we have to go by faith. The bottom line, however, is that we can trust the Bible because God has given us many good reasons to.

Suppose someone were to ask you, "Why do you trust the Bible? Why do you think the Bible is the Word of God? Why do you live according to what the Bible says?" How would you answer, and why?

The Old Testament

Read Mark 15:28; Luke 4:21; John 13:18; 17:12; 19:24; Galatians 3:22; 2 Timothy 3:16; James 2:23. What do these texts tell us about how the Old Testament was viewed by the writers of the New Testament? What message is in these words for us?

As we saw last week, there are amazing prophecies in the Bible that give powerful testimony to its accuracy in both the Old and the New Testaments. The fulfillment of these prophecies shows how both Testaments are reliable; each one works to help establish the validity of the other.

But there's even more. For many years higher critical scholars have told us that the Bible can't be trusted. After all, there are no complete copies of the Hebrew Old Testament dated earlier than around A.D. 900. Certainly, with no copy machines around, many errors got into the texts. Thus, how can the Old Testament be trusted?

Then, in early 1947, the world learned about what has been called "the greatest archaeological discovery of the century." In caves near the Dead Sea, ancient jars were discovered containing the now famous Dead Sea Scrolls, many of them dated from about 150 B.C. to A.D. 70, which means these biblical texts were more than one thousand years older than many of the other known texts. The find included the earliest manuscript copy yet known of the complete book of Isaiah and fragments of almost every book in the Old Testament. The books of Samuel, in a tattered copy, were also found, along with two complete chapters of Habakkuk.

In comparing the Dead Seas Scrolls with the other manuscripts, scholars were amazed to find just how accurate our modern Bibles are. In most cases there were just minor spelling differences. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has given us great external evidence on just how reliable the text of the Old Testament is.

How much sense would it make for God to give us His Word and it not be reliable? Or for Him not to give us reasons to trust its reliability? Should we not be able to trust the Bible in the same way that we trust in the God of the Bible?

The New Testament

Read Revelation 22:18, 19. What message about just how seriously the Lord takes the words of the Bible is found here?

“I’ll be honest with you. . . . When I first found out that there are no surviving originals of the New Testament, I was really skeptical. I thought, If all we have are copies of copies of copies, how can I have any confidence that the New Testament we have today bears any resemblance whatsoever to what was originally written?”—Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1998), pp. 58, 59.

Good question. Here, too, we have to ask ourselves: Would God not leave us a reliable source to know His will? Even more so, would He not give us reasons to trust in whatever sources He left us?

Yesterday’s lesson showed that the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls is important for us to see the accuracy and reliability of the Old Testament. Can we find the same evidence for the New Testament?

One of the most amazing things about the New Testament, something that gives us incredible evidence for its reliability, comes from the fact that so many copies of its manuscripts are still in existence, so many more than other ancient manuscripts. The Lord has left us with a wealth of manuscript evidence that attests to the accuracy of the New Testament that we have today. According to scholars Norman Geisler and William Nix: “The New Testament, then, has not only survived in more manuscripts than any other book from antiquity, but it has survived in a purer form than any other great book—a form that is 99.5 percent pure.”—Strobel, p. 65.

Then, too, there is so much external evidence; that is, there are many quotations and excerpts from the early copies of the New Testament found in commentaries, sermons, and letters of the early Church Fathers. The Apostolic Fathers, writing mostly between A.D. 90 and 160, showed great familiarity with most of the books of the New Testament. This external evidence, called the lectionaries, were the reading lessons used in public church services. By the middle of the twentieth century, more than eighteen hundred of these reading lessons had been classified. Because they so closely reflect the New Testament as we have it today, these early church manuscripts also give us many reasons to trust in the reliability of the New Testament texts as handed down through the years.

How firm is your faith in the Bible as the Word of God? Also, ask yourself this question: “If I can’t trust the Bible, what can I trust?” What’s left?

Internal Evidence: Part 1

What other evidence can help us trust in the Bible as the Word of God, besides what we've looked at in the past few days?

Think about the New Testament story of Jesus. Of all the things that happened to Him, which event is not only the most incredible (in that it is not something that happens very often) but has a great deal of importance to the whole Christian faith? See *Rom. 8:34, 1 Cor. 15:12-19*.

Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 makes it very clear how central the resurrection of Jesus is to our faith. In other words, even though Christ died for our sins, even though He was our Substitute, it all would have come to naught had He not been resurrected. That shows how important this event is to all that we believe.

Of course, it's one thing for a Jew to have been crucified by the Romans. That happened all the time. It's wholly another for that Jew to have been resurrected from the dead. And yet that's exactly what the New Testament writers declared happened to Jesus.

Read Matthew 27:51–28:20, Mark 16:9-14, Luke 24:35-53, John 20:19-31. What do all these accounts have in common?

Whatever the differences in the Gospel accounts (in that some writers recorded things that others didn't), one thing all have in common is that all testified to the resurrection of Jesus from the grave.

Now, some reject the idea that someone, anyone, could be raised from the dead after three days. It's crazy, they say—the product of a sick mind, of someone having hallucinations.

Now, that might be a reasonable assumption if only one person were making the claim that Jesus rose from the dead. But in this case, there were four! It's one thing for all four Gospel writers to be crazy. But for all four to be crazy in the same way? Hardly sounds as if the hallucination theory makes any sense.

Read again 1 Corinthians 15:12-19. Why is the resurrection of Christ so central to our faith? Now ask yourself this question: "Would God ask us to believe in something like this and not give us plenty of evidence to believe it?" Explain your answer.

Internal Evidence: Part 2

As we saw yesterday, the idea that the resurrection of Jesus was based on the claim that the disciples were crazy made no sense. Realizing that this idea wasn't too sensible, others claimed that the disciples conspired to make up the story of Christ's resurrection.

From what you know about the life and fate of those early followers of Jesus, why does the conspiracy theory make no sense either? See *Luke 21:16, 17; John 16:2*.

What reason would they have for making up this story? Power? Prestige? Money? Please! Shunned by their own people, rejected by the religious leaders, and mercilessly persecuted by just about everyone, the disciples never gained worldly power, influence, or money as a result of the Resurrection. On the contrary! They lost everything the world had to offer because of their insistence on it.

Some have argued that though the disciples had conspired in hopes of personal advantage, things went awry concerning their plans. However, because they already had committed themselves to the story of the Resurrection, they had no choice but to keep promoting it. The only problem is that the Gospels were not written until many years after the Resurrection. If the disciples had hopes that through the fabricated story of Jesus' resurrection they were going to get rich or powerful, they learned early that this was a vain hope. Why, decades later, long after they had had plenty of time to disassociate themselves from the whole failed endeavor, did they cling to it anyway—even at such a great personal cost?

Read 1 Corinthians 15:6 (NIV). What is Paul saying here that gives even more evidence for the resurrection of Jesus?

Paul is telling people that Jesus, after the Resurrection, appeared to more than five hundred people, "most of whom are still living." In other words, Paul is so confident about the resurrection of Jesus that he is all but inviting people to talk to those among the 500 who are still alive and ask them to tell them what they saw. And, of course, one reason that Paul was certain of their testimony was because he, himself, had been a witness to the resurrected Jesus (Acts 9:1-8).

Go over in your own life and experience the reasons you have for your faith in Jesus. What things can you do to strengthen that faith? At the same time, what activities tend to weaken it?

Further Study: “The Languages, Manuscripts, and Canon of the Old Testament,” pp. 25–45 in *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 1.

“God has faithful witnesses, to whom He committed the truth, and who preserved the Word of God. The manuscripts of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures have been preserved through the ages by a miracle of God.”—Ellen G. White, *Letter 32*, 1899.

Aside from the Dead Sea Scrolls, there are two other ancient witnesses that attest to the accuracy of the copyists of the Old Testament. One of these is the Greek translation of the Old Testament, called the Septuagint; another is the text that was preserved by the Samaritans that live today in Nablus, Palestine. No wonder R. Laird Harris, an Old Testament scholar, concluded: “We can now be sure that copyists worked with great care and accuracy on the Old Testament, even back to 225 B.C. At that time there were two or three types of text available for copying. These types differed among themselves so little, however, that we can infer that still earlier copyists had also faithfully and carefully transmitted the Old Testament text. Indeed, it would be rash skepticism that would now deny that we have our Old Testament in a form very close to that used by Ezra when he taught the Law to those who had returned from the Babylonian captivity.”—R. Laird Harris, *Can I Trust My Bible?* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1963), p. 124.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Russian Leo Tolstoy wrote the great novel *Anna Karenina*. Could you imagine Tolstoy willing to face persecution, rejection, jail, and maybe even death, because he insisted that the whole story was true, even though he knew he had made it all up? How does this analogy help us understand why the disciples wouldn’t have made up the story of Christ’s resurrection?
- ❷ However much evidence God has given us to trust in His Word, there is always room for doubt; there are always unanswered questions. What can you as a class do to help those in your church who are struggling with questions about the reliability of the Bible?
- ❸ As a class, go over your answers to Sunday’s final question. What can you learn from each other?

New Name, New Heart

by EMMANUEL A. ALLOTEY

Sabbah lives in a town in central Ghana. When she was 17 years old, some of her friends invited her to attend evangelistic meetings near her home. Sabbah wanted to go to the meetings, but she knew that her father would object, for he hated Christians. She decided it was best not to tell her parents where she was going each night, so she arranged to meet her girlfriends at their homes and walk to the meetings with them.

Sabbah was touched by what she learned about God. She gave her heart to God and asked to be baptized. But her father learned of her plans and forbade her to be baptized. He threatened to beat her and disown her if she even attended a Christian function. Sadly, Sabbah did not take part in the first baptism. But she was not willing to give up her love for Jesus just because her father said she must, and she continued attending worship services whenever she could.

When her father learned of Sabbah's continued interest in Christianity, he drove her from her home. However, Sabbah's mother had secretly encouraged her daughter's decision to become a Christian, and she tried to encourage her daughter's faith. When Sabbah's father learned of her mother's actions, she too was forced to leave her home.

On her baptismal day, Sabbah changed her name to Christine* to reflect her new faith.

Christine passed her junior high school exams and could enter high school, but without her parents' financial support, she had no way to continue her studies. As her pastor, I encouraged her to trust in the Lord and pray for a sponsor.

Not long after this conversation, I received a telephone call inviting me to the conference office. There I met a couple from overseas who wanted to sponsor Christine to finish her education. She could continue her studies!

Christine has done well in her high school years and wants to serve God in whatever capacity He leads her. She is thankful for those who have helped her finish her education, but is even more grateful for those who made it possible for her to be introduced to her Savior, Jesus Christ. Your mission offerings help make evangelism possible in Ghana and around the world. Thank you.

* Not her real name.

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