

Reasons We Don't Believe

The Bible Isn't Trustworthy

2 Peter 1:16-21

Mark Vroegop

¹⁶ For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷ For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," ¹⁸ we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. ¹⁹ And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, ²⁰ knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. ²¹ For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. 2 Peter 1:16–21 (ESV)

There are three critical questions that we are attempting to answer in the weeks leading up to Easter weekend. These struggles can become barriers for a person believing in Jesus, and they can become hindrances for Christians in sharing their faith:

- How can Jesus be the only way?
- How do you know the Bible is trustworthy?
- How can an all-powerful and good God allow evil to exist?

Now these are not the only questions that must be addressed, but they are, in my experience, the most frequent. Therefore, the aim of this short series is to help us take some steps in addressing these questions. I don't expect to answer these questions definitively, but I hope to at least help you know how to be prepared to give a better answer after walking through these questions.

Last week we explored the exclusivity of Christ, and we learned about the cultural context, the problem of the human condition, and why Jesus is the only solution. Hopefully, you'll remember that He alone is the intersection between the holiness of God and our forgiveness. He alone is worthy to stand in the gap between God's justice and our justification.

Our question for this week—How do you know the Bible is trustworthy?—is important for two reasons: 1) The Christian faith requires belief in the Bible,¹ and 2) the number of people in the United States who believe in the Bible is increasingly shrinking. Those of you who are older than 50 will no doubt remember a time when you could nearly assume the Bible was ascribed as the Word of God. It wasn't long ago that public school homerooms featured not only prayer but even the reading of Scripture. But those days are long gone. The Gallup Organization, along with the American Bible

¹ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), 102.

Study, conducted a survey in 2017 regarding our nation's beliefs in the Bible. They found that while 71 percent believe the Bible is a holy document, only 24 percent believe the Bible is the "literal word" of God.² What's more, this is the first time that people skeptical of the Bible outnumbered those who believed the Bible literally. This has significant challenges for talking about Christianity.

In order to believe the message of the gospel, a person has to believe the source. So how do we know that the Bible isn't "Fake News"?

Well, this was Peter's concern when he wrote the book 2 Peter. He anticipated this book as his last letter, and he wanted to provide some assurance to the church about the trustworthiness of the Word of God. Here is what he said:

¹⁴ since I know that the putting off of my body will be soon, as our Lord Jesus Christ made clear to me. ¹⁵ And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things (2 Peter 1:14–15).

What follows in 1:16-21 is where he points them. Let's learn what he says so we can know why we can trust the Bible. Let me show you three characteristics of the Bible and then draw some applications.

1) The Bible is Beyond Human Reasoning

The first characteristic is the Bible's superiority to human thought and reason. This does not mean that the Bible is unreasonable or intellectually indefensible. Rather, the Bible does not derive its authority based upon the constructs of human reasoning or thought.

We see this in 2 Peter 1:16, as Peter writes, "For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ . . ." Now when you hear the word "myth," I'm sure that your mind immediately goes to stories that people tell that aren't true. My mind runs to Greek mythology or to stories about Big Foot. Or maybe you think about it in terms of the Marvel Movies. You hear "myths," and you think in terms of stories that are false. I think a better way to contextualize these myths would be to think of them as "urban legends." These are cultural stories that are told often enough or that have an element of truth to them so that they feel true.

In Peter's day, historic myths helped Roman and Greek cultures explain the world in which they lived. Other-worldly stories connected gods like Zeus, Apollo, Poseidon, Aphrodite, and Dionysus and served as a lens to interpret the world. Peter is saying that the message about Jesus' power and His coming are not just another creative way to make sense of the world.

This is important because in 2018, and in our Western context, we don't feel the power of cleverly devised myths. They seem foolish or childish. But that's because our culture isn't dominated by myths like in Peter's day.

² <https://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/michael-w-chapman/gallup-only-24-americans-believe-bible-literal-word-god>

What kind of thoughts dominate our culture as it relates to truth-claims? What are the beliefs underneath our understanding of truth? How do you know something is true?

There are a number of things we could say here, but I think it would be safe to say that our culture believes things to be true if they can be scientifically proven, if they make reasonable sense, or if a majority of people believe something to be true. In our post-enlightenment and post-modern culture, this way of thinking is just part of the air we breathe.

The Bible has to be proven that it fits with science. It has to be validated based upon it making sense with human reason. And it needs to fit within the broader narrative of human culture. This challenge has become more intense in the last 30 years. With the dawn of the information age and with greater access to every conceivable world-view, our knowledge of what other people believe has grown exponentially. Advances in science and technology have only served to increase our confidence in our knowledge. And with all of this has come a greater confidence in human reasoning.

But you need to know that underneath the scientific method and our human reasoning are beliefs. When a person concludes that something is true because it was proven scientifically and that nothing can be true unless it is proven scientifically, you need to know that there is a belief underneath. A scientist must always assume there is a natural cause because natural causes are the only kind of cause its methodology can address.³ But there is a philosophical belief underneath that method. How can you naturally prove something supernatural? You can't.

So, to believe that something must be proven or be entirely rational is itself a belief. Now, I'm not suggesting that science and human reason have no place in the discussion. I'm not advocating an intellectually myopic or irrational Christianity. I'm merely suggesting that we need to consider what lies underneath our belief system and the belief system of others. And we need to recognize the limitations of human rationalism and scientific proofs.

There are some who think that the key to the defense of the Bible is to prove that it is scientifically accurate, historically reliable, or rationally acceptable. And while those efforts may be helpful at some level, they fail to realize that the problem with humanity is not our intellectual ignorance, but a will that does not will to do God's will.⁴ Our problem is not just thinking the wrong thoughts but that we are incapable of seeing what is true.

Here is how Paul diagnosed the human condition. He tells us that our human minds are blinded to the truth.

⁴ In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. 2 Corinthians 4:4 (ESV)

³ Keller, 89.

⁴ John Piper, *A Peculiar Glory – How the Christian Scriptures Reveal Their Complete Truthfulness*, (Wheaton, Crossway, 2016), 243.

In Romans he says that we suppressed the truth in our unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18), we become futile in our thinking (Rom. 1:21), while claiming to be wise, we are actually fools (Rom. 1:22), and no one understands or seeks after God (Rom. 3:10-11).

When Jesus affirms Peter's testimony ("You are the Christ, the son of the living God" – Matt. 16:16), He tells Peter how it happened:

¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. Matthew 16:17 (ESV)

That is why Paul, when writing to the Corinthians, said:

¹ And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom...⁴ and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power...⁶ Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away (1 Corinthians 2:1, 4, 6).

It is a miracle any time anyone believes the Bible. And while there is nothing wrong with talking about archeological evidence, manuscript reliability, or the rationality of the Bible, we have to realize that something else will still be needed. You can work hard to defend the Bible, but at the end of the day, human reason and scientific proofs cannot open blind eyes. The Bible is beyond human reasoning.

2) The Bible is Better Than Hearing God Speaking Audibly

The second argument is, frankly, a stunning statement. I think Peter intends for that to be the case. He uses his own experience as the backdrop for a critical comparison between God speaking audibly and the Scriptures themselves.

Peter was an eyewitness to the majesty of Christ. There was a moment when the veil of Jesus' humanity was lifted. Peter, James, and John saw Jesus as the Son of God. His humanity was eclipsed by His glory. This event is called the transfiguration.

Mark 9 is one place where this is recorded:

² And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them,³ and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴ And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. ⁵ And Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." ⁶ For he did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷ And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." Mark 9:2-7 (ESV)

What moment could have been better than this? What combination of seeing the glory of Christ, meeting with Elijah and Moses, and hearing the Father's affirmation of His Son could have been more powerful? It is hard to imagine anything that could more fully validate who Jesus was.

Peter saw with his eyes. He heard the voice of God speak. Peter is writing from a historical vantage point of someone who was there on the mountain (2 Peter 1:18). During his lifetime, skeptics could have asked real people like James and John if the transfiguration really happened. If the record of the Bible wasn't true, it wouldn't name so many people with whom others could have "fact-checked" the story.

He provides this level of detail, not for the purpose of validating the Bible, but rather, this is a set up for another point. He desires for you to be in awe of his personal and historical experience as an eyewitness. However, the punch line is in 2 Peter 1:19--

¹⁹ And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts . . . (2 Peter 1:19).

What does this mean?

By prophetic word, Peter is referring to what was previously written about Jesus, and by implication, all of Scripture. He uses the word, or something similar to it, in verse 19 ("prophetic word"), verse 20 ("prophecy of Scripture"), and in verse 21 ("prophecy"). Now this word does not just mean things that are predicted by the Bible. The phrase "prophetic word" combined with "prophecy of Scripture" point us to the written word.

But then he says something stunning! This prophetic word is more fully confirmed. The NASB renders this as "made more sure" and the NIV as "something completely reliable." He simply says that his eyewitness testimony only confirmed what was already true—the prophetic word, the Word of God. Peter's personal experience wasn't more reliable than the scriptures themselves; his experience served to confirm the trustworthiness of the Scriptures.

This is really important because it determines how you view the Bible. There are some of you who might be tempted to think: "If I saw it with my own eyes, it would be much easier to believe." Others might be tempted to say: "I really can't believe without seeing it for myself."

In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus back from the dead to warn his family about their eternal jeopardy. But in the parable, Abraham says something very instructive:

²⁹ But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.'³⁰ And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'³¹ He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.' " Luke 16:29–31 (ESV)

Hardness of heart against the Word of God is not cured by a miraculous sign. The Scriptures themselves are sufficient. They are more trustworthy than a voice from heaven or someone returning from the dead. One commentator says it this way, as if he were speaking for Peter:

Listen to me—I was an eyewitness to the saving acts of God in history. And I know that after Christ's death and resurrection God will have no need to ever again perform these things in the presence of another generation. But remember, this in no way means that your faith is inferior to mine (1:1). We have both been given the prophetic promises of God. We can all read the words written down long ago. They are a more sure light than anything I ever saw and heard. Beloved, my seeing these things is important. Witnesses are essential. But God does not need to appear in the flesh every forty or fifty years to enlighten us and confirm his love to us. Seeing isn't essential for believing—reading God's word is.⁵

The Bible is more certain than even if we heard God audibly. The Bible is God speaking. It is the Word of God.

3) The Bible Bears Witness to Itself

The final characteristic that affirms the trustworthiness of the Bible is its own claim to be the Word of God by virtue of its inspiration. The Bible is a supernatural word. It is God's revelation to mankind.

As you look at verses 20-21, there are few things that stand out. First, according to verse 20, there are no private interpretations that create prophetic Scripture. The teachings of the Bible may have been written by human beings, but humans are not the source.

Second, in verse 21 there is a reiteration of what is said in verse 20, with a focus on why interpretations do not create Scripture: prophecy does not come from human will.

Third, and finally, we get the source of the Scriptures themselves and the reason why they are trustworthy: *"men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit"* (v. 21). To be carried along means that like a ship is driven by the wind or a ferry carries cars, something greater than the individual is at work.

The Bible claims to be the Word of God and to be inspired by the Holy Spirit. And because God says that His word is true, it must be accepted as truth. Now some of you may protest that this argument is circular. Someone might suggest that this argument presupposes the truth of the Scriptures. And they would be correct. However, everyone presupposes something. By suggesting the argument is circular, the person presupposes the autonomy and authority of human reason. Skeptics of the Bible presuppose that we can appeal to reason to prove reason.⁶

The Bible is self-evidently the Word of God when a person's eyes are opened to belief. Here is how John Piper says it:

When God mercifully clears away the corroding effects of sin on the template of God's glory in our hearts, we see "the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). It fits. This is what we were made for. We know it. This light is its own confirmation, just as natural light is its own confirmation. We know we are seeing reality. In the end, we do not deduce by logical inference that the eyes of our heads are seeing objects in the world. Sight is its own

⁵ David Helm, *1-2 Peter and Jude – Sharing in Christ's Sufferings*. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 216.

⁶ John M. Frame, *Apologetics – A Justification of Religious Belief*, (Philipsburg, P&R Publishing, 2015), 14.

argument. Similarly, in the end, we do not deduce by logical inference that the eyes of our hearts are seeing the peculiar glory of God in his word. Sight is its own argument.⁷

We talk this way in other ways. If someone asks you, “How do you know you are in love?” how do you answer? Do you use the scientific method? Rational argument? Historical research? Ask an engaged couple who are madly in love how they knew that they were in love? They’d say something like: “We knew. That’s how.” If you don’t know you are in love, you probably aren’t.

You can use all the facts that point to the historical evidence of Jesus. It’s there. You can cite all the literary evidence for the Bible’s veracity. It’s there. Nothing’s wrong with any of that, but I would suggest that it is never enough. The Bible is its own authority, and when you see it for what it is, believe!

Now What?

These first two messages in this series have been, at times, a bit intellectual, so let me help you think through few applications.

Read the Bible. If you are not yet a believer, let me encourage you to start reading the gospel of John. And my challenge would be for you to read it, asking yourself, “What if this is actually true?” And if you are a believer, let me remind you that the Bible is not a book just to be studied; it is a window through which you see the glory of God.⁸

Learn the cultural language. You might think it odd, after everything I’ve said, to add this application point. However, I would commend to you books like *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, *The Case for Christ*, and other books that speak the empirical language of our day. You should read Tim Keller’s book *The Reason for God* and Scott Saul’s book *Jesus Outside the Lines*. You should listen to people like Ravi Zacharias and read their books. I’m not suggesting that you should be ignorant of good arguments in apologetics. I’m merely saying that they are not the basis of the trustworthiness of the Bible.

Pray for open eyes. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:6, that the same God who said “let there be light” is able to open spiritually blind eyes, so plead for God to do the miraculous in opening people’s eyes to the truth of the Word of God.

Share the Word. I mean more than just evangelism. We must realize that there is something supernatural about the written Word of God. In our conversations with people, we must do more than give them biblical principles; we must literally share the Word of God with them.

Memorize the Word. The greatest mechanism for sharing the specifics of the Word and having it ready is having it in your heart. But there’s more. The action of “getting it into your bones” increases

⁷ Piper, 250.

⁸ Piper, 18.

your confidence in its trustworthiness as you feel its weight, see its application, and observe its effect. People who memorize the Word have great confidence in its trustworthiness.

You don't have to defend the Bible. Spurgeon said defending the Bible is like defending a lion. Our role is not to defend the Lion, but just to unleash him.

Why? I'll let scripture speak for itself:

¹² For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³ And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account (Hebrews 4:12–13).

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