

The Bible

Key Verse: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

Key Idea: I believe the Bible is God's Word.

Key Question: What is the Bible and why is it important?

Any responsible look at a single Christian belief should be based on what God says about that subject. Therefore, as we begin to look at a series of basic Christian beliefs, it makes sense to start with the basis for these beliefs – God's words, or the Bible. One topic the Bible thoroughly covers is itself; that is, the Bible tells us what God thinks about his very words. God's opinion of his words can be broken down into four general categories: Authority, clarity, necessity, and sufficiency.

Authority

All the words in the Bible are God's words. Therefore, to disbelieve or disobey them is to disbelieve or disobey God himself. Oftentimes, passages in the Old Testament are introduced with the phrase, "Thus says the LORD" (See Ex. 4:22; Josh. 24:2; 1 Sam. 10:18; Isa. 10:24; also Deut. 18:18-20; Jer. 1:9). This phrase, understood to be like the command of a king, indicated that what followed was to be obeyed without challenge or question. Even the words in the OT not attributed as direct quotes from God are considered to be God's words. Paul, in 2 Timothy 3:16, makes this clear when he writes that "all Scripture is breathed out by God."

The New Testament also affirms that its words are the very words of God. In 2 Peter 3:16, Peter refers to all of Paul's letters as one part of the "Scriptures." This means that Peter, and the early church, considered Paul's writings to be in the same category as the OT writings. Therefore, they considered Paul's writings to be the very words of God.

Since the Old and New Testament writings are both considered Scripture, it is right to say they are both, in the words of 2 Timothy 3:16, "breathed out by God." This makes sense when we consider Jesus' promise that the Holy Spirit would "bring to" the disciples' "remembrance" all that Jesus said to them (John 14:26). It was as the disciples wrote the Spirit-enabled words, that books such as Matthew, John, and 1 and 2 Peter were written.

The Holy Spirit doesn't change the words of Scripture in any way; he doesn't supernaturally make them become the words of God (for they always have been). He does, however, change the reader of Scripture. The Holy Spirit makes readers realize the Bible is unlike any book they have ever read. Through reading, they believe that the words of Scripture are the very words of God himself. It is as Jesus said in John 10:27: "My sheep hear my voice...and they follow me." Other kinds of arguments (such as historical reliability, internal consistency, fulfilled prophecies, influence on others, and the majestic beauty and wisdom of the content) can be useful in helping us see the reasonableness of the claims of the Bible.

As God's very words, the words of Scripture are more than simply true; they are truth itself (John 17:17). They are the final measure by which all supposed truth is to be gauged. Therefore, that which conforms to Scripture is true; that which doesn't conform to Scripture is not true. New scientific or historical facts may cause us to reexamine our interpretation of Scripture, but they will never directly contradict Scripture.

The truth of the Scriptures does not demand that the Bible report events with exact, scientific detail (though all the details it does report are true). Nor does it demand that the Bible tell us everything

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we need to know or ever could know about a subject. It never makes either of these claims. In addition, because it was written by ordinary men in an ordinary language with an ordinary style, it does contain loose or free quotations and some uncommon and unusual forms of grammar or spelling. But these are not matters of truthfulness. The Bible does not, in its original form, affirm anything contrary to fact.

Therefore, since the Bible affirms that it is the very words of God, we are to seek to understand those words, for in doing so, we are seeking to understand God himself. We are to seek to trust the words of Scripture, for in doing so, we are seeking to trust God himself. And we are to seek to obey the words of Scripture, for in doing so, we are seeking to obey God himself.

Clarity

As we read Scripture and seek to understand it, we discover that some passages are easier to understand than others. Although some passages may at first seem difficult to grasp, the Bible is written in such a way that all things necessary to become a Christian, live as a Christian and grow as a Christian are clear.

There are some mysteries in Scripture, but they should not overwhelm us in our reading. For "the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple" (Ps. 19:7). And "the unfolding" of God's "words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple" (Ps. 119:130). God's Word is so understandable and clear that even the simple (people who lack sound judgment) can be made wise by it.

Since the things of God are "spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14), a proper understanding of Scripture is often more the result of an individual's spiritual condition than his or her intellectual ability. Often the truth of Scripture will appear to be "folly" to those who have rejected the claims of Jesus (v. 14).

This does not mean, however, that every Bible-related misunderstanding is due to a person's spiritual condition. There are many people – many godly, Christian people – who have greatly misunderstood some part of Scripture. Often the disciples misunderstood what Jesus was talking about (see Matt. 15:16, for example). Sometimes this was due to their hardened hearts (Luke 24:25); at other times it was because they needed to wait for further events and understand (John 12:16). In addition, members of the early church did not always agree on the meaning of what was written in Scripture (see Acts 15 and Gal. 2:11-15 for examples of this).

When individuals disagree on the proper interpretation of a passage of Scripture, the problem does not lie with the Scriptures, for God guided its composition so that it could be understood. Rather, the problem lies with us. Sometimes, as a result of our shortcomings, we fail to properly understand what the Bible is specifically teaching. Even so, we should prayerfully read the Bible, asking the Lord to reveal the truth of his words to us.

A simple principle of Bible interpretation is this: the clear passages interpret the unclear passages.

Necessity

It is not only true that all things necessary to become a Christian, live as a Christian and grow as a Christian are clearly presented in the Bible. It is also true that without the Bible we could not know these things. The necessity of Scripture means that it is necessary to read the Bible or have someone tell us what is in the Bible if we are going to know God personally, have our sins forgiven, and know with certainty what God wants us to do.

Paul hints at this when he asks how anyone can hear about becoming a Christian "without someone preaching" (Rom. 10:14). For "faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom.

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10:17). If there is no one preaching the word of Christ, Paul says, people won't be saved. And that word comes from the Scriptures. So in order to know how to become a Christian, ordinarily one must either read about it in the Bible or have someone else explain what the Bible says about it. As Paul told Timothy, "the sacred writings...are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15).

In addition, the Bible is our only source for clear and definite statements about God's will. While God has not revealed all aspects of his will to us – for "the secret things belong to the LORD our God" – there are many aspects of his will revealed to us through the Scriptures, "that we may do all the words of this law"(Deut. 29:29). Love for God is demonstrated by keeping "his commandments" (1 John 5:3). And his commandments are found on the pages of Scripture.

While the Bible is necessary for many things, it is not needed for knowing some things about God, his character, and his moral laws, for, "the heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork" (Ps. 19:1). Paul says that even for the wicked, "what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them" (Rom. 1:19). Not only do the wicked know of God and about God, but they also have in their minds and consciences some understanding of God's moral laws (Rom. 1:32; 2:14-15).

Therefore, this "general revelation" about God's existence, character, and moral law is given to all people; it is seen through nature, God's historical works, and an inner sense that God has placed in everyone. It is called "general revelation" because it is given to all people in general. It is distinct from the Bible. By contrast, "special revelation" is God's revelation to specific people. The entire Bible is special revelation and so are the direct messages from God to the prophets and others as recorded in the Bible's historical stories.

Sufficiency

Although those alive during the Old Testament period didn't have the benefit of God's complete revelation, which is found in the New Testament, they had access to all the words of God that he intended them to have during their lives. Today, the Bible contains all the words of God that a person needs to become a Christian, live as a Christian, and grow as a Christian. In order to be "blameless" before God, we just have to obey his Word: "Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord!" (Ps. 119:1). And in the Bible, God has given us instructions that equip us for "every good work" that he wants us to do (2 Tim. 3:16-17). This is what it means to say that Scripture is "sufficient."

Consequently, it is in Scripture alone that we have all of God's words. The sufficiency of Scripture should encourage us to search through the Bible to try to find what God would have us think about a certain issue or do in a certain situation. Everything that God wants to tell all his people for all time about that kind of issue or situation will be found on the pages of the Bible. While the Bible might not directly answer every question we can think up – for "the secret things belong to the LORD our God" (Deut. 29:29) – it will provide us with the guidance we need "for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:17).

Because Scripture is sufficient, we do not have the right to subtract or add to its commands or teachings.

In the same way, with regard to living the Christian life, the sufficiency of Scripture reminds us that nothing is sin that is not forbidden by Scripture either explicitly or by implication. Therefore, we are not to add prohibitions where we don't believe Scripture is precise enough. In our doctrinal, ethical, and moral teachings and beliefs, we should be content with what God has told us in Scripture. God has revealed exactly what he knows is right for us.

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Material from Christian Beliefs, by Wayne Grudem

Basic Rules of Interpretation

1. Literal – take the plain sense
2. Compare – Scripture with Scripture
3. Original intent – the words mean what the writers originally meant them to mean. Grammar is important.
4. The last is the first – that last revelation has priority over the earlier so that the NT interprets the OT and the didactic interprets the historical.
5. Clarity – the clear has priority over the unclear, the explicit over the implicit.
6. Application – application follows meaning.

Knowing Scripture by R.C. Sproul

Personal Study

1. Why is it important that the Bible be the basis for our beliefs?
2. Will the Bible definitively answer every question we bring to it? Why or why not?
3. What is one issue that the Bible speaks clearly on? What is one issue that the Bible does not speak clearly on? How does this affect the emphasis you should place on these issues?
4. How has the Bible clarified misconceptions that you had about God, yourself, the world and/or the church?
5. If someone has reservations about the authority of the Bible, how can they find help for their questions?
6. Today, people reject the idea of absolute morality and truths. Therefore, before we can discuss the authority of the Bible on our lives, we often need to establish conversational ground rules about truth. How do we go about doing that?

Group Discussion

OPEN What questions do people have about the Bible?

VIDEO TEACHING NOTES

Key Question: How does God _____ himself and his truth to us?

Key Idea: I believe the Bible is the Word of God and has the right to _____ my belief and action.

Key Verse: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for _____, _____, _____ and _____ in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

The Psalmist writes: "Your word is a _____ for my feet, a _____ on my path." (Psalm 119:105)

(Application) the Bible is the _____ from which I view the world.

(Application) I am motivated to study the Bible to _____ God's will for my life.

(Application) The principles in the Bible must _____ my life even when I don't fully understand or like what it teaches.

GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What does this mean: "The Bible is the Word of God"?
2. In what ways have you seen the Bible be specifically useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training?
3. How has understanding the Scriptures changed the way you see the world?
4. Many people are overwhelmed by the Bible, but it doesn't have to be that way. What advice would you give to help this person?
5. How did Jesus help his disciples revere the Scriptures as the Word of God?
6. In what ways did God, through the Scriptures, build a case for the identity and purpose of Jesus?
7. In what ways have you experienced the Word of God as "alive and active" in your own spiritual life?
8. Read 2 Peter 1:1-21 and 2 Timothy 3:16-17. Complete these statements:
The Scriptures are:
The Scriptures came to exist because:
9. What is the comparison Peter is making in 2 Peter 1 regarding his experience and the Scriptures?
10. Which of the following qualities of the Bible are most important to you (and why)?
 - Authority
 - Clarity

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- Necessity
- Sufficiency

KEY APPLICATION:

Make a quick list of ways to demonstrate that the Scriptures are the authority in your life.

OTHER SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

Exodus 3:1-4:17	Hebrews 4:12-23
Luke 24:27-49	Deut. 4:1-2
Exodus 19:1-9, 16-19; 20:1-21	Prov. 30:5-6
Matthew 4:1-11	Rev. 22:18-19
Isaiah 40:6-8; 55:6-13	

CLOSING PRAYER – Ask the Holy Spirit's help in demonstrating the Bible's authority in your life.

PERSONAL QUESTIONS FOR NEXT WEEK

Key Verse: "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse." Romans 1:20

Key Idea: I believe in the Triune God

Key Question: Who is God and how can I know Him?

Study Passages

Genesis 1:1; 2:4-9	Psalms 19:1-4
Deuteronomy 6:1-9	Joshua 24:1-31
Exodus 33:1-34:7	Isaiah 45:19; 61:8
Romans 1:18-25	

Questions:

1. What are the attributes that God most clearly shares with humans? (Read Gen. 1:26-27)
2. What would be the problem with emphasizing one of God's attributes more than the others?
3. Can you name three or four key passages that teach the trinity? What do these passages specifically tell us?
4. How would you respond to someone who insists that the Holy Spirit is only the power of God in action?
5. What behaviors help us recognize that someone believes in the God of the Bible as the one true God?
6. What might hinder someone from fully putting their faith in the God of the Bible?
7. What can you do this week to demonstrate your belief in the one true God?