

## **Is The Bible Reliable?**

Pastor Mark Alvis

This morning we are exploring the question: Is the Bible reliable? Is it true and trustworthy in all the matters it addresses? Let me cut to the chase by saying that we can be sure the Bible is **not reliable** – if the claims it makes about itself are false. And the most important claim the Bible makes about itself – is that it is the Word of God. 3,800 times in the Old Testament we read statements such as: “God said,” or “Thus says the LORD.” **Exodus 31:18** declares, “And God gave to Moses . . . the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.” That is clear claim concerning the source of the Ten Commandments, which summarize God’s Moral Law. Listen also to what the Apostle Paul stated about his teaching – which helped to form our New Testament **[I Thessalonians 2:13]**,

“And we also thank God continually because, when you [people who lived in Greece] received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.”

God did not give mankind the Bible in order to fill our heads with interesting facts. The purpose of the Bible is to transform us. Listen to **II Timothy 3:16-17**,

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,<sup>17</sup> that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.”

Christians are not saved by good works, but we are saved for good works. And the Bible is designed to equip us to do those good works.

The Bible doesn't tell us everything there is to know, or even everything there is to know about God. But it does tell us everything we need to know in order to live Godly lives; lives that can help change the world for the better.

But **IF** the Bible is **not God's Word**, as it clearly claims to be, then it is a **sham**. If the Bible is not God's Word, then the people who wrote it were either lunatics or liars. I don't know of anyone who has seriously studied the Bible who thinks it was written by lunatics. **But could the Bible be the work of very intelligent, but bold faced liars?**

Let's prob that question. What if God did not meet with Moses on Mt. Sinai, as Moses claimed? Since Moses was clearly not a lunatic, he must have lied about receiving the Ten Commandments from God – even though the Ninth Commandment tells us not to lie! Why would Moses do that? The most logical explanation is that Moses lied in order to gain power over the people of Israel. This means he was not only a liar, but he was a liar with evil motives.

But we cannot stop with the Bible being the fabrication of individual liars. Let's take the story of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea on dry land [by the way, the Red Sea probably refers to the modern gulf of Aqaba]. If that event, which was clearly supernatural, did not actually take place, then it means the whole nation of Israel agreed to lie about it and then teach that lie to their children and grandchildren and so on.

If the Bible is not God's Word – then the book which teaches the highest moral standards the world has ever known, was written by a

diabolical group of over 40 individual liars and in some instances, whole generations of liars. I am stressing all this because I have heard people say – “I believe the Bible is a good book, but I don’t think it came from God.” Friends, if it did not come from God, it cannot be a good book.

A tangible support for the Bible being the Word of God – is that it shows itself to be **supernatural** by its harmony and continuity. It was written over a **1500 year period**; by over **40 authors** from **every walk of life** - kings and farmers, rich and poor; **on three continents** - Asia, Africa and Europe; **and in three languages** - Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. There is nothing supernatural about any of that. Here is what is supernatural.

**The subjects and issues which the Bible addresses are the most controversial imaginable** - <sup>1</sup> the nature of God, <sup>2</sup> the nature of man, <sup>3</sup> the meaning of history and <sup>4</sup> where mankind is headed. Good luck in finding even two people who can agree on all those issues. **And yet the Bible covers these controversial matters with complete harmony from Genesis through Revelation.** If the Bible does seem to contradict itself – it is because we are not yet rightly interpreting it.

The Bible is also unique among ancient books in its preservation – as the following quote explains,

“It seems strange that the text of Shakespeare, which has been in existence a little over 400 years, should be far more uncertain and corrupt than that of the New Testament, now over 1900 years old . . . With perhaps a dozen to 20 exceptions, the text of every verse in the New Testament may be said to be so far settled by general consent of scholars, that any dispute as to its readings must relate to the interpretation of the words rather than any doubts respecting the words themselves. In

**everyone of Shakespeare’s 37 plays** there are probably a **hundred readings** still in dispute, a large portion of which materially affects the meaning of the passages in which they occur” [None of the disputed texts of the New Testament affect any major doctrine].

The Old Testament was written in Hebrew, with some Aramaic. The oldest copy, at one time, was the Massoretic Text – dating around A.D. 900. In 1947, the discovery of “The Dead Sea Scrolls” took us back 1000 years. In comparing the scroll of Isaiah, dating 100 B.C. – with the Massoretic Text of A.D. 900, there were four words that differed – which did not affect the meaning of the text.

May I also explain that when a serious translation of the English Bible is made, the scholars go directly to the original languages of the Bible. Some people have it in their heads that our English Bible is a translation from the German, which was translated from the Latin and so forth. No. All serious translations of the Bible go back to the original languages.

Many opponents of the Bible emphasize that we do not possess any of the original documents. That is, we do not have a scroll with Jeremiah’s handwriting on it, or Paul’s original letter to the Philippians. This is true. Why do you suppose God allowed the originals to be lost? Can you imagine the mess it would be if someone got to the originals and tampered with them? What seems to have happened is that God made sure many accurate copies were made of the originals, and then the originals themselves were set aside (lost or destroyed). In this way, if one of the copies of the original is tampered with, we have fifty others that are not.

The Bible is absolutely unique and clearly supernatural in its

prophecies. Listen to **II Peter 1:20-21**,

“Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation [his own ideas].<sup>21</sup> For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”

In the Bible, God boldly speaks about His ability to foretell the future. Listen to **Isaiah 41:22-23**, as God challenges Jewish people who were worshiping idols,

“Bring in your idols to tell us what is going to happen . . . declare to us the things to come,<sup>23</sup> tell us what the future holds, so we may know that you are gods.”

Of course lifeless idols say nothing. God continues His rebuke of idolatry in **Isaiah 46:9-10**,

“I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me.<sup>10</sup> I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.”

God then goes about 160 years into the future to foretell the fall of Babylon in **Isaiah 47:1-11**,

“ “Go down, sit in the dust . . . Daughter of Babylon; sit on the ground without a throne . . .<sup>11</sup> Disaster will come upon you, and you will not know how to conjure it away . . . a catastrophe you cannot foresee will suddenly come upon you.”

And sure enough, about 160 years later, we read in **Daniel 5**, that King Belshazzar was giving a grand party for a thousand of his Babylonian nobles. All of sudden a floating hand was writing a message on the wall of the banquet hall, declaring that Belshazzar and Babylon had been weighed in the scales and found wanting. That very night Belshazzar was

slain, and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom of Babylon. How is that for sudden and unexpected?

Let's also consider the city of Tyre spoken of in **Ezekiel 26:3-5**, which had rejoiced when Jerusalem fell to Babylon in 586 B.C.

“Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I am against you, O Tyre, and will bring up many nations against you, as the sea brings up its waves. <sup>4</sup> They shall destroy the walls of Tyre and break down her towers, and I will scrape her soil from her and make her a bare rock. <sup>5</sup> She shall be in the midst of the sea a place for the spreading of nets, for I have spoken, declares the Lord GOD.”

Two years after Jerusalem fell, Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Tyre. It took him 13 years, but he finally captured the city. However, a large portion of Tyre's population escaped to an island fortress about one mile off the shore. Nebuchadnezzar could not capture that. When the Babylonians moved on, the citizens of Tyre returned to their mainland location and rebuilt. But 250 years later, Alexander the Great attacked Tyre. When it became evident that he was going to capture the city, the people of Tyre once again moved out to their island fortress with their wealth – probably thinking “Ha, ha, aha ha.” But Alexander tore the entire city down, and used the rubble to fill in the water between the shore and island. He then walked over and conquered it too. The buildings of Tyre literally ended up in the Mediterranean Sea. That location became a place for the spreading of nets.

It has been said that God has given enough evidence to provide a solid foundation for our faith, but not so much evidence that faith is no longer required. **Hebrews 11:6** tells us, “Without faith, it is impossible to please

God.”

Let’s now address some specific issues that have caused people to doubt if the Bible is reliable. Genesis 1:1 states, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” The truth that the universe had a beginning, has prevailed over the theory that Carl Sagan bought into, which is that the universe always existed. To the sorrow of many scientists, the development of more powerful telescopes and other technology clearly indicates that the universe had a start. Put a check mark by the Bible on that issue. However, the scientific discoveries made through better technology, also indicate that this universe is much older than what many Christians have understood Genesis to say.

Long before modern science came upon the scene, theologians declared that God has two books. One book is general revelation – which refers to God’s creation. The other book is special revelation – which refers to the Bible. Listen to **Romans 1:20** [NIV],

“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 men are without excuse.”

Is God’s creation an accurate revelation about God? Yes. And as scientists have seriously examined God’s general revelation for hundreds of years with the aid of ever improving technology, there is solid evidence that this universe and earth are much older than seven to ten thousand years. Friends, the Bible is the inspired Word of God, but our understanding of the Bible is not always inspired. Sixteen hundred years ago, Augustine pleaded with Christians to display some humility

concerning the interpretation of the creation account of Genesis 1 and 2. He sternly warned that if Christians mis-speak concerning these chapters, it could make the Bible and Christianity look bad.

Another issue that makes the Bible seem unreliable – is the subject of slavery. Does the Bible condone the kind of slavery practiced here in the United States? The critics say yes, but let me read some of the regulations God gave to Israel concerning slaves, which is better understood as servants. The servitude practice in Israel was similar to people today who serve in the military. There are serious commitments by both parties involved.

**Deuteronomy 15:12-17**, “If a fellow Hebrew, a man or a woman, sells himself to you [he had debts he could not pay] and serves you six years, in the seventh year you must let him go free. <sup>13</sup> And when you release him, do not send him away empty-handed. <sup>14</sup> Supply him liberally from your flock, your threshing floor and your winepress. Give to him as the LORD your God has blessed you [due to his labors] . . . <sup>16</sup> But if your servant says to you, ‘I do not want to leave you,’ because he loves you and your family and is well off with you, <sup>17</sup> then take an awl and push it through his ear lobe . . . and he will become your servant for life.”

There was no forced lifelong servitude in Israel.

**Deuteronomy 23:15-16**, “If a slave [a servant] has taken refuge with you, do not hand him over to his master [this is probably referring to a servant who had signed up for life, but changed his mind]. <sup>16</sup> Let him live among you wherever he likes and in whatever town he chooses. Do not oppress him.” [Does this sound like the slavery practiced in the United States?]

In America, slaves could be badly beaten, but were still legally bound to their masters. Not so in Israel.

**Exodus 21:26-27**, “If a man hits a manservant or maidservant in the eye



and destroys it, he must let the servant go free to compensate for the eye.

<sup>27</sup> And if he knocks out the tooth of a manservant or maidservant, he must let the servant go free to compensate for the tooth.”

Could a servant receive a flogging for blatant, serious wrongdoing?

Yes, but so could free people. **Deuteronomy 25:1-3**,

“When men have a dispute, they are to take it to court and the judges will decide the case, acquitting the innocent and condemning the guilty.<sup>2</sup> If the guilty man deserves to be beaten, the judge shall make him lie down and have him flogged in his presence with the number of lashes his crime deserves,<sup>3</sup> but he must not give him more than forty lashes.”

We in the United States now think flogging, under any circumstances, is barbaric. I have heard this passage mocked and criticized by evangelical Christians. But what about the over 4,700,000 women who are physically abused by their partners every year. Almost 25% of this physical abuse is witnessed by children. I think a legal, proper flogging for men who beat women seems very appropriate. What I think is strange is that most people in the United States are not bothered by 100,000 abortions every month, with babies being torn apart in the mother’s womb – but if a habitual wife beater got a flogging, that would be barbaric.

And by the way, wife beating in Israel was probably unheard of. Why? Because if a husband in Israel slandered his wife’s moral reputation, he was fined 100 shekels. That was equivalent to a year’s salary. So you tell me how many husbands beat their wives under the so called barbaric Old Testament Law?

What about the many death penalties in God’s Law? Isn’t that proof that God’s Law was harsh and barbaric? Let’s get the whole counsel of

God's Law on this issue.

**Exodus 21:28-30**, "If a bull gores a man or a woman to death, the bull must be stoned to death, and its meat must not be eaten. But the owner of the bull will not be held responsible.<sup>29</sup> If, however, the bull has had the habit of goring and the owner has been warned but has not kept it penned up and it kills a man or woman, the bull must be stoned and the owner also must be put to death.<sup>30</sup> However, if payment is demanded of him, he may redeem [ransom] his life by paying whatever is demanded" [there could be a substitute penalty].

Were substitute penalties allowed in other death penalty crimes? Yes.

Let's consider adultery.

**Leviticus 20:10**, "If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death" [a community filled with adultery is doomed].

However, there is no record in the Old or New Testament where an adulterer was put to death by civil authorities. Dennis Prager, who is Jewish and a serious student of the Old Testament and Jewish history, testifies to this reality. Think about this scenario in the Bible. When Joseph was engaged to Mary, which was as binding as marriage, and discovered that she was pregnant, and he knew it wasn't by him, the death penalty was never considered. He was going to divorce her quietly. The dowery he had paid to Mary's parents, would be returned to him. Mary's loss of her dowery, would be the substitute penalty for what appeared to be adultery.

Substitute penalties were continually practiced throughout Israel's history. Why? Because God the Father was setting the stage for God the Son to come to earth to be mankind's perfect substitute for sin. However,

God does go out of His way to discuss one crime for which a substitute penalty was not allowed.

**Numbers 35:30-31**, “Anyone who kills a person is to be put to death as a murderer only on the testimony of witnesses. But no one is to be put to death on the testimony of only one witness.<sup>31</sup> Do not accept a ransom [a substitute penalty] for the life of a murderer, who deserves to die. He must surely be put to death.”

Here is where good people disagree. Now that Christ has come to be our perfect substitute for sin, and has ushered in the glorious New Covenant Age of grace, some people argue that all death penalties should be abolished. This is not a simple issue. The Apostle Paul, who was a minister of the New Covenant, did not see it that way. Listen to what he says at his own trial in **Acts 25:11**, “If then I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death.”

As a Christian, Paul knew he was forgiven by God for all his sins – even when he voted to have Christians put to death because of their faith in Christ. The Apostle Paul clearly understood grace, but he also realized that the earthly consequences of certain deeds may still require the death penalty. But even if a person committed cold-blooded murder and it was witnessed by a dozen people, a Christian may still pray that this person will repent and trust in Christ – before the death penalty is carried out.

Here is my last question: Is the abolishment of the death penalty for proven murderers compassionate for everyone? The average amount of prison time for murderers in the United States is 11 to 18 years. Listen to

the following scenario. A man is proven guilty of viciously raping and killing a girl – and is put into prison for his crime. This requires the girl’s parents to help pay for the food, clothing and medical expenses of the man who raped and murdered their daughter. They will do that through their tax dollars for 11 to 18 years. Is that compassionate for the parents? I do not think so.

I believe the Bible is God’s Word and is therefore true and reliable. I am convinced that **Psalm 18:30** is exactly right, “As for God, his way is perfect; the word of the LORD is flawless.” Let’s pray.