

## Wonder Out Loud: Can I Trust the Bible?

Mark Statler, Pastor of Discipleship and Missions, September 5, 2010

Last week we starting this new message series, “Wonder Out Loud” where we’re asking the tough questions that thinking people have about faith. As Aaron mentioned last week, it’s unfortunate that there are a lot of people out there believe that to come to church you have to check your brain at the door of the church and not think. There are people that believe that you have to lose your mind to become a Christian. I do not believe that.

So over the next few weeks we’re going to try to tackle the questions you have that keep you from going deeper, the questions that people have that keep them from faith.

This morning our big question is “**Can I Trust The Bible?**” I can’t say this with any data to back me up, but I think there are lots of people in this world, and probably lots in this church, who share this question. Some of you shared your questions and quite honestly they are very similar to questions I once had. There was a time when I did not trust the Bible because of questions like these. They are questions that I still work through from time to time.

Questions like: “Why does God seem so angry and mean in the Old Testament?” That’s a picture of God that’s hard to understand in light of the New Testament picture of God. “How can we reconcile our current scientific knowledge with the biblical accounts of creation, Adam and Eve, and other things in the scriptures? And what about some of the almost mythical stories in the Bible? How can we believe these things as modern contemporary people?” And “Who put the Bible together anyway and what was their agenda?”

Questions like these and many others spin around some large issues and I wish we had time to look at all of them. But for today, I just want to deal with a couple of categories: **The accuracy of the Bible.** Many people wonder if the Bible is not historically or scientifically accurate, how can it be true? **The consistency of the Bible.** What about the angry God and judgment passages of the Old Testament, how is that picture of God consistent with the compassionate, merciful God of Jesus?

As I address how I have worked through these kinds of questions, I want to remind you of a couple of things; I am not telling you what to think. I am just sharing how I deal with these questions myself. I want you to think this out for yourself.

Also, my goal is not to lay out a perfectly reasoned, harmonious answer to all these questions. I made an attempt at that and it ended up 15 pages long. That would mean that we would be celebrating communion during the music of the next service!

I can’t do that and it wouldn’t be fair to the Bible if I did. The Bible is a connection to God, and like any connection to God (prayer, communion, worship) it is mysterious...not easily understood or explained. We have to apply some measure of faith. What I hope to accomplish is to remove some of the barriers that may be preventing someone from encountering God through the Bible so that you can apply a measure of faith to it when you read it.

Now there are probably some of you who readily accept the authority of the Bible in your life. You probably had some of these questions in your life and you have worked through them and you’re wondering (not out loud – but in your head) “why is this message important for me?” It’s important because maybe God wants to you get some of this down so you can help someone else out...someone God loves but remains disconnected because they have issues about the Bible. So you need to pay attention too, because it could really make a difference to someone else.

### **The Accuracy of the Bible**

I receive lots of questions about the accuracy or inaccuracy of the Bible. Lots of times those questions are about the historical or scientific accuracy. The conflict of evolution and Biblical creation falls into this category, as do questions about historical accuracy of events and some conflicts between different accounts of the same events in the Bible. As we get into this, it’s useful to talk about what the Bible is not.

**The Bible is not a science textbook**, it was never intended to be a science textbook, it was not written to be a science textbook. There are Christians who try and make the Bible out to be one. They have proposed all

kinds of scientific theories based on the scriptures. But the Bible was not fundamentally intended to teach us how God created the world. And it was not intended to teach us about how God created human beings.

The Bible isn't concerned about where dinosaurs fit into creation. It isn't trying to answer those type questions at all. When we try and make the Bible deal with these kinds of issues we are forcing it to do what it was never intended to do.

Can you imagine God trying to explain to people 3,500 years ago how he created the world? We don't even understand it today! Imagine if God tried to explain DNA fragments to the people 3,500 years ago. Or the Big Bang theory. God wasn't concerned about teaching these things in the scriptures. Let's not try and make the Bible out to be what it doesn't wish to be. It is not a science textbook.

**The Bible is not a history textbook.** Now, there is a lot of historical information in the Bible. In fact, it's the only source for some historical information from that time period. But the Bible wasn't written to be history book. You see, modern history books try as much as possible to be objective in what they present. They present certain kinds of information. But the Bible wasn't concerned with time-lines or pinpoint accurate dates. It wasn't concerned with objectivity. So as we read the Bible, yes, we **can** learn a lot from it historically but we need to understand that it wasn't written to be a history book.

Even the Gospels of Jesus are not biographies of his life. They didn't write the kinds of things that biographers of today would write. They were more concerned about the message of Jesus than they were about pinpoint accuracy of the events of his life. They also wrote from very different perspectives and we need to understand that about the scriptures.

So if this is what the Bible is not concerned with, what is the Bible concerned with?

Having said what the Bible is not, let's try and find out what it is? Well, **the Bible is first and foremost a book about God!** It is a relational book. From front to back, from cover to cover, God is the primary subject of the Bible. The purpose of the Bible is to show us how intensely God wants to be in relationship with us! How God worked in the history of ancient Israel; what God taught them and teaches us through them. How God worked in the lives of individual people and how God came in Jesus Christ. The Bible is a book about God! It's God's book about himself!

For an example, let's look at the story of creation in the first book of the Bible, Genesis. The Bible is not concerned with the science behind creation. It isn't concerned about how long it took or what it looked like. Instead it's concerned with teaching some basic principles about God. It's not concerned about how it took place, but who did it and why. It is teaching us that before the universe existed, God was. That God called everything into being as an act of his will. That God created everything that exists. That's what the creation story is trying to teach us. Not how, but who and why.

If we turn a few pages we see the stories of Adam and Eve. Again, this is not meant to be a story of how human beings came to be. It is a story that says that however human beings came to exist God was in the process--designing, guiding, creating all along the way. Making us in his image. It shows us that we are created in a special relationship with God and that God has a plan for our lives. That we were created originally to live in perfect harmony with God and creation but something went wrong and paradise was lost. It's a story about us and about God. It's our story and gets repeated in every generation. It wasn't designed to teach us biology. It was designed to teach us about humanity, about God, about wonder of creation, relationship God desires, sin and brokenness.

So the Bible really is about God who wants to be in relationship with you. In the pages of the Bible God's talks to us and says, "This is what I'm like. This is who I am. This is my will for your lives!" That's what the Bible is.

Now let's look at the issue of **the consistency of the Bible**.

What about those troubling passages that I sometimes want to pretend don't exist. All that judgment and doom and punishment and bloodshed from the angry God of the Old Testament. The Old and New Testaments kind of have the image of bad cop/good cop. It's not accurate, but it is a picture many people have. There are as many or more pictures of a compassionate and loving God in the Old Testament, but it's the angry God who gets our attention and makes us say, "What is up with that? That doesn't sound like Jesus!"

I want to put some context around this and show you how I have come to resolve some of this for myself. I believe the Old Testament is God's continual revelation of who God is and what God is about. God didn't give it to people all at once through the story of creation. In that story we learn some things about who God is, but not everything. The exodus story tells us more about who God is, that he wants his people to experience freedom, that God will work for their deliverance. And the law provides God's ideas about how we should live and relate to each other and worship. The prophets came along and God reveals more about his desire for justice and righteousness. And God also uses the prophets to reveal that there will be a day when the Messiah comes; God in flesh, the ultimate revelation. So all along, until the ultimate revelation in Jesus arrives, God is showing more and more of who God fully is to people who are not always easily catching on.

And if you think about it, if God had chosen not to come in human form and reveal his heart to us in Jesus, then we might still think about God as the angry God of the Old Testament who tells us to wipe out our enemy. The correction to this picture of angry God did not come from people evolving into a higher consciousness. The correction comes because Jesus is the one who reveals the grander the picture of who God is. Jesus is the one who tells us about the good Samaritan, a hated foreigner whose kindness and compassion towards his enemy demonstrates God's will. Jesus teaches us to love our enemies. Jesus demonstrated sacrifice, not violence. Jesus reveals a greater picture of the heart of God to us. This picture is beyond the previous understandings of God and so it appears that God is different. But God isn't different. We just have a more complete picture of who God is. On this side of Jesus, we have teachings and stories that are the highest revelation of God's self. We have a picture that the ancients Israelites could never have.

And what that means is **All scripture is equally inspired, but all scripture is not equally important**. John 3:16, "for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son.." is more important than "Jesus was walking by the sea of Galilee." Both are part of the story of Jesus, but one verse is more important than the other. When I find a picture of God that is not consistent with the nature of God as revealed in the gospel accounts of Jesus, then I give greater credence to the picture of God revealed in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. It's just more important. That does not mean that other scripture is not important, that I discount it. God is still God, and God can use any scripture to speak to us, and lead us through life. But clearly, the good news of the gospel of grace and forgiveness found in Jesus is the most important message of scripture!

I have one more bit of teaching I want to share with you, before I move into why I trust the Bible. I think it is critically important for us to understand a few things about interpretation. We teach these principles in several different courses here, and that is that we believe that there are three ways to interpret scripture, and that no one way in and of itself is an adequate way to understand what God is telling us in the Bible. We need all three.

The first is **literal**. Literal is black and white. That's what it says, that's what happened. "Jesus went up on a hillside". The next is **figurative or metaphorical**. That means that there is a meaning beyond the literal meaning. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life". He means something beyond literal bread. When he said "if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off." ALL Christians interpret that figuratively (one thing we all agree on) to mean to go to extremes to eliminate sin from your life.

The third method of interpreting is **contextual**. That means to seek to understand the author's intent to the people that received the original message. All of Paul's writings are contextual. He was writing to specific churches with specific instructions for their specific issues. So it's important to study backgrounds so we don't take a command to one ancient church like "Women be quiet in church" and make it a universal application. Find out what it meant to those who first received it and bring that message to the present. In the case of the command for women to be quiet in church, Paul was asking them to act respectfully and quit disrupting worship. So the universal application is to be respectful in worship.

OK, all three of those are valid and important ways to interpret the Bible, but again, you need all three.

So I've made an attempt to remove some common stumbling blocks for some people and their readiness to trust the Bible. Now I want to tell you why I can trust the Bible.

I can trust the Bible because when I was 20 years old and lost, I turned to Jesus. He was real, alive, and he loved me and forgave me and led me into life. How did I know about Jesus? Lots of Sunday School teachers told me stories about him from the Bible.

When I was 21 years old and was really reading the Bible intently for myself for the first time in my life, God spoke to me through the Bible. I had already read through the four gospels and I was just starting into Acts. One night, I read Acts 1:8, "**But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.**" That night, time stood still and the words spoke not to my head, but to my heart and I knew God was calling me to ministry. I met God in those words.

My wife, Jennifer, was reading her Bible one night and she heard a message that we were supposed to adopt a child. She listened to that, and convinced me this was a calling, and there were times we thought we might have that wrong, but today, we have Macie along with our other 2 beautiful kids.

When it comes right down to it for me, there is ONE AMAZING reason that I trust the Bible. It's because when I read it, God shows up! God is uncovered! God speaks into my life. The Bible is infused with the power of God to change my life. In its stories I find God's comfort, God's challenge, God's power, God's mercy and forgiveness, God's amazing ability to love even me.

The words and stories of the Bible come alive in some amazing and mystical way. That doesn't happen every time, sometimes nothing happens. But when it does happen, the words and stories transcend the page and leap into my life! They have the power to change me from the inside out. And sometimes, it's not about the big AHA moments, it's about a cumulative effect of reading scripture day by day and one day you realize that your attitude toward something is totally changed. You're in a different place than you used to be.

I trust the Bible because I trust what God has done through it in my own life. That's not a very scientific or rational reason, but it is the witness of God in my life. So if you're looking for me to tie all this up neatly, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I can't. Ultimately, your ability to trust the Bible is going to have to be a step of faith. Maybe you can only see the obstacles to trusting the Bible. Let me challenge you today to look beyond the obstacles and see the possibilities of encountering God; deep cleansing forgiveness and overwhelming joy and assurance of God's love and steady, contented peace, and freedom to live a new life. This is what reading the Bible has brought to my life, over and over. God wants to visit with you; right here in these ancient stories. Can you trust that?