

The Bible – Just What Is It?

(Is It God's Word? Is it historically accurate or just another religious "holy" book?)

Introduction

Several years ago, John Wooden gave the keynote speech at a banquet to honour the Olympic Gold Medal-winning USA volleyball team. Coach Wooden is considered by many to be the finest college basketball coach in the history of the NCAA (National College Athletic Association).

Retired, elderly, and eloquent, Coach Wooden began to challenge these Gold Medalists to pursue the finer things in life. He spoke of things like art, beauty, history, and so on. As his speech was coming to a close, he introduced the subject of literature, "Read the classics," he said. And then, as if he were speaking of a separate category altogether he said, "And read the greatest classic of all, the Bible."

This man of great accomplishments and possessions spoke of some things he thought transcended all human honour and glory—that which are founded in the pages of Scripture.

Starting Point: Determine the Basis of Belief

Last month we talked about what truth is. What is our standard for determining what we believe and live by?

I am not asking you to submit to what I say I say. Lest you think I am seeking to make you overly submissive to what I have to say, the Scriptures also instruct us,

"Test all things; hold fast what is good " (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

Test what I am saying. If what I have to say is senseless, throw it in the garbage with the rest of the trash. This, however, brings us to our first issue; by what standard will you determine if what I, or anybody else, says is true? What is your control belief? What is the bedrock of your measurement of truth? What is your starting place of knowledge? You open a book or a newspaper; listen to a lecture or a television or radio broadcast, and then begin to make your evaluations. On what authority do you rely to make this evaluation?

If I were to say that I think it is all right for me to lie, cheat, steal, and hurt others in order to secure my own happiness, by what authority would, or could, you prove to be false such a self-centered standard of living? You could say, "It's just wrong," or "It's obvious," but I am not sure how convinced I would be by such an argument.

Recently PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) was back in the news regarding the use of dolphins to find depth charges in the ocean. Many PETA enthusiasts are under the impression that the value of the life of an animal is equal to that of a human. A letter from a PETA member was written to the leader of a nation that supported terrorist activities. It seems they had sent a donkey, loaded with explosives, into a group of people. The explosion killed many people and, of course, the donkey. The writer was not so concerned about the people who died in the explosion as she was concerned about the innocent donkey who had died.

Is a human life inherently more valuable than an animal's life? If you were driving down the road and found yourself in a situation where you couldn't avoid either hitting a human or an animal with your car, would you choose to hit the human or the animal?

Ninety-nine percent of people asked would clearly choose to save the human rather than the animal; but not everybody would agree with this decision. The real question is, "Where is the answer found?"

What is our starting place of ethics and truth? Is it the way we feel, or what our ancestors or culture has taught us? Is it mere acceptable custom or consensus (what most of us agree on)? Does majority agreement makes it moral and right? Is it so woven into our nature that it is just transparently obvious? It doesn't take too much figuring out that none of these provide an objective basis for truth. What if someone else feels different than I? What if I feel different tomorrow? What if I find that my other ancestors (from my mother's side) believed completely opposite to my father's ancestors? What if the consensus changes? What if I'm the deciding vote? What if that which is woven into my nature is contrary to what is woven into my neighbor's nature?

In order for there to be any sense of objective, absolute truth or ethics, we must recognize a source that transcends all of humanity. This source must be righteous and this source must communicate that righteousness to us in an objective and observable way. According to Christianity the source of truth is God and the means by which He conveys this truth is the Bible.

The Holy Bible

Just what is this best seller above all best sellers we call the Bible? It is not 1 book but 66 books written by 40 different authors of varying occupations over a 1500-year period. The 66 books of the Bible are broken into two large sections known as the Old Testament (39 books written between 1500 B.C. and 400 B.C.), and the New Testament (27 books written in the first century).

We refer to these 66 books as The Holy Bible. The word Bible merely means book or roll or scroll. Holy means separate, sacred, or set apart. The Bible is a holy book. Its Author is holy, its message is holy and its design is to make us holy. The Bible is not merely a book about God, it is a book from God. The claim is that God inspired the forty authors to infallibly (totally reliable) and inerrantly record what He had determined to communicate. The Bible is, therefore, absolute in its authority. It is the standard of all standards. It is not confirmed by human investigation but just the opposite; human endeavors, be they scientific or philosophic, are judged by Scripture. For Christians, the Bible is the starting point of true knowledge. Later we will discuss why we should believe this.

A Broad Overview of The Bible

Let me give you broad overview and summary contents and main message of the 66 books. First the Old Testament:

The Old Testament (39 Books)

There are various types of books in the Bible. The first 5 books of the Bible (the Pentateuch), written by Moses, are historical narratives. They give an account of events from the beginning of creation until the delivery of the Israelites from slavery. We learn of the fall of man into sin, the beginning of the nation of Israel. We learn of key characters like Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jacob (Israel) and Daniel. They also give a

record of the sacrificial and priestly systems designed to foreshadow the person and work of Christ.

Books 1-5: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy - Historical Narratives

Books 6-17: Joshua through Esther - Historical Narratives

We read of Joshua entering the Promised Land and receiving all the land God had promised to Abraham. In these books we read of a period in history called Judges, where God ruled His people through these selected and inspired leaders. It is here that we read of Samson and Gideon.

This section of the Bible also contains the period called Kings (1, 2 Samuel; 1, 2 Kings; 1, 2 Chronicles). We learn here of King Saul, David, and Solomon and the eventual division of Israel as kingdom and its enslavement to foreign nations.

Books 18-22: - Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon - Songs and Wisdom Literature

Right in the center of your Bible you will find a book of 150 chapters known as the Psalms or Songs. These are mainly written by David and are poetic in nature. Being poetic, however, does not mean they are not rooted in historical fact. Many of the events we read of in the Kings portion of the Bible are the historical context for the Psalms. They often record David's passionate and personal responses to the struggles in his life and the peace, protection and provision he finds in God.

3 of the other 4 books were written by Solomon, who was gifted by God to be the wisest man who would ever live. These books do not so much convey history as much as they impart specific truths and thoughts (often dealing with ethics) in particular situations. We are generally informed in these books what kind of behavior is foolish and what kind of behavior is wise.

Books 23-27: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel - Major Prophets, Prophetic

The Major Prophets give both warning and consolation to God's people. They warn Israel to repent lest they fall into judgment and they proclaim that God will deliver them from judgment and oppression. We learn much about the justice and deliverance of God in the Major Prophets. In these books you will find language that is apocalyptic (unveiling of future judgment through signs).

Books 28-39: Hosea through Malachi - Minor Prophets, Prophetic

The Minor Prophets generally address the issues of the divided Kingdom of Israel, which had come to be referred to as Israel and Judah. It is here in history (about 700 B.C. until 400 B.C.) that we learn of Israel's captivity to the Assyrians and Judah's captivity to the Babylonians. The Old Testament ends with God's people in captivity.

The New Testament

After about four hundred years of silence from God, a new prophet arises in Israel whose name is John (the Baptist). It is his job to announce the coming of the Promised One of God, Jesus the Christ. He is the one who will bring freedom to God's captive people, although not in the way many people thought. This is the New Testament.

Books 1-4: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—The Gospels - Biographical Narratives

These 4 books of the New Testament are called Gospels (good news). The good news is that Jesus, God's promised Messiah, has come to seek and to save that which was lost. The 4 gospels give accounts of the birth, life (works, miracles, teaching, character), death, and resurrection of Christ from four different perspectives. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are very similar and are called the synoptic (to see the whole together) gospels. Luke, a physician is the most chronological. John's is the most intimate and personal.

Book 5: Acts - Historical Narrative

Acts, written by Luke, is basically a continuation of the Gospel of Luke. It records the beginning and spread of the Christian church.

Books 6—18: Romans through Philemon—Paul's Epistles or Letters - Pastoral & instructional—meant for teaching

The letters of the Apostle Paul make up the meat of theological instruction found in all of Scripture. They teach proper doctrine about God in a very direct manner. Many of the churches, or individuals, to whom Paul writes are churches he started or individuals he brought to Christ. The letters instruct and correct errors creeping into the church.

The problem is, we're reading somebody else's mail. They were addressed to specific situations and problems, to cultures different from ours.

Book 19: Hebrews (Jewish audience) - Instructional

Although many people believe Paul wrote Hebrews, there is no conclusive evidence in Scripture that he did. Hebrews is written to Jewish Christians who were tempted (often through fear of persecution) to leave Christianity and go back to Judaism.

Books 20-26: James through Jude—General Letters - Instructional

The General Epistles were written by James, Peter, John (the Apostle), and Jude.

Book 27: The Revelation - Apocalyptic

The final, and perhaps most controversial, book in the Bible is the Revelation. It is a letter written to 7 churches warning and predictive of future judgment and heaven through signs.

The Over-Arching Message

The over-arching message of Scripture is quite clear. We see it all in seed form in the very first three chapters in Genesis. In short, there is a God who is good and holy. He created everything and created them good. God created man who rebelled against God and sin and death entered the world. It did not please God to leave people at the mercy of death so God made a promise (a covenant) that through the seed of the woman (speaking of the eventual birth of Jesus), the enemy of God's people (Satan, sin, death, etc.) would be destroyed.

The rest of the Scripture unveils that simple message of redemption. The Bible is the story of the history of redemption. The Bible surely contains instructions in living, truth, reality, knowledge, ethics, etc. But all of these categories are there to support the primary message which is God's glorification of Himself through His redemptive plan to save sinners through the cross of Christ. This is what led Jesus to say, "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me" (John 5:39).

The message that there is a God who judges sin and delivers sinners through the judgment of His own Son is the main the point of Scripture. From Genesis to Revelation, that is the message.

Then the Lord God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil. And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever?"— 23 therefore the Lord God sent him out of the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken. 24 So He drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life (Genesis 3:22-24).

And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. 2 In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. 3 And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. 4 They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. 5 There shall be no night there: They need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they shall reign forever and ever (Revelation 22:1-5).

I haven't fully answered the questions, "Why can you be confident that the Bible is absolutely true and is God's unique holy book and revelation to us?," and "Why can I be confident it is historically true?" Next month I'll address that and show you how it can transform our lives and give us a relationship with God.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is your starting point of knowledge? Why do you think it's reliable?
2. How many books make up the Bible? How many authors? When were the books written?
3. What is meant by the title Holy Bible?
4. How does the Christian view the Bible in terms of authority, authorship, etc.?
5. Who wrote the first five books of the Bible?
6. If something is poetic, is it necessarily fiction?
7. What are the books of wisdom?
8. What were the jobs of the prophets?
9. What are the gospels and what do they convey?
10. Who wrote Acts and what must we be careful of in studying Acts?
11. What was Paul's purpose in writing his letters?
12. Why, do you suppose, the Revelation is such a difficult book?
13. What is the over-arching message of Scripture?
14. What are good reasons to believe the Bible to be God's Word and to be true?