

How Then Shall We Live?: Trusting The Bible
By Jason Huff
Acts 18:24-28, 2 Peter 1:13-21, John 5:31-39

Today's final Scripture reading comes from John 5:31-39. Listen now to God's Word. "[Jesus said,] "If I testify about myself, my testimony is not valid. There is another who testifies in my favor, and I know that his testimony about me is valid. You have sent to John and he has testified to the truth. Not that I accept human testimony; but I mention it that you may be saved. John was a lamp that burned and gave light, and you chose for a time to enjoy his light. I have testimony weightier than that of John. For the very work that the Father has given me to finish, and which I am doing, testifies that the Father has sent me. And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form, nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent. You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me."

When you type the word "bible" into the search engine at Amazon.com, you get over 326,000 items to choose from. There are 1,513 study Bibles, 1,368 family Bibles, 983 women's Bibles, and 440 award Bibles. If you're Catholic, there are 637 Bibles specifically for you, and if you belong to a Charismatic or Pentacostal denomination, there are 265 Bibles for you. There are 2,957 versions of the King James Bible available, with the New International Version we use here coming in second with 608 versions. There are Bibles in every color, shape, size, and language. It is the best-selling book in America with 25 million copies sold each year. The Gideons distribute another 45 million Bibles every year. 92% of Americans own a Bible.

And yet for a book that's so popular, it's often left unread. A Rasmussen poll in 2009 showed that only one in six Protestants reads the Bible on a daily basis. Many do not read it at all. When asked why not, 80% said it was too hard to understand, but 64% said they were simply too busy. Now I am truly thankful that some of us chose to read *The Story* together over the last year. Those of you who read through it all and came here faithfully have heard the overarching narrative of the Bible. But there's much more to the Bible than what we read together. Now that we've got the plot of what God's been doing through history, it's time for us to examine God's ways. We need to look at the ethics and morality of Scripture and what it says about God and about us. And to do that, we've got to start with Scripture.

I'm going to give you three ideas at the very start of my sermon so you can listen for them and latch onto them. If you don't get out of here with anything else, I want you to have these to take home and chew on throughout the week. Here's what we're going to see – the Bible is trustworthy and reliable – what we call infallible. The Bible is God's primary way of speaking to us today. And the Bible, while sacred, is not a substitute for God. If you can remember those three points, it will go a long way towards the goal of becoming a faithful disciple through God's Word.

Let's start with the first point: *the Bible is trustworthy and reliable – it's infallible*. That means it never fails us. I want to deal with the first argument we get against the Bible right up front: why believe it? Why believe that it is the rule and authority for our lives? Why can't we just pick and choose what we like from the Bible and leave the parts we don't like behind? Here's what I can say...you must choose what your ultimate authority will be. No one can prove to you beyond a shadow of a doubt that Scripture is true. However, the evidence is strongly in its favor. If you do not have Scripture as your moral compass that you can always trust is pointing you in the right direction, there's nothing else out there that can replace it. Either truth is absolute or it's relative to each individual. I believe that truth is absolute, and that absolute truth is centered in the God Scripture tells us about.

We also need to recognize that Scripture stands or falls together as a whole. Either the entire thing is trustworthy or it's undependable. Throwing out parts of it based on our own desires or beliefs means we can't believe the rest as certain either. That doesn't mean that every single verse has the same weight or intention for us. For example, the New Testament expands upon the Old Testament, and it specifically removes some of the laws and expectations the people of Israel were bound by. It makes other parts of the law even stronger. We must be careful in how we interpret Scripture, making sure that our understanding fits with the complete witness found in the Bible.

So let's take a look...why can we trust the Bible? The first thing we want to be able to trust are the words themselves, the text. Do we have the Bible as was originally intended, or was it corrupted along the centuries as Islam and other religions would have you believe? The proof is overwhelmingly in the Bible's favor. There are over 5,800 copies of the Greek New Testament in existence and nearly 25,000 fragments of New Testament books, many of which can be dated within a hundred years or so to the original documents. While there are scribal errors and minor changes found in them, the text is overwhelmingly consistent throughout. And when there is disagreement between texts, your English Bible always puts in a footnote. No change ever affected any major point of theology.

Now the Old Testament is just that...old. For a long time, the earliest Hebrew manuscripts were copies over a thousand plus years removed from the originals. But the Dead Sea Scrolls changes all that. Not only were the Dead Sea Scrolls the earliest copies of the Hebrew Old Testament ever found, they confirmed what had been long believed but never proven – the Jewish scribes throughout the centuries had preserved the text immaculately.

So if we can trust the text, what else helps our case? There's archeology. Throughout the centuries, scholars have argued about the literal events in the Bible. Certainly, there's no way to find absolute proof of various eras in biblical history. And yet never once has archeology shown the biblical witness to be false. In fact, time and time again, archeological findings validate Scripture. Even historical witnesses that were enemies of Israel prove the truthfulness of the Old Testament. We have evidence of everything from the ancient walls of Jericho falling outward to the existence of many of Israel's kings. The more we dig, the more we find that proves the Bible's reliability.

From a historical perspective, we can show that the Bible is unique. It completely reverses the historian's expectations. Instead of cataloging the Jewish nation's victories and its glorious kings, the Old Testament is negative about a variety of its rulers that according to archeology appear to have been wealthy and successful. It paints a portrait of a group of people to whom God reveals Himself, and most of them act in ways utterly contrary to His wishes. Even Israel's most holy and revered authorities are shown to have significant weaknesses and foibles. The human actions recorded in the Old Testament are often wicked and debased – and yet that makes them surprisingly believable. The four parallel accounts of Jesus' life reveal a complex individual who was pure and without sin, but also one who confronted the enemies of God boldly and showed no reluctance in offending others. The disciples are weak; their leader denied Jesus three times. Paul was once a murderer of Christians. There is no gloss, no shine to make the people more likable, and no attempt to make every eyewitness account exactly the same. It is what it is – the truth of the matter.

Then there's what Scripture has to say about itself. In 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Paul wrote to his young friend saying, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” In our final reading, Jesus claimed the Old Testament scriptures pointed to Him. In 2 Peter, we learned that the accounts of Christ's life and work were not “cleverly invented stories” but were from the eyewitnesses. Peter states that the prophets did not speak or write according to what they wanted to say, but what they said and wrote was from the Holy Spirit's inspiration. Later on in that same letter, Peter verifies Paul's letters as being considered Scripture even at that early date. The Bible is consistent in stating that the whole thing is written by men yet totally and infallibly inspired by God and must be trusted if we are going to get to know the God revealed through it.

That leads us to the second key about Scripture: *it is the primary way God speaks to His people today*. Sometimes when we read the Bible a lot, it seems like people in ancient times heard from God a lot. But truthfully, God's revelation of Himself was rare even back then. Abraham, the man from whom the entire Jewish people come, only had a few direct experiences with God, and each came 10-15 years after the last. We actually have a much better situation than the ancient Israelites did. Believers have the Holy Spirit, which guides us in God's truth, and we have the whole of the Scriptures, the Bible, which tells us what God has done and is doing in space and time.

Here's the thing...there is an overall story in the Bible. We read that story together over the past nine months. But the story, the history, is not the only thing. The Bible is full of so much more to discover. It is full of the poetry of God's people found in the book of Psalms – and not just ordinary poems, but songs, laments, even prophecies that point to Jesus. It has a book dedicated to wisdom, Proverbs, and a book dedicated to married love, Song of Songs. Jesus' words found in the four gospels spell out details of the life of discipleship. Paul's letters give further encouragement, comfort, and training in righteousness. In the books of Romans and Hebrews, we have detailed discussions of how God transforms the human nature and how God's saving work through Jesus brings us forgiveness and peace.

I encourage you to read the Bible on a daily basis, and not just to get the story. Think back over the books you've really enjoyed over the years, the ones that you return to again and again. The plot isn't going to change the next time you read it. Ebenezer Scrooge is always going to be visited by three spirits and Rhett Butler is always going to walk out on Scarlett O'Hara. But we re-read books because we love the characters, the dialogue, the concepts, the wordplay. The Bible is a book we return to even once we've read it, even once we've got the gist of it, because there is a thousand lifetime's worth of material in its covers that reveal God's love and power and majesty to us. You'll never be able to say, "I guess that's it." That's because God speaks to us through its pages.

God intends to meet us there. As David writes in Psalm 119:52, "I remember your ancient judgments, O LORD, and I find comfort in them." If you are discouraged or distressed, there is relief to be found in His message to us. If you're praying and it seems like God is not answering, perhaps He desires for you to read what He has given to you in His holy Word. If you are uncertain about the future or are facing personal trials, hope for you can be found here. Whether you are afraid or angry, happy or frustrated, joyful or miserable, He wants to be a part of the conversation. I have compiled just a few places to go in Scripture on certain topics...you'll find them in your bulletin. These are verses that lead the way through a variety of issues we face. There are countless more, but here's a start.

Another way to get into the Scriptures daily to hear God speaking is through a devotional book. There are several that are fantastic. Oswald Chambers has a couple of classics called "My Utmost For His Highest" and "Daily Thoughts For Disciples." Catha has a little calendar with daily verses and quotes compiled by Billy Graham. There are devotional magazines like Table Talk that are helpful to get us reading the Word and listening to the Spirit speaking through it to us. If you've never done any devotions or don't know where to start, talk to me and I can steer you in the right direction. I've listed a couple for you to check out as well. God never intended for us to go without His voice in our lives, and we hear Him through Scripture.

That leads us to our final truth today about Scripture: *the Bible is the sacred word of God, but it is not a substitute for God.* In our main passage this morning, Jesus talks about the testimony of John the Baptist to His position as the Christ, and God the Father testified to His Son's legitimacy by giving Him the power to do the works He was doing. The Scriptures that God had inspired revealed that Jesus was the Messiah. To their credit, the Pharisees that opposed Jesus studied the Scriptures diligently by Jesus' own admission. But the problem was, they were so convinced that they were saved by following the letter of the Law found in Scripture that they missed out on the Savior the Scriptures proclaimed was coming. They had gotten so enamored with God's book that they missed God entirely when Jesus came to them.

Maybe the best way to think of it is like love letters from your special someone. When you're apart, you read them over and over again. You treasure them. You might keep them hidden in a special place. You keep special lines from them in your memory. But when that person returns, you don't say, "No, I'm good with just the letters." Of course not! You watch for their return and run out to them when they finally arrive. You thank them for the letters and the wonderful thoughts they shared with you. You know that those letters were full of truth and beauty. But what's most important is not the letters themselves but the person that sent them.

We value the Bible because it is God's love letter to us. We hold it special in the same way. But there's nothing worse than a love letter that's left unread. And sometimes we've done that. We've elevated Scripture to such a holy and sacred thing that we're scared to touch it or delve into it. I know some of us were taught things like, "Don't set any other book on top of the Bible." In some families, the Bible was kept on a high shelf to show it honor. But that Bible on display didn't gather fingerprints; it gathered dust. And that's the very opposite of what God desires. Occasionally, we'll run into folks who believe that the King James Bible is the only legitimate translation of the Bible. They love the beauty of the old English and think that it honors God in a way that other translations don't. But in insisting that people read the Bible in a 500-year-old translation that most of us can't comprehend anymore, they make the mistake of substituting a love for the Bible for the love of God Himself.

So my encouragement to you today is this: fall in love with God, and do so through the Scriptures. Read them often. Memorize them as you can. Deuteronomy 6:5 told the Israelites to "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." The way for them to do it was to remember God's Word. Deuteronomy 6:6-9 continues, "These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates." If you do the hard work of making Scripture a part of your daily life, taking the time to learn it and remember it, you will find yourself falling in love more and more each day with the God who created you and gave Himself on the cross for your sake. You can trust His Word. Let Him meet you there.