

Can You Trust The Bible?

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Davis

[0:00] Well, this morning we are continuing a short series that we're doing this month called God Speaks. And in this little series, we're trying to learn a little bit more about the Bible.

! And we're aiming for four parts, and in each part we're asking four questions. Do you need the Bible? Can you trust the Bible? Can you understand the Bible? Is the Bible enough?

And each of these questions relate to four key aspects of what we call our doctrine of Scripture.

And so the questions connect with what we call the necessity of Scripture, the authority of Scripture, the perspicuity of Scripture, and the sufficiency of Scripture.

Last week we started with this question, do you need the Bible? We looked at the necessity of Scripture, and of course the answer to that question is yes. And what we tried to unpack was that we need the Bible because of who God is, that He is the absolute of reality.

And the only way we can know Him is if He reveals Himself. So God has to reveal Himself in some way if we are going to know Him. We also need the Bible because of who we are, that we are made to bear God's image.

[1:08] And so we need God to communicate to us. We need Him to guide us and teach us in order for us to be what we were created to be. And the third thing we saw last week was that we need the Bible if we're going to be brought into a covenant relationship with God.

In many ways that's the main message of the Bible, that our sin has broken our relationship with God. It's left us failing to be what God made us to be. And yet the amazing message of the Bible is about God's unrelenting promise that He will be our God and we will be His people.

And everything that He accomplishes on the pages of Scripture is to make that possible. And so we need the Bible to receive that message of covenant promise from God and to be restored into covenant relationship with God.

So the Bible is necessary. But you might agree with all of that, thinking, well, yeah, I need God to communicate. I understand that. There has to be some kind of revelation. But you might still be thinking, well, yeah, I know God needs to speak to me.

But how do I know that it's the Bible that is the document that contains His message? And that takes us to this morning's question, can you trust the Bible?

[2:27] And that ties in with the authority of Scripture. As we answer that question, we're going to turn back to the chapter that Mary read from 2 Timothy 3, and we'll read verses 16 to 17.

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

And as we think about this, we're going to just ask two questions. Can you trust anything? And can you trust the Bible? Now, as we start this, I feel I should warn you that I think this is potentially going to be the most complicated sermon I've preached, which means it might be the most boring sermon that I've ever preached.

But what I'm hoping is that it might be one of the most helpful sermons that I've preached. So let's give it a go. So we're going to start with this question, can you trust anything?

If we're talking about the authority of the Bible, what we have to recognize first of all is that whole question is inescapably connected to the wider question of authority in general.

[3:36] So we're just thinking about this whole question of authority. We interact with authority all the time. It's a key part of the functioning of our families, of our society, of our church, of everything really in lots of ways.

And there's two important aspects of that authority that we deal with day to day that we have to recognize. Number one is that that authority is given to us by someone or by something else.

And secondly, that authority operates within defined boundaries. So let me give you some examples to reinforce that. So a teacher has authority. They're given that authority by local council that's employed them. And that authority operates within certain boundaries. So a teacher can, you know, in the classroom can tell everyone in front of them what to do.

That authority applies there. It doesn't apply in every other part of life. A police officer has authority from the government that operates within the boundaries of the criminal justice system.

[4:40] So the police officer can come and tell you how fast you can drive your car. But the police officer can't go to you if you're choosing a car at Arnold Clark and say, oh, you have to buy that one. The authority operates within certain boundaries.

And to just use more football illustrations, referee has authority. And it's given by football association, I guess, all the way up to FIFA. But that operates within the boundaries of a game, of a match.

End of the match, that authority ends. And you get the idea, same principle applies a thousand ways all across our lives. When these examples of authority are functioning properly, then the authority that's exercised is trustworthy.

That's the kind of next key part of this. If it's working properly, authority is trustworthy. So a good teacher is a good teacher when what they say is accurate and where they're actually going to correct things that are wrong.

If a child has picked something up wrong, a teacher will correct them. So it'll be like, well, okay, the information the teacher conveys is trustworthy. It's accurate. A good police officer is going to enforce what's good and is going to restrain what's evil.

[5:54] And if they don't do that, then they're not a good police officer. And a good referee is going to punish rule-breaking, but will otherwise allow the game to flow fairly. So the big key point we're kind of building to start with is that authority needs to be both trustworthy and trusted.

So good authority is going to be trustworthy, and then it has to be trusted. So if authority is exercised badly or inappropriately, or the word we probably use is if authority is abused, then that means it's not trustworthy and the structures that it's operating in are undermined.

So if a teacher was giving out nothing but false information to a class, then they're no longer a teacher. They're a counterfeit. Everything's starting to crumble. But equally, if the authority is good but not trusted by the people under that authority, then everything also falls apart.

So you might have a brilliant referee, but if every time they blew their whistle in a football match, the players were like, well, I'm not listening to that, then the whole game would fall apart.

For life to function, there has to be authority that's trustworthy, and that authority has to be trusted. That all, I think, makes sense.

[7:07] Now, all of this is straightforward if we think about things like school or crime or football. But the question we want to ask today is what about ultimate authority?

What about the question of ultimate authority? And remember we said that the authority we interact day to day is given by someone or something else.

So go back to your teacher example. Primary seven teacher given authority by the principal teacher. Principal teacher given authority by the head teacher. Head teacher given authority by the education department of the council.

Education department given authority by the councillors. Councillors given authority by the education secretary in Holyrood. Education secretary in Holyrood given authority by the government elected in Holyrood.

Government elected in Holyrood given authority by the democratic election process. Democratic election process given authority by? Well, that's the question. Now, I might not have got the management structures of the teaching world right, but you get the idea.

[8:09] There's a chain. A chain that keeps on moving back further and further and further. And this is the thing that we need to think about. That chain keeps working its way back to a starting point.

And that starting point takes us into the category of an ultimate authority. And from our point of view, when we're thinking about the gospel, when we think about ultimate authority, we're actually thinking about the biggest questions of life.

The questions, what's real? What's true? What's right? And what are the answers to those questions at an ultimate level? And what I want us to get to is that when we get to that level of ultimate authority, what happens is that we have to recognize that that ultimate authority, by definition, is what we call self-authenticating.

Ultimate authority, by definition, has to be self-authenticating. Now, let me explain what I mean by that. What I mean by that is that an ultimate authority does not derive its authority from something outside of it.

Because the minute you do that, you end up... you're no longer an ultimate authority. So, I'll try and draw a terrible picture. So, here's one authority here. It gets its authority from here. Which gets its authority from here.

[9:34] Which gets its authority from here. Which gets its authority from here. Which gets its authority from here. Which gets its authority from here. And we want to say that that's the ultimate authority. And so, that ultimate authority cannot say, I get my authority from here.

Because if that ultimate authority says, I get my authority from here, then that becomes the ultimate authority and that's no longer the ultimate authority. And so what we have to recognize is that for something to be an ultimate authority, it has to get its authority from itself.

It has to be self-authenticating. Otherwise, it's not an ultimate authority. Now, you're going to be thinking, Thomas, that's a circular argument.

And you're right, it is. But it has to be. That's the point. It has to be. And a lot of people don't like this idea of self-authenticating authority because they think, well, that's a circular argument.

You can't have circular arguments. But for something to be ultimate authority, it has to actually be a certain form of a circular argument. It's a logical circular argument, not a fallacious circular argument.

[10:46] It's a logical circular argument. Because for anything to have ultimate authority, self-authentication is inescapable. Go back to what I said about the chain with the teacher, teacher, principal teacher, head teacher, education department, council, education secretary, Hollywood government, democratic election process.

Where does the democratic election process get its authority from? It gets its authority from a democratic election process. It's just a circle. The people get the power from the people. And to reach that end point, you have to accept that that's going to be circular.

Now, you might go beyond that in terms of political theory, stuff like that. That's right. That's a different sermon for another day. But you get the idea of what I mean. And actually, you know this is true. You all know this is true.

Because when you meet a child who is about three or four years old, and they're starting to understand reality, they will confront you with a series of questions that all constitute the same word.

Why? And they will say, Why? Why? Why? Why? And you say, Why? And you say, Why? And you say, Why? And you say, Why? And you say, Why? And you say, Why? And how do you end that argument? You say, Just because.

[12:02] And that's a circular argument, but that's where you have to get to. It's not illogical. That's my big point. It's not illogical. It's actually appropriate in terms of discovering ultimate authority.

Let me take another example, okay? How do you know the authority? How do you know that you can trust your own senses? This is massive. For us to have any secure knowledge, how can you trust your own senses?

So how can you be sure that you can see me today? How can you be sure that right now you are looking at me? And so you might say, Well, I'm looking at you. I can see you. And that means you're trusting your sight.

Okay? Well, how do you know that your sight is accurate? And you might think, Well, maybe I could ask others and say, Well, can you see him? Yeah, I can see him. Can you see him? Yes, I can see him. But then you're trusting your hearing. Because you're thinking, Oh, well, I'm listening to what they're saying.

And you think, Well, how do I know your hearing is reliable? You think, Well, maybe I could go up and punch him. And you might be thinking, Well, that's very tempting. But then you'll be trusting your touch. And so on and so on and so on.

[13:09] The key point is this. The only way that you can trust your senses is to trust your senses. That's a circular argument, but it's perfectly logical. You have to accept that reality.

Otherwise, you cannot function. And the key point I'm trying to make here, that's whether it's in relation to your senses or anything else, whatever you want to put into the category of ultimate authority, you have to accept that authority as self-authenticating.

So if we come back to our question, Can you trust anything? There's actually only two choices. You can say no.

And that means that you have to embrace radical skepticism. You just have to. And some philosophers have done that. You'll see that throughout history. Some people have sort of accepted that you can't have any certainty about anything. So like David Hume would be a very famous example of that.

Scottish philosopher. He's got a statue on the Royal Mile in Edinburgh. And that was the basic place where he ended up. Or you can say, Yes, I can trust things.

[14:17] But if you do that, you have to accept this concept of self-authenticating authority. And the key question then is, What ultimate authority are you going to trust?

And that takes us to our next question. Can you trust the Bible? And in many ways, this is really what kind of lies at the heart of the biblical understanding of reality that we are placing the Bible into this category of ultimate authority, which means that we are saying that the Bible has to be self-authenticating.

The key to trusting the Bible is to recognize that its authority is and has to be self-authenticating.

Now, I want to try and explain that a little bit more because it's easy to just say, Well, you just need to trust the Bible.

But we can say more than that in order to kind of grow in our confidence of this position that we hold. The big thing I want to highlight is that the trustworthiness of the Bible is connected to the nature of the Bible and the purpose of the Bible.

The nature of the Bible and the purpose of the Bible. And 2 Timothy 3 confirms what both of these are. I can take away my drawing now. You can see that in terms of nature, the Bible is breathed out by God.

[15:53] Now, that's a very famous, what's translated there in four English words is just one Greek word. It's a famous word, the Greek word theopneustos.

I don't know if I've spelled that right, but it's close enough. And it literally means God breathed. So that's the word for God, theo, and neustos is like the word for breath. All Scripture is breathed out by God.

And this is part of what we mean when we talk about the Bible being inspired by God. The Bible's doctrine of inspiration. And so although the Bible is written by human authors across various locations, times, settings, all of them were guided by the Holy Spirit so that the ultimate author of the Bible is God himself.

Peter makes the same point. No prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. And the key point here is that inspiration is not emphasizing that the Bible is kind of inspiring to us, like it's really inspiring to read.

That's not what we mean. We're emphasizing that the Bible is actually, really technically, we're saying that the Bible is inspired. It's breathed out by God. So Paul's key point is not about the Bible's effect on us, but about the Bible's source in God himself.

[17:11] In the Bible, God uses human authors as the instrument through which he breathes out his word. So that's the nature of the Bible. It's God's breathed out word.

Now, the purpose of the Bible is also revealed in these two verses. It's so that we might become men and women of God.

There's all details there of what the effect of the Bible can have on us. And the goal is that we would be the people of God. And so the key point here is that God doesn't breathe out his word to make us people who know about God.

He breathes out his word to make us the people of God, those who know him as our loving Father through his Son by the work and indwelling of his Spirit.

Now, all of this is coming back to the great thread that runs through the whole of the Bible that we emphasized last week and that we'll emphasize every week. The great thread that runs through the Bible is what we call covenant theology. And that's just the big language of the fact that the Bible is seeking to establish the relationship between God and his people.

[18:20] He is our God. We are his people. That relationship is what the whole Bible is all about, that we would know God and that we would be in relationship with him.

The whole Bible is revealing that and establishing that. So, the nature of the Bible is that it's God's breathed out word, it's his covenant word. The purpose of the Bible is that we would be his covenant people.

And we can put these into a wee diagram, which I hope will make it a little bit clearer. So, you've got the nature and you've got the purpose side by side. And the big thing I want us to see is that what we call the attributes of Scripture that we're looking at in this little series tie in with both of these.

So, last week, we saw that the necessity of Scripture connects both of these. So, the Bible is God's word and we need that if we're going to be God's covenant people.

And, what I hope that we're going to see just now is that this is also true, the same connection is also there in relation to God's authority. The nature and purpose of the Bible are the basis for its authority and trustworthiness.

[19 : 34] In other words, once we recognize what the Bible is, we're instantly confronted with its authority. And that makes sense.

Like, if we're saying the Bible is God's inspired covenant word, it has to have authority. It has to be trustworthy.

And so, these connections become very important and very logical. Now, I'm going to give you, as we just go through the last wee bit of the sermon, I'm going to give you a couple of quotations from the Westminster Confession of Faith because these, it's really helpful in terms of what it says.

So, everything I'm trying to say just now is captured really well, paragraph four, chapter one of the Westminster Confession of Faith. Westminster Confession of Faith, if you're thinking, what on earth is that? It was written at the same time as the Catechism.

Again, it's just a summary of what we believe the Bible says. It's not very long, but very helpful. And as a church, we subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith. In terms of, people have different views of what the Bible says, we would argue that what the Westminster Confession summarizes is an accurate summary of what the Bible teaches.

[20 : 44] So, paragraph four, the authority of Scripture for which it ought to believe and obey dependeth not on the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God whose truth itself, the author thereof, and therefore it is to be received because it is the Word of God.

Now, I want you to see the importance of this word not in the paragraph there. You, recognizing the authority of the Bible is not because someone tells you to.

And it's not even because the church tells you to. It's not me saying, you must believe the Bible, you must believe, it's not, that's not how it works. It's not based on that.

It's based on what the Bible actually is. The authority of Scripture dependeth on the fact that it is the Word of God.

And you see that pattern in 1 Timothy 3 in a couple of examples. There's mention of Janus and Jambres. Jewish tradition tells us that they were two magicians in Egypt who opposed Moses.

[21 : 55] And they were opposing the truth. And lots of what 2 Timothy 3 talks about is people opposing the truth, deceiving people. And notice that Paul doesn't, when Paul talks about people being deceived in this chapter, he doesn't say, they're wrong and I'm right.

He says, no, they're wrong and God's Word is right. It's God's Word that is breathed out by God. And that's what we must use to teach us, reproof us, correct us, and train us and point us in the right path. And the bottom line of the Bible's authority is this. God's Word has ultimate authority because it's God's Word.

Now, you might be saying that's a circular argument. I'm saying it has to be a circular argument. The Bible is self-attesting. The technical term for that that theologians use is that it's autopoietic. Autopoietic means to be trustworthy and auto means of itself. So it's trustworthy of itself. It's self-authenticating. And the key point is that ultimate authority, if it's attested by something outside of itself, then it's no longer an ultimate authority.

[23 : 11] And you see this crystal clear in Hebrews chapter 6 in a fascinating verse. Here it talks about God's promise to Abraham. And it says here, when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, surely I will bless you and multiply you.

That right there is one of the most important words in the whole Bible. Because if that word had said anything other than himself, if it had said when God made a promise to Abraham, he made a promise by the stars, he made a promise by the sun, he made a promise by the land and the sea

and the seasons, he made a promise by time.

If it had said anything else, then the whole intellectual credibility of the Christian faith would collapse. Because if God had sworn on something else, then he immediately makes himself dependent on that.

And he immediately ceases to be an ultimate authority. And of course, God absolutely knows that. And the fact that it says himself, he swore by himself, massively confirms the intellectual robustness of everything that the Bible is claiming.

The big point I'm trying to highlight here is that the choice that you have is not circular arguments or no circular arguments.

[24 : 45] You do not have that choice. your choice is which circular argument are you going to set all your hopes on for life and death?

That's your choice. And you might be thinking, how can I know that the Bible is right? How do I know that?

Well, here we come to another really important part of our Reformed theology. In recognizing the authority of the Bible, there's lots of things that can help us. There's lots of aspects of the Bible that help us.

Lots of things that evidence it to be the Word of God. but our full persuasion comes from the Holy Spirit working in us.

And again, the Westminster Confession of Faith captures this really well. I'm going to read the paragraph. So, we might be moved and induced by the testimony of the church to a high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture.

[25 : 49] So, the church might have a lot to say that helps us think, yeah, well, the Bible's important. And there's aspects of the Bible that help. The heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of the parts, the scope of the whole, which is to give glory of God.

The full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation. The many other incomparable excellencies. The entire perfection thereof are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God.

Yet, notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority in the Bible is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.

Now, this takes us back to our diagram. The key point here is that trusting the Bible is not actually about assessing a historical document.

It's about meeting a person who is speaking to you. The nature of the Bible is intimately tied to the purpose of the Bible.

[27 : 01] The whole reason that God is speaking is so that you can know Him. It's so that you can know Him.

And that's why recognizing the authority of the Bible is not about capitulating to religious pressure. And it's not about winning a kind of rationalistic, apologetic argument.

It's about knowing God. And in the Bible, He's speaking to you. And He's speaking to you in order to reveal Himself to you.

And what you discover is that He's the God of truth and goodness and righteousness and holiness and wisdom and power. And that's part of the reason why we insist on the infallibility of Scripture, that it's inerrant, it's reliable, it's breathed out, it's God's covenant word.

And that's why it can do all the things that Paul describes in verses 16 and 17. Where can you go to be taught ultimate truth?

[28 : 06] Can you go to something other than the Bible? If so, what? Who actually has the right to reprove and correct you?

Who's got the right to tell you what to do? Someone other than the Bible? Who's going to train you in righteousness? In other words, who's going to tell you what is real and right and true ultimately? Someone other than the Bible? And if it is someone other than the Bible, you have got to be able to explain why. So, to recap and to return to the question, can you trust the Bible?

The answer is that you can trust the Bible because of its nature and because of its purpose, because of what it is and what it's doing. It is the breathed out covenant word of God and he speaks that word so that you might be his covenant people.

And because of what it is, because of what it's doing, it absolutely has authority and that authority means that you absolutely can trust it.

[29 : 23] And as we finish, there's two crucial implications that we've got to recognize in relation to this authority of Scripture. Authority of Scripture means that if it's warning you about something, you've got to listen.

And it warns us about a lot of things. It warns us about the seriousness of sin, the shortness of life, and the unending ages of eternity. It's warning us that we need to repent.

It's warning us that now is the day of salvation. If the Bible has authority, we've got to listen. But the second thing is even more amazing.

The authority of the Bible means that the promises it makes are unbreakable. And that is what makes the Bible so amazing.

It's what makes the gospel so amazing. All of this stuff that I'm trying to teach you today about ultimate authority, about self-attestation, about the nature and purpose of Scripture. Do you know what it all boils down to?

[30 : 39] It says that when Jesus says to you, come to me, and I'll never cast you out, that is an eternally unbreakable promise.

When Jesus says, it actually doesn't matter how many times you've messed up, or how many mistakes you've made, my blood is powerful enough to cleanse you of all your sin, that is an eternally unbreakable promise. And when Jesus says, follow me, and I will be with you every step that you take, I will never leave you, I will never forsake you, that is an eternally unbreakable promise.

That's what the authority of Scripture means. You can trust every promise the Bible makes because its promises are eternally unbreakable.

Amen. Let's pray.