

**Can The Bible Be Trusted?  
You Asked For It**

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From the beginning of time until 2003 we generated 5 billion gigabytes of data (5 exabytes) – all the books and news and movies and information in history. We now generate five exabytes of data every ten minutes. We are living through an explosion of information unparalleled in human history.

On the one hand, this is a great thing. I'm not a handy guy – now I can watch a five-minute YouTube video and learn how to plumb a sink.

On the other hand, this avalanche of information has left us disoriented and confused. We just can't keep up. We struggle with distinguishing truth from lies, accuracies from fabrications. We struggle to distinguish what is important from what is merely silly.

Now, more than ever, we find ourselves longing for truth, longing for something firm that we can build our lives upon, longing for something solid to hold onto in the midst of this tidal wave of information.

We have so much information, not enough knowledge. We have so much data, not enough wisdom.

Into this swirl of information, Scripture speaks.

Psalm 33:4 – “For the word of the LORD is right and true; he is faithful in all he does.”

Psalm 119:160 – “All your words are true; all your righteous laws are eternal.”

Psalm 119:105 – “Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.”

Followers of Jesus affirm that the Word of God found in scripture is that firm and steady foundation in a world full of misinformation. In a dark world, God's Word is a lamp lighting our way.

Followers of Jesus affirm with 2 Timothy 3:16-17, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

Given the amount of information in our world, it's only natural that some people might wonder: “Can I really trust the Bible? Is the Bible really that firm foundation?”

There are usually three types of questions that I get regarding the reliability of scripture.

First, transmission – we don't have the original copies of any of the biblical books. What we have are copies of copies. Can we trust the transmission process? How do we know that things didn't change through the years, like a game of telephone that spans generations?

The actual truth is that the Bible you possess is more accurate to the originals than any Bible in history. Your Bible is more accurate to the originals than the Bible of Martin Luther in the 16<sup>th</sup> century or Saint Augustine back in the fourth century. The reason is because of textual criticism.

The job of textual criticism is to compare and study thousands of ancient manuscripts in order to arrive at the most accurate reading of a text.

When it comes to the NT, there are more than a handful of manuscripts to consider – 24000+ manuscripts. The earliest is from 125 AD – a section of the gospel of John.

Outside of the NT, the best attested piece of ancient literature is Homer's *Illiad*, which only has 643 copies in existence, and those copies are 500 years removed from when Homer wrote it.

The New Testament has not only survived in more manuscripts than any other book from antiquity, but it has survived in a purer form than any other great book – a form that is 99.5% pure.

That means that the portion of our New Testament which could be in doubt, whether it was in the original or not, would amount to only one-half of a page in a five-hundred page Greek New Testament.

Second, canonization – canonization refers to the shape of our Bible, which books are included among the authoritative books of the Bible. Can we be sure that we have the right 66 books included in the Bible?

DaVinci Code – More than eighty gospels were considered for the New Testament, and yet only a relative few were chosen for inclusion – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John among them.

Modern conspiracy theorists would like us to believe that we can't really be sure which books belong in the New Testament. Unfortunately for them, the reality is much less interesting than their conspiracies.

For instance, consider this: within about two hundred years after the first century, nearly every verse of the New Testament was cited in one or more of the over 36 thousand citations by the Church Fathers. We could piece together the canonical books of the New Testament just by reading the sermons being preached in the early church. These books were being used authoritatively within the Christian community extremely early. By contrast, none of these other books mentioned by the conspiracy theorists find their way into the earliest preaching of the Church.

As early as 95 AD, we have evidence of leaders quoting books like Matthew, Luke, Hebrews, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, and 1 Peter as scripture.

Occasionally in the first few centuries there were questions about books like 2-3 John, Jude, or 2 Peter – but there were never any questions whatsoever about vast bulk of New Testament books.

What is important to recognize is that the Church didn't give us the Bible by selecting the books. God gave the church the Bible. J.I. Packer – “The Church no more gave us the New Testament than Sir Isaac Newton gave us the force of gravity. God gave us gravity, by His work of creation, and similarly He gave us the New Testament canon, by inspiring the individual books that make it up.” The first Christians recognized the power and authority of these books, which is why they used them in their preaching and their teaching.

Third, content – does the Bible tell the truth about history?

Obviously, this is a much bigger question.

The first thing that I'd say is that if we accept that the Bible is God's Word, then we should expect that it does not lie to us.

The second thing I need to say is that we should probably be careful that we don't impose a misleading definition of history on scripture.

Let's take the gospels for example – the gospels tell the story of Jesus. They are presenting Jesus to us.

An artist can present a subject in three ways – as an abstract, a photography, or a portrait – the subject matter is presented accurately, but through the artist's skill and interpretation. Are the gospels an abstract, a photograph, or a portrait?

I fear that a lot of people assume that the Bible presents history as a photograph, and if it isn't a photograph, then it must be abstract.

The fact is that history in the Bible – like most literature – is much more like a portrait.

So the story of Jesus in the gospels is a true story.

It has all the hallmarks of reliability. Attention to detail, first-hand testimony, multiple witnesses, the evangelists themselves died because of their testimony, and external confirmation with known historical events. (For instance, the gospels say that Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate. We have confirmation of that from sources outside of the Bible.)

But the story of Jesus in the gospels is also a true portrait of Jesus.

They are written from the perspective of each gospel writer with slightly different emphases.

Taken together they give us this beautiful, rich picture of Jesus, his ministry, and his teachings.

This last point actually gets us closer to the heart of the matter.

Ultimately the question of whether I can trust the Bible is not so much about how the Bible was copied and passed down. It's not about the way the canon was formed. Ultimately the question of trust is more about what I can trust the Bible to do.

I mean, we know the history of a lot of books, but just knowing the history of a book doesn't necessarily make it something that I'm going to build my life upon.

Think of it this way, if you're shopping for a car that you are hoping to take you on a long trip, the salesman could tell you everything about how that car was made and where it came from, but the most important question is: will the car work? Will it get me where I need to go?

It's similar with the Bible. What can we trust God's word to do?

Hebrews 4:12-13 – “For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”

God's word is not a dead book collecting dust. God's word is not a historical curiosity to be studied like a museum piece.

God's word, although it is quite old, is young and vibrant. It's living and it's active.

Hebrews wants us to know that God's word is both timeless and powerful.

In 2017, the YouVersion community read and listened to 19.7 billion chapters of the Bible this year. On average, people listened to 96 audio chapters, and read 532 chapters every second of every day. This is just YouVersion. It doesn't take into account all of the other reading of scripture that people are doing.

What does this demonstrate? This is more than merely a popular book. There is something different about this book. There is a timelessness and a timeliness to the book that people around the world, regardless of culture, come to experience.

The word of God found in the pages of scripture continues to change people's lives, it changes the direction of families, it gives new hope to communities.

That's not all that Hebrews 4 says – it says that scripture also lays us bare. Like a sacrificial dagger – it exposes who we really are. It judges the thoughts and attitudes of our heart. It leaves us feeling vulnerable.

It actually leaves us feeling like we need a priest – someone to intervene.

Hebrews 4:14-16 – “Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

The word of God introduces us to our need for Jesus.

This is the most important thing you need to hear today: the point of the Bible is not the Bible. The point of the Bible is a *person*. The Bible doesn't really tell us to believe in the Bible. It tells us to believe in the one sent to save us from our sin and brokenness. The point of the Bible is that we would know Jesus, that we would know his hope and his salvation.

The question, “Can I trust the Bible,” ultimately must give way to the question, “Can I trust the Jesus I meet in the Bible?”

The point of the Bible is that in a storm-tossed world, we might build our lives upon the solid foundation of Jesus.

Communion: this is our opportunity to celebrate and remember Jesus – this high priest who sympathizes with us, who has intervened for us, who gives us timely help in the midst of life's challenges.