

Man'S Greatest Challenge (Part 2)

Confidence in God's Word

Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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As you may remember, I began a series of sermons before the Feast, the subject of which was inspired by the transcript of a speech given by Michael Crichton. He delivered this speech in September 2003 and said this (quoting the two paragraphs I read during the last sermon):

I've been asked to talk about what I consider to be the most important challenge facing mankind, and I have a fundamental answer. The greatest challenge facing mankind is the challenge of facing the distinction of reality from fantasy, truth from propaganda. Perceiving the truth has always been a challenge to mankind, but in the information age—or as I like to think of it, the *dis*information age—it takes on a special urgency and importance.

We must daily decide whether the threats we face are real, whether the solutions we are offered will do any good, whether the problems we are told exist are, in fact, real problems or non-problems. Every one of us has a sense of the world and we all know that this sense is in part given to us by what other people in society tell us, in part generated by our emotional state which we project outward, and in part by our genuine perceptions of reality. In short, our struggle to determine what is true is the struggle to decide which of our perceptions are genuine and which are false because they are handed down or sold to us or generated by our own hopes and fears.

I agree with the general assertion that Michael Crichton makes: that man's greatest challenge is determining what is real and true. However, being secular, he then, in his speech, veers off into such things like scientific method, double-blind studies, and independent verification of results. He looks at life as a scientist because he is trained as a medical doctor. He thinks that you can prove whether something is true or not by testing it and verifying the results by independent studies and other such scientific methods.

Consequently, he does not provide any solutions for determining religious or moral truth. The reason, quite simply, is that he has none. He is incapable of finding a way to determine whether something that we would consider to be a religious truth is, in fact, true. He is, in this instance, clueless.

Nevertheless, seeking the truth or determining what is true is an absolute necessity for everyone—particularly for Christians and particularly for us now—because we are being bombarded, as Crichton says, by so much information. The problem is that it is not just information, but we are handed a lot of *disinformation*, as well. People are constantly trying to get you to think along their lines, but what they are saying is not necessarily true. They shade the truth; they get you thinking one way so that they can spring something on you. Then they get you agreeing with them; and when that begins to happen, they get you doing something that you would not normally consider doing because, by this point in time, you have agreed with the person several times and you are suddenly convinced!

There are all kinds of marketing techniques out there today that try to get you to buy this and that. The real danger, however, is not just the selling of products but the marketing and selling of ideas! Thus, we need to be on the ball to figure out what is true, what is real. No doctrine, no philosophy, no morality, no religion, no individual life has any foundation worth the name if it is not built on a bedrock of absolute, unequivocal, irrefutable truth!

Let me just take a simple, silly example: What would mathematics be if it were not true that one plus one equals two, or that anything multiplied by zero is zero? What if we could not rely on any one of the truths—the quadratic equation, for instance—that we may find in math? If those things were not true, the whole idea of arithmetic would crumble! We could not use what would come from this in any kind a technical field. We could not shoot rockets to the moon or send satellites to other planets. We could not even build a bridge! Math is fundamental to our technology! It is built on bedrock of truths, and we can prove those truths.

Most of us go through a year of geometry in high school in which we have to build and come up with theorems and geometric truths so that we understand how these things work. I do not know if you remember doing that; it was always kind of fun to me to work through these things logically.

However, the idea that there are irrefutable truths—absolutes—is not a popular principle in this day of rationalism and post-modernism. Intellectuals hypocritically and, really, paradoxically reject all absolutes as antiquated. The paradox is that they make an absolute statement by saying that there are no absolutes. Therefore, they have just shot themselves in the foot or, as intellectuals, in the head. They can build no good, stable philosophy upon such a foundation, and nothing constructive will result as we see our society continue to crumble around us.

In this regard, modern thought and Christianity are polar opposites. Christianity is a religion of absolutes: there is one God; there is one Lord and Savior; there is one Church; there is one faith; there is one baptism; there is one Spirit, etc., etc. There is only one Name by which we may be saved; or to put it another way, there is only one road, one path to salvation, not many. Sin is the transgression of God's law—another absolute. Here is another one: Satan has deceived the whole world. Another: Jesus will return and establish God's Kingdom on the earth and we will live and reign with Him for a thousand years. These are unequivocal truths!

How do we know these statements are so? How do we know that they are correct? The answer is (probably the first thing that popped into our heads) because the Bible tells us so! How do we know that the Bible can be trusted to provide the truth? How can we be confident that the Bible contains the uncompromised revelation of the one God of the entire universe? How can we be sure?

Part 1 of this series dealt with the fact that the search for truth *begins* with God's direct revelation to us. That direct revelation to us is about Him and the one He sent, Jesus Christ. If you recall, this is how we concluded the last sermon.

Everything begins with the relationship that God initiates between Him and us. He gives us a clue, one way or another, of His own nature—that He is God and that He sent Jesus Christ as our Savior. We must remember, too, the scripture given to us through John, which says that "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh."

We must come to understand the Father-Son relationship, as well, and understand that the Father is supreme and greater than the Son. The Son does the Father's will in all things, and the Son came in the flesh. He was human and He died without sin as our Savior. He is now seated at the right hand of His Father carrying out His will—primarily toward the Church since He is its Head.

Once we understand that They (the two of Them combined) are the Ones to whom we look, that there is one God, and that Jesus Christ is under Him and over us as our mediator and High Priest, then the ball is rolling. Once we understand—we know and believe who is the true God and what His nature is—we are then well on our way to eternal life. It has to *begin* there. It has to *begin* with the foundational truth about who God is and what His nature is.

This sermon will concern itself with the logical next question: if the bulk of our information about God comes from the Bible, how can we determine whether the Bible itself is true? How can we trust the Bible?

I will begin in John 17:17. This is one of those memory scriptures that I like to throw out every once in awhile. As a matter of fact, nearly all of the scriptures that we will be studying today are familiar. This is the prayer of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane just before His arrest. He says:

John 17:17 Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.

Does this scripture not solve our problem for us? Is this not the solution? In one blow we have our Savior, Jesus Christ, telling us, "God's Word is truth." Can I now say, "Okay, I can shut my Bible and go sit down and you guys can have the next hour and ten minutes to do what you like?" No, it would be nice if we could do that, but this is a rather simplistic answer to our question. It is too easy! Sure, we could commend the person who says, "Well, this is good enough for me." We may say that this person's faith is just fine. However, this is reminiscent of the old joke about one faithful soul commenting on all the new translations coming out and was overheard saying, "If the King James Version was good enough for Jesus, it is good enough for me!"

The Bible contains several declarative statements about its authenticity that are very much like this. You may want to jot these down; I will go through them somewhat quickly. For instance, Romans 3:2 calls the scriptures "the oracles [or sayings] of God." That is pretty firm. God said these things and people wrote them down. There is Proverbs 30:5, which says that "every word of God is pure." In tandem with this is Psalm 12:6, which says that "the words of the Lord are pure words" and "they are purified seven times." That is pretty pure! That means that God's Word, which we say that the whole Bible is, has been run through God's editorial process to the point that *every word* is absolutely pure and true! We all know that II Peter 1:19 says that God's Word is more sure than an eyewitness testimony. Peter said, in effect, "We saw Jesus transfigured on the mount and that made an indelible impression on our minds, but we know that the prophetic word is even surer than that. It has God's stamp of approval!" There is another memory scripture in II Timothy 3:16, which says that "all scripture is given by inspiration of God," and as we have come to understand, it means that God *breathed* every word of scripture. They came directly from God's mouth to our ears, as it were. There are other scriptures we could find that say very similar things. We could go through Psalm 19 and Psalm 119 where such things are said, seemingly, every other verse. The Bible declares itself to be the true, authentic Word of God—the *authoritative* Word of God!

Yet, for many—and certainly for those who are skeptical—this internal testimony of the Bible is, essentially, worthless as proof! These cynics, these skeptics, these unbelievers

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would say that it would be like me telling you that I once met Bob Hope, Arthur Murray (the dancer who started all those dance studios around the country), Patty Page, and Marie Osmond all on the same summer evening in 1983 at the Ambassador Auditorium.

You are probably thinking, "Oh, sure you did!" Well, I did! It is true! However, you will have to take my word for it. I do not have any autographs or pictures. I do not even know if I could find any eyewitness testimony to the fact that I met all of them on one evening. I cannot remember who was with me when that happened. I was seventeen years old, and I was working in the Ambassador Auditorium in the green room. They were having some sort of benefit variety show for something that I do not remember. Marie Osmond was one of the emcees of the event, and the big draw was Bob Hope. Arthur Murray and his wife danced; Patty Page sang a song. It was really neat! We were supposed to see Carol Burnett that night, too, but I think that she may have been sick and had to have her part video-taped before hand. That was too bad because I had wanted to see her.

Anyway, the story that I have just told you will have to be taken on faith because I have no proof that any of that ever happened! The same happens with the Bible. If the Bible says that something happened or that something is true, many people would say that it is not good enough. They want more proof; they want something verifiable; they want something objective; they want something into which they can sink their teeth. They want *evidence* leading them to a conclusion that it is so!

Are we stuck? Have we exhausted the proofs of the authenticity of the Bible? Not even close! There are several others. I know you probably have gone through them in the past, but I would like to, throughout the rest of the sermon, go through some of the ones that I think are the most convincing.

John 10:34-36 Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your law, 'I said, 'You are gods?'" If He called them gods, to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture cannot be broken), do you say of Him whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'?"

Here is a very plain revelation where Jesus said that He is the Son of God. He uses the scripture back in Psalm 82:6 where God tells us, "You are gods." He uses this as proof that He *is* God—the Son of God. However, He throws in this parenthetical statement, "The scripture cannot be broken." Here is another declarative statement from Jesus that the scripture is of divine origin—and it cannot be refuted!

The Greek word for broken is *lutheenai* and it means "to loose," as if you had a donkey tied up and you loosed it; or "to dissolve," as sugar dissolves in your coffee; or "to invalidate," which is closer to what He meant; or "to destroy the force of," as in, "you loosed the bonds of wickedness." You destroy the force of that wickedness. Jesus is saying that the scripture has unbreakable authority. Put in the vernacular: scripture has not one chink in its armor. Scripture is perfect, inerrant, always in agreement, and without contradiction. Nothing that is in it can be gainsaid one way or another.

We have already seen that God said it has been purified seven times. He has looked at it seven different ways, as it were, and He has made sure that everything agrees perfectly and without exception. Again, this is a declarative statement by Jesus, the Author, but He really does not give any *proof* that this is so; He just *says* this is so.

However, critics, unbelievers, and opponents have taken up the challenge. Throughout the millennia they have made it their life's goal to find errors and contradictions in God's Word. Do you know what they have come up with? Zero. Zilch. Nada. Not one. They try to throw up the "gotcha's" and the "aha's," but every one of them can be successfully refuted; and in many cases, it is easily done.

Some of the most common attacks:

There is the focus on the apparent contradictions between Paul and James on the subject of law and works. They most certainly did not contradict one another. They are in perfect agreement, working together and not against one another. Paul looked at one side of the relationship while James looked at another.

There is the scripture that says twenty-three thousand died in one day in the wilderness and then when we go back we find that twenty-*four* thousand died. This is not a contradiction because Paul said "in one day." It seems that another thousand died on another day.

Paul and Moses count a little differently when they say how many people went down into Egypt with Jacob—one says seventy and the other says seventy-two. It is just a matter of whom they were counting, but the same number of people ended up in Egypt.

No, the mustard seed is not the smallest of seeds, but it was the smallest seed that farmers in Palestine regularly planted. Jesus was addressing farmers in Palestine. He would use something that was common to them. At

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the time it probably was the smallest seed that men knew about—a very tiny seed. There may be smaller seeds now. One that I saw in a commentary was mushroom spores. They are smaller than mustard seeds, but some would argue that mushroom spores are not seeds. Anyway, that is not a contradiction. Jesus was not trying to prove a biological or botanical point. He was making an analogy, a metaphor.

Here is another one: no, the city of Tyre was never rebuilt. The city that is now there, Sur, is not on the same site. It is in a different place.

There are many arguments like these. Men have written books about alleged contradictions in the Bible, and they are *all* very easily dismissed with referral to a few scriptures or a little common knowledge. More important than all of these, which may be nothing more than grammatical arguments or other seemingly innocuous differences, is the *teaching* of the Bible, which is not contradictory:

In this case, if God said in Psalm 82 that "you are gods," then it is correct no matter what the Jews thought about what God said. Jesus said that this is a correct teaching, and, of course, He came to show us why this is so.

The way to salvation has always been the same whether it was in the Old Testament times or whether it was in the New Testament; it has never changed. One just happened *before* Jesus Christ came and the rest of us have had the opportunity to understand it *after* Jesus Christ came. Salvation has always been through the Son and the work that He has done.

God does not annul His law. The law in the Old Testament is the same as the law in the New Testament. For example, the Sabbath is still the seventh day and the day on which God has said His people should worship. That has not changed.

The same God is present in the Old Testament as in the New Testament. It is not "that old, cruel Yahweh" and the "sweet, lovable Jesus." They are the same Person. The same One has been revealing Himself to His people throughout. He is the One that has always been sent by God as the Messenger, as the Mediator, as the One who grunts for the Family, as it were.

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It is consistent; there are no contradictions. The Bible is always going to be in agreement no matter what it is. This first proof, then, is that there are no contradictions.

Let us now turn to a scripture with which we are familiar and examine a proof that is, perhaps, the most objective of them all:

Luke 24:44-48 Then He said to them, "These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me." And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures. Then He said to them, "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And you are witnesses of these things."

As I said, this is probably the most objective proof of them all: God's Word is authoritative because prophecy has been fulfilled—to *the letter!* Josh McDowell wrote a book entitled *Evidence That Demands A Verdict* and has made a career out of this particular niche of biblical understanding. He has systematically studied and documented hundreds of prophetic fulfillments—particularly the ones concerning Jesus—and come up with a way to determine the odds of such things happening. He argues that if you examine the Bible from this point of view, a rather mathematical or statistical point of view, the prophecies that have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ are *irrefutable proof* that God is behind His Word. As he has shown, those concerning Jesus are perhaps the most astounding—especially when you stack them all together and then take their combined probability of occurring exactly as they were written. Add to this detail that, in so many of them, Jesus had no hand whatsoever in affecting their outcome.

Just think of some of them, such as that He would be born in Bethlehem. How much could He have affected that one? He was in Mary's womb when they left Nazareth and went to Bethlehem. How could He have affected the fact that Rachel's descendents would mourn the massacre of their children? How could He, as a young child, have affected the fact that God had said He would call His Son out of Egypt? How could He, manhandled by the Romans and the guys on the crucifixion duty, prevent them from breaking any of His bones? Not one of them, it says, would be broken. How, staked up there, helpless, could He have affected the fact that the soldiers would gamble for His garments? How, up there on the cross, nailed down, could He have affected the fact that He would be given *gall* to drink? How, lying dead in a tomb, could He have affected

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the fact that He would be raised from the dead *exactly* three days and three nights from the time that He was put in?

The odds of any *one* of these happening are astronomical! When you stack them together, the odds have been calculated to be beyond our ken. It is one in ten to the I-do-not-know-how-many-hundredths power that these things could have happened to one person during his lifetime! It is just absolutely astounding—unless you believe in God and believe that His Word is true!

If you were so inclined, it might make a good study to go through the book of Matthew, because he, especially, used this particular approach to impress upon the Jews that Jesus was, indeed, their Messiah. Every chance he gets, he says, "And this happened because it was written in the prophet [whoever]." Go through the first couple of chapters and read where he is constantly quoting scripture, such as Isaiah 7:14, quoted in the first chapter:

Matthew 1:23 "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us."

Then he goes on to cite others, it seems, in every chapter. We regularly see something to the effect of, "He did this to fulfill prophecy."

Remember Paul says that the Jews seek a sign? Well, this was sign after sign after sign *after sign!* They should have seen it. They should have declared Him Messiah after just one or two of these happenings, but they were blinded. Because they were expecting something quite different, they rejected Him.

This is just one set of prophecies, just the ones that concern Jesus. There are scores of other prophecies written in the Bible that have already been fulfilled—either completely or in part—and they prove the truth that God is behind His Word.

They prove the truth of Isaiah 46:

Isaiah 46:8-11 "Remember this, and show yourselves men; recall to mind, O you transgressors [this is a challenge from God]. Remember the former things of old, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure,' calling a bird of prey from the east, the man who executes My

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counsel, from a far country. Indeed I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass. I have purposed it; I will also do it."

Then He repeats this in Isaiah 55:

Isaiah 55:10-11 "For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and do not return there, but water the earth, and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void [or empty], but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it."

If God says that He is going to do something, He will do it. It does not matter how many years pass between the time that it is said and the time it is fulfilled. God is the only One capable of doing that because He is Sovereign and He is eternal. Time means little or nothing to Him. He can work and bring things to pass—even the smallest details—over thousands of years of time.

It is just amazing, in terms of Jesus Christ, to go through Psalm 22 and see prophecy after prophecy about His crucifixion, the suffering and death of the Messiah. Psalm 22 has been called the "Fifth Gospel" because it is so accurate. You go through there and find out things about Jesus' crucifixion as if David were right on the spot, but he was a thousand years before. It is uncanny! "They pierced my hands and my feet," verse 16. "I can count all my bones," verse 17. "They divide my garments among them. And for my clothing they cast lots," verse 18. How accurate is that?

It is remarkable that, at the time David was writing this, crucifixion was not a manner of death being used to any extent. It was certainly not something that the Israelites used. However, the things that David writes here are perfectly in line with the Roman crucifixion. How did he know these details one thousand years before it happened? It is because God knew and God inspired it. God's Word was behind this, and He says that whatever He sends forth, whatever He speaks, is going to be fulfilled. It does not matter what happens in the mean time. God works everything out so that even the smallest detail is brought out and fulfilled. Who else can do this except a great God with all power?

What can we say about these almost offhand comments in Revelation 9? Details such as this would have been so far removed from the imagination of John the Apostle, as a

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person, that he could not have come up with something like this:

Revelation 9:9-10 And they had breastplates [He is talking about an army here, these locusts that are part of the fifth trumpet, the first woe. And he says they had breastplates] like breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings was like the sound of chariots with many horses running into battle. They had tails like scorpions, and there were stings in their tails.

He is talking about locusts. They are flying insects. Have you ever seen a locust with a breastplate of iron? It is obvious that he is not speaking literally about locusts. He is talking about something that is figurative. Because he is trying to use the language of his day to illustrate something that is beyond his understanding, he talks about locusts with breastplates of iron that made a sound like the roaring of many chariots.

What does that tell us? Here we are in the A.D. 2000s and we have airplanes and helicopters that, if one looked at them and tried to place himself back in a first century mindset, look like locusts with breastplates of iron and wings that make the sound we would recognize today as that of a chopper. They do, indeed, sound like the galloping of horses and of many chariots! How else could he describe it? How would he have known even that, if God's Word had not been put into his mind, if the revelation had not been given him in a vision—this vision in which he was attempting to describe something that was not even going to be invented yet for some two thousand years?

How about chapter 11? This is referring to when the two witnesses will have just been killed.

Revelation 11:9-10 Then those from the peoples, tribes, tongues, and nations will see their dead bodies three-and-a-half days, and not allow their dead bodies to be put into graves. And those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them, make merry, and send gifts to one another, because these two prophets tormented those who dwell on the earth.

How could all the nations of the world see what was going on in Jerusalem in John's day? You could say that they will send representatives, but this is not what John meant. John said that everybody on earth has the opportunity to see these two dead prophets lying in Jerusalem. The whole world goes on to rejoice and make merry over them. How did John know there would be something like satellites that could beam an image to televisions all around the world? It is an amazing thing that a man, two thousand years

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ago, has an insight given to him by God that there would be something like mass communication.

You must remember that John lived in a period of time when they were still carrying paper messages by courier over hundreds and thousands of miles to communicate back and forth. However, John says that everyone on earth would, at the same time, see these two prophets lying dead in Jerusalem. Such a thing, before the advent of television, was scoffed at. It was thought to be impossible. God's Word proves itself, once again, to have been inspired by a God who could see these things thousands of years in advance. Mere men could never have come up with things as detailed and improbable as these.

As we leave the proof of fulfilled prophecy, we see that Jesus gives us another proof from His Word:

Luke 7:19-23 And John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to Jesus, saying, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?" When the men had come to Him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to You, saying, 'Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?' " And that very hour He cured many of infirmities, afflictions, and evil spirits; and to many blind He gave sight. Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and tell John the things you have seen and heard: that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me."

The Bible is full of promises regarding God's intervention. As we go to Psalm 103, we see a seemingly exhaustive list of all the benefits God promises to give us.

Psalm 103:1-8 Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name! Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: who forgives all your iniquities, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from destruction, who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies, who satisfies your mouth with good things, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. The Lord executes righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed. He made known His ways to Moses, His acts to the children of Israel. The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy...

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I have placed in my margin what it is that He gives us: forgiveness, healing, redemption, love, mercy, food, health, long life, justice, His law, His way, grace, etc. It just goes on and on! What a list of things that God mercifully gives us! He has bound Himself by these promises. If He says He is going to give them, then, being God, He is going to give them. He does not renege on His promises.

I should interject here, in case somebody should misunderstand, that although God says He will answer prayer, He might sometimes answer no. He knows what is best for us. He is not going to give us something that is bad for us. James says that God is the "giver of every good and perfect gift." He is not going to give a gift that is not good and perfect because that is not His nature. Since He is a giver of good things, if we ask for something that is not a good thing, He is going to deny it to us. That is what we must understand and that is why He reveals Himself and His nature to us *first*. That is the basis for everything. Then these promises will make much more sense to us. We understand the parameters so much more

If we go back to Matthew, we see that Jesus reiterates these same types of promises in a more general way:

Matthew 7:7-8, 11 "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened...If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!"

It is a general statement that God will give to those who ask, but it is a true statement. We can bank on it! We can ask God for things and He will give them to us.

Matthew 21:22 "And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive."

That is almost a blank check, it seems, although we understand that it is not. These promises are sprinkled throughout God's Word; and if we know God's Word, we can remind Him of these things in prayer. He will answer because He is a God who loves us. He listens to us and gives us the things that we need.

The Apostle John adds something to this that is very important: He adds some conditions. These are found in other places, as well, but I just came here because they

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are so concise. He says in a confident and assuring manner,

I John 3:22 And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.

I John 5:14-15 Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.

Those are pretty straightforward, but John does give us three conditions to remind us that God is no genie in a bottle granting our three wishes:

The first condition is that we must keep the commandments. This is the bottom line and the one with which he starts. "Keep the commandments," he says.

Secondly, he says that we are to do what is pleasing to God. This, to me, comprises not only commandment keeping, but goes beyond to include what we might call "acts of love." This is speaking of a manner of living that is pleasing to Him and that would include things like love toward neighbor.

The third condition, found in chapter 5, is for us to ask according to His will. There must be a good scriptural backing for what we ask of Him.

If you were to get down on your knees and beg Him for a million bucks, it would not be according to His will. Try to find that one in the Bible! "God, you promised that you would prosper me!" While He never said that He would literally give you a million bucks, He finds ways to prosper you other than simply giving you money. There is a good reason why He does not give you the million bucks. You would probably turn from Him! By asking such a thing in the first place, it is evident that all you wanted was the million bucks—when what God wants is a relationship.

If we meet these conditions—keep the commandments, do what is pleasing to God, and ask according to His will—there is really very little or nothing to hold God back from blessing us! We just saw that list in Psalm 103 of all the things He is willing to give us; and if you noticed, most of those were spiritual in nature. He did say that He would supply food for us and give us the health that we need, but a lot of it had to do with

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redemption, forgiveness, grace, justice, love, mercy, and those sorts of things. Those are much more spiritual.

This is what we might call a highly subjective proof, but perhaps it is the most convincing to us personally. There is nothing like seeing God work in one's life to galvanize a person's faith. To have a brush with God, one might say, is a thing that really gets our attention. We can say, "Yeah, God is with me. I know He is there. I know that He will be there when I need Him. He never leaves!"

How many times have we, in our hospitality toward one another, sat around the dinner table and recounted the times that God has personally answered our prayers? I can tell you one right now. It happened just three weeks ago. We were praying for all we were worth that Johnny would be released from the hospital and be allowed to go to the Feast. It did not look very good. We had already started to make plans for Beth and Johnny to remain at home for at least part of the Feast and, perhaps, come later. We were cutting it awfully close and had planned to leave Sunday morning.

We asked—and God made it possible. Johnny was released from the hospital on the Sabbath before the Feast, and the doctor told him, basically, "Oh sure, have a good time!" It just blew us away! God had answered the prayer.

How many times have we seen a miracle occur before our eyes? My mom used to say that God performed a miracle every Saturday evening by keeping the lettuce nice in the salad. It is a small thing, but normally when you normally cut or tear lettuce and put it in a salad and then leave it in the refrigerator for twenty-four hours or more, it is going to turn brown. However, the salads that we enjoyed on Saturday nights were always green and fresh! Some people would scoff and say that our crisper was just good, but every week? This is just a little thing.

God is interested in little things. He created mealy bugs. Have you seen how little they are? They do not seem to do much or mean much. What impact do they have in the world? There are billions of them! We saw some about two months ago in our wheat, and they were eating. They get rid of waste. God made them. Many of us hate mosquitoes, but God made them. He is involved in the minutiae of our lives just as sure as He made little-bitty things to bug us. I am just kidding.

I am sure that if we were to go down the rows, we would come up with a good score of miracles right off the top of our heads. I had heard a couple of years back about a lady at the Feast with some children but not very much money. Afterwards, as she was heading for home, she had no money to put gas in the car. She went out on faith

knowing that God would take care of her. Whether she was a widow or a divorcee I do not know, but as the story goes, the moment she arrived home and pulled into the garage her car stopped. She had run out of gas. Even though the distance home from the Feast was far beyond one full tank, God had given her enough gas to make it the whole way. As soon as she was in her garage, the miracle stopped. Minutiae—but God is interested.

Sometimes He saves us from harm or even death. I remember, as a teenager in Y.O.U., we had a campout in the mountains of upstate South Carolina, up toward Anderson or maybe even further up into North Carolina. One night, I believe it was Friday night, the man who was in charge of the campout gathered us all around the fire, and we were telling stories. He told a couple of stories about the miracles that had happened in his life and in the lives his close family members. Late one particular evening, as he was barreling down the highway—doing something that he probably should not have been doing but God had mercy—he came to his exit, which he took at an excessive rate of speed. His lights suddenly revealed that, just feet in front of him, his exit had been blocked off with a barrier. He had no chance to check himself, turn, or do anything. He was going to smash right into this barrier. He said that the next thing he knew, his car was idling and he was facing the other direction. He said he had no idea what had happened. He did not turn; he did not put on the brake; he did not do anything—but the very next instant he was safe!

These things happen because God watches over His people. Some of us, perhaps, have had encounters with what could only have been angels—somebody showing up out of the blue to do something for you that you could not have done for yourself. You wonder, "Where did he come from?" Maybe we have witnessed God rebuking a demon that has been bothering us. Things have happened in the past and people have learned to say, "The Lord rebuke you," and God listens. I have had experiences like that myself. I do not desire to go into them at this time, but they have happened. I do not know how many times I have had terrible dreams knowing that some sort of spirit was behind them. They just were so demonic! I am trying to say, in my dream, "The Lord rebuke you," but it just seemed as though I had gravel in my mouth. I could barely say anything. Then you wake up and say, "The Lord rebuke you" and you can feel the spirit leaving. He cannot stay when the Lord has rebuked him! God is with us and will keep us from harm. He will not allow us to be overmatched and, if we cry out to Him, there is nothing that can overmatch Him!

These are the types of proof that galvanize our faith because we know God is there and we know God is active. We know that God is watching over us, providing for us, and ruling in our lives. Has He ever failed to provide what we need? Some of us may moan

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about the conditions in which we are living and how we do not have this or that; but we have never been destitute. We have never been totally broke or starving to the point of imminent disaster. He always gives us what we need. This is something that we have to ask ourselves personally: Have we not seen Him intimately active in our lives—even down to the smallest detail?

Recently, Beth told me about her mother and how she would pray in real fine detail. In one instance she even prayed for the particular type of dog that would be in the best interests of her family. They wanted a dog, but she had certain requirements in mind. Evidently, she took before God this list of all the things that she wanted in a dog, and they found Buckwheat. Buckwheat fulfilled every one of these details except one—because she neglected to pray for it. She wanted a cuddly dog and, from what I have heard, Buckwheat was the most *uncuddly* dog that there ever was. At least, that is the legend. Maybe Paul thought he was cuddly, but he was not cuddly for the ladies.

Beth decided to do the same thing when we wanted a dog. I think we got pretty much what we wanted when we got Sydney. It is amazing! God was interested in the kind of dog that we were to have around. How much can you see in a puppy? Here is this little six- or eight- or ten-week-old puppy and you know nothing about dogs, other than that they eat a lot and they spoil things and they chew. You go in there with maybe three, four, five, six puppies and you say, "Okay, I want that one."

When we went in to get Sydney, Beth wanted a different dog from the rest of us. I liked one that was a little bit more playful and a little bit more confident. I think the other kids were siding with me somewhat. We even took that one for a walk around the store. Beth said, "No, I want that one," and we got "that one" because she said it. Truly, we did want to please her because she was the most reluctant of us all about getting a dog. Sydney turned out to be exactly the dog for which she had prayed.

That is a silly example, but God backed her up on that. God gave her something that she wanted. It was a silly dog, but she has added a great deal to our lives. God must have seen that if we got a dog that was, in some small way, the desire of our heart, it would add something to our family. Thus, He responded. As I said, it is not a big thing, but God is involved in our lives to an extent of which we have no idea. When we come to understand just how much He is involved, how much He will fulfill the promises He has given us in His Word, then we have no doubt that what is in this Book is true.

This next proof is one of the greatest.

Malachi 3:10 "Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food

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in My house, and prove Me now in this," says the Lord of hosts, "if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it."

This is maybe the most conclusive proof of all of God's Word: His way works. It is not just that He will give us what we ask, but that the things He says for us to do will produce what He says it will produce. Here, God commands His people to tithe. To many, this would seem awfully arbitrary, and to those who are greedy, foolish. "Why should I give ten percent to God? Why does He need it? He is the maker of all things. He could just—*shazam!*—give the Church a million bucks and they could do what they need to do. Why does it have to come out of my pocket?"

God says to do it. He says, "If you tithe as I say, you will have even more." That is counter-intuitive. Usually, if you give somebody ten percent of something you have ten percent *less*. God, though, says, "If you give me ten percent, you will have *more!*" That does not make any sense to us. He says, "Prove it! Prove it by doing it. Test Me. Put Me to the test in this." He not only promises us the blessing of tithing, He says, "I will give you more than you can handle." Paul puts it, "More than we can ask or think." That is Ephesians 3:20.

This is not just an Old Testament principle. Romans 12:1 says we are to present our bodies a living sacrifice and then Paul says,

Romans 12:2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

Here is another challenge. In essence, what he is saying is that our entire conversion is a series of proofs—to us—that God's way works. It is the only way to abundant living and eternal life. God says, "Decide to take the road less traveled—My way, the strait path, the narrow way—and just notice what happens. Make it a test throughout your entire life." Examine whether God's will, His way of life, is really good and acceptable and perfect.

If we do this right, we will not be spending our whole lives skeptically trying to prove these things. After the first one works, He has us—or should have us. It will quickly become apparent that God's way of life is, by far, the most fulfilling and rewarding and true. God's way, which is taught only in His Word, will prove itself in any and every point.

Pick any one; it does not matter. Start with the Sabbath, or choose marriage. If we do what God says, in terms of our marriages, He says that they are going to be wonderful. How about child rearing? God has a lot of instruction in His Word about child rearing. I did three sermons on it. Shall we take a look at one of the moral principles, such as "turn the other cheek"? Have you ever tried to prove that one when you were in an argument? How about healing? We mentioned tithing? How about speaking the truth in love? How about working hard so that you have enough to give to others? How about sacrificing to others, or not giving any offense, or "a soft answer turns away wrath," or providing for a widow or an orphan, or taming the tongue or—or—or—or—

There are principles and instructions and commandments all through the Bible. Prove that they are the good and acceptable and perfect will of God. Put them to the test. They work consistently, constantly, and abundantly. We will know after these tests that the Bible is, indeed, the will of God.

The greatest proof of all?

John 20:30-31 And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.

John is speaking primarily of his gospel. He has put signs together in a particular order to prove to us that Jesus is the Christ. This principle applies to the whole Bible. The central figure in the Bible after God the Father—who is not revealed until the New Testament—is Jesus Christ. The whole Old Testament points to His coming. The whole New Testament contains His teaching, His life, His Church and its teachings through the Apostles. If this principle is true, the entire Bible has been made available to us so that we can know that Jesus is the Son of God and that we may believe in Him and His teachings in order that we might have eternal life.

This brings us right back to the conclusion I gave in the last sermon: all the proofs of the Bible hinge on the nature of God. You have to know the Person—the Persons—first. Everything flows from that. If you can see the signs, if you can read the Bible and see the Person that is Jesus Christ and believe Him, then what you have done is you have started to have a relationship with Him. John 17:3 says that eternal life is knowing the Father and the Son. It all begins there.

The greatest proof of the authority of God's Word is contained in our personal

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relationship with God through Jesus Christ. If we truly know Him, if we really understand His mind and His purpose, if we have seen Him at work in our lives, then we need have no doubts whatsoever about His Word. If you know the craft and you know who the craftsman is you can tell who made what. We will know because we know Him and see that it is God who has lined up everything perfectly and we can trust it absolutely.