

**Equipping Class**  
**How to Study the Bible**  
**Class 1: What Is the Bible & Is It Reliable?**

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“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.” (2 Timothy 2:15 ESV)

**Introduction:**

Let me read to you a brief snippet from a conversation I had with a co-worker a few years ago:

Me: Have you ever read the Bible?

Sam: Yeah, a bit here and there

Me: What do you think it's about?

Sam: Um, it's mostly just a bunch of stories of people who did things, and it tells us how we should live our lives.

You know, Sam is not all that wrong. The Bible is a bunch of stories. But it's not 'just' a bunch of stories. The Bible also tells us how we should live our lives, but it's so much more than just about what we are to do.

When I was Sam's age, about 19 years old, I had never read the Bible. I had heard a few stories here and there, but I'd never read it with the intention of learning anything, or being changed by it. And yet, as Christians, that's exactly what we set out to do when we read the Bible for ourselves.

We know there's something qualitatively different about this book that separates it from any other book.

Yet, because it is qualitatively different from every other book, we can't expect to simply read it as we would any other book.

There is great value in reading the Bible:

## Read Psalm 119:9–16

- <sup>9</sup> How can a young man keep his way pure?  
By guarding it according to your word.
- <sup>10</sup> With my whole heart I seek you;  
let me not wander from your commandments!
- <sup>11</sup> I have stored up your word in my heart,  
that I might not sin against you.
- <sup>12</sup> Blessed are you, O LORD;  
teach me your statutes!
- <sup>13</sup> With my lips I declare  
all the rules of your mouth.
- <sup>14</sup> In the way of your testimonies I delight  
as much as in all riches.
- <sup>15</sup> I will meditate on your precepts  
and fix my eyes on your ways.
- <sup>16</sup> I will delight in your statutes;  
I will not forget your word.

Good morning and welcome to our **How to Study the Bible** equipping class. Over the next 13 weeks we'll consider:

- The most important methods of understanding how the Bible fits together
- The Bible's structure and literary genres
- And some specific study tools and methods to allow us to better understand the Bible.

Our goal is to equip you to grow in your love for God, and grow in your discernment of how to live as faithful followers of our Lord Jesus Christ, by teaching you how to read and understand the Bible.

To that end, today's class looks at the foundations of the Bible. It's not meant to be exhaustive. And we won't be able to answer all the very interesting questions you may have.

When we have time to ask questions, try to keep in mind something that you think would be helpful for the whole class. It's the difference between asking, "Did Jesus have a belly-button?" versus, "How can I know God is trustworthy?"

Several decent study Bibles with articles providing interpretation and background information include the following:

- *MacArthur Study Bible*
- *HCSB Study Bible*
- *ESV Study Bible*

\*\*\*\*[STOP FOR QUESTIONS]\*\*\*\*

If you have more questions after this class, I'll be around to talk.

So, while we may not get through a great deal, we're going to start by asking two simple questions:

First, "What is the Bible?"

Second, "Is the Bible reliable?"

## **I. What Is the Bible?**

### **A. Inspired**

The Bible is unlike any book ever written. At the most fundamental level, it is both authored by human beings and by God – the word Christians have commonly used to describe this process is "inspired." This means that the Bible is the product of God inspiring and using human authors to write His perfect, holy words without error or defect.

Two passages that explicitly tell us the Bible is God's inspired word:

2 Timothy 3:16

*"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."*

That phrase "breathed out by God," literally means "God-breathed." That's where we get our use of the word "inspired."

1 Peter 1:20, 21

*“knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”*

The Bible originated, not with the will of its human writers, but with the will of God the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:20–21). Over 3,000 times biblical writers claimed to have received their messages from God. God the Holy Spirit “inspired” (breathed out or originated) the Scriptures through the human writers (2 Timothy 3:16).

To be clear, this does not mean that God dictated the Bible to its human authors. Rather, they wrote with their own creativity, and in their own styles, and their own vocabulary, accomplishing exactly what God wanted.

That word “carried along” is the same word that describes Paul’s ship in Acts 27:15 that’s “carried along” by the storm.

God commissioned His true prophets to write, including Moses (Exodus 17:14; 34:27), Joshua (Joshua 24:15–26), Samuel (1 Samuel 10:25), Isaiah (Isaiah 30:8), Jeremiah (Jeremiah 30:2; 36:2, 17, 28–29), Ezekiel (Ezekiel 43:11), and Habakkuk (Habakkuk 2:2).

Hence the Bible was not a result of Israel’s quest for God; it is God’s witness against Israel (Deuteronomy 31:26). Zechariah laments the fact that Israel “made their hearts like a rock so as not to obey the law or the words that the LORD of Hosts had sent by His Spirit through the earlier prophets” (Zechariah 7:12).

The collection (or canon) of biblical books began to be formed as inspired writings were placed alongside the ark of the covenant in which were contained the Ten Commandments (Deuteronomy 31:24–26; Joshua 24:25–26; 1 Samuel 10:25; 1 Kings 8:9; Is 8:20; 29:18; 34:16).

The Lord Jesus Christ validated the OT’s inspiration by quoting from all three sections: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings (Luke 24:44). He endorsed the inspiration and authority of the OT in detail (Matthew 5:17–18).

The Lord also prepared His disciples for the coming of the NT (John 16:12) and so endorsed it in principle. Paul received revelation pertaining to redemption (Galatians 1:11–17) and expected his writings to be received as from God (2 Thessalonians 2:13, 15). Peter classified Paul’s writings with the inspired OT

(2 Peter 3:16).

So, in the twenty-first century, we can rely on our own translations to convey what believers need to be “equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:17).

Every word of the Bible – every book – is equally inspired and authoritative. The OT prophets treated the books of Moses as inspired and authoritative and Jesus treated all of the OT in the same way.

Something worth mentioning is our own experience with the Scriptures. The longer I spend studying the Bible, and the more flawlessly I see it fit together—even pieces written thousands of years apart—the more it feels like the work of God.

I know that’s not something you can bank your life on. But for me, in addition to more objective arguments, I have to say it feels like what it claims to be.

There’s much more that could be said about the nature of Scripture’s inspiration, but for our purposes it’s important you see the *divine origin of the Bible as well as its human authorship*.

This reality shows us:

1. God wants us to know Him and in His kindness He has revealed Himself to us in the Bible so that we may know Him.
2. God was kind to choose human authors so that we could understand God’s Word and have everything we need for “life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3).

Knowing the Bible is true should cause us to want to study it to find out what it says and what God is saying to us!

## **B. Look at What God’s Word Says about Itself**

Consider the passages on the handout. They keep referring this thing called “the word of the Lord.” Listen as I read through them:

- Psalm 12:6, “The words of the LORD are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times.”

- Psalm 18:30, “the word of the LORD proves true; he is a shield for all those who take refuge in him.”
- Psalm 119:89 it says, “Forever, O LORD, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens.”
- In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus Himself says, “... It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God’” (Matthew 4:4).

According to these passages, the word of the Lord is:

- pure
- true
- eternal
- life-giving

These descriptions of God’s Word are really the descriptions of all of the Bible. When we read the Bible, we want to have a conviction that what we are reading is trustworthy, sufficient, and authoritative for our lives. And it means that when we read the Bible, we are assuming that God has wisdom for us to gain, which can only be gained through reading His inspired Word to us.

\*\*\*\*[STOP FOR QUESTIONS]\*\*\*\*  
Any questions specifically on inspiration?

So Christians make some pretty significant claims about the Bible.

- It’s the Word of God.
- It’s perfect and without error.
- It’s reliable and understandable enough for Christians to stake their eternity on.
- It’s sufficient for all matters of godliness.

## II. Is the Bible Reliable?

Well, it may well be that all that is true of the Bible that first-century Christians read. But what about us? Haven’t things been lost over time? Muslims, for example, claim that what we have today is a hopelessly corrupted version of the original. How do we know they’re wrong?

It's important for you to understand that we can have full assurance and confidence that our modern Bibles are trustworthy and authoritative just like the original texts.

### **A. Three Tests of Reliability**

Many critics scoff at this claim, but let's just see how the Bible stacks up using some of the most common methods of assessing the reliability of ancient texts. There are three standard criteria by which the authenticity and integrity of ancient texts may be judged:

1. quantity of manuscripts – how many older manuscripts have we discovered?
2. quality of those manuscripts – Are the manuscripts we have consistent or are there variations?
3. the time interval between when the original manuscript was written by the author and the oldest manuscripts we have in our possession (generally, the shorter the interval, the higher the reliability).<sup>1</sup>

### **B. Old Testament**

#### *Quantity of manuscripts*

We must admit—like most books of antiquity—there are relatively few OT manuscripts. That's because they were made of animal skins that didn't last as long as clay tablets or other mediums.

Also, the Old Testament was written by nomadic people (the Israelites) who were under political subjugation for much of their history. Another reason for scarcity is due to their reverence for the Word of God.

The Hebrew scribes actually burned or buried worn out or flawed manuscripts. Of course, this negative affect on quantity is actually a positive when it comes to quality.

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<sup>1</sup> W. Gary Phillips and William E. Brown, *Making Sense of Your World: A Biblical Worldview* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Publishing Co., 1991), 116.

### *Quality of manuscripts*

The OT manuscripts have a nearly unparalleled quality due to the diligence of a group of scribes called the Masoretes who copied the OT between the 5th and 9th centuries AD.

One scholar put it this way, “[The Masoretes had] specifications not only for the kind of skins to be used and the size of the columns, but there was even a religious ritual necessary for the scribe to perform before he wrote the name of God. Rules governed the kind of ink they were to use, the spacing of words, and also forbade their writing anything from memory. The lines, and even the letters, were counted methodically. If a manuscript was found to contain even one mistake, it was discarded and destroyed.”<sup>2</sup>

### *Time interval*

The discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls in 1947 was a big deal! It unearthed more than 100 copies of books of the OT that have been dated between 200 BC to AD 68.

Commenting on the quality of these manuscripts, Millar Burrows, a textual scholar at Yale University, wrote this. “It is a matter of wonder that through something like a thousand years the text underwent so little alteration.”<sup>3</sup>

The Dead Sea manuscripts are nearly identical to those dating to 500 AD, or 1300 AD. This just goes to show how carefully the text was transmitted over time.

The bottom line here is the Dead Sea scrolls give us a level of confidence that our copies are very close to the original documents – a confidence we have with no other text of that long ago.

Are there any questions about the reliability of the OT manuscripts?

## **C. New Testament**

### *Quantity of manuscripts*

We have over 5,700 Greek NT manuscripts ranging from early second century AD to sixteenth century AD.

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<sup>2</sup> Geisler and Nix, *General Introduction*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1986), 380.

<sup>3</sup> Millar Burrows, *The Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Viking, 1955), 304.



When you include early Arabic, Latin, and Coptic translations, we have up to 25,000 early manuscripts.

Just looking at the Greek manuscripts, 10 to 15 date within the first 100 years after the original was written, and about 50 within the first 200 years. This is a large number when you compare the NT books to other ancient texts.

- For example, consider the famous Annals written by the Roman historian Tacitus. We have only one copy, dating to the 9th century. 800 years after he wrote.
- The best attested of the Greek writers may be Euripides. We have about 300 fragments from his writings, the earliest about 700 years after he lived.

So think about it this way, the NT, has not just 10x, or 100x, but 1000x as many manuscripts as the average classical author. Simply stated, we have a lot of manuscripts to compare with each other to make sure we understand what was written in the originals.

### *Quality of manuscripts*

Regarding the quality of these manuscripts, I'll quote two scholars, Gary Phillips and William Brown,

It is true, however that the quality of the New Testament manuscripts is less than that of the Old Testament ones. More variant readings do exist, although these are usually matters of spelling or word order, not matters of doctrine.

However, because there are so many manuscripts of the New Testament available, by comparing the readings the original can be reconstructed. The result of the science of textual criticism is an almost pure text, and most of the remaining textual problems have reasonably sure answers.<sup>4</sup>

Critics point out these inconsistencies and then claim the Bible isn't reliable. But the truth is that less than 1% of these inconsistencies are truly meaningful in how

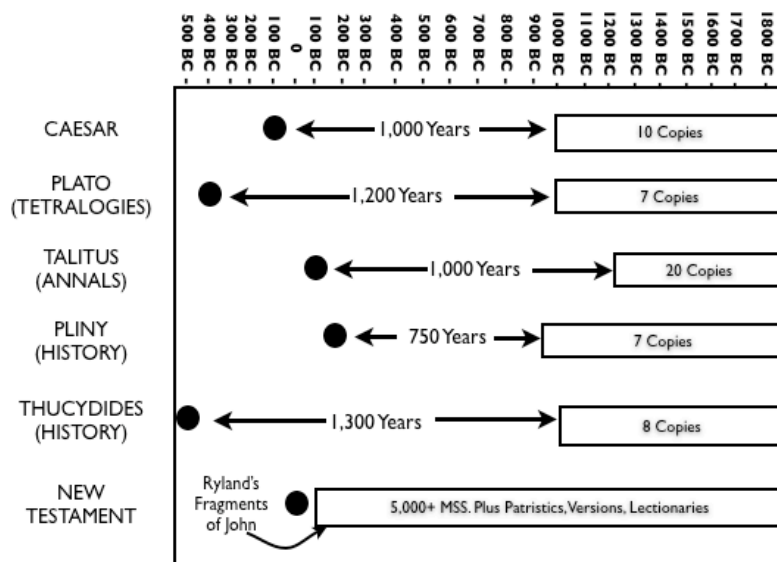
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<sup>4</sup> W. Gary Phillips & William E. Brown, *Making Sense of Your World*, 119.

we understand the text and when those inconsistencies do occur most translations acknowledge them in footnotes. Bible translators aren't trying to hide anything.

Why are there so many copies?

Because the NT contains good news! The gospel of Jesus Christ is contained in these pages. The apostles and early Christians wanted to get the gospel out to as many people as possible. They wanted everyone to know that God had provided a way for sinful people to be reconciled with their Creator, if they would simply repent of their sin and trust in Christ's life, death, resurrection, and reign—they can be saved from God's wrath!



This is good news and so it was copied and distributed widely, often giving rise to the types of variations I just mentioned.

But again remember, the sheer number of manuscripts means that we have a deep pool of texts that we can examine and we are able to now have almost a “pure text,” as the scholars called it.

### *Time interval*

Finally, we turn to the time interval test for the NT manuscripts. Remember, this is the time between when the original manuscript was written and the oldest manuscripts we have today.

The time interval for the NT is unusually short for ancient writings, which means the NT is very reliable. Some of our manuscripts are from the 3rd and 4th centuries. Others date from within 100 years of the estimated date of the original manuscript, and we have papyrus papers that are within 25 years. Take a look at the graphic provide there in your handout (talk through it).

**\*\***The bottom line here is that both the OT and NT are some of the most historically reliable and documented of all the ancient texts.

We ought to give God much praise for the way He has protected and sustained His Word through the ages. This illustrates His great kindness and deep desire that His people know Him and follow His commands.

**\*\*\*\*[STOP FOR QUESTIONS]\*\*\*\***

Are there any questions about the reliability of either the OT or NT texts?

### **A Brief Word on Translations**

OK. So some words on the reliability of the originals, and the reliability of the copies we have today. But of course, very few of us are reading from the original Greek or Hebrew. We use English translations.

Which leads to some final questions: how can we trust the Bible if there are so many versions of it? How do we know which translation is best? Or even more central to the question, how can we trust a translation at all? Shouldn't we read the text in the original languages if we want to truly understand it?

Well, it's true that learning to read the Bible in its original languages can be extremely helpful. But what I need to emphasize is we have all the tools we need to understand the Bible in English such that we can read, and understand, and teach the full council of God's Word.

Even by the time of Jesus, the Bible had a long history of being translated—and Jesus didn't seem to have any problems with that. And unlike many religions that are centered on one particular ethnic and linguistic group, Christianity has always been trans-ethnic and trans-national—even from the early chapters of the book of Acts. So it may be that a good Muslim needs to read the Bible in Arabic. But you can be a perfectly faithful Christian and never learn a word of Hebrew or Greek.

So which translation is best? The simple answer is, many of them. If you really want to understand the text, grab a few different translations and compare them to see how the range of the English language encompasses the meaning of the

original words. You'll notice that at PBC our pastor preaches from the ESV in our services.

The following evaluation of a few modern translations represents the opinion of Capital Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC (Pastor Mark Dever):

The ESV is a good, solid translation that's a good starting point. It tries to stick pretty close to the detail of the original language, which means that it is very accurate but can be difficult to read at times. The NIV and the HCSB are two translations that are more "thought for thought" translations—so they're easier to read and we rely a bit more on the translator's interpretation of the text.

The NASB is on the other side of the ESV: still readable, but sometimes a bit more clunky than even the ESV. But it does a great job of capturing the sense of the original vocabulary. Then there are paraphrases like The Message that put the Bible in everyday English. They can be great to get a sense of a large passage. But they don't stick very closely to the original vocabulary and sentence structure. So they're not intended for careful Bible study like what we're teaching in this class.

\*\*\*\*[STOP FOR QUESTIONS]\*\*\*\*

Are there any questions about anything we have covered today?

## **Conclusion**

So in conclusion, the Bible is the very words of God. It is the most powerful source of knowledge and wisdom available anywhere. It is the only source of special revelation regarding our Creator's nature, plans, and requirements for His people.

Furthermore, the Bible is reliable, containing all we need to know to be saved and to glorify God. As Christians, we ought to give ourselves to studying this book. Studying the Bible will allow us to understand who God is, understand who we are, and understand who Jesus is and what He's done for us. And there is nothing more important than that!

Let's pray.

Homework: Read Luke 24:13–35, 44; Deuteronomy 18:20–22; 2 Peter 3:16. What do these verses say about the reliability of Scripture?

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## FAQs

Just in case – Canon criteria

1. Written by a recognized prophet or apostle (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Moses, Paul, or Peter).
2. Written by those associated with recognized prophet or apostle (Luke and Acts).
3. Truthfulness (Deuteronomy 18:20–22) – “if a prophet claims to be speaking from me, and what he said is not true, then he has not spoken from Me.”
4. Faithfulness to previously accepted canonical writings (Hebrews).
5. Confirmed by Christ, prophet, or apostle (e.g. Luke 24:44; 2 Peter 3:16).
6. Church usage and recognition: The Church used these writings and was deeply edified by them; they were believed over time that they were from God, and so the final acceptance of the recognition of the 66 books of the Bible as Scripture took place at the Senate of Carthage in AD 397.