

What is the Bible?

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[0 : 00] We're starting a new series tonight called believing the scriptures in a secular age.

And I want to read from 1 Thessalonians 2 verse 13 as we begin. So if you want to read with me, that'll be the text that will base our reflection on.

Let's read 1 Thessalonians 2 verse 13.

And it says, And we also thank God constantly for this that when you receive the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as what it really is the word of God, which is that word in you believers.

Every single one of us in here tonight knows that believing in the Bible as the authority and rule of life is really hard in the 21st century.

[1 : 10] And people all around us in the culture that we live in find it really difficult to accept the idea that the Bible has a supernatural authority about it.

And even more that it is the living speech of God that can do things that that can affect change in the midst of the heart or in the midst of society.

And so that's what we want to think about in this series is how can we trust the Bible? So we'll get into real specific issues over the course of this, even considering things like the Bible and slavery, the Bible and genocide, the Bible and violence as a category or what to do with Bart Ehrman's claims that there are over 400 technical errors or something like that.

So we'll get into some of those details as time goes on and think about those. But tonight I want to do something more fundamental and ask, what is the Bible? What is the Bible?

Where does it come from? Where is its power located? What does it mean to say it's powerful? So what is it? Where does it come from? What do we mean when we say it's powerful?

[2 : 18] It has power. So we read from 1 Thessalonians 2.13. This is a famous text about inspiration. And Paul says here that when he spoke the gospel and preached to the Thessalonians that he's thankful to God that they heard it as what it really is.

And what does he say it really is? He says it really is the Word of God, not the Word of men. Now when we define scripture, my favorite simple definition for what the Bible is is to say it like this. The Bible is the Word of God in the words of men. It's the Word of God in the words of humans. And that sounds almost like it's contradicting Paul.

Because Paul says you heard it as the Word of God, not the Word of men. But the key is that that little phrase Word of men there is to be thought of as something like the primary author, the absolute authority.

There's things that are given by the Word of men. They're contingent. They're relative. And there's the Word of God. What we have in the Bible is what Paul says, the Word of God in the words of human beings.

[3 : 39] Both of those things have got to go together. Now that means for us that the Bible is written by an author that is beyond space and time, that is absolute, and written by authors that are contingent within space and time at the very same time.

And that means the Bible is like other books because other books are written by human beings. It can be printed on paper. It's like other books.

And at the same time, it's not like any other book because it has an absolute divine author, an authorship that stands outside of all space and time, an authorship that comes from the Creator Himself.

Now here's the question. How can this be the Word of God that comes with authority and with power into the human life if it truly is also the words of human beings?

And the reason that we have to ask that question is because when you think about the authors of scripture, Moses, David, Paul, these are incredibly sinful men.

[4 : 49] They have really bad track records. They were not great people for a lot of their lives. And they continue to sin. And even as they wrote the Bible, they were sinners. And they wrote the Bible as sinners.

And so we've got this, what we say, infallible, authoritative Word of divine power written, truly written by sinful human speech.

And both of those things come together. And so that's one of the things that we've got to reckon with when we ask the question, what's the Bible? So let me dig into it a little bit. What is the Bible? What is this book? We said it's the Word of God in the words of men. If you go into the culture, you're going to get three or four typical definitions of what the Bible is.

So if you go to the Academy, Capital A, if you go to a place like New College, for example, across the street, or the Modern Religious Academy, the university, the main idea about the Bible is what we might call simply the naturalistic approach.

[5 : 51] And that's that the Bible is a great artifact of human history, something that's really worthy to be studied. But it's not the Word of God in the words of men. It's the words of men exclusively.

And so it's the words of men that were religious people, that they were inspired in some sense the Word. But that inspiration comes from something in nature, something from within themselves.

And so it denies the first half of the claim that Paul offers us, the words of God, just the words of men, a great document, but merely human. That's the Academy that that perhaps is one extreme, the naturalist approach.

The opposite, the opposite extreme, for lack of a better term, I'll call it the fundamentalist approach. The fundamentalist approach goes in the entire opposite direction.

And it says the Bible is not the words of God and the word of men really. The Bible is just the Word of God. And you can understand why a person might want to go there and might want to say that they're trying to put God at the center of everything, of what the Bible is and what the Bible doesn't, where it has power.

[7 : 02] They've got a big view of God's sovereignty. And that's exactly what that view is. We call it extreme theory, extreme dictation theory, or an extreme authorship theory.

And the idea is that even though perhaps, yes, Paul wrote the letter, what's happening in the creation of the Bible is that God is using Paul merely as a machine.

So God is speaking through Paul in a manner that we might call dictation. He's using him as a mere vessel. Paul's own personality is not involved.

Paul's own context is not involved. But Paul remembers from what his mom taught him when he was a boy or key phrases or anything like that is not involved, not at all. It's God speaking through him by way of dictation.

Now it's important to know that Christians for 2,000 years reject that theory of what the Bible is. We don't believe in a mechanical dictation view of what the Bible is, that it's God working just through humans as mere vessels.

[8 : 05] Why? Well, for one, this is the view of several other religions about their own scriptures. So what other religions view their scriptures in this way?

Islam very famously, the Quran, is complete dictation, a mechanical control over the will of Muhammad dictated by an angel.

Another one very famous, the Jehovah's Witness. Yeah, also the Mormons as well. So several that complete dictation theory. So you've got the naturalistic problem you've got on the flip side, the dictation, mechanical dictation theory problem.

And then one other I think that's really common amongst religious people. You might find that left leaning, more liberalized Christian denominations is they're going to talk about how God is the author of scripture, but he's the author of scripture in a really nuanced way.

And the way he's the author of scripture is that what he's done is he's come into the lives of the people that wrote the Bible and he's inspired them. Inspired in the sense that he guided them.

[9 : 20] There were very religious people, but he left everything open. And so he wanted to give them guidance, but he also wanted them to make their own choices. And so the Bible really is a book that's an inspired religious document, but can't word of God in historic sense of the term.

It's a book of religious inspiration of people who were guided by the divine merely by their personal relationship to God. And what that does, now the reason a person might go down that road is because it enables them to say the Bible is both important for religion.

It has some level of authority, but at the same time, because God left the human writers open to kind of do what they wanted to do, it leaves the possibility of saying it's full of ideological and material errors all over.

But it's divine in a sense, but it's very, very human. And so if you find a material error, if you find an ideological error, you can say, I'm okay with that. I'm okay with that because I know that God was leaving space.

He was leaving space for the human to make their own decisions. Okay, and so this is kind of another route that some versions of Christian doctrine on this have gone. Now, the problem, let me just give you the problem with the last one.

[10:36] The problem is that the Bible won't let you say that because the Bible claims so much more than that. So you've got a text like John 10:35 where Jesus says, the scriptures cannot be broken.

And in that passage, he uses a Greek verb that has a metaphorical connotation, which is the sense of a rope that's been tied together through different strands.

So if you weave a rope together, if you mess around with a fraying rope, that you can pull all the strands apart. And so he takes that metaphor and says, scripture cannot be unraveled is the idea. It's translated broken, I think in the USB. What's the idea? The idea there is the Bible is composed of 66 books in English, over a 1500 year period at least, by tons of different authors, we don't know exactly how many.

And he's saying, yet, it's one thing that cannot be unraveled. He's saying you can't treat it as if it's just a multiplicity, a collection of mere human documents.

[11:44] That's Jesus's claim. And so either you've got to take it or you've got to reject it. You've got to go naturalism or supernaturalism. That's the only option because of the claims that the Bible makes about itself over and over and over again, it self authenticates and makes enormous claims.

And you've got to choose to be with it and for it or against it. It really won't let you do anything else in between. All right, so what I want to say briefly just about what it is and we've got to hurry.

I probably won't get to everything is that ultimately what you believe the Bible is, is entirely based at a more foundational level on what you think about the relationship between God and the world.

All right, so what do we as Christians believe about the relationship between God and the world?

We believe God is the Creator, not the creation, meaning that there are only two things that exist.

You're either the Creator or you're a creature. There's only two types of stuff. There's God and there's everything else. And God is not the everything else. He's completely other, completely.

[12:55] We don't even share being with God. We don't share existence with God. He's totally other outside of space, outside of time, the Creator, not the creature in any way.

And secondly, God has chosen to relate to the creaturely world primarily by way of speaking.

When you open the Bible, Genesis one, the very first thing you see God do is that he relates to creation by creating it how by speech. Speech is the quality, that thing by which God wants to relate to the world.

And so we learn that God is a divine communicative agent and that he loves to communicate by way of word and that we're created, no surprise.

And one of the very first things we learn that makes us different from the animals is that we can speak. We have personal communicative agency. And so God stands wholly separate from the world, yet he connects to the world by way of speaking, but then he does it even further by way of covenant.

[14:04] And so the primary way that we learn as Christians in the Bible that God relates to us is by making covenants and covenants are made by speech.

God declares the covenant. It's the same thing mimicked in an analogy in the way we make marriage vows. God does that with us. And yet at the same time in the covenant ceremonies, we do it back to God.

We speak. And so this great divine communicative agent that is God who created the world by speech made us to be speakers as well in our communication.

And then he decides that the fundamental relationship we're all going to have together is solidified through speech and maintained by speech, through word, through prayer, through covenant relational speaking to one another.

When we speak to God, it doesn't impinge upon or change the fact that he is absolutely another. And when he speaks to us, it doesn't take away at all from his absolute being.

[15:05] And yet at the same time, God in the covenant says, you have choices. You can you can you have free will you have agency you can obey or not you can be blessed.

He says to Israel in the covenant or be cursed. You can make your vow. You can break your vow. He gives in the midst of the covenant free agency, free will to human beings.

Now, the same exact thing is happening in a sense, or that's the foundational backdrop, the covenant to what scripture is the covenant book.

And in the covenant book, the absolute author speaks absolutely and simultaneously, the creaturely human sinful author speak at the exact same time.

We hold in divine mystery that God's absolute purposes are maintained and the human will is not completely sequestered, that both of those things are possible.

[16:05] And that's exactly what's in divine inspiration. It's important to say this is maybe something you've not thought about or something that you that we tend to think I think wrongly about the humans that wrote the Bible are not inspired humans.

They're not humans, no, not at all. Instead what they wrote is inspired by God by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

And it's important to say that because Paul was not an inspired human. You know, he didn't when everything that he said over dinner with his buddies was God's word.

He did, you know, Isaiah didn't speak God's words all the time. No, not at all. Instead, what they wrote in the light of the presence of the Holy Spirit as the agent of inspiration is God's word.

So it's the text, the word of God that's inspired, not the human that's inspired. And that's fundamental. God does things by human words.

[17:10] I want to my favorite illustrations to make this clear. It's imperfect. It's a little apart at some point, but it works for at least the first few pieces of logic.

You know, if you've got an ambassador to state, you know, the ambassador meets with the prime minister. And the prime minister says to the ambassador, you know, this is what I want you to communicate to the foreign president that you're going to visit.

The ambassador goes and when he speaks in the right moment, according to the purpose that he's been given, he's inspired.

He speaks the very word of the prime minister. And it's not just that he dictates that word identically, right, because the president has questions. You know, the president says, well, what about this?

Well, what about that? Well, the ambassador has the power by inspiration through the deputizing of the prime minister to say this is the word of the prime minister.

[18:14] Now when the ambassador goes to, you know, the hotel bar later that night and has dinner, he no longer speaks with inspiration. He doesn't have the power to say this is what the prime minister says to his waiter, right?

No, not at all. And the same thing is happening in inspiration. Now before we move on, because we have to move on because we're nearly out of time, I just want to give a caution here because what we're trying to say is what we have here.

I listened to once again, Jordan Peterson, the public intellectuals interview with a Roman Catholic thinker today. And he said, Jordan said, if you believe that God really has come into the world and the incarnation that the narrow title as he calls it, the world of the spirit, the myth, as he likes to say, has entered into the real world, then you ought to be terrified of the consequences for your own life. If you think that this is the divine word of God with absolute authority over all existence, that this is the true speech of the living God, then the consequences are terrifying.

They're terrifying in the sense of they're so big. They're so extreme. They're so important. They're so critical that we have to fight the temptation to get bored with this book.

[19:37] Now simultaneously what I want to say as we move on, and I'll just be able to make one brief point simultaneously, what I want to say is that scripture is the word of God.

It's so important and it is not God. Scripture is the word of God, but scripture, this book is not God. And so if the Reformers were upset with the Roman Catholic Church for not taking this seriously

enough, sometimes people would be justified in the evangelical church in times and places of saying, you can mistake this for God himself.

This is not the word of God. This is not God. This is the word of God. This is the means by which we know God, by which God has spoken. And so even in our tradition, this tradition in the past, there has been times where the Bible has been possessed and kissed and different things.

And those can mean different things and maybe you can make sense of it. But ultimately I think that's a mistake because it misses the fact that this is not God. This is that by which God has spoken so that we may worship and know the true and living God.

All right. In four minutes, let me say something about why the scripture has power. We've already said that the scripture has power.

[21 : 05] It is the word of God because it's inspired. And so 2 Timothy 3 16 is the famous text. All scriptures breathed out by God. That means it's divine.

It has power. It has life. But let me move on to the second big reason. If all that we've said so far is true, then the best way to think about scripture and why it is so powerful is to say that scripture is at the end of the day, Trinitarian discourse.

And to say that is to say that there is something more going on when you as a Christian read the Bible than you ever know. That's the view. And here's what it is. Here's what the Bible teaches us about what's going on when you read the Bible.

The father is the speaker of the divine word. The son of God is the very content of that speech. God, the father speaks. He speaks the content that is the son. And Luke 24, Jesus tells us that every single word of the Bible is about him.

[22 : 14] And the Holy Spirit is the interpreter of that speech. There in and through the believer. And so when you read the Bible, the promise of God is that the father speaks.

He speaks the word, the son, and it is the Holy Spirit that interprets that speech. And so when the Bible, we say is rightly preached and proclaimed, it is the Holy Spirit that is the primary interpreter. Right. And that means that when we read the Bible rightly, what's happening is a is the Trinitarian presence of God at work in the person's life. It's Trinitarian discourse.

And that means that the power of the Bible is all based in God's divine presence. It's all about the fact that God is with us as we read and as we receive discourse, discourse, Trinitarian and discourse, not just Trinitarian words.

So this is just a foray into some of the little little things that we need to deal with when we think about the problems we face in believing scripture in the modern world. How is it that we can say that all of these words are divine words whenever we know that they're not the original?

[23 : 31] And in fact, when if I was to bring up Greek Bible or Hebrew Bible and read from it, we can say that that is not the original. We don't have the original, the autographs, the first copies, the very piece of paper that Paul wrote on, the very stone that Moses carved the Ten Commandments into.

We don't have that. How can we say? This is precisely why we want to say that the word of God is Trinitarian discourse. In the autographs and the originals, every single word was intentioned by the Holy Spirit.

But we know that this has been translated by a committee. We got the ESV here, it was translated by a committee of 13 people, and they've made changes to it.

But it remains the word of God. How so? And it's because the inspiration of God is not primarily about every little word, every little jot and tittle, though in the autographs it is that.

But it's the fact that God by the power of the Spirit has preserved his word as discourse. What is discourse? Discourse is what a sentence means.

[24 : 41] You can change the words. You can translate it from Hebrew to Greek. You can translate it from Greek to English. You can translate it from English to French. And yet the discourse remains, which is the meaning, the intention, the very thing that God wants to communicate.

And that's why we can translate the Bible into thousands of languages across thousands of years and call every single copy the word of God. Now the last reason, and I'll just have to stop, that we can do that is because Jesus said we could.

So in the Gospels, whenever Jesus stands up in the synagogue, he opens the scroll of Isaiah, he reads, what's he reading from?

Jesus reads Isaiah and he says, today this is fulfilled in your hearing, this is the word of God. And what's he reading from? He's reading from the Old Testament.

He's reading from a copy and he's reading very likely in most instances from a Greek translation. And so Jesus is reading a translation. He's reading a copy of a copy of a copy and he says, this is the word of God.

[25 : 47] And so we've got to either say with Jesus, okay, or not. We've got to go with him if we're for him. If we believe he rose from the dead, we've got to say, I'm okay with copies of copies of copies of copies.

And there's a lot more we can say about that to bolster that idea. But the ultimate power of the word of God is that it is indeed Trinitarian discourse and that God's very presence is here as we read it and as the people of God gather especially to read it in particular places like this and on the Lord's day.

All right, I had a long section on what anerrancy really means, but we'll have to wait for that to another day. That's another important one. Okay, let's pray together.

The prayer tonight is simply asking God to make his word alive to us. His word is alive, but in our sinfulness and our dullness, we need help.

And so we ask that God would make his word alive to us for the presence of the Spirit that he would stir us up. And at the beginning of the year, maybe an important prayer in your life might be Lord, help me to stay committed to the word.

[26 : 58] To reading the Bible, to loving the Bible, to loving it not because it is God, but because it is that through which God has spoken. It is his divine speech. All right, so let's pray that prayer together now.

Lord, we ask that you would help us to love your word, that we would feel and know the power and presence of the Trion God as we read it, that you Father speak, that the Son, you O Christ are the very content of this word and that you Holy Spirit interpret it for us.

And so help us to see it rightly, do that work and also Lord, and give us a deep, deep love for what you have said. And we pray this in Christ's name. Amen.