

Bible Special 06-05-23a

This is the 23rd day of May, 2006. We continue tonight our special on Why the Bible? Why Christianity? Are there good reasons? Or are we just being blindly faithful in trusting in God's Word and trusting in God's Son? Let's take a moment as we begin to ensure that God the Holy Spirit can do His work in our souls by going to the Lord in prayer. Father, we are grateful for this opportunity to spend time in fellowship and in the study of Your Word.

We thank You for its preservation, for its uniqueness, for those things that You have given us by way of witness and testimony to confirm that it is from You. We ask that God the Holy Spirit will take these truths and these facts and add them to the resources in our souls so that we can be ready always to give an answer to every man who asks us a reason for the hope that is in us. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

This, as I said last time, is a slightly different kind of study than we typically do. We generally address ourselves to passages of Scripture verse by verse, passage by passage, in order, going through books. That's the way God's Word was written and it seems right that that is the way it should be received.

But it, I think, is useful to also have an understanding of the Word of God itself, how it came into our hands, what its characteristics are, why we recognize it as God's Word, not only by faith but also by reason. You will find, as you move around in the wide world, that there are people who think that Christian faith is unreasonable, that no reasonable person would believe the Scriptures are the Word of God, no reasonable person would believe in the miraculous events recorded in it, no reasonable person would think that Jesus Christ is the Messiah, the Son of God. Therefore, if you are a Christian, there is something wrong with your mental processes.

You are not logical. You have some sort of flaw. You have some sort of psychological or pathological need that Christian faith fills.

You are deficient in some way. There's something wrong with you. Well, this is nonsense.

The eminent Bible scholars of the world who have devoted their lives not only to studying the text of Scripture but also its context, its historic context, its literary context, the culture of ancient times, the early witnesses to it and so on, these men are not strange and psychologically crippled. Millions upon millions upon millions of people for the last 2,000 years have looked at the witness of the New Testament and have found it to be reasonable. And the only criteria by which people find it unreasonable is when they start with a presupposition.

When they start with the presuppositions largely from the last century, recent times, that have to do with materialism, with a mechanistic view of the world. They begin this idea by looking at the writings of Charles Darwin who, interestingly, himself was a believer. But they start with Darwin and his observations regarding nature and his theories that animals of greater complexity sprung from animals of simpler complexity and that natural selection had a role to

play in the development of biological species as we see them.

And the investigations of science proceed on experimental basis. We observe, we test, we try to eliminate variables and so on in science. Well, all of this has led to a false conflict, a false comparison that, well, there's either the Bible or there's science.

You can't believe both. If you believe the Bible, you're unscientific. You're irrational.

Well, last time we looked at the characteristics of the Word of God and why it has such a unique place in history. It is unique in literature. It is unique in terms of its manuscript attestation.

I had some questions come in last time about some of the things that we observed, such as other ancient manuscripts and what was there. Are they in any way similar? Because we have very early witnesses, particularly for the New Testament. And we have seen that the Hebrew witnesses for the Old Testament are consistent across a thousand years.

We didn't have any manuscripts earlier than about 1100 AD for the Old Testament scriptures in Hebrew until the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered. And that rolled back the testimony a thousand years. And the Hebrew of the books, every single book of the Hebrew canon was found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, at least fragments of it.

But every single book except Esther is found in whole or in part in the Dead Sea Scrolls. And the parts that they have found and if compared to the manuscripts of a thousand years later, they are virtually identical. They are the natural mistakes that you would find due to scribal copying, but they are minor.

None of them affect the meaning. None of them change the significance of the text. None of them say, well, it wasn't Moses on Mount Sinai, it was Joshua or Caleb or someone else.

The differences, the variations, are exceedingly minor, less than 5%, less than 2% in many cases. So, what are we looking at here? There is a great deal of historic preservation of the biblical text. And ancient texts in other categories don't enjoy this.

I mentioned last time Catalyst. He was a poet who lived in the first century B.C. Ovid and Suetonius mention him. He lived around Verona.

And somewhere circa 50 B.C., he seems to have not lived very long. He seems to have lived, some witnesses think that he only lived until about 30 and then he got tired and died. I mean literally, they say he died of exhaustion at the age of 30.

So they figure maybe 84 to 54 B.C. because he alludes to certain things in his poems that took place or were current at those times. Anyway, Catalyst was a very famous poet and he influenced later poets such as Ovid, Horace, and Virgil. And yet his poetry, which is from the century before Christ, the earliest copy that we have is based on a manuscript that was discovered around the year 1300.

That manuscript is also lost, but there were two copies made from it. And only one of those copies survived. And then there are three manuscripts based on the second copy of the one manuscript that was found in 1300.

So 1300 years after the fact, you get three copies of Catalyst, who was a renowned poet in his day. You can look at one of the most famous historians of the ancient world, Herodotus. And Herodotus' histories were initially published around 430 to 424 B.C., 400 years before Christ.

And I mentioned last time that the earliest witnesses we have for Herodotus are 1300 years after the fact, which means our earliest manuscript is 1,000 years after the fact, would be 600 A.D., right? And then add another 300 years to that, so circa 900 A.D., between 900 and 1,000 A.D., those are the earliest copies of Herodotus, who is one of the biggest historians of the ancient world. And we only have eight copies of him. Let me mention one other, because I find it very interesting.

I mentioned Caesar's Gallic Wars. He wrote that in circa 58 B.C., that's when the war took place. It is very polished and clear Latin, and it is often given to first-year Latin students as soon as they're able to translate, while they'll give them passages out of Caesar's Gallic Wars.

But again, the earliest manuscripts for this are circa 1,000 A.D., 950, 1,000 A.D., 1,000 years after the fact. And this is Julius Caesar, some of the finest Latin history that's ever been written, and the closest copy to what he actually wrote is a millennium after the fact. And the list goes on and on.

I won't give you all of those, but my point is that when you realize that the earliest fragments, the papyri that we have for the New Testament, are early second century, early in the 100s A.D., and that puts them within 50, 60 years, 70 years of the originals, there can only be maybe one or two copies between the autograph and those early witnesses. This is unheard of for early manuscripts. So Thucydides, this is the last one I'll give you.

Thucydides is back in the time of Xenophon. This is back a couple of hundred years before Christ. And the Peloponnesian War, you get the first part of it from Thucydides, and then you get the last seven years of it from Xenophon.

And those two guys together give us everything we know pretty much about the Peloponnesian War. But the total number of existing manuscripts for the most important historian for that time, this is Greek now, we're not talking about the Romans, Thucydides, Xenophon, this is Greek. The total number of existing manuscripts of Thucydides is about 50.

The oldest one is Codex Laurentianus, which is in Florence, and it's 10th century. So 1,200 years after the fact. All of these are just really, really late.

People didn't preserve those manuscripts like they did the manuscripts of the Bible. So what does all of this say? You can have confidence that the Bible in front of you is accurate by the standards of ancient literature and by the standards of the ancient world. It is incredibly

accurate, and it is incredibly well-attested, well-documented.

Now, here's another thought for you. The Jews who believed the Old Testament, even back in ancient times, were persecuted, tortured, and even died because they believed that their Old Testament books were the Word of God, and they would not deny them, and they would not recant. Much as the Christians of the first century, when they were persecuted, believed that their New Testament scriptures were inspired and carried the record of God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and they went to their death refusing to deny or recant that faith.

Now, if there were some sort of myths or fairy stories that were made up about Jesus, if it was like Aesop's fables written within the living memory of people who actually saw Jesus, who actually heard the disciples and later the apostles teach and preach, if somebody made up a bunch of nonsense, do you think people would have gone to the lions, would have been tortured and killed, would have been impaled, would have been crucified, would have been burned alive, and all of the other horrible tortures that were inflicted on them by not only the Romans, but also the Jews who decided that they were heretical, would people martyr themselves, give up their property, be driven out of the land for wild stories? There's only one reason that people will go to their death, and that is if they absolutely believe the truth of a thing. Now, it's one thing for someone today to say, well, I'm a Muslim, and I absolutely believe the Koran. There's nobody today who is an eyewitness of Muhammad in 600 A.D. or thereabouts, right? There's nobody who can say, wait a minute, this stuff you've got in the Koran here is not right because I was there.

But in the first century A.D., there were hundreds of people who were eyewitnesses and who could say these stories are false. That's why the early date of the Gospels, the early date of the manuscripts of the New Testament, are so important because their authorship within the living memory of eyewitnesses puts their content in a whole different category. People don't write spurious things within the time when eyewitnesses can dispute them.

And there are no documents. They have all of these Gospels of Judas, Gospels of Thomas, Gospels of Peter, and a lot of Gnostic writings and other writings that were branded heretical by the early church. These writings came out.

None of those writings deny what the Gospels claim. None of them deny that Jesus was crucified, buried, and rose from the dead. None of them deny that He walked on water or that He turned water to wine or that He fed 5,000 or that He fed 4,000.

They will put different interpretations on it, as I mentioned last time. The Gnostics will try to say, well, He was only the Son of God for a certain period of time. But the eyewitness facts, the eyewitness events, the raising of Lazarus, there are no first century witnesses who say, this is a falsehood.

There was no raising of Lazarus. I was there. Or, there was no resurrection of Jesus.

I saw His body. Even though the Jews paid the Roman guards and others to try to spread the story that Jesus did not get raised, none of that has survived. None of it was written down.

Nobody could make that fly because there were too many witnesses to the resurrection. There were upwards of 500 people. So, we've established that the text of your Bible has integrity like no other ancient document before or since.

Now, people try to say, well, the Bible is interpreted by so many different people in so many different ways. Have you ever heard this? Have you said, well, people make the Bible say anything. Look at all the denominations.

Look at all the confusion. Your Bible is unclear. It's confusing.

How can you believe it? And if you do believe it, what makes you think that your belief and your particular strand of Christianity is right when there's 400 or 500 other kinds of Christianity who interpret the Bible differently? This is one of the most common arguments you hear. So, therefore, the Bible is no good. It's worthless because nobody can figure out what it really means.

Well, first of all, this is kind of a sneaky argument because there is great widespread agreement on the essential teachings of the Bible in all the different denominations and all the different branches of Christianity. By and large, everyone believes that God created man in His image, that He gave him free will, that man chose to break God's command, and this is how sin came into the world. I've got a dictionary of denominations in there and you can read the creeds and the doctrinal statements of 430-odd different kinds of churches in there.

But you can't find more than a handful that deny any of those truths. God is the Creator. He created man.

Man was perfect. Man voluntarily sinned. And now sin is in the world and man is in a fallen state.

Virtually all Christian denominations of any size and with any history believe that to be true. Virtually all of them believe that God in love sent the Lord Jesus Christ who is God's Son, who died a death on the cross that was substitute. He paid the price that we could not pay.

Virtually all Christian denominations believe in the redemptive work of Christ on the cross. Virtually all of them. There's no dispute of any significance about that.

Christ paid the penalty for sin. And mankind can be entered into relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. Virtually any denomination.

You pick one. Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Catholic. Virtually anybody who claims Christian faith believes those truths.

That salvation is through the work of Christ on the cross and that you can, by faith, be entered

into relationship with God. There's no dispute about that. So people say, oh, well nobody knows what the Bible says.

Virtually everyone who claims biblical belief believes those things. In fact, there was a recent poll and in America today, believe it or not, you know that more than 44% of Americans believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and He's coming back? That's 4 out of every 10 people in this country believe the claims of the Lord Jesus. That He's the Son of God and that He's coming back.

More than 80%, well into the 80s, 8 to 9 people out of every 10 believe in God. Some form of the Creator God of the Bible. Now a lot of them won't believe in Christ.

A lot of them won't believe in one thing or another. But they believe in God. Better than 80% of the people.

You know what that tells me? God the Holy Spirit is doing His work of convicting the world of sin, righteousness and judgment. Now what people do with that knowledge is a far different thing. But 8 out of 10 Americans believe in God in some form or fashion.

And half of them believe in Christ. So don't let people convince you that Christianity is passe or it's something left over from the dark ages. People know better.

And the Bible is not confusing. It's not unclear on these central truths. And much of the lack of clarity and much of the confusion comes because people recognize the Bible as an authority and they want to use it as their authority for what they want to think or what they want to do.

And so they come to the Bible looking for a way to justify their preconceived belief. And so they will discard some parts of the Bible and emphasize others. They will proof text.

They will take things out of context. Homosexuals will go to the place where Paul says there is neither male nor female in Christ and say, see there, you don't have to worry about gender anymore if you're a Christian. Well, that's a strange sort of logic, a strange sort of citation of the Bible when it clearly says in other places that man lying with man as he would with woman is an abomination.

Or failing to note in the Old Testament that it was a death penalty offense in Israel reflecting God's attitude toward such things. But this is what people do with the Bible. Because it is authority, because people recognize it as the Word of God, they want to get it in their camp as backing up their point of view.

And so the lack of clarity is not so much a problem with the Bible as a problem with the people who go to the Bible and use bad methodology to interpret it and to quote it and to understand it. So, a big part of having an accurate faith and an accurate Christianity is having a proper approach to the Word of God. People say to you, what makes you think that your understanding of the Bible is correct? Well, most of the time people say, well, you know, I just

do.

I don't really know. I just, I believe it and that's enough. Well, there are good reasons for the view of the Bible and the understanding of the Bible in any given passage that we have.

And when we come back from the break, we're going to talk a little bit about why you can have confidence not only that the Bible is the Word of God, but that your understanding of the Word of God is accurate and valid and will stand up against other views that people try to take and that people will try to argue. Is it possible, in other words, to know what the Bible teaches? And the answer is yes, absolutely. That's the reason God gave it to us.

And the fact that people distort and pervert it doesn't mean that you and I cannot understand it and have confidence that our understanding is correct. And that's a very important point. What's the point of being a Christian and saying you believe the Bible if you don't really know what the Bible says and you're not sure that what you think it says is right? So, we'll take a look at that when we come back from the break.