

"HOW CAN YOU TAKE THE BIBLE LITERALLY?"

Today we're going to talk about the Bible. G. K. Chesterton was a brilliant Christian writer about a century ago. Somebody asked him, "If you were marooned on a desert island, and you could only have one book with you, what would it be?" His answer was, "*A Handbook of Practical Shipbuilding.*" True story about Chesterton. He was a really witty guy. If you find yourself trapped in a desperate situation, you don't want a book that will just entertain or even educate you; you want to find out...*How do I get home. How do I get saved?*

Why has the Bible gained so much attention, and been the best-selling book ever, year after year? Because more than any other book, the Bible tells us *How do I get home? How do I get saved?* We know – we know in our guts – that this world is not home, that things here are not as they should be. And we have a need to know *How do I get home? How do I get saved?*

Today we are discussing the very common question, "*How Can You Take the Bible Literally?*" Many, many people these days, many churches even right around here, do not take the Bible to be true. Believing the Bible is not true and accurate is a big roadblock for many to having faith in Jesus as their Savior.

If you are wondering who this sermon message is for, let me put it this way: Has anyone here ever found anything in the Bible that was confusing to you? If you have found anything in the Bible confusing to you, then, the good news is that this sermon is for you. If you haven't, I wonder if you've actually read the whole book.

A lot of why the Bible seems confusing to us is simply that it's ancient, and we don't read much ancient stuff. The ancient world is filled with sacrifices and polygamy and ideas of uncleanness and odd customs, and we read it, and we think, *Why was life so much weirder then than it is now?* I'll tell you a secret. It wasn't! The only difference is we live now, and so we think we're not weird. I will guarantee you something. If you fast forward 2,000 years and have

somebody watch reruns of *The Bachelor* and YouTube videos of pet dog antics, and look at our famous musicians like Lady Gaga and Snoop Dog, do you think they're going to say we were normal in our day?

So today we're going to look at this honest, sincere question that thoughtful people have about the Bible that could keep them from taking it seriously or trusting it, and trusting Jesus. We will do this in the form of reservations that folks have to trusting the Bible.

1. Some people do not believe the Bible can be trusted literally because feel, **the Bible may have valuable moral insights, but it ought to be understood as just a collection of myths and fables.**

Now, what we call the Bible is really not one book. It is 66 different books written by dozens of authors over centuries...in fact, over a thousand year period. All of the writers held a conviction that there is a God, and He's not silent. He's revealed Himself in human history, particularly in the history of Israel. This is what made the Scriptures of Israel radically different than other ancient sacred writings of the Sumerians or the Egyptians. They took seriously the idea that God has revealed Himself in history.

Take just one statement from the writer of the gospel of Luke. He's going to describe the beginning of the ministry of John the Baptist about the time of Jesus' ministry. This is what Luke writes, ***"In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert."*** *Luke 3:1-2*

How concerned is Luke about historical detail? VERY concerned. Why? Because he wants people to know this is not myth. People who read much of ancient literature will tell you: you don't get this kind of detail in stories about Hercules or Thor. Luke wants people to know regardless of what you think about the claim that Jesus is God, this really happened.

Now that of course raises the question...*Is it accurate?* Well, many details in the Bible have been confirmed by external sources. Ancient people who wrote letters and news events, even authors who were hostile to faith in God, their writings confirm that this stuff did, indeed happen.

For example, for a long time people who were skeptical said this Luke 3 passage was a problem. Luke mentions Lysanias. He was known to have lived 50 years earlier, to have had a different title, and to have been a ruler in a town called Calsis. So there were people who said, "Luke cannot be trusted as a writer of history." Then in the 20th century, archeologists found an inscription that was written during the reign of Caesar Tiberias (14-37 AD) that refers to Lysanias being the tetrarch of Abilene. It turns out there were two Lysaniases and that Luke got it right all along, but we didn't know that until the 20th century.

Another example: In Acts 18, verse 2, it says the Emperor Claudius gave an order for all the Jews to leave Rome. Outside the Bible, a Roman historian named Suetonius wrote, "***Because the Jews of Rome caused continuous disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus Claudius expelled them from the city.***" "Chrestus" is probably a different spelling of "Christ." [Now Suetonius is the Latin name for Sue. If you've ever heard the old Johnny Cash song *A Boy Named Sue*, this is where it came from. I just made that part up. That's not true.]

Archeology continues to dig up artifacts. People these days find ancient palaces, cities, tombs – all confirming that the places and people mentioned in the Bible are not fairy tale, but were very real. I think it was last week that two different stories were about finding the wall of Jericho that fell down when Joshua and the Israelites blew the horns, and finding a memorial stone that Jacob set up. This happens all the time.

Second reservation: **2. Some people don't take the Bible literally because they think contradictions they see in the Bible itself prove it is not true.** Let me give you an example of

this kind of thing. In Matthew, chapter 8, Matthew tells about a centurion who comes to Jesus and asks Jesus to heal his servant. Luke also tells the same story in Luke 7, only in Luke's version the centurion sends a few elders, and they're the ones who put the question to Jesus. So, some people say, "See this proves the Bible cannot be the Word of God because it contradicts itself."

Even in our day, however, different people will summarize stories in different ways. A reporter might say, "The President announced today." When in actuality, the President didn't say anything at all. The words were written by a speech-writer and spoken by a press secretary. But we all understand there are different ways of telling the story. It doesn't mean the story didn't happen.

Folks, it is precisely this kind of gritty detail that makes the gospel accounts so compelling. Here's what I mean: If you want to believe the resurrection did not happen, then you pretty much have to believe at some point the writers of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John got together and made this story up. Now if the Bible's account of Jesus' life really was the product of a group of guys getting together and making this up, these inconsistencies are exactly the kind of thing they would *NOT* have done. They would have airbrushed all the details out to make everything look perfectly smooth and identical.

Instead, what we find is Matthew and Mark say there was one angel at the tomb, Luke and John say there were two. Matthew says Peter denied Jesus before the rooster crowed once. Mark says the rooster crowed two times. And what's really surprising is that all 4 of the gospel accounts of Jesus' Easter resurrection say the first witnesses were women. Back in the first century in Israel, women were not allowed to give legal testimony. Their testimony was not recognized in courts. If you were making the story up to deliver it to first century Israelites, you *never* would make up in the story that the resurrection was witnessed by women.

So, why does the Bible include these details? Why? Because that's what really happened! When you get eyewitnesses together

to describe an event, they will differ on little details because they're looking at it from a different perspective, different frame of reference, giving attention to different things. It doesn't mean they're not reliable or the event didn't happen. In fact, it's precisely when every detail given by every person is identical, that's when investigators get suspicious because that's when they know people have gotten together to cook it up.

What's most important is that all of the eyewitnesses agree on what matters most -- which is Jesus rose from the dead!

Some people think the Bible is just a collection of myths, others think inconsistencies prove the Bible isn't reliable. And, third **3. because we don't have the original copies, some people don't take the Bible literally because they are convinced that over the centuries errors and legends have been added to the copies we have.**

You all know in the ancient world there were no printing presses. Books were copied by hand onto scrolls that could be 20 or 30 feet long. How do we know we have accurate copies?

Well, let's compare the Bible to other ancient writings that are all considered accurate and reliable.

<u>Ancient Writing</u>	<u># of manuscripts</u>	<u>Years between writing and oldest manuscript</u>
Julius Caesar's <i>The Gaelic Wars</i>	10	1,000 yrs.
Pliny the Younger's <i>Natural History</i>	7	750 yrs.
Herodotus' <i>History</i>	8	1,350 yrs.
Tacitus' <i>The Annals</i>	20	1,000 yrs.
<i>New Testament</i>	5,664 Greek manuscripts 10,000 Latin 8,000 Ethiopian & Slavic	30-70 yrs.

That's the New Testament. For the Old Testament there is also a lot of evidence that points to what we have in the Bible, is actually what was originally written down. All of this is to say that we can trust that the words we have in our Bible today are what the authors originally wrote down.

4. A fourth idea about the Bible that is a roadblock to people have in faith in Christ is **many people think the Bible can't be taken literally because modern science disagrees with it.** We hear this a lot and this is very important.

Science has enormous authority and prestige in our day. And when the Bible was written, it was not written to be addressing the scientific questions from the 21st century because the writers did not live in the 21st century.

The Bible certainly mentions scientific facts. But it was not written to be a science textbook. The Bible was written to accurately tell the story of God and people. It opens with these words: *"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."* *Genesis 1:1* Over time, that one sentence changed the world, and that's no accident. There is a God, and He is good, and He made everything that is. That's why creation is good, and He made people in His image, and that's why we all know they're so precious because they really are. People have fallen through sin, and that's why nothing is the way it's supposed to be, and we know in our guts nothing is the way it's supposed to be. God has not given up on his creation, and so we live through hope in redemption that must come from a power greater than ourselves. That saving is by God's Son, Jesus, who is innocent but still gave His life as payment for the guilt of all people's sins. And now, being given forgiveness and innocence, now having the punishment of eternal hell we deserve taken away, there is heaven, and hope, and life and death have meaning. All this from a God who loves. Nothing that can be proven through the scientific method is at odds with any of this.

Fifth reservation about the Bible: **5. Doesn't the Bible support regressive practices like violence or slavery?** Again, really important, very legitimate concern. For example, most people

are familiar with the statement, "***Eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.***" *Exodus 21:24* It's from Exodus 21. A lot of people in our day when they see that, they'll say, "See that's what I'm talking about. What a bloody, vengeful way to live. The Bible must be pro-violence."

Well, let's go back to ancient times when there are no squad cars driving along on the roads, no police departments, no law enforcement like we have. If you hurt me, I can do anything in my power to hurt you as much as I want to. In that world, Exodus 21 is actually laying the foundation for proportional justice. Unlimited vengeance is no longer to be allowed. Somebody knocks out your tooth, you don't get to kill them. The punishment must fit the crime. It's actually an enormous step forward in the direction of justice for the ancient world.

God's main concern isn't just to fix up this world through justice. God's concern is for the condition of your heart. So Jesus comes along, and Jesus exposes the condition of our hearts by raising the bar. Jesus says, "***You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you...love your enemies...***" *Matthew 5:38,44* The only way you can love your enemies, is you first have to be filled with God's love – to know His grace through Jesus.

So, for example, you come to something like slavery. In the early 1800's, people in the South would say, "The Bible says slaves obey your masters, so it supports slavery." At the same time the people who were opposed to slavery based their opposition on the Bible too. Well for one thing in American slavery, it was based on racism. American slavery was based on racism. But slavery in the ancient world was not racially targeted. In the ancient world, every major world culture had slavery. Ancient slavery was different from slavery here in America.

Still, into the ancient world comes the law of Moses. Moses introduces that slavery is to be limited. Now after six years, you let them go free, Moses' law says. The power of a master is to be limited to certain actions. The punishments that a master can inflict on a slave are to be limited. When the slave goes free he is to be

given gifts. The Old Testament is limiting, subverting this practice of slavery, and over time as the church eventually looked at how God made all people in His own image, how Jesus died for every human being, how Paul says, ***"Now in Christ there is neither male nor female, there is neither slave nor free."*** It was the power of this Book more than any other idea, more than any other power that led to the world movement to get rid of slavery.

Sixth objection to the Bible – and I believe, the REAL objection for most people. It's this: **6. Some people will not take the Bible literally because doing so will interfere with how they want to live their life.** If that's you, I cannot help you there. See, the deal is we want to live the way WE WANT TO LIVE. We each want to be the supreme authority in our lives. The Bible says we each want to be our own gods. That's the nature of our sin. So we look for ways to discredit and forget about God and the Bible – so I can do whatever it is I WANT to do – rather than have to be accountable to God, and do what He says. This rebellious attitude of the human heart, this is really THE issue, THE roadblock for people to trust God, trust God's Word, and come to saving faith in Jesus. And if this objection describes you, then please know, God is always willing and ready to forgive when you come to Him humbly, admitting your wrong, and accepting His forgiveness through Jesus.

"Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another - showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us." 2 Timothy 3:16-17

Folks, the Bible has changed the world, and it did not do that by accident. It was written by real people to a real world in a real historical place and time, and that can often be frustrating and confusing to us. The Bible shares one unified message through the whole thing. The one message that God shares through the whole Bible is that: There is a God, and He is more loving than you can imagine, and although this world is broken and we have fallen, God has not given up on you. So He, Himself, came down in Jesus, to

do for us what we could never do for ourselves. As God's gift of great love, He offers forgiveness, a new relationship with God, a new heart of love, a new order coming in heaven, and a new hope to carry you through whatever you have to go through.

There has never been a book like this Book. So read it. Read it with intensity. Read it with a humble spirit. Read it and ask God, "God, would You meet me in this Book?" And God promises He will!

It is real, real, real important that we – each one – meet God, know God, love God. And so God has given you His Word in the Bible so that you are pointed to Jesus, and you know Him.

AMEN.