

## Concerns Christians sometimes have How should one understand the Bible?

*[Please note : sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.  
English Standard Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

### Introduction

Today's talk concludes our series 'Concerns Christians sometimes have', which we at Truth for Today have sought to answer from the Bible. It's therefore important for every Christian to understand the Bible itself.

### What's in a name?

When Christians refer to the Bible, they really mean the word of God or the Scriptures. The word Bible is a transliteration of *biblos* (*βιβλος*), the Greek word meaning "book." However, the same Greek word also means "scroll" or "parchment." Parchment scrolls were originally used for the first Scripture writings. The name Bible was adopted by Wycliffe and gradually came into common use in the English language to describe the collection of the books in the Bible. But to distinguish it from other collections of books, it is now called The Holy Bible. This more accurately defines it as being the sacred writings, the Christian Scriptures.

The Bible is a collection of sixty-six books, written at different times, by some 40 different authors, in different situations and in a few different languages. These writings span a period of some 1600 years. The Bible is divided into the Old Testament, containing thirty-nine books, and the New Testament, containing twenty-seven books. The Old Testament scriptures are those books accepted by both Jews and Christians as being canonical, that is, genuine and therefore authoritative. Similarly, the New Testament books are those accepted by Christians as belonging to the canon of Scripture. Therefore the most important thing for Christians to understand about the Bible is that it exists by the providence of God and is, from Genesis to Revelation, His word.

### It's important to understand that the Bible is the inspired word of God

Let's read 2 Timothy 3:15-17 from the ESV:

“[Timothy] from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 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.”

Paul told Timothy that all Scripture is inspired, that is, God-breathed. That means He gave the writers the exact words to write down. In Acts 7:38, Stephen described the (Old Testament) Scriptures as “the oracles of God” - the utterances of God (see also Romans 3:2; Hebrews 5:12). Peter

explained how this happened. “[The Old Testament prophets] spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21). Being impelled by the Holy Spirit means that they did not necessarily understand what they spoke and/or wrote down.

“They...prophesied about the grace that was to be [for Christians, they] searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but [Christians], in the things that have now been announced to [Christian believers] through those who preached the good news...by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look” (1 Peter 1:10-12).

Peter also stated that the New Testament Scriptures have the same status as the Old Testament Scriptures. He said that: “Paul...wrote...according to the wisdom given him...in all his letters...he speaks...of [spiritual] matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do [the Old Testament Scriptures]” (2 Peter 3:15&16). However, with respect to the New Testament writers, Paul explained in 1 Corinthians 2:9-13 that the Holy Spirit enabled them to understand as well as write down the truths of the Christian faith: “It is written, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him”— these things God has revealed to us [New Testament writers] through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person’s thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we [New Testament writers] have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we [New Testament writers] might understand the things freely given us by God. And we [New Testament writers] impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.”

You will have noticed that I have interpolated the words “New Testament writers” into this quotation so that you can readily see who the “we” are in these verses. Notice also that Paul highlighted the Spirit’s capacity, as God, to search out, understand, and know, the deep truths of God. These truths, said Paul, were revealed, or disclosed, to the apostles such that they entered the hearts and minds of the New Testament writers. The Lord Jesus had specifically said that the Holy Spirit’s function was to teach the apostles the truths of Scripture:

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (John 16:12-15).

In other words, the apostles fully understood all these New Testament truths, but only through the Spirit of God, who indwelt them. Furthermore, the New Testament writers taught these truths, not with words of their own choosing, but with those chosen by the Spirit of God himself. He matched “spiritual words to spiritual truths” (v.13, Weymouth). Bible teachers call this “verbal inspiration”, that is, the Holy Spirit gave every writer the correct word, in the original language of writing, to use. Therefore the second most important thing for Christians to understand about the Bible is that, from Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21, in reality it was written by the Holy Spirit.

## **It's important to understand that believers must be taught by the Holy Spirit to understand what He has written in the Bible**

This statement is an outcome of the truth that the Holy Spirit was the author of the Bible. Let's pick up again on Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 2:13 and read through to 2:3:

“We impart [the truths of Christianity] in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. “For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ. But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not ready yet, for you are still of the flesh...behaving only in a human way”(1Corinthians 2:13-3:3).

Unconverted, that is, natural people are totally incapable of understanding what the Bible is really about. They, including academics, may read its history and its teachings, but somehow, they don't grasp its message for themselves. That's because its truths belong to the spiritual realm, and they don't possess the Spirit of God. On the other hand, Christians receive the Spirit of God upon believing the Gospel message (Ephesians 1:13) and possess the mind of Christ. Like the Corinthians, some may be carnal, and their lives are dominated by natural life and natural desires. But even in such a state of Christian immaturity, they have the capacity to long for the pure spiritual milk, just like new-born babies crave for their mother's milk, so that by the unadulterated milk of the Scriptures, they may grow up into salvation and become spiritual people (see 1 Peter 2:2).

## **It's important to understand that the Bible is trustworthy**

The Lord Jesus Christ said, “Your word is truth” (John 17:17). Psalm 119 v.160 states: “The sum of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever.” “The sum of your word is truth” is translated by NKJV as, “The entirety of Your word is truth”. But the KJV translation appeals to me, “Thy word is true from the very beginning.” The true and living God of the Bible cannot lie (Titus 1:2). The Lord Jesus said that His Father was true (John 8:26), a fact which is repeated several times over in the New testament. For example, thrice over Paul told the Corinthian church that, “God is faithful” (1 Corinthians 1:9 & 10:13; 2 Corinthians 1:18).<sup>1</sup> God is always consistent with His word,<sup>2</sup> and He is totally reliable, even when we are not. “If we are faithless, he remains faithful— for he cannot deny himself” (2 Timothy 2:13). And when there are those who will not believe it, we must assert with Paul, “Does their [unbelief] nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written, “That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged”” (Romans 3:3&4).

## **It's important to understand that the Bible must be accepted by faith**

By faith, Christian believers know that God exists. “And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (Hebrews 11:6). Similarly, v.3 states that they understand that He is the Creator of the universe, an issue that I will return to later in this talk. But for now, it is necessary to point out that to receive salvation and thereafter to understand the Bible, everyone must accept the word of God

by faith. Abraham is the father of the faithful, about whom Paul wrote in Romans 4:3:

“For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.””

That Scripture is Genesis 15:6, which is a comment on 15:5, “[God] brought [Abram] outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” Abraham placed his faith in God’s promise, even though at the time he and Sarah were childless. Later in Romans 4, Paul gave this explanation:

“[Abraham] did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.” But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (vv. 19-25).

### **It’s important to understand that the Bible is its own final and sole authority on all matters of the Christian faith and its practice**

Let’s consider further Paul’s comments in 2 Timothy 3:15-17 about the Bible:

“The sacred writings...are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 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.”

First, the Bible contains the essential Gospel message of salvation, that it’s through faith in Christ. Many New Testament Scriptures present this truth<sup>3</sup> but Acts 15:11 will suffice. “We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus.”

Second, the Bible contains all of the teachings concerning the Christian faith, jointly called “the doctrine of our Saviour God” in Titus 2:10. The New Testament contains the entire doctrine of God, “the faith once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude v.3). And Paul claimed, “I...according to the dispensation of God which is given me towards you to complete the word of God” (Colossians 1:25, Darby).

Third, the Bible is able to convict us of any views which are not consistent with the declared doctrine of God; and of any sin (wrongdoing) in our lives.

Fourth, the Bible has the intrinsic ability to correct these doctrinal errors and/or any sinful practices.

Fifth, the Bible contains instructions for training the people of God in all aspects of practical godli-

ness and righteousness, both negative admonitions (things we mustn't do) and positive admonitions (proper Christian behaviour).

Finally, the Scriptures are designed to perfectly equip each man and woman of God to complete every good work and action that God has prepared beforehand for them to do (Ephesians 2:10). These things being true,

### **It's important for believers to understand how to interpret the Bible**

Perhaps, this is the issue that Christians have the most concerns about. But first, let's consider the contents of the Bible in a little more detail. The 39 books of the Old Testament the Lord Jesus called, "the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44).<sup>4</sup> The New Testament consists of 27 books: the four Gospels and Acts; the letters from the apostles to churches and individual believers; and the Revelation. Also, The Bible contains distinct styles of writings, different literary genres, such as historical narratives, prophecies, poetry, wisdom, doctrinal treatises, and apocalyptic writings. We should take into account which group a particular book of the Bible belongs to when interpreting its meaning. But we must be careful. For example, the Psalms are poetry, but they also contain prophecies.

Most of us can't read the original Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek texts and so we have to rely entirely on English translations of the Bible. The better translations follow the priority principle of "verbal inspiration", that is, word-for-word translation from the original language. There are many such faithful translations available to us in the twenty-first century to assist us in making sound, as well as informed, interpretation of Scripture. And there is a huge number of books about the Bible, written by people who are both spiritual and scholarly, which are also available to us. However, it's important to remember that each and every believer is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and He is our Teacher. I quoted earlier that the Lord Jesus said, "The Spirit of truth...will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13).

### **Now to some guidelines for Interpreting Scripture**

First, and foremost, we must accept that The Bible is the word of the true and living God. Ultimately, it is its own authority on everything that it says and teaches.

Second, generally we must accept the plain sense meaning of every Scripture. This is done by taking into account its literary genre and the original people to whom, and for whom, it was written. That will give us an understanding of why it was written. For example, Leviticus defined the rituals, rules, and regulations for worship by the children of Israel.

Therefore, and third, each Scripture has only one primary meaning, that is, one interpretation. The apostle Peter emphasised this fact about prophecies. "Knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation" (2 Peter 1:20). For example, the book of the Revelation is one complete prophecy. In 1:11 & 19, John was instructed to write in a defined threefold way: what he had seen (the vision of the Son of Man, vv.12-18), those things "that are" (the prophetic outline of the church age, 1:20 – 3:22), and "those [things] that are to take place after this" (the prophetic future given in chs.4-22, "after this" being the first words of ch.4)

Fourth, we interpret Scripture with Scripture. That is, we consider any text within its immediate context; and the passage of that particular Scripture in the broader context of the book it occurs in. A text taken out of context can easily become a pretext. Therefore we must consider any portion of

Scripture taking into account what other Scriptures say about any given subject by “rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). We must with all eagerness of mind search and examine the Scriptures to establish the truth of a specific Scripture (cp. Acts 17:11).

Fifth, we must rely upon the Holy Spirit and remember that He is “the anointing” that we received from the Father and who abides in us. As such we have no need that anyone else should teach us. The Holy Spirit teaches us the truth about everything (see 1 John 2:27).

Finally, whilst each Scripture has only one interpretation, the whole of the Bible is “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). Every believer has experienced its power in their lives. And all believers know that God speaks to them through the Bible each and every time they read it or hear it preached. They apply it to themselves for all matters of faith and practise, as we noted earlier in my talk. (The message of the Bible also has timeless relevance to unbelievers in every age.)

### **It is important to understand that the Bible is the complete revelation of God to mankind**

It’s important to understand that it’s primarily through the Scriptures that God has revealed himself to them. It’s true, that throughout every era, they have clearly understood the Creation to be His workmanship. Even though they make every attempt to blatantly suppress and deny this truth by their ungodliness and unrighteousness (Romans 1:18-20). It’s true also that His Son, the Eternal Word, has fully made God known, when He became flesh and lived upon earth (John 1:1-18). But we know these truths because God has written them down in The Bible.

So let me make a self-evident statement that God has repeatedly spoken to, and dealt with, mankind in various ways throughout the different ages of history. But each of these dispensations it ended in judgement because mankind repeatedly disobeyed God’s word, His instructions to them. This attitude culminated in His chosen nation, Israel, rejecting their promised Messiah. The writer to the Hebrews stated this in plain, unmistakable words.

“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world” (Hebrews 1:1-2).

All God’s purposes for time and eternity are centred in His Son, who is the full expression of His being (v.3). The writer insists that we must give our utmost attention to what we learn in God’s word, and then asks the question,

“How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation...[which] was declared...first by the Lord, and..was attested to...by [the apostles]?” (Hebrews 2:1-4).

This Scripture highlights one of my earliest remarks about Paul’s statements in 2 Timothy 3:15-17 that the Bible is inspired by God and is designed to make believers wise for salvation, in its most comprehensive sense, through our faith in Christ Jesus. Thus, when properly understood as the inerrant, infallible, and complete word of God, The Bible is our only source for Christian doctrine, the faith once and for all time, delivered to us (Jude v.3). The Bible is therefore absolutely indispensable for all aspects of our Christian faith and Christian living.

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk 'How one should understand the Bible', talk No. T1326, in our series 'Concerns which Christians sometimes have'.

## Footnotes

1. "is true": John 3:33; Romans 3:4. "is faithful": 1 Thessalonians 5:24; 2 Thessalonians 3:3; Hebrews 10:23; 1 Peter 4:19; 1 John 1:9.
2. His word is also described as being faithful: Titus 1:9; Revelation 21:5 & 22:6.
3. For example, John 3, Romans 3.
4. The Hebrew Bible accepted as conical by Christians has these parts consisting of these books:
  - a. The Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.
  - b. Historical: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings, 1-2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, [Esther](#).
  - c. Wisdom: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, [Song of Songs](#).
  - d. Prophetic:
    - i. Major: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, [Daniel](#).
    - ii. Minor: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi.

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