

## The Bible and Reliability

So I'm here to talk to you today about the reliability of the Bible. What does that mean, reliability? Well, according to the dictionary, if something is reliable it means we can trust it, or depend confidently on it. Basically, we know that it will do what it says on the tin. But reliability isn't as simple as either something is trustworthy or it's not. There are those things that we generally accept to be reliable and we don't think about it until it goes wrong, and when it does we're really surprised. Sitting on a chair, for example. There are also those things where "reliable" is a relative term because you can depend on them being unreliable. For example, when I go to the train station, I know that it's not a matter of whether my train is going to be late, but how late is it going to be. But then I don't expect much from Sydney Trains.

We expect a whole lot more of something when we have a lot invested in it, when we spend a lot of time, effort or money in it. Say, you buy a \$40,000 watch. You'd expect it to tell the time very accurately for a long while before it needed tuning, right. Though, to tell you the truth, for that price I would expect it to actually make me travel through time. But you've invested a lot in this watch, so you expect to be able to rely on it to do its job. So much more rides on the reliability of the Bible, though. Christians for thousands of years and from all over the globe have trusted that the message of the Bible is true, and it has shaped their lives. It has shaped global politics and international relations. As Christians, we use the Bible to define our lives, dictate our actions and attitudes. We trust what it says is true. We have to, because we have no other ultimate source of the story of our salvation besides Scripture. And that makes it a delicate faith.

This is what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15.14-17. He's talking about the importance of the resurrection, and he starts by saying that,

"If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith."

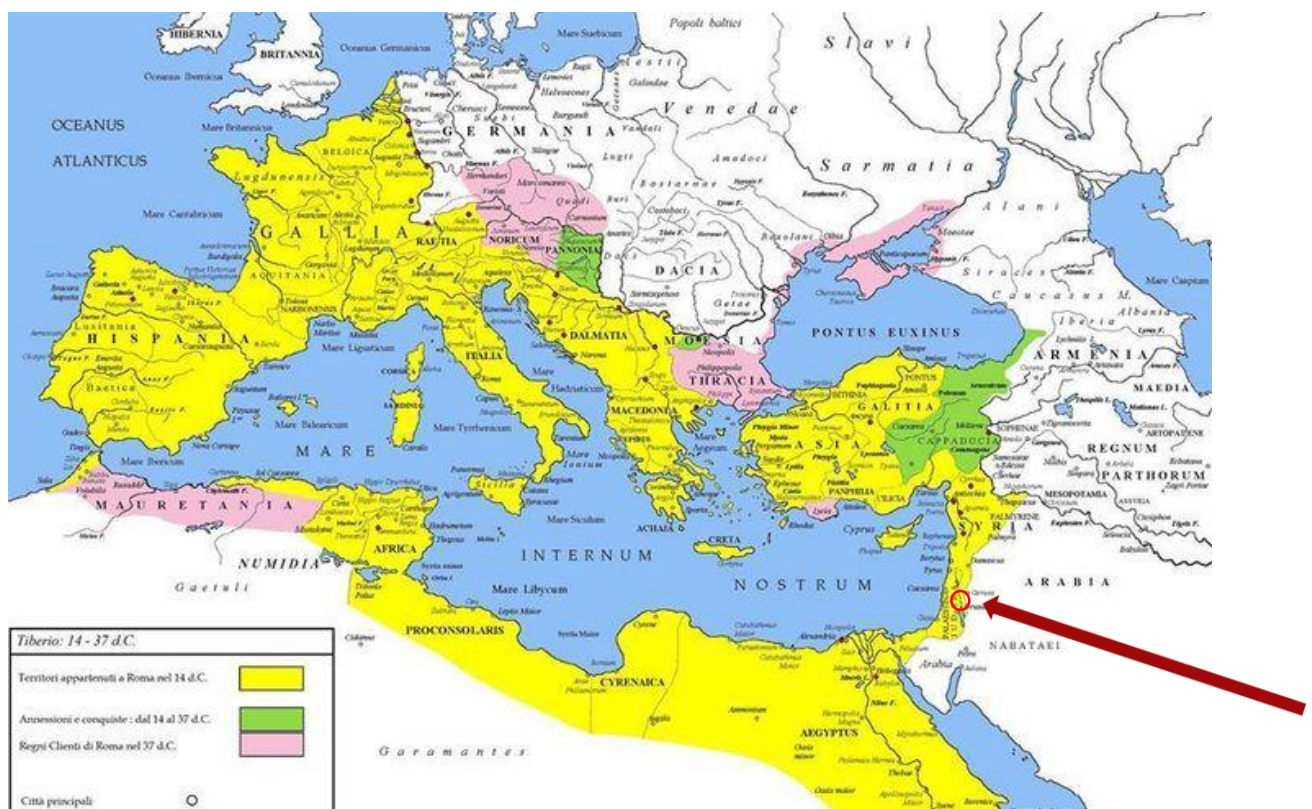
But he goes on:

"More than that, **we are then found to be false witnesses** about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead... And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins."

This is life and death stuff. We have everything riding on what's written in Scripture being true. So this is why we need to ask how can we know that Scripture is reliable. We need to know this firstly for ourselves, obviously. We need to know we can in fact trust what Scripture has to say to us. But it is also an important question for non-Christians. They're not just going to believe something because the Bible says so. They're going to ask some pretty foundational questions about it. Some people can also be critical, saying that the Christian faith is just blind acceptance of what the Church tells us, or wishful thinking, that we would like to believe what the Bible says is true even though it isn't. We're going to need to have answers for these questions and criticisms, from ourselves and from others.

To give us a basis to start from, here is what I reckon is a good definition of what we mean when we say the Bible is reliable: **"The Bible shows itself to be fully truthful in all it affirms, when we understand its context, know its purpose and listen to its message."** Now, you might be wondering why I've added all these other bits. Isn't it enough to just say that the Bible is truthful in all that it affirms? What do we need to think about all that other stuff for? Well, let's explore a bit more together and you'll see what I mean.

To start with, let's look at the gospels and historical reliability, because it's what people think about most when they think about the trustworthiness of an ancient book like the Bible: it was written so long ago and so far away, how can we be sure it's telling the truth about what happened back then? Well, there are some issues that we have to think about here. Firstly, there's not really much evidence for Jesus outside the Bible. And this poses a problem for us modern-day investigators. Ideally we would want more. We would like to have had someone on the scene, live reporting from the Sermon on the Mount or whatever. We would like there to be lots of documents talking about him. But they're just not there. There's two reasons for that. Firstly, take a look at this map.



This is the Roman Empire when Jesus was around. It's massive, all the way from France to Egypt. And way down in the corner, that red circle, is where Jesus did his ministry. This is really the back end of the empire, where junior generals and incompetent governors got sent so they couldn't do too much damage if they failed. Nobody cared what was going on over here, so no-one really wrote about it. And Jesus was just one local hero among many at the time. Who knew his little

movement would grow into a global phenomenon? Secondly, this was a really long time ago. Not a lot of stuff survives from back then just in general.

These two issues, remoteness and lack of material, get even worse when we think of events in the Old Testament. Back then Israel was still only a small place in terms of the vast empires, and it had the misfortune of being in between the large political powers in Egypt and Mesopotamia. These two lands were constantly fighting each other, and Israel was caught right in the middle, and so not a lot is left.



But what we do have can give us confidence to be able to trust the Bible's message, especially the gospels. From the snippets of evidence that we have from authors outside the Bible, such as Josephus (a Jewish historian from the first century BCE) and Tacitus (a Roman historian from the second century BCE), we learn there was a man called Jesus, who was baptised by John the Baptist, had a bunch of disciples and was crucified by Pilate. His followers thought he was the Messiah and cause a lot of trouble all over the empire. For the Old Testament we have archaeology that describes people and events, such as the Sennacherib Prism here on the left that describes Assyria conquering Judah and besieging Jerusalem, which we read about in 2 Kings, Chronicles and Isaiah.

But also remember the words we had read to us from Luke chapter 1:

"Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as **they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye witnesses** and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught."

Luke is telling us that what he's got in his book is something that actually happened, to give his friend - and us too - information to give us confidence in what we believe. He's giving us the whole scoop. He wants to make sure that he's got an accurate picture from the best sources to show that what Christians believe isn't a bunch of fairy stories. Peter says something similar in 2 Peter 1.16:

"For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but **we were eye-witnesses** of his majesty."

Within themselves, the gospels have a good degree of reliability. They were written shortly after the events they describe - a lot sooner than a lot of other ancient documents historians consider reliable - and within the lifetimes of eye witnesses to the event, so their claims could be verified. Also they are consistent with one another, a lot like corroborating witnesses in a trial. This is also true of events Paul describes in his letters and those in Acts. And the gospel message has been kept

alive - and kept consistent - through the community of believers for hundreds and hundreds of years. It was a truth that those who witnessed the events were willing to back even with their very lives.

Here let's talk a little bit about memory. We don't do it much in schools these days but in the ancient world, memorisation was seen as the best means of education, not only by Greeks and Romans but also by the Jews. Rabbis like Jesus would sit down with their disciples and go through their teachings very carefully with them to make sure they memorised them. "Okay, Peter, this is the parable of the sower. Now repeat it back to me." This sort of teaching was also very important for the Pharisees, like Paul, whose traditions of their elders were entirely oral, not written down anywhere. They had to be memorised. Several times in Paul's letters - such as Philippians 2 and especially the beginning of 1 Corinthians 15 - he recites passages that seem to be summaries of Christian beliefs that have been made to be memorised. This is Philippians 2.5-11:

"In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

- <sup>6</sup> who, being in very nature [\[a\]](#) God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
- <sup>7</sup> rather, he made himself nothing  
by taking the very nature [\[b\]](#) of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.
- <sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
by becoming obedient to death –  
even death on a cross!
- <sup>9</sup> Therefore God exalted him to the highest place  
and gave him the name that is above every name,
- <sup>10</sup> that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
- <sup>11</sup> and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

And this is from 1 Corinthians 15.3-5, which is slightly shorter:

"For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup> and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve."

Note too how the gospels are written in short chunks of teachings, or miracle stories, or parables. This also makes them easy to remember.

Memorisation is also helped by storytelling. Back in the ancient world, people didn't have computers or Netflix to entertain them off an evening. So what they would do is gather around and tell each other their favourite stories. And if you're a group of Christians, what better stories to tell than those about Jesus, or stories from the Old

Testament. And if you got it wrong, especially on the major points of a story, you could be sure that someone would pull you up and say, "Wait, that's not how it goes." Not only does storytelling help people to memorise the Bible narrative, it also forges the group closer together. It's not my story, it's our story. I'm sure you've got stories like that with your own families or friends: all those remember the time when stories. Remember that Christmas when the folding chair collapsed under Pa, and we were so worried and embarrassed we never used them again? That's a story from my childhood that is still told by the family. Pa was fine, by the way. Remembering our stories together grows our relationship and reminds us of what's important to us. And that's what we have here in the Bible.

But there's more to the reliability of the Bible than just history, so we need to look at what I mentioned before, the purpose and the context of writing. One of the big problems we have when we come to reading the Bible is bringing in our own ideas, and thinking about it in terms of our own experience, rather than letting it speak for itself. For us, when we read a newspaper article or read a book about historical events, we expect it to tell us exactly what happened in a factual, unbiased way, and in the order things happened. But that's not how people in the ancient world wrote histories.

Have a look back at what Luke writes. He writes his gospel **"so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught"**. And we read this in John about his gospel: "But **these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah**, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." The gospels aren't written in the way we would expect, they're written to make a point. We can even take that back to the historical events in the Old Testament as well. What it doesn't tell us, for example, is a blow-by-blow account of the reign of King David, it's telling us about the relationship between God and his people, between God and David, and between David and his people. It's history and it's theology intertwined into one, so you can't just take out the historical bits and test them to see how factual they are.

The Bible does so much more than just tell us about history, it tells us about God, and it does it in complex and multifaceted way. Think about the relational and emotional truths penned in the Psalms, the philosophical truths in the wisdom literature. Think about the theological truths of the New Testament letters, or think about the prophets and how they describe the truth of God, his grace and faithfulness. These are truths that cannot be proven with history or science, but are deeper realities that impact us far more profoundly than either history or science could ever do. Peter sums up how this adds to the Bible's reliability in 2 Peter 1.19. He says,

"We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts."

Even here Peter transitions from a bare statement of fact to poetry, and both are true. This is because the Bible is telling us about God, and God breaks into our



world on every level. It is his word to us and so we can trust it because we can trust him.

So what does this mean for us, then? Well, for starters, we have to be careful how we treat what we're reading. There's such a variety of literature in the Bible, sometimes even in the one book, that we can sometimes get distracted by the wrong things. For example, in Jesus' parable of the mustard seed recounted in Mark 4.30-32 he says,

"What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade."



Now, mustard seeds are indeed very small, as you can see there on the left, but they are not the smallest of all seeds on earth. These orchid seeds on the right are smaller, as one example. There are even seeds that are so small you can only really see them with a

microscope. Does this mean that because Jesus got it technically wrong, we can't believe what he says? Does this mean we can't trust anything the Bible says?



It goes back again to my statement from before: **The Bible shows itself to be fully truthful in all it affirms, when we understand its context, know its purpose and listen to its message.** What is its context? What is its purpose? What is its message?

Here we have Jesus talking to people, like him, from first century rural Judea (the context). He's using an illustration to describe the kingdom of God to them (the purpose), so that they can see though it may start small, it grows very large (the message). Jesus is not giving a botany lesson. For the people he's talking to, in their experience the mustard seed is the smallest, and it grows very large. It's an illustration that they understand. It's conveying a theological truth, not a scientific truth, so it doesn't really matter that it's not scientifically accurate. So when we're reading Scripture, we need to think about these three things: **context, purpose and message.**

Purpose and message are particularly important, because when we read the Bible as Christians, we're also reading it to see what God has to say to us today. Indeed God's Spirit led the editors and authors of the Bible to write not only to the people at the time but also with future generations in mind. Think about the Exodus, for example. Although it might relate to an actual event in history, it's written so that in a way it's timeless. Pharaoh is never named; he's just Pharaoh, and in this way he stands for every earthly power that claims total authority instead of God, whether it

be the Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Romans, or even a society of oppressive anxiety, individualism and entitlement. And in the story of Exodus is the timeless message of the ultimate triumph of God and the salvation of his people from that godless power.

These are purposes and messages that we always need to hear and, more importantly, respond to by doing what it tells us and letting it affect our lives. If we can trust the Bible to be true in what it says to us, especially stuff that it says about God and his people, then we should be listening to it. We should be reading it. We should be following it. Nothing else will reliably tell us what we need to know to live and grow as Christians, and to deepen our relationship with the God who made us, loves us and saves us. Indeed, how else can we know that God made us, loves us and has saved us, except through the Bible? How can we know that God will be faithful in the future, except that we read that he has always been faithful in the past, in the Bible?

The Bible is reliable. It is where we can meet God and know God, hear God's voice speaking to us. We can trust it to tell us about God and how we should be responding to him, and we can trust what it says about what the future holds for us. So we should listen to the Bible, read it as much as we can, and value it as a joy and a privilege. It contains the trustworthy witness of God's people down through the ages of how an interaction with the real and living God has changed their lives. And their stories and experiences can challenge us, encourage us and equip us as we follow Jesus. As Hebrews 12.1-2 tells us:

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith."

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