

# Week 3: The Reliability of the Bible

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Objective: Demonstrate that the Bible is trustworthy, historically accurate, faithfully preserved, and divinely inspired. Equip Christians to explain why we can trust the Bible as God's Word.

## Introduction - 5 minutes

- Ask: "Why do you trust the Bible?"
- Have you ever sent a text that was misunderstood - or had a message passed along that came back totally different?

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  - Text from mom to son: "Your great aunt just passed away. LOL" "Why is that funny?" "It's not funny David! What do you mean?" "Mom, lol means laugh out loud!" "Oh my goodness! I sent that to everyone. I thought it meant lots of love. I love to call everyone back."
  - Remember the Telephone game? (Explain)
- A lot of people assume the Bible came to us this way - stories passed down over centuries, copied and recopied until no one knows what the original said.

So how can we trust the Bible?

- Describe a courtroom scene: multiple witnesses, written statements, copies preserved, cross-examination
- Historians use very similar standards when evaluating ancient documents.
- The Bible doesn't ask to be trusted blindly - it invites investigation.
- Today, we're going to ask: *Does the Bible meet the standards we use everywhere else for reliable history?*

Remember, the Bible is not a science textbook, not a modern biography, and not a mythological epic. It is a collection of ancient historical documents written in real places, by real people, about real events.

Here's what we will be investigating:

- Self-proclamation - What does the Bible say it is?
- Transmission - Was it copied accurately?
- Historicity - Does archaeology/historical data support it?
- Unity - Is it internally consistent?

I contend that the Bible is reliable. It is:

- Early (close to the events)
- Eyewitness-based

- Corroborated
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## What the Bible Claims About Itself - 5 minutes

- 2 Timothy 3:16-17 “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”
    - God didn’t override personalities – He guided them.
  - 2 Peter 1:20-21 “knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”
  - Hebrews 4:12 “For the word of God 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.”
  - The Bible claims divine origin and supernatural power.
  - Jesus Himself affirmed:
    - OT history as real (Noah, Jonah, Abel, Sodom) - (Matt. 12, 19, 24)
    - OT authorship and divine authority (Matt. 5:17–18)
    - OT prophecy fulfilled in Him (Luke 24:44–45)
  - Key point: Jesus did not treat Scripture as optional, symbolic, or flexible - He treated it as the very voice of God. If we trust Jesus, we must trust the Scriptures He trusted.
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## Manuscript Evidence and Preservation - 10 minutes

This is where Christianity shines.

- Number and age of manuscripts
  - New Testament manuscripts (from AD 125 – 15<sup>th</sup> century)
    - 5,800+ Greek manuscripts
    - 10,000+ Latin manuscripts
    - 9,300+ early translations (Coptic, Syriac, Armenian)
  - Compare to other ancient works:

Work	Earliest Copy	Time Gap	# of Manuscripts
Homer’s Iliad	500 BC	~400 years	1,800
Plato	900 AD	1,200 years	7
Caesar’s Gallic Wars	900 AD	1,000 years	10
<b>New Testament</b>	<b>125 AD</b>	<b>25–50 years</b>	<b>25,000+</b>

- As Lee Strobel discovered in *\*The Case for Christ\**, even skeptical scholars like Dr. Bruce Metzger affirm that the **NT text is 99.5% textually pure**, with the remaining 0.5% consisting of spelling or word-order differences - not doctrinal content.
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- The Dead Sea Scrolls
    - Prior to their discovery, the oldest manuscripts were the Aleppo Codex (c. 920 AD) and Leningrad Codex (c. 1008 AD)
    - OT manuscripts dated from 250 BC–70 AD
      - Pre-dates Christianity – meaning all the prophecies, foreshadowing, and Kingdom of God speech was written before Jesus.
      - This undermines the claim that Christians later “rewrote” Jewish Scriptures to make Jesus look like the Messiah.
    - Contains fragments or complete texts from every book except Esther.
    - The Great Isaiah Scroll is **99.8%** identical to the Masoretic Text (the authoritative Hebrew and Aramaic text of the Hebrew Bible) copied 1,000 years later, demonstrating stunning preservation accuracy over a millennium.
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- Patristic quotations (early church fathers, AD 95-400)
    - Clement of Rome (c. AD 95), Ignatius of Antioch (c. AD 110), Polycarp (c. AD 110–135), Justin Martyr (mid-2nd century), Irenaeus (c. AD 180), Tertullian (late 2nd–early 3rd century), Origen (early 3rd century), Athanasius (4th century), Augustine (late 4th–early 5th century)
    - Early Christians quoted the NT so extensively that we could reconstruct nearly the entire NT *\*just from their writings\**. This confirms early, widespread use.
    - This claim is not rhetorical - it is a conclusion drawn from documented data.
      - There are over 1 million quotations and allusions to the New Testament by the Church Fathers
    - In other words, if all Greek New Testament manuscripts disappeared, scholars could still recover almost the entire New Testament text (wording, content, structure) just by collating quotations and allusions found in the Church Fathers.
    - This shows that the NT, within decades of Jesus’ life, was
      - Already written
      - Already recognized
      - Already widely circulated
    - One other tidbit - the Church Fathers quoted the NT as Scripture long before official canon lists (e.g. Irenaeus (c. 180) explicitly affirms four Gospels - no more, no less)
  - Conclusion: The Bible has been faithfully preserved. Scholars argue over many things - but not whether we know what the New Testament originally said.
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## Unity of the Bible - 5 minutes

- 66 books
- 40+ authors (If you were on trial for your life, what kind of evidence would you want - one vague witness, or many independent eyewitnesses?)
- 3 languages
- 1,500+ years
- Yet one unified message of redemption. This coherence is unmatched in world literature.

What's the difference between a news report and a legend (like King Arthur)?" (time gap, eyewitnesses, embellishment).

- The Bible's core events were written down within the lifetime of eyewitnesses - and circulated while those witnesses were still alive.
- Legends grow when no one can fact-check them. The Bible emerged when people could.
- The Gospels show marks of eyewitness reporting - unnecessary details, place names, cultural precision.
- If the Gospels were written late, legends would have replaced these details; but the presence of verifiable facts indicates early composition.
  - The Bible isn't... "A long time ago, in a galaxy far far away..."

Going back to the courtroom illustration, think of the **Chain of Custody**: Eyewitnesses → Apostolic teaching → Early written creeds → Early manuscripts → Widespread church use → Canon recognition → Modern translations

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- For example:
    - **1 Corinthians 15:3-8** "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me."
      - Contains a creed dated to **within a few years** of the resurrection (recognized across scholarship). This shows Christianity began with **eyewitness claims, not legends**.
      - In other words, Paul is not inventing the resurrection claim, it was already being circulated.
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## Archaeological and Historical Confirmation - 10 minutes

Archaeology rarely proves individuals (e.g., Abraham, Moses), but rather primarily identifies cultures, settlements, and patterns

- Silence in archaeology  $\neq$  contradiction of Scripture
- Archaeology does not excavate people's names out of the ground - it excavates contexts. The Bible claims to be historical narrative, not a modern census.
- The absence of archaeological confirmation for individuals does not undermine biblical history. We do not have archaeological proof for most ancient individuals - yet we do not call them fictional.

"The Bible Unearthed" by Finkelstein is a book that "aims to tell the story of ancient Israel and the birth of its sacred scriptures from a new, archaeological perspective." Their goal is to "attempt to separate history from legend."

- The conclusion? Even critical archaeologists like Israel Finkelstein now agree the Bible is not mythological fiction. It preserves authentic historical memory rooted in real geography, cultures, and events.
- A problem is that archaeology – while a powerful tool – is not omniscient.
  - For example, one fallacy would be ignoring oral tradition as a reliable historical mechanism
    - See above examples on preservation, but also:
    - The Rig Veda (a collection of 1,028 sacred hymns from ancient India) was preserved orally for over a millennium before being written.
    - The Rig Veda shows controlled oral transmission can be extremely precise.
  - Or assuming late authorship always equals late invention
    - Remember Alexander the Great?
      - Earliest surviving biographies (Arrian, Plutarch) date 300–400 years after Alexander's death.
      - Authors relied on earlier sources now lost (e.g., Ptolemy, Aristobulus).
      - However, Alexander's historicity is unquestioned.
    - Historians routinely accept late texts if they credibly preserve earlier sources.

But archaeology does repeatedly confirm Scripture!

- Pontius Pilate inscription
    - Discovered in Caesarea in 1961, dated to early 1<sup>st</sup> century AD
    - The stone aligns with the Gospels, and independently confirms that:
      - Pontius Pilate was a real historical person
      - He governed Judea
      - He held the correct title (prefect, not "procurator")
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- Tel Dan Stele
  - References the “House of David,” disproving earlier claims that David was mythical
  - Describes a conflict between Aram (Syria) and Israel/Judah, aligning with accounts in 1-2 Kings

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- Pool of Bethesda (John 5:2 “Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades.”)
  - Discovered in 19th century with all five porticoes (significant because Roman pools typically had only four, implying firsthand knowledge)
  - Important because John describes this accurately and not as a ruin (**What happened in 70 AD? Romans destroyed Jerusalem**)

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- Cyrus Cylinder
  - Discovered in Babylon in 1879, dated to 539-538 BC
  - Records Cyrus the Great’s imperial policy toward conquered peoples.
  - Matches Ezra 1’s account of returning exiles

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- Gallio inscription
  - Discovered in Delphi, Greece in 1905, dated to AD 51-52
  - Part of a letter from Emperor Claudius, so an official imperial document
  - Acts 18:12-17 records that Paul was brought before Gallio, “proconsul of Achaia,” while in Corinth.
  - Because Roman proconsuls served limited terms, the inscription allows historians to say with confidence
    - Paul was in Corinth around AD 50–52
    - The events of Acts 18 occurred during Gallio’s tenure
  - Proves Luke accurately recorded real people, real titles, and real events - exactly what we expect from reliable history.

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- Hezekiah’s Tunnel - exactly as described in 2 Kings 20:20 and 2 Chronicles 32:30, water tunnel still exists; inscription found inside.
- Hittites - once thought fictional, now well-attested by archaeology
- Caiaphas ossuary - artifact bearing the name of the high priest who tried Jesus
- Sergius Paulus inscription - confirming Acts 13
- Nazareth 1st-century dwellings - 1st-century homes discovered, confirming Nazareth existed exactly as described.
- Moabite Stone (Mesha Stele) - Mentions Omri, king of Israel (2 Kings 3), confirming Israel’s political presence.
- Sennacherib Prism - Assyrian record confirming the siege of Jerusalem (2 Kings 18–19) and that Hezekiah was not defeated, matching the biblical account.
- Erastus Inscription - Matches Romans 16:23, where Erastus is called “city treasurer.”

Sir William Ramsay - the leading archaeologist of his era (late 19<sup>th</sup> century), began as a skeptic. He set out to disprove Acts and instead concluded: “Luke is a historian of the first rank.”

- Luke correctly records:
    - Cities, titles, governors, and geographic details
    - Travel routes and political boundaries
    - Correct titles such as politarchs in Thessalonica (Acts 17)
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#### Non-Christian Historical Sources (i.e. hostile sources)

- Tacitus, Roman senator & historian (Annals 15.44, AD 116), describes Nero's persecution of Christians after the Great Fire of Rome (AD 64): Confirms Jesus was executed under Pontius Pilate.
- Josephus, Jewish historian, not a Christian (Antiquities 18, AD 93-94): Mentions Jesus, His teaching, crucifixion, and followers.
  - Antiquities 20: "James, the brother of Jesus who is called Christ"
- Pliny the Younger (Roman governor of Bithynia) (Letter to Emperor Trajan, AD ~112): Early Christians meeting regularly, worshiped Christ "as a god."
- Suetonius (Lives of the Twelve Caesars, AD 120): Mentions Claudius (AD 41-54) expelling Jews from Rome due to disturbances over "Chrestus". Confirms early Christian-related unrest in Rome within decades of Jesus's death.
- This shows that even hostile sources confirm key facts of Christianity.

CONCLUSION: The Bible is not legend - it is rooted in real history.

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### Addressing Common Objections - 5 minutes

- "The Bible is full of contradictions."
  - Most contradictions are differences in perspective, not substance.
  - Apparent contradictions are expected in eyewitness testimony; perfect uniformity would indicate collusion.
  - Real eyewitnesses tell events from their angle.
- "The Bible has been changed over time."
  - Manuscript evidence proves otherwise.
  - 99.5% textual certainty
  - No doctrine is in doubt
  - Differences are mainly spelling or word order
  - Similar to "color" vs. "colour" - same meaning
- "It was written by men."
  - Yes, but under inspiration (2 Peter 1:21).
- "Miracles are impossible."
  - Lewis in *\*Mere Christianity\** shows this is a worldview question: If God exists, miracles are not violations - they are His interventions.
- Why differences in manuscripts do NOT hurt reliability
  - Keller reminds us (The Reason for God, ch. 7) that variations demonstrate *\*freedom from centralized control\** - meaning no one group "changed the Bible" to suit its agenda.

- The Gospels are too counterproductive to be fabricated
    - They include embarrassing details about apostles – they are fearful, flawed, and slow to believe (Mark 9:32; Matt 28:17, John 20:3-4)
    - Women as first witnesses (culturally embarrassing but historically reliable).
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### Application and Encouragement - 5 minutes

- The Bible is trustworthy - build your life on it (Matt 7:24-27, the wise man builds on rock)
- We can speak confidently to others about its truth. Christianity is not a blind leap. It is historically grounded and evidential.
- Encourage daily reading and study; knowing Scripture strengthens faith and equips us to share it.
- Assign:
  - Read Luke 1:1–4 (“an orderly account...so that you may know the certainty”)
  - Read Acts 17 (the Bereans examined Scripture daily)

### Closing

The Bible has withstood every attack - philosophical, historical, scientific, literary - yet remains undefeated.

- Honest doubts can lead to stronger faith when we pursue truth sincerely.
- Lewis reminds us, Christianity is both intellectually robust and spiritually transformative.
- Following the evidence leads not \*away\* from faith, but \*toward\* Christ.

The Bible is trustworthy, preserved, God-breathed - and worth building your life on.

### Class Discussion – 10 minutes

Discussion Questions:

1. What evidence from today strengthens your confidence in Scripture?
2. How would you answer someone who says, “It’s just an old book”?
3. Why is it important that the Bible be historically reliable?
4. Which archaeological or prophetic example impacted you most?

*Next Week: Jesus... Myth or Messiah?*