

Can the Bible be trusted?

Series: The Case for Faith

Teacher: Bruce Carter

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This week I had a phone conversation with a woman who was describing her spiritual journey. And the very questions she was struggling with are the same questions that we've been responding to in this series called The Case for Faith . She wondered why there's so much suffering in the world. If God is so good, why is the world so bad? That's a great question and we dealt with it two weeks ago. At one a point she said she really admires Christian principles and tries to live her life by them. She tries to be loving and caring and honest, but she questions whether Jesus Christ really is the Son of God. She's attracted to the morals of the Christian faith, but questions the miracles of the Christian faith. And last week we responded to the question, How can miracles be true? And so at the end of our conversation I affirmed her journey and encouraged her to visit our web site and read our response to those two profound questions.

Questions like that can be real sticking points for us in our spiritual journey. And if we're not convinced that there are reasonable, sound answers we can get stuck in our doubt or even lose our faith altogether. Which is what happened to Charles Templeton, the former pastor and evangelist with Billy Graham, who's now an agnostic.

And in his taped interview with Lee Strobel this is what Templeton had to say , "It is not possible to believe there's a God. If I could, I would like to believe in God. I'm 83 years old and I've got Alzheimer's Disease, which is always mortal. I'm an agnostic. I've spent my life thinking about it and I'm not going to change now. If someone came to me, hypothetically, and said, 'Look old boy, the reason you're ill now is God's punishment of you for your refusal to continue in the path your feet were set in.' Would that make any difference to me? No. There cannot be in our world a loving God. Cannot be."

Templeton has reached his conclusion, at least for the moment, and that is that there cannot be in our world a loving God. But when I heard him say that he suffers from Alzheimer's Disease, I couldn't help but wonder how much of his conclusion is driven by the fact of his own personal suffering. How could a loving God allow me to suffer from Alzheimer's Disease?

For you see, often these intellectual questions are fueled by intense personal pain and struggle. There's often a question behind the question. It's not so much why does God allow suffering in the world out there. It's why does God allow suffering in my world, in my life. It's not so much how can miracles be true? It's why doesn't God do a miracle for me, and heal me, or change my situation. That's why these questions are emotional barriers to belief, not just intellectual ones.

And the question that's on the table today is, "Can the Bible really be trusted?" You don't have to get into many spiritual conversations before someone raises the question of the trustworthiness of the Bible. It comes in a variety of forms like, "How can you believe the Bible, there are so many interpretations out there? Or how can the Bible be relevant for today, it was written so long ago?" Or like someone asked me recently, "Do you mean to tell me that you actually believe everything that's in the Bible? You believe the Bible's literally true?"

Research tells us that almost every American household owns at least one copy of the Bible. But fewer and fewer Americans know what's in the Bible, where it came from, or how much they can trust it. For almost 200 years in this country, the Bible was the unquestioned authority on spiritual truth. But that's not the case today.

According to pollster George Gallup, Jr., "We Americans revere the Bible--but, by and large, we don't read it. And because we don't read it, we have become a nation of biblical illiterates."

One reason people are put off by the Bible is because of the atrocities it records especially in the Old Testament, the destruction of whole societies like the Canaanites in Deuteronomy 7, the genocide of the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15, the execution of every Egyptian firstborn in Exodus 12. Horrible things. So they feel like Robert A. Wilson who said, "The Bible tells us to be like God, and then on page after page it describes God as a mass murderer."

How do we reconcile a God like that with the God that King David described in Psalm 86:15? But you, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.

What is God really like? When it comes to the character of God, critics and Christians alike both appeal to the Bible as their source of information. But can we really trust the Bible? To answer that question, Lee Strobel interviewed a former professor of mine, Dr. Norman Geisler. Dr. Geisler taught me apologetics at Dallas Theological Seminary twenty years ago, but today he's the Founder and President of Southern Evangelical Seminary in Charlotte, North Carolina.

And in his interview with Strobel one thing Geisler was careful to point out is the difference between the things that the Bible records and the things that Bible approves. Listen to what he said, "The Bible records Satan's lies, but doesn't approve of them. The Bible records David's adultery but doesn't approve of it. There are a lot of gross stories in the Bible. Raping a woman, cutting her into twelve pieces and sending one piece to each of the tribes of Israel is in the last of the book of Judges but the Bible doesn't approve of that."

The Bible doesn't approve of everything it records. There are some wicked stories in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament, which have caused some people to think that the Bible actually describes two gods, an angry, judgmental God in the Old Testament and a loving, forgiving God in the New Testament. Or that God evolved over time, gradually worked through his anger in the Old Testament to become a God of love in the New. But actually, the truth is we don't have two gods in Scripture, we have two sides of one God.

Geisler points out that the word "mercy" is found 261 times in the Bible and 72% of them are in the Old Testament. God's mercy can be seen in the Old Testament as well as the New. The word "love" is found 322 times in the Bible and half of them are in each testament. We don't have two gods or a god who evolved. We have one holy, unchangeable God who as a righteous judge must punish sin, but as a loving father is always ready to forgive. And God's pattern throughout the Bible is always to offer grace and mercy first before bringing judgment.

Geisler puts it this way, "In Joshua 6 when it talks about the destruction of Jericho and the destruction of the so called innocent Canaanites, I would only say there that the same thing applies. You've got a pattern in all of these. You've got evil people who are destroyed, righteous people who believe who are saved. For example, Rehab who protected the spies, she was not judged with the other people. You've got the cup of iniquity that is full. You have Israel, sparing those who would repent. And notice it is God who commanded this. This is not an initiative that Israel took. And it was the angel of the Lord who appeared to Joshua before he had attacked the city and Joshua said, 'Who are you?' And he said, 'I am the captain of the Lord's host. This is God's army, this is God's command and if God can send an earthquake to judge people, if he can send a tornado, if he can send a hurricane, if he can judge people through natural disasters, he can use a group of people as the instrument to execute his judgment on nations which is exactly what he did here.' Notice what it says here in the scriptures, it says that Nineveh which God also said he was going to judge. When they repented, God saved the whole bunch. Or the whole bunch repented, well, whoever repented, God was willing to save. And over and over in the Old Testament it says God is going to drive out the inhabitants. He's going to send hornets in and drive them out. So God's purpose wasn't destruction, it was deposition. He was trying to depose the people not destroy them and those who wouldn't be deposed, so that Israel could get in and be in a relatively pure environment for the holy people to bring the holy book and the holy Son of God into the world. Those who weren't driven out, the Israelites had to drive out and even then they were given a chance to repent. And if they did repent, God wanted to save the whole bunch and Jonah said, remember after they all repented, 'That's just what I was afraid of. I came to Nineveh and I knew you

were a gracious God, I knew you were a loving God and these people repented and that's exactly why I suspected you would forgive the whole bunch of these characters.' Well that shows that even Jonah and the Israelites knew how forgiving, how loving God was. God is not cruel, he's just."

God is a just God and God is a forgiving God and both sides are revealed in the Bible. But can we trust the Bible? Charles Templeton doesn't think so. He dismisses the Bible as a book of "embellished folk tales" and says "it's no longer possible for an informed man or woman to believe that the Bible is either a reliable document or, as the Christian church insists, the infallible Word of God."

But I disagree with Templeton. And in the time that remains I'd like to put the Bible on trial and play the role of defense attorney. And in that role I'd like to give you, the jury, six reasons why I am convinced that the Bible can be trusted as the inspired, infallible Word of God.

First, the unity and consistency of the Bible. One of the common misunderstandings that people have about the Bible is where it came from. One survey showed that four out of ten adults believe that the entire Bible was written after Jesus' death and resurrection. They have no idea that more than half the Bible, the Old Testament, was written hundreds of years before Jesus was born.

One of the amazing things about our Bible is the fact that it was written over a period of 1,500 years, in 66 individual books, by 40 different authors, in three languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek), on three separate continents. And the writers were all different. Some were kings, some were farmers, some were fishermen, some were rabbis, some were wealthy, some were poor.

The Bible deals with hundreds of different subjects from heaven to hell, marriage to money management yet there's amazing agreement among all the writers and a wonderful unity that ties them all together. The unity is around the person of Jesus Christ. The Old Testament points to his coming. The New Testament describes his coming and explains what it means.

The unity and consistency of the Bible is testimony that this book is different. People don't agree that easily, especially people from such varied backgrounds and times and places writing about such controversial issues like the meaning of life. It would be tough to get that kind of agreement in your own home. The amazing unity and consistency of the Bible is our first witness.

Second, the amount of manuscript evidence is overwhelming. A manuscript is a written document. The Bible was first written down by hand and long of photocopy machines it was meticulously copied by hand, word by word, letter by letter. Scribes checked it over and over again for accuracy. And when an

error was found they didn't use white out to correct it, they burned the entire manuscript and started over.

Still today we have over 5,000 Greek manuscripts that contain all or part of the New Testament. The New Testament was written in Greek. No ancient document comes close to having that kind of manuscript support. We have 7 surviving manuscripts of Plato's (380 BC) writings and 5 for the works of Aristotle (350 BC). The manuscript evidence for the Bible is overwhelming.

And what's even more amazing is that they agree with each other 99.5% of the time. The .5% of time when they vary is mostly over spelling and word order. The enormous volume and accuracy of the manuscript evidence, along with the unity of the Bible put it in a class by itself.

Third, the archaeological evidence. If rocks could talk we'd call them to the witness stand and they would testify to the accuracy of the Bible. There once was a time when the Bible was criticized as being inaccurate when it came to historical information. But that's not true anymore. Again and again archaeology has confirmed the reliability of the Bible.

Nelson Glueck a Jewish archaeologist in his book, *Rivers in the Desert*, put it this way, "It may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever contradicted a biblical reference." Even *Time* magazine (December 1974) which isn't known as a Christian publication admits that "the Bible is often surprisingly accurate in historical particulars, more so than earlier generations of scholars ever suspected." We can trust the historical information in our Bibles to be accurate.

So far we've said that the Bible is a special book because of its amazing unity and consistency, its vast amount of manuscript support, and its archaeological evidence. But being a special book is not the same as being the infallible Word of God. So let me up the bar with these last three reasons to build the case that the Bible is in fact the written Word of God.

One of the most compelling reasons to believe that the Bible is not just a special book, but the Word of God is the record of prophecies fulfilled. When the Bible was recorded, about one out of every four verses was written as a prediction about something that would happen in the future. In the Old Testament 191 of those predictions were about the coming of Christ.

Over five hundred years before Jesus was born Hebrew prophets predicted the place of his birth (Micah 5:2), Bethlehem, that he would be born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14), escape to Egypt, return to Nazareth, live the life of suffering servant (Isaiah 53), ride into Jerusalem on a donkey (Zechariah 9:9), be betrayed for thirty pieces of silver (Zechariah 11:12), stand silent at his trial (Isaiah 53:7), be beaten and spit on

(Isaiah 50:6), be crucified on a cross before crucifixion was even known as a method of execution (Psalm 22:16), offered vinegar to drink while hanging on the cross (Psalm 69:21), have lots cast for his clothing (Psalm 22:18), be buried in a borrowed tomb (Isaiah 53:9), come back to life (Psalm 16), and be called God (Isaiah 9:6).

The odds of all those prophecies being fulfilled in one man are astronomical. And every single one came true. 100% accurate. Someone did a study on the prophecies made by psychics since 1975, including those by Jean Dixon. And the study showed that only 6% came true. That doesn't come close to the amazing prophecies fulfilled in Scripture. It's one reason I believe the Bible is not only a special book, but also the Word of God.

Now let's put the Bible on the stand itself. In every trial the defendant has a chance to speak. So let's hear what the Bible has to say about itself. The Bible claims to be the Word of God.

2,600 times in the Old Testament we read phrases like "And the Lord spoke to me, saying," or "The word of the Lord came to me saying," or "The Lord said to me." Over and over again the writers claim that the source of their information came from God himself.

The New Testament describes this process using the word inspired. 2 Timothy 3:16 says, All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.

The biblical word "inspired" literally means God-breathed. The Scriptures both Old and New Testament came from the very mouth of God. The words originated with him. That's what the Bible claims for itself. It doesn't just claim to be a special book. It claims to be the Word of God.

Now I've saved our star witness for last. I'd like to call Jesus Christ to the stand. The sixth reason why I believe the Bible is the Word of God, comes from the lips of Jesus Christ, the Son of God who testified to the accuracy and authority of the Bible. He spoke of himself and the events surrounding his life as being fulfillments of Scripture. His most sweeping endorsement came in John 10:35 when he said, The Scripture cannot be broken.

A few chapters later in the same gospel of John he promised the apostles that they would receive the same inspiration to write the words of the New Testament as did the prophets of the Old Testament. Jesus Christ not only believed that the Bible was a special book. He was convinced that the Bible was the Word of the Living God.

Can the Bible be trusted? Absolutely! Is the Bible the Word of God? Yes it is. Why? Because Jesus believed the Bible was the Word of God. Because the Bible claims to be the Word of God. Because prophecy fulfilled convinces us that the Bible is the Word of God. Because archaeology and manuscript evidence and unity and consistency support the Bible as the Word of God.

And so many of us could add another reason why we trust the Bible and that's because we've seen what it's done in our own lives. We've found in the pages of the Bible living water that has quenched our spiritual thirst and changed our lives and given us hope and meaning and purpose in life. The Bible has taught us how life works, and we can't imagine living our life without it's guidance. God didn't give us the Bible to be revered. He gave us the Bible to be read and studied and memorized and obeyed so that we can really live. And as a church, this is a great time to re-up our commitment to the Word of God and to read it and to live out what it says. That's what God wants us to do. Are you doing it?