

An Inspired Word

2 Peter 1:16-21

What you believe about this book literally shapes everything about your life. That is *not* an exaggeration.

Is this book the Word of God? Is it only *a* word of God among others? Does it merely *contain* the word of God, buried somewhere for us to find it? Or is it something else altogether? How you answer that question, what you believe about this book, shapes your understanding of *humanity*—who we are, why we’re here; *morality*—what is right and wrong, how we should live; *philosophy*—how we think, what we believe about truth; *society*—how we relate to others, how various institutions should work, like marriage, family, government, vocation.

Because ultimately, what you believe about this book is inextricably related to what you believe about God. Our beliefs about God shape everything about us, and what we believe about God is intimately tied to what we believe about the Bible. Is this God’s Word, or not?

An Orthodox View of Scripture

Like I’ve already said this morning, we take the Bible pretty seriously at Westgate. In our practice, and also in our confession of faith. If you look at our doctrinal statement, article 2 reads:

We believe that God has spoken in the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, through the words of human authors. As the verbally inspired Word of God, the Bible is without error in the original writings, the complete revelation of His will for salvation, and the ultimate authority by which every realm of human knowledge and endeavor should be judged. Therefore, it is to be believed in all that it teaches, obeyed in all that it requires, and trusted in all that it promises.¹

And this view of Scripture stands within the heritage of historical, orthodox Christianity stretching through the Reformation into the Church Fathers and all the way back to the apostles and the prophets. We believe what they believed and taught about the Bible—that it is nothing less than the very Word of God.²

¹ Article 2 of the EFCA Statement of Faith. See <https://www.efca.org/explore/what-we-believe>.

² See, e.g., ch. 1 of the Westminster Confession of Faith. See also Geoffrey Bromiley’s summary of some of the Church Father’s views on inspiration in “Church Doctrine of Inspiration,” *Revelation and the Bible*, ed. C.F.H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958), 207-208.

Competing Views of Scripture

But of course there are other views and other opinions about this book. And we shouldn't be afraid to acknowledge or wrestle with them or try to understand them. Nor should we be afraid to ask the honest, hard questions we might have about the Bible, especially if we're going to hang so much weight on it.

For some people, this book is nothing more than an *ancient mythology*—stories invented to explain the origins of the world and give authority to the moral codes of that particular culture. Ancient Babylon had *Enuma Elish*; ancient Egypt had its creation accounts and wisdom literature; ancient Israel had their Scriptures—what we call the Old Testament. The Bible's value for today then is merely history. Rather than being the Word of God, it is simply a record of what a bunch of dead people once upon a time believed about God.

Others agree with the idea that the Bible is an ancient mythology, but try to find *some modern value* in it. If you can break through and peel away the layers of mythology, you can often find a kernel of truth that's beneficial for man's soul. Ideas and values that help us become better versions of ourselves and achieve our potential. This is what Thomas Jefferson did. He actually took a pen knife and cut out of his Bible all of the miracles, anything supernatural, anything having to do with God's judgment—and focused only on certain words of Jesus, which were to him “the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man.”³

We might not bust out the scissors so quickly, but a lot of people do something similar today. They *pick and choose* the parts of the Bible they like, while ignoring or even denouncing the rest of it. Like a box of Russell Stover's chocolates—you pick the caramels, or the soft centers (the love of God, the mercy of God), and you leave what you don't like (God's holiness or justice).

Yet there are still others who tell us that the entire box is poison. The Bible is at best a *human invention* designed to prop up weak and ignorant people, and at worst an *instrument of oppression*—a tool used by people in power to marginalize the vulnerable and powerless and suppress opposition, even to justify genocide. Thomas Paine, in his book, *The Age of Reason*, wrote, “The most detestable wickedness, the most horrid cruelties, and the greatest miseries, that have afflicted the human race have had their origin in this thing called revelation, or revealed religion.”⁴

But then there are those who throughout history have come to this book and read it as *nothing less than the very Word of God*. Sir Isaac Newton, who discovered gravity and the laws of motion and invented calculus, said, “We account the scriptures of God to be the most sublime philosophy. I find more sure marks of authenticity in the Bible than in any profane history whatsoever.”⁵ John Locke, philosopher and father of Classical Liberalism, wrote, “Let him study the holy Scripture, especially in the New Testament. Therein are contained the words of eternal life. It has God for its author; salvation for its end; and truth, without any mixture of error, for its

³ Jefferson, as cited in Peter Carlson, “The Bible according to Jefferson,” *The Humanist*, Feb. 18, 2012. Available at: <http://thehumanist.com/march-april-2012/the-bible-according-to-thomas-jefferson/>.

⁴ Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason: Being an Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology, Part 1* (New York: The Truth Seeker Co., 1898), 169-170.

⁵ Sir Isaac Newton, *Optics*, 1704. As cited in William Joseph Federer, *America's God and Country: Encyclopedia of Quotations* (St. Louis: Amerisearch, 2000), 473.

matter.”⁶ Abraham Lincoln said “I believe the Bible is the best gift God has ever given to man. All the good of the Savior of the world is communicated to us through the Book.”

So what should *we* think about this book?

To begin to answer that question, we need to understand what this book tells us about itself. And to do that we’re going to look specifically at 2 Peter 1:16-21.

The Scripture’s View of Scripture

The apostle Peter writes this letter toward the end of his life not to give some new information, but to remind his readers of what they have already learned and believed. He says in 1:13-15: “I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of reminder, since I know that the putting off of my body will be soon, as our Lord Jesus Christ made clear to me. And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things.”

And what does he want them to recall? He doesn’t want them to forget that their knowledge of God—knowledge they have gained through the Scriptures (“his precious and very great promises,” v. 4)—is meant to bear fruit in lives of character and obedience. Knowing God is not just about having information; our knowledge of God is meant to shape our lives (1:3-4). So he doesn’t want them to become “ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ” (as he puts it in 1:8), but instead to “grow in the grace and knowledge of your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (3:18).

But how do we know we can trust this “knowledge of God” that Peter is talking about? Peter has been teaching people about God for decades, and what he says about God has massive implications for how we live—we should turn away from sin, trust Jesus as King and Savior, and pursue lives of character and holiness. But how reliable is this “knowledge of God” that Peter teaches and wants us to remember?

That’s the question he answers in ch. 1:16-21. And you’ll notice he offers two kinds of evidence to ground the reliability of what he has to say about God. The first is eyewitness testimony, vv. 16-18.

Eyewitness Testimony (1:16-18)

I want you to pursue holiness, and I want you to remember these things, because . . . v. 16:

we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.¹⁷ For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,”¹⁸ we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.

‘So what we’re telling you about Jesus is not a myth, it’s not a story to trick you into doing something, it is true knowledge of God, and we know this because we were *there*. We saw Jesus’

⁶ John Locke, “The Works of John Locke, Vol. II.” Printed for Arthur Bettesworth: London, 1727. Page 536. As cited: https://www.hbu.edu/HBU/media/HBU/publications/Dunham_Bible_Museum/DBM_QuotesabouttheBible.pdf.

glory revealed. We heard God’s endorsement of his Son from heaven. Therefore we must give our lives to him.’

The event Peter describes here, of course, is what we call the “transfiguration” of Jesus, which you can read about in Matthew 17, Mark 9, and Luke 9. Jesus had taken Peter, James, and John (three of his closest disciples) with him to the top of a mountain where the Father spoke from heaven and revealed Jesus’ heavenly glory, majesty, authority, and power. And the fact that it wasn’t just one witness, but three, was important not only for the sake of history, but even for Israel’s law. A claim couldn’t be validated without the testimony of two or three witnesses.

And the apostles witnessed more than this. Three men saw the transfiguration; *hundreds* of men and women saw Jesus after his resurrection. And keep in mind that these eyewitnesses were both authors and sources of what would become the New Testament (cf. Lk. 1:1-4). We’ll talk more about the reliability of the Bible next week, but the information we have in the New Testament about Jesus’ life is not a “cleverly devised myth”; it is verifiable history. When the Gospels and Letters were written down, many of the eyewitnesses were still alive, and therefore able to verify or discredit what was written. And what was written has stood ever since.

But there’s a second kind of evidence Peter points his readers to in order to convince them that this knowledge of God is true and sufficient for walking with him. We have our eyewitness testimony on one hand, but if that doesn’t convince you, then (as some translations put it), we have something *more sure*—the prophetic word, vv. 19-21.

The Prophetic Word (1:19-21)

And here is where we really learn quite a bit about what the Bible tells us about the Bible—which, if that’s true, is what God tells us about the Bible. Look again at vv. 19-21:

And we have something more sure, the prophetic word . . . [or as the updated version of the ESV puts it:] And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts,²⁰ knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation.²¹ 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.

When Peter talks about the “prophetic word” here, he’s talking not only about the words spoken by Israel’s prophets in history, but the prophecies *written* in the Old Testament itself. “No prophecy of *Scripture*,” he says in v. 20. What does he mean by “Scripture”? For the early church, this meant the Old Testament, the Scriptures of Israel (the New Testament didn’t exist yet). But already by the time Peter wrote this letter, some of the New Testament books were being recognized as Scripture. In ch. 3, Peter refers to Paul’s letters as part of the “Scriptures” (3:16; cf. 1 Tim. 5:18//Matt. 10:10). The Scriptures are Peter’s second kind of evidence.

And he wants us to pay careful attention to it. “. . . to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” (1:19). Whenever you drive somewhere after sunset, imagine trying to do that on New England roads without headlights. You won’t make it two blocks. Peter wants you to pay attention to the Bible like you pay attention to your headlights. It is your safety and guide until the day dawns.

But the reason we should pay attention to the Bible that way, he finally tells us, is because it is the very Word of God. It's not just *a* word of God; it doesn't merely *contain* the Word of God; it *is the* Word of God. An inspired Word. As an earlier version of the ESV puts it in v. 19, what the Bible tells us about God is *more sure* than even Peter's own eyewitness testimony. Another way to translate that phrase, which is what we have in our pew Bible edition, is that Peter's testimony *more fully confirms* what the Old Testament Scriptures already said. Either way the point is the same: the Bible is a trustworthy source for knowledge of God. Because, in the Bible God speaks. "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" (1:21).

This is what we call the doctrine of "inspiration." And when we talk about inspiration, that doesn't mean that the Bible is *inspiring*, like a really good Hallmark card (though it is). Nor do we mean that the people who wrote it were *inspired* the way an artist is inspired to paint when she sees a beautiful sunset. What we mean is that *this book came into being through the very breath of God*. It's what Paul describes in 2 Timothy 3:16: "All Scripture is *breathed out by God* [inspired] and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." It's what is implied in every one of the roughly 1,000 occurrences of phrases like, "Thus says the Lord," or "Then the Lord said," or "the word of the Lord." It's what Jesus believed when refers to the Old Testament as "the word of God" (Matt. 15:6/Mk. 7:13).

In the Bible God speaks. Not just the message within it, but the very words and sentences that communicate that message—every one of them. Every "jot and tittle," as Jesus puts it in Matthew 5. This book is nothing less than the very Word of God.

So how does this work? Because if I look at the introduction to 2 Peter, it tells me that Simon Peter is the author (1:1). How can God be the author and Peter be the author at the same time? Peter himself explains it. Verse 21 again: "men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." The Bible is God's Word written in human words through human authors. Around 40 of them—kings, prophets, priests, poets, historians, doctors, tax collectors, apostles—in three different languages, on three different continents, over the course of 1,500 years, completing 66 books.

Some of these authors heard directly from God—prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah. Some of them wrote out of their own pain and experience. Some of them used earlier writings as their sources (e.g. the interdependence of the Synoptic Gospels). Some of them did research, like Luke, who interviewed eyewitnesses of Jesus in order to write his "orderly account" of what happened (Lk. 1:1-4). But all of them were carried along by the Holy Spirit, so that *what they wrote is exactly what he wanted them to write* in order to reveal himself to us.

This is what the Bible claims of itself—that it is nothing less than the very Word of God. Now we'll examine the truthfulness of that claim next Sunday, when we consider the reliability of Scripture. But this morning I want to close by offering some reflections on what this means for us if the Bible's claim about itself is true, if this book really is nothing less than the very Word of God.

The Implications of the Scripture's View of Scripture

First, it means that it's actually possible to know God in a true and accurate way. We don't have to guess; we can really know him. Not because we're so clever, but because he has revealed himself to us. That's amazing!

Second, if this book is God's Word, that means Peter is right: we will do well to pay attention to it as to a lamp shining in a dark place (1:19). If the Bible is God's Word, then our greatest need in life, our greatest act of love, our most defining characteristic, should be to listen carefully to what God is saying.

Think about how rude it is to ignore someone when they're talking to you. You're talking to your spouse and their looking at their phone or reading the paper instead of listening. You say something to your children and you have to repeat yourself a hundred times before their brain engages and they realize that you're talking to them. Imagine what it is like for God to go to the incredible lengths he has gone to over two millennia through all sorts of people to inspire his Word, and then to protect and preserve it as it's passed down through generations for another two millennia, only to have us ignore it. If we love God, we will listen to him when he speaks. We will make it a priority to be students of his Word. Because he is *always* speaking in his Word.

And essential to being good listeners is that we prioritize the teaching of the Bible in our church and in our homes. This is the reason we teach and study the Bible in literally every ministry of this church. *God is speaking*. It's the reason we preach the Bible on Sunday mornings and not some inspirational talk loosely based on the Bible. That's no good for you. You need to hear from God, not from me (believe me, I don't have anything great to say). My job is to *preach the Word*—to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God.

This is also the reason we usually preach through whole books of the Bible. God's Word has not come to us in isolated principles or commands or doctrines or examples, but in whole stories, in poems, songs, and letters. And we understand the message of those stories and poems and letters better when we study them as a whole—the way they were written, within their own context.

If the Bible is nothing less than the Word of God, our greatest duty is to pay careful attention to it.

But third, you're not really paying careful attention unless you're doing something with what you heard. Again, if my boss tells me to do something, and I hear the words, but don't actually do anything, have I really listened? Peter wants us to pay careful attention to the Word so that our knowledge of God is not ineffective and unfruitful, but bears fruit in holiness and character (cf. 1:3-11). That means there's a proper response to what we hear. So what does that look like?

As our doctrinal statement that we looked at earlier framed it, the Bible "is to be believed in all that it teaches, obeyed in all that it requires, and trusted in all that it promises." The book of James puts it this way: "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves" (Jms. 1:22).

The centrality of Scripture in the life of the church must be more than just gaining information. It should result in *transformation* and *obedience*, in changed lives.

That begins by believing in Jesus. He is the centerpiece of God's Word. The whole Bible works together to reveal who he is and what he has done. As Jesus himself says in John 5:39, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me." Nothing else the Bible says or asks us to do will ultimately make sense or even be possible apart from Jesus and his work on the cross. We respond to the Bible by trusting Jesus.

It also means becoming more and more like Jesus. God's Word should help us love righteousness more and more and hate sin more and more. It should impact our relationships—how we treat each other, with the kind of love that we ourselves have received from God (cf. 1 Jn. 3:16). That's one of the reasons we make a big deal of reconciled relationships within our congregation, not just because it's healthy but because God tells us to.

The Bible should shape our view of morality. All of the controversies being debated today—sexual ethics, marriage, gender identity, racism—*God says something about those things*. What matters to the Christian therefore is not what we want to think, but what God says. And if we only listen to the parts of the Bible we like or agree with, then we're not really believing the Bible; we're believing ourselves. The Bible should shape our view of morality.

The Bible should shape the priorities and values of every ministry. It should shape the way we approach leadership in the church. For instance, the reason we ask qualified men to serve as elders here is not because that's the way we've always done it (it's not the way we've always done it); nor is it because we think it's the most strategic or effective model of leadership; it's because that's what God's Word says (in 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 14).

We need to believe what it teaches, obey what it commands, and trust what it promises. That doesn't mean we've got everything figured out, or that we have nothing more to learn. We have *plenty* to learn, and plenty to unlearn and relearn. It means that what drives us when we have a question about what to believe or what to do or how to act, is not what we think it should be, or what the world tells us—whatever the latest blogger deems as being on "the right side of history"; what drives us is *what God says*. Understanding and believing and obeying and trusting *that*. That's our goal, if this is nothing less than the very Word of God.

Our posture toward Scripture, because it is God's Word, should reflect the Puritan heritage of New England. J.I. Packer describes it like this:

To the Puritan the Bible was in truth the most precious possession that this world affords. His deepest conviction was that reverence for God means reverence for Scripture, and serving God means obeying Scripture. To his mind, therefore, no greater insult could be offered to the Creator than to neglect his written word; and, conversely, there could be no truer act of homage to him than to prize it and pore over it, and then to live out and give out its teaching.⁷

May it be so among us.

⁷ J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 98.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Opening Questions

1. What do you think about the claim what you believe about the Bible shapes everything about your life?
2. How would you summarize some of the various views people have toward the Bible today?

Questions for Study and Understanding

3. Take a moment to read all of 2 Peter 1. What is Peter talking about in vv. 1-15, and how does that help us understand what he says in vv. 16-21?
4. What point is Peter trying to prove according to v. 16? How does he back it up in vv. 17-18?
5. How do vv. 19-21 build on the point Peter has been making?
6. Summarize what we learn about the Bible in vv. 19-21.
7. What does Peter want us to do with the Bible (see v. 19)?

Questions for Reflection and Application

8. How does Peter's claim about the nature of the Bible compare or contrast to your own view of Scripture?
9. What are some of the implications of the Bible being the very Word of God?
10. What happens if we move away from this view? What are the implications of not treating the Bible as the Word of God?
11. What are some practical ways we can "pay careful attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place"?