

Series: *I BELIEVE IN GOD, BUT...* January 15, 2012

I CAN'T BELIEVE EVERYTHING IN THE BIBLE!

Matthew 5:17-19, 2 Timothy 3:16

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1. How many of you are familiar with the concept of an **urban legend**? There are tons of them out there—and a TV show called **Mythbusters** dedicated to either proving—or disproving them. For example, anyone remember Mikey from the **Life** cereal commercial, “Let’s give it to Mikey—he won’t eat anything.” Urban legend had it that Mikey ate a bunch of Pop Rocks, drank Coke—and his stomach blew up. His parents even received sympathy cards! True or false? Not true.

-However, there **was** an urban legend that has never been disproved. Someone told me when I was a kid that **there are actually more bald women than bald men in the world!** I mean, it **could** be true, couldn’t it? I mean, the thing with women having more hair than men **could** all be a cover-up. I know. Bad joke. So, let’s see how you do at urban legends! I’m going to show you some pictures—and you tell me whether they’re real or fake!

*What about the whale and the kayaker—*real*, or fake?

*What about this tourist on 9-11—real or *fake*?

*What about the man-eating catfish—*real* or fake?

*What about the moose pulling a plow—real or *fake*?

*What about the world’s largest dog—real or *fake*?

*What about this huge cat—*real* or fake?

*What about this satellite photo of the blackout?

*What about this ghost, captured on film?

*What about the *hands of God* photo—real or fake?

*What about this, real or fake?

Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God’s way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us. (2 Timothy 3:16-17 MSG)

-Well, that’s where—in a world like ours, and maybe in a gathering like this, there’s a **vast** difference of opinion—right? Some people—from the well-educated to the uneducated—would tell you that you’ve checked your brain at the door if you believe that. Other people from the very same ranks—would say: “This is an accurate description of the Bible!”

-And then, of course, there’s everything in between. Some say, “Well, it does contain **some** truth—but you can’t trust **everything** it says. Or, “Well, you know it was written by ancient people to address ancient problems—so what it says doesn’t fit in a post-modern world.”

-The most current disclaimer comes from Dan Brown in his book, **The Da Vinci Code**—which basically says that the New Testament books in particular were chosen

by the Roman Emperor, Constantine—for political purposes; that other records—**better** records of Jesus' life and teachings that were discarded and banned.

-So, as we start this morning—I want to ask you what **you** believe. And I especially want to ask you... **Why?** The most popular disclaimer I hear in my travels sounds something like this: “Well, you **can't trust** everything the Bible says.” Or, “The Bible is so hard to read and can be interpreted **so many different ways.**” Or the Bible has been **added to** so many times, you be sure of anything it says. It's full of errors and contradictions!”

-Now, here's specifically where I'm at, okay? When you press a little on the people who, basically, that the Bible can't really be trusted—what you find is that their opinions are sometimes--many times, perhaps, based on **urban legend.**

-Here's what I want to do. I want to talk about the Bible itself—and why it's impact on the world has been so profound. Then I want to spend a few minutes talking about how to actually **read** the Bible based on what it **is...**and what it **isn't.** Then I'll close with what I think are some barriers in our willingness to accept what it says. We'll do a little Q & A—and then we're done!

2. First, just some facts about the Bible and why it's unique. The way the Bible was written is very unusual. It contains 66 books altogether and was written in three different languages over a period of 1600 years by 40 different authors. That boggles the mind! Imagine a book started in 400 A.D. and completed last year!
 - a. What I find fascinating is the consistency of the Bible's message about God, about the soul, and about us! Even though each book retains the personal style of the human authors—it tells a new part of the same story. And it answers the core questions about life; how everything started—Who started it—what happened—what God is up to—what our part is—and how everything will finish.
 - b. Just some facts you may be interested in. The Bible is the single most widely published book in the world and has been translated into well over **2000** languages. And it's **durable**—it's been investigated more closely, criticized more thoroughly, and banned more broadly than all the other books put together. People have regularly risked their lives to own a Bible—or study it.

-If you were to ask the question—**why?** Especially, **why would you lay your life on the line for what appears from the outside to be a random collection of writings?** Well, I can **tell** you what people would say. They would tell you, “I believe that God has spoken. This teaching has not just **transformed** my life—it has **saved** my life!” Can anyone relate to that? No other book that has that kind of impact!
3. There's another factor that adds huge weight to the teaching of the Bible; Jesus of Nazareth, believed and taught that it was absolutely true and trustworthy. In fact, He staked his teaching and identity on it. Most historians, whether or not they believe Jesus was the Son of God, would agree that He has influenced history and thinking more than any person who has ever lived.

-In fact, if you check Jesus' teaching and cross-reference it, you'll find that He either quotes or refers to most of the books in the Old Testament. Not only that, he referred to the creation account, the fall, Abraham and the miracles contained in those books as fact. He said this:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.
(Matthew 5:17-18 NIV)

-As I mentioned last week—Jesus put his teaching in the same category—as a foundation that would make it through the storms that life brings. People have taken seriously what Paul, an early leader, said about the sacred writings; that:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness... (2 Timothy 3:16 NIV)

-That's pretty strong language, isn't it—that these writings ultimately come from a God who chooses to speak to us in ways we can understand. These *incredible* claims for the Bible have, understandably, brought intense scrutiny over the years. And this has been a good thing—because it has stood the test. In fact, no other book or collection of books has even come *close* to the impact the Bible has had on health systems, school systems, legal systems, social justice, compassion and scientific research.

-The authors wrote as eyewitnesses of how God worked. One of them, Peter, actually talks about how God uses and speaks through ordinary human beings to say what He wants to say:

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 eyewitnesses of his majesty...Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:16, 20-21 NIV)

4. Now, truth is, a *lot* of sacred books--the Koran, the Book of Mormon, the Bhagavad-Gita--make these kinds of claims; that they uniquely originate with God. It's one thing for the Bible to claim authority—but is it historically authentic? A lot of people—some of whom you heard in the video—say that the Bible is *full* of myths and inconsistencies! If you probe a bit and ask, "Why don't you tell me about the ones that trouble you most—maybe I can help"—most people have to admit that they've borrowed that line from others—and haven't actually read through the Bible.

-Having said that, there are *tons* of places where the Bible could be inaccurate—because it claims to be historical—and refers to kings, nations, emperors, wars, military leaders, cities, islands, seas—as well as cultural practices. If the Bible was talking about people and places that never existed—the intense research and

archaeological work that's been done over the past 200 years would've made that clear. What **has** become clear is how accurate the Bible is.

- a. Some critics from the 19th century said that the Bible was clearly wrong in what it said about cultures and practices. Truth is, **no archaeological find has EVER contradicted the historicity of the Bible!** Not a single one. You need to know that no other sacred book can make this claim.
- b. Sometimes people say that the Bible is full of stories that got further from the truth the more they were repeated. Anyone ever heard that? What has astounded me is both the **quantity** and **quality** of the ancient records that are available.

-Let me give you an example. Most people would believe that the ancient historian—Tacitus—who lived around 100 A.D.—accurately recorded history. There are only 20 ancient manuscripts that have survived—the oldest dated at 1100 A.D.--1000 years after his original history was written.

-Compare that to **5000 ancient manuscripts or fragments** of the New Testament that have survived—some of which were are dated to less than 100 years of them being written. No other ancient writings even come close in volume, age and quality.

-Just a word on **accuracy**: It took Scribes about a **year** to make a hand-written copy of the Bible. When they finished writing a page, they would go back and **count the letters** to make sure it had been done right. And that's why out of 20,000 lines of writing in the New Testament, only **40** are in question—none of which affect the overall interpretation of what it says.

-When people talk about the Bible being full of inaccuracies and mistakes, I think, "Man, they couldn't **possibly** have ever read the Bible or studied its history."

5. There are two core issues that always seem to come up when the trustworthiness of the Bible is discussed. The first is whether or not the Bible conflicts with scientific discoveries. Let me simply say, the Bible doesn't discuss scientifically how God created things—it just says that He did.

-I'm not going to dig deeply into this—because I've talked about it before. Let me say this, if you have questions—do some reading. Francis Collins, a brilliant geneticist who headed the Human Genome Project, recently wrote a great book, **The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief**.

-The other core issue people struggle with is what the Bible says about miracles. Some people would say, "You expect me to believe that Jesus actually walked on water, raised the dead, and fed a crowd with a little boy's lunch? Come on! Give me a break!"

- a. The key issue, really, is whether or not the God who created the natural order can interrupt it when He wants to say or do something strategically important to His plan for the human race. Overall, miracles are relatively rare in biblical history. When they do occur, they are not random, weird things—like someone finding the Madonna in a grilled cheese sandwich. They point to a God who loves people and is working on their behalf. Jesus miracles, in particular, showed his compassion—and revealed his authority over the natural order—quantity, quality, gravity, time, supernatural forces, life...and decay.

-It's also important to note that people then were not ignorant and gullible; they were just as wary and suspicious as we are. Belief was a **choice**. Some saw—and believed; some saw and doubted.

- b. Philosophically, miracles actually do make sense. If we are made in the image of God—and we speak—He must speak. If we are made in the image of God—and we can create beauty, and make plans and use our power to fulfill them—then He surely can. Francis Collins points out that if God can put the recipe for an entire human in a strand of DNA—then anything **we** call a miracle being all that hard for Him!

- c. By the way, something else you need to know; the narratives of Jesus' life, miracles, death and resurrection were **widely** distributed within the lifespan of most of those who saw them happen—or experienced them.

-In fact, just 30 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, Paul wrote a book to the church in Corinth and quoted a creed about Jesus life, death and resurrection that was circulating in the very city where it happened. Jerusalem.

-Paul said, "Over 500 people saw this happen—and most of them are **still alive!**" I.e., go check it out for yourself if you don't believe me! If he had been lying or exaggerating, the people who **knew** the truth could've come forward. If they had, Christianity could've been discredited and shut down in weeks—see, Jesus staked everything he said about himself and about life on His resurrection.

- d. The most **powerful** evidence for the accuracy and supernatural origin of the Bible is how Jesus—through his birth, life, death, and impact on the world fulfilled almost 100 **specific** prophecies. When you read Psalm 22 or Isaiah 53, it reads like an eyewitness account of Jesus' crucifixion. Daniel describes the next 500 years of world history **so** accurately, many say that it had to have been written after the fact.

-But the way, know what the odds are of Jesus fulfilling even **eight** of the prophecies made about him? The same as someone throwing a wedding ring into one of the 7 oceans of the world—and someone, not knowing which ocean, making a single cast with a fishing lure—and **hooking** it. I.e., **way** too big to be coincidence!

6. Now, let me mention one more thing. A **lot** of the problems people have with the Bible is in not knowing how to read it. As in any literature, you have to read what is narrative—as narrative, what is poetic imagery—as poetic imagery, and what is clearly metaphorical—as metaphor. That’s only fair.

-First. Remember Jesus’ words,

All authority in Heaven and on Earth has been given to *me*. (Matthew 28:18)

So, when we talk about the authority of the Bible—we’re really talking about the authority of God and what He has to say. Let me say some things about what the Bible is **not**, okay?

- a. First, the Bible is not primarily a book of rules to keep or doctrines to **believe**. Sometimes people talk about the Bible as the **owner’s manual** for humans. In some respects, that’s a helpful image—but it can give the wrong impression. An owner’s manual is mainly for doing maintenance or solving problems. ***What do I do when I have doubts?—p. 46. What do I do when I have a fight with my spouse?—p. 58-64. How do I raise my kids?—p. 64-972.*** The Bible isn’t arranged like that, is it?

-Now, the Bible **does** have commands and establish doctrines—but at the core, it is mainly a narrative. It has an arc to it—a beginning—and an end. Now, let’s be clear—**that’s** how God--the authority behind it—has chosen to reveal himself. When people don’t understand this—they get frustrated and say dumb things—because they don’t get it.

-A couple of years ago, a book came out called, **The Year of Living Biblically: One Man’s Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally As Possible**. It’s written by a guy named A.J. Jacobs—a **really** funny book. So, he’s from NYC—and grows a beard, wears a robe, eats kosher—and tries to live as biblically as he can. For example, the OT mentions stoning Sabbath-breakers—so he’d go to Central Park looking for offenders—and secretly throw pebbles at them—then look the other way.

-He says,

“Millions of people say they take the Bible literally. A *Newsweek* poll put it at 55%, but *my* suspicion was that almost everyone’s literalism consisted of picking and choosing. People plucked out the parts that fit their agenda.”

And that’s a fair critique, isn’t it?

- b. Here’s the key to **not** falling into that pit. The Bible is best seen as a story with 5 chapters—or a play with 5 acts. I’ve talked about this at length before—so I won’t go into a lot of detail.

Act 1 is the creation—where God makes everything—and it's **all** good. Act 2 starts when the humans God has created believe a lie—and everything gets twisted by sin, and even when God starts over—people go into all-out defiance. Act 3 starts when God promises that He is going to bless all nations through Abraham—and starts the long, arduous process of re-teaching people about Who He is—and what He wants to do.

-And, of course, Act 3 includes God bringing Israel out of Egypt—and establishing a covenant relationship with them. To be honest, this is where a **lot** of confusion has come in understanding the Bible. See, God gives them three categories of laws. There are moral laws—which reflect everything the Bible says about righteousness—and overlap the New Testament. But there are also **state** laws—which are basically about how to set up a nation; there are ritual laws—which deal with personal cleanliness and the entire sacrificial system. These are intended to point to Jesus—who will give his life as a sacrifice—and **fulfill** the law.

-Now, here's the deal—we can't go back to all of state laws and laws about ritual and sacrifice; that would violate why they existed. They will always be a part of our story—but they're in a previous act.

- c. Act 4 is Jesus. Jesus makes it clear that **all** the prophecies, all the teaching has pointed to **Him** and what He would accomplish. Now, if He wasn't the Son of God—that would be quite arrogant, wouldn't it? But when he rose from the dead—he made it clear to everyone that He was who He said He was—and it was now a whole new deal. God was offering friendship, freedom, forgiveness and life to **anyone** who would come—both Jews and Gentiles!

-And, of course, Act 5 begins with the book of Acts—the coming of the Spirit to ordinary people—like you and me—God gifting and empowering **everyone**, as they're sent everywhere to be salt and light; to save, redeem—live out the Good News!

*Act 1—Creation—Very good!

*Act 2—the Fall—which explains all the chaos and heartache.

*Act 3—God has a plan—and will start with a people who will bless the nations.

*Act 4—Jesus, God the Son, steps into history and gives his life.

*Act 5—the restoration of everything begins through the power of the Spirit in the hearts of ordinary people. Revelation gives us a peek into Act 6—Jesus' coming—and the complete restoration of **everything**. We just have to remember **where we are in the story!**

7. I want to make one more observation about the accuracy of the Bible. This is personal—and it's what makes most people uncomfortable with the Bible. It's how accurately the Bible describes the interior of our hearts. Listen to this:

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and intents of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from the God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account. (Hebrews 4:12-13 NIV)

- a. From my perspective, this is profoundly true! I have never in my life read a book that cuts so deep into the core of what really goes on in my heart—and what needs to happen to fix it. Sometimes I read the Bible—and it makes me blush when I recognize how unloving—or how willing I am to use others to make **me** look good. It calls this darkness what it is. Sin.

-Read what the Bible says about sex outside of marriage, what it says about arrogance, selfishness, unforgiveness and greed--I mean, it gets right to the core of our motives and attitudes. How many of you have ever been caught doing something wrong? Were you a happy camper? **NO!** It's a **lot** easier to justify ourselves and dismiss the Bible with a single phrase: **Well, you just can't believe everything the Bible says!**

- b. Now, let's just lay our cards on the table. I suspect that a **lot** of people have an interest in taking parts out of the Bible—not because they have serious intellectual doubts—but because it **confronts the way they're living!** See, the Bible says some **very** unpopular things; that your pride will send you to hell; that sin needs to be confessed and repented of; that we actually are accountable for how we use our lives, our time, our money and our bodies; that we can't ignore poverty and injustice and greed. That, friends, is **not** popular stuff!

-But there's another side to this. If you can't believe what the Bible says about moral issues—the sword cuts both ways. That means that you can't believe what it says about God's forgiveness—and outrageous love for people like us. It means that there is no justice; that **everyone** gets away with what they do—whether they steal stamps from the company—or steal the innocence of children by raping them?

-See, when we make **ourselves** the ones who decide what's true and false, that's pretty risky stuff. I believe that the God of the universe has a voice—like us—and that He has spoken to let us know that He is filled with love, mercy, compassion—and **wisdom** to keep us from wrecking our lives! What do **you** believe?

Q & A

8. Some of you, today, have genuine and honest questions about what the Bible says. You're curious—interested—and maybe a little cautious, not because you've read the Bible, but because of what you've heard and read **about** it. I want to challenge you—if that's okay. Take the time to read it and study it for yourself. If you're interested, I

have some books—and CDs of books that could help. Don't make a decision on something this important based on urban legend!

-There may be some of you who say you actually believe that what it says is true—but, if we were to be honest, that's not seen in the way you handle it, use it, or know it. If you struggle in this area—I do have some suggestions for that; start small; use a translation that helps you and engages you—and a medium, book, CD, MP3 that works for you. And ask God to speak—and engage your heart and your will.

-But it could be this morning—and I'm just going to be **really** blunt—you've been blowing smoke. C.S. Lewis once said, "I didn't **want** there to be a God—because I didn't want anyone interfering in my life—and I saw God as the **Great Interferer!**" If this is where you are—be honest about it. Recognize that God is not the Big Stick in the Sky; God is not the Genie in the Bottle you call on when you get in trouble. He's Lord of all—but He's way more merciful and kind and good than you'd **ever** believe. But...you'll need to trust Him—and trust that everything He says is for your good. You **can** believe; God **can** be trusted...will you?