



**REALLY?**

# Untruths Uncovered

**M**any untrue things are said about God, Jesus, the Bible and the Church. Let's expose some false narratives as we walk toward Easter this year. We are not trying to win arguments, but to begin conversations with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15). Each week's sermon will provide a thoughtful question, so you can start a conversation with a skeptic or non-believer. Ultimately, Easter morning declares the greatest news. Everyone said Jesus was dead, and that death would hold Him forever. Really? Guess what—Jesus is alive again!

## REALLY? • Hebrews 4:6-13 • Tim McConnell • February 25, 2018

Always check your references. I was surprised to find a few quotes on the internet I wasn't sure about. Here's one from Abraham Lincoln, "The problem with quotes on the internet is that it is hard to verify their authenticity." That sure surprised me. We ought to be a little more careful! Especially when it matters. There is no collection of words that matters more to us believers as this book we call the Bible. In our church, we make the claim that this book is, to quote the Westminster Confession, "the Word of God written... given by inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life." That's a big claim. Not all our friends will agree with that. How do you answer when someone says the Bible is bogus? If we lose the Word we lose our way.

First we want to understand the position. If you are not a believer, you probably have a very hard time figuring out why Christians put so much emphasis on their Bible. It is hard to fathom why a person would grant so much authority over their lives to an ancient book of wisdom, something written thousands of years ago. You have probably heard that it wasn't written by the authors it claims, that it has suffered all kinds of corruption and that it was really only meant for the people it was originally written for anyway—it is hopelessly anachronistic. So, accepting all that, why in the world would anyone want to submit their lives to the guidance of this one ancient book? Particularly when it seems to limit what a person can or can't do, like only marrying someone of the opposite sex, or giving their hard-earned money away, or making a sacrifice to go to worship weekly when other things are so much more appealing.

Some would even say there is something wrong with a person who seems to love an ancient book more than they love the people around them. Now, that's a problem we have to address right away. The Word of God teaches above all to love—love God and love our neighbor. If anyone gets the idea we love our Scriptures (or love our moral rectitude) more than we love the people around us, then we have some work to do right away because the Scriptures teach us to love. If you love God's Word then you will love your neighbor. Remember, they don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. But that's the problem. That's the argument. "Why do you submit your life to one ancient book of wisdom? Don't you know? The Bible is bogus." Really?

This passage in Hebrews is a challenge to grab. It jumps in the middle of an argument, part of a long argument to prove that Jesus is greater than Moses, and this particular part of it debates what is meant by "entering God's rest." The text it takes up is Psalm 95, a Psalm about the people of God when they had been rescued from slavery in Egypt but still doubted the Lord. What does the Bible mean when it says that God

declared, "They shall never enter my rest"? What does it mean when it says "Today if you hear his voice do not harden your hearts"? What does "Today" mean in that text? It's an argument about the meaning of Scripture, that's what I want you to see. "God's rest" it says is God's Kingdom, the place where we are at peace with God, where eternal life is, where we are at home. It's a place that Jesus brings. You enter the 'rest' of God by believing the Word of God. You enter God's rest by believing God's Word. So to put a point on it, it says when God speaks you ought to listen. Hebrews 3:12 set it up, "See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God." If you hear God's Word, don't harden your heart. Or flip it positively, soften your heart. Soften your heart and take God at His Word.

In the middle of this argument, as an aside almost as Hebrews wrestles with the meaning and significance of Psalm 95, we are told what the Word of God is: "For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." (Hebrews 4:12) Why debate so hard about the ins and outs of Psalm 95? Because the Word of God is alive. It moves in on you. The Spirit of God accompanies the Word of God. Just like when you say something the sound is carried to others by your breath; the Word of God is carried along by the Spirit of God. It's living and active. And penetrating. The Word of God has its own, self-authenticating power. I may just be old school here, or maybe I've run in Christian circles too long, but I just think the Bible stands out. The Bible verse still has this unique power. I've read that America is 20% tattooed today. Many of those tattoos are Bible verses. Have you noticed that? I mean I'm never sure if I'm supposed to try to read someone's tattoo or not, but when I notice one, it's often a Bible verse. Why? There's some power there the world can't often explain.

"For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." (Hebrews 4:12) This isn't the only place the Word is compared to a sword. Ephesians 6:17 says, "Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." In Revelation the word coming out of the mouth of the Messiah is a sword. Don't get too wrapped up in soul and spirit, joints and marrow, the point is that the word is penetrating. When Peter preached the Word on Pentecost from Joel and from the Psalms, Acts 2 says the people were "cut to the heart." This living Word penetrates. When you really

get to reading the Bible you realize that you are not reading the Word so much as the Word is reading you. It reveals that God knows. "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account." (Hebrews 4:13) You know when you were a kid, and you did something wrong and tried to hide it and when you got home you could see in your mother's eyes—"She knows! I don't know how she knows, but I already know, without her saying a word, she knows!" Nothing is hidden from God. His Word penetrates and exposes us, it tells us who we really are. We have to take God at His Word.

So then, "The Bible is bogus." What is the Bible? The Bible is not one book, but a collection of sixty-six books, written by over three dozen authors (some known, some unknown), over the course of about fifteen hundred years. It contains many genres of literature: history, wisdom, poetry, prophecy, epistolary (letters). Many misunderstandings about the Bible stem from failing to note the genre; a poem conveys truth differently from a history. A wisdom story that begins "once upon a time" is different from an account that begins "when Quirinius was governor of Syria" or "when Cyrus was King of Persia." Christians say the text is inspired by the Holy Spirit as Paul wrote to Timothy, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." (2 Timothy 3:16 ESV). But set that aside for a minute. Ancient texts are measured for authenticity on the basis of a few factors: the time passing between the event itself and the first attestation of the event writing down, the veracity of the authorship—in other words, can we verify the author and the author's relationship to the events, and the amount of consistent corresponding manuscripts prior to the invention of the printing press. I don't have time to argue these points out, and I want to go a different direction actually, but you can research this for yourself—the Bible is ten times stronger in historicity than any other ancient document. It simply outpaces every historical document. There were over 5,000 copies of the Greek New Testament in consistent agreement with one another at the invention of the printing press, the next nearest ancient document is Homer's Iliad with 500 copies. The Gospels were written within forty years of Jesus' death by eyewitnesses. These things are not largely disputed, but the people who do dispute them make it onto every news special around Easter.

But let's go another direction. Let's say you are entering a conversation about the Bible, which you are going to enter this conversation with gentleness and respect, and you are going to try to get into the other person's shoes and see it from their perspective. You are going to

remember too that this conversation, although it pretends to be about the Bible, is actually about Jesus Here are some conversation prompts. Let's start with science. This ancient book at times seems to reflect archaic understandings about the natural world. That doesn't surprise me. It was written beginning maybe as much as 3500 years ago! I'm not surprised there are some outdated understandings. But you know what does surprise me? It surprises me that somehow, with all the advance of the natural sciences, somehow the Bible is not totally inaccurate. It is not indisputably wrong about any of them. Let's take the creation narrative of Genesis. You might argue that the world clearly came to form over the course of 13 billion years, but the Bible says it has only been 6000 years since God created the universe in seven days. Now, first of all, if God created space and time you can't use space and time to objectively measure God's act of creation (follow?). Space and time bend in His hands. But here's the amazing thing, even if you do go for a theistic evolution kind of theory, the word used for "day" in Genesis is the word *yom* which could also be understood to be an era or epoch of an undetermined length. Somehow the Bible survives. God said "Let there be light." Scientists increasingly argue that all matter is made of light, photons. It surprises me that no scientific discovery has caused us to toss the Bible out the window, of all that's been discovered. Why is that? We ought to take God at His Word.

Or argue from voice. Biblical criticism emerged in the early twentieth century in Germany trying to discriminate between the various voices of the Bible. The Bible was written by three dozen different authors over a span of centuries in different languages and locations. It doesn't surprise me that you can hear the voice of Paul, and David, and James and Moses. That doesn't surprise me one bit. What does surprise me is that if you take God at His Word and listen for a single voice in Scripture, it is there. Somehow, through the pens of three dozen different authors in different languages and different times, there is a consistent voice running straight through the Bible. When the early church went through the process of "canonization," granting an authoritative list of the books of the Bible in the 300's AD, they were not conferring power on certain books over others, they were recognizing the voice of God in those texts. It surprises me that I can hear that consistent voice. We all can. If we take God at His Word.

Now, how about Jesus? Read the account in Genesis of Abraham taking his son Isaac up the mountain to sacrifice him, and then not and then saying "see, the Lord himself will provide the sacrifice." Tell me that isn't about Jesus, the Son of God, becoming the sacrifice on our behalf. Read David at Psalm 22, the Psalm Jesus quoted on the cross, "my bones are

out of joint...a pack of villains encircles me; they pierce my hands and my feet...they cast lots for my garments." Tell me honestly that's not about the crucifixion of Jesus. Read Isaiah 53, "...he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities...by his wounds we are healed." Explain what that is about if it isn't about Jesus. Sixty-six books. Three dozen authors over 1500 years. On every page you find Jesus. Every page. I'm not surprised that the New Testament is about Jesus. But I am surprised that He can be found all the way through. Is this book different from other books? If we take God at His Word.

But that's the point. If you hear God's voice, do not harden your heart. Jesus explained this by the Parable of the Sower. He said a farmer casts seeds all over the place. Some of them fall in rocky soil, too shallow to survive growth. Some of them are choked out by weeds, distractions. Some of it falls on hard soil, ground that is hard as a rock. Like a path that has just been beaten down, trodden upon. Too many footfalls. A heart gets hard. The seed doesn't get in. It can't bring life. But for the heart that is softened to God's voice, the heart that has softened, turned over, broke open, soil. For that heart, the Word comes in as a seed and starts to grow life. As Jesus' brother James later put it, "Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you." (James 1:21). It's easy to find reason to dismiss the Word of God. It's easy to find people of hardened hearts. It's prevalent, the moral filth and evil that resists the penetrating, uncovering, exposing Word of God. But for you, if you hear the voice of the Lord, don't harden your heart. Take God at His Word.

We said goodbye to Billy Graham this week. Ninety-nine years faithfully preaching the Gospel. We also said goodbye to our friend Paul Ferrin, a member here who was an internationally known Christian musician and played for three of Billy Graham's crusades. Amazing. But of all the stories I read about Billy Graham this week, the one that stuck out the most was about a time in his life when he doubted the Scriptures. And he had a friend telling him to leave behind his simplistic trust of the Word and get more sophisticated about it. It was a struggle for Billy. But he went outside, sat down on a stump, and prayed. He said he made a decision that moment, he told the Lord, "I can't answer every question, but from now on, from this day forward, I will take You at your Word." Take the Lord at His Word. His Word is life and light and grace and forgiveness—His Word is Jesus.

## STUDY GUIDE

### REALLY? • Hebrews 4:6-13

#### **UP:** Connect With God Through Spending Time in God's Word

- What do you notice about our passage? What questions do you have after reading the passage?
- What does it mean to harden your heart? How does a hardened heart keep us from hearing God? Has there been a time or an issue in which you feel that you hardened your heart toward God?
- Re-read verse 12. What does it mean that the Word of God is alive and active? Think of a time when Scripture cut through and spoke deeply to you or into a core issue in your life.
- What does it mean that God's word is authoritative and trustworthy? (See also: Proverbs 30:5 and 2 Timothy 3:16-17)

#### Going Deeper:

What is a word, phrase, or thought from today's passage that God seems to be lifting up as significant for you? How does it speak to a current situation in your life? How is God inviting you to respond?

#### **OUT:** Connect With the World Around Us by Joining God in God's Mission

What are some answers you have heard to this question: how do you think the Bible is different from other wise books?

Try it out: ask someone this question this week. What do you notice when you raise that question? What do you learn from their response?

#### **IN:** Connect With the Family of God

Spend some time praying for our church family. Pray that God would lead us into spiritual conversations with people around us. Pray that we would be led by the Holy Spirit.