



## Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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**Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost**

**August 7, 2016**

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### **“Can the Bible be Trusted?”**

Rev. David K. Groth

*“From childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work. ” (2 Timothy 3:15).*

**COLLECT:** Almighty and merciful God, it is by Your grace that we live, as Your people who offer acceptable service. Grant that we may walk by faith, and not by sight, in the way that leads to eternal life; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

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What we believe and how we practice our faith comes from the Bible. But many are not sure the Bible is trustworthy.

I meet many guests who come here for weddings and funerals and weekend services. An important part of each service is the sermon, based on a text of the Bible. I think the average visitor is surprised by how carefully we listen to the Bible and study it. My guess is some of them are thinking, “You don’t really take all that literally, do you?” And what they mean by that is that the Bible is not entirely trustworthy. Maybe it’s because they believe parts are scientifically impossible (they find the miracles, for instance to be unbelievable). Some think the Bible is historically unreliable, that the people and places are mostly made up. Many also believe that, over the centuries, in the process of copying the bible, the text has become so corrupted that you can’t be sure what’s authentic. Many also believe the Bible is culturally archaic and irrelevant to 2016, if not blasphemous. We’ll consider each of these in turn.

First, many find the miracles in the bible to be offensive to their intellect. Men usually are not able to walk on water. A handful of bread and fish usually will not satisfy a hungry crowd of thousands. The sun usually shines at the appointed hour. For many, their worldview prohibits

miracles. They think of the universe sort of like this closed box. The earth, the sun, the milky way, the entire cosmos is within this box. And everything that happens inside the box is caused by or can be explained by other things that exist within the box. Their world view says nothing (including God) nothing exists outside the box. Therefore nothing outside the box can change anything within the box, within the cosmos.

But as people of faith, we have a different world view. We believe God exists outside the box. And we believe if God wants to enter that box and reveal himself to us and intervene in our lives and change things, he can do that. He can do whatever he wants to do. That's what makes him God. The very laws that govern the universe were created by this God. And if he wants to suspend those laws for a moment and walk on water, who are we to stop him? Who are we to say, "You can't do that! That's not allowed around here!" But to believe in God is to believe in the possibility, at least, of the miraculous.

Often, if you think about it, these miracles really aren't a big deal. Consider the miracle at Cana, for instance, when Jesus turned water into wine. C.S. Lewis wrote, "Every year, as part of the natural order, God makes wine. He does so by creating [a plant] that can turn water, soil and sunlight into a juice which will, under proper conditions, become wine. God is constantly turning water into wine. The miracle at Cana consists in a short cut" (Miracles, p. 141). That's all. Not a big deal. No need to stumble on that or say, "Sorry, that's impossible." Clearly, it is possible, at least for God for whom all things are possible.

God's ordinary way of making wine is through a lengthy, controlled, predictable process. God's extraordinary way of making wine happened once at Cana. God's ordinary way of healing a sick or injured person is through the healing properties he's knit into our bodies. For example, over time, an accidental cut in your skin will stop bleeding and repair itself, and you don't even have to think about it, because he already has. Over time, a person with an infection will

usually get better because God has placed into our bodies white blood cells that attack bacteria and viruses and germs. Normally our bodies do an admirable job of healing themselves because God designed them that way. But God will also use doctors and nurses and medicines and surgeries, and a long convalescence to help our bodies heal. It's all very common and ordinary. On a few occasions God chose the extraordinary way to heal. He took a few short cuts, and with a quiet touch or words like, "Go, your faith has made you well," he brought healing to people. Is that okay with you? Is it okay with you that Jesus would have the compassion and love and power to do all that?

Some of the Bible's miracles are more difficult to swallow, because we don't ordinarily see them happening as part of the natural order. Dead people usually stay dead. But again, to believe in God is to believe in the possibility at least of the miraculous.

Some would say, "Maybe so, but surely you don't trust the Bible to be historically accurate?" The basic concern is that the Bible asserts certain people lived in certain places where certain things happened. For many years skeptics, for example, said but there's no proof that King David ever lived, no proof that Pontius Pilate ever lived either, and on down the list. Surely there would be some evidence somewhere. The skeptics aren't saying that anymore, at least those who stay abreast with the news, because yes, records were kept, and evidence was left behind. This is where archaeology has been very helpful because it's collaborated and confirmed many of the biblical claims, including the reign of King David, and the reign of Pontius Pilate as governor of Judea and Herod. The Bible is about real people who lived in real places. The vast majority of places mentioned in the Old Testament . . . we know where they're at, and over 95% of the place names in the New Testament are known. Skeptics are quick to zero in on those people and places not known to us yet from sources outside of the Bible. But as one archaeologist said, "The absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence." Two,

three thousand years from now I suspect folks will have a hard time finding evidence that those skeptics ever lived. Time and again the Bible is being proved to be very reliable historically.

You know, many movies today say they are based on actual events. Whenever you read that in the preamble of the film, you just know Hollywood is about to lie through its teeth and spin a yarn that has very little to do with actual events. Drama, romance, sex, action are all added to make the movie more marketable. And we eat it up and reward them for doing so. Meanwhile, the Bible is held to a much higher standard of verification, as well it should be. But it also reminds me of a C.S. Lewis quote: “Why not try doubting something else for a change?”

Some skeptics of the Bible like to say the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were written a hundred plus years after the events happened and so they're not historically reliable. Most scholars today, however, agree that Matthew, Mark and Luke were written about twenty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. What that means is that the Biblical writers couldn't invent outlandish claims about Jesus, about his miracles in front of great crowds, or about his death and resurrection. The reason is most of the people from that era were still living. If it were all fictitious they would have come out of the woodwork saying, “Hold on a minute. I lived in Bethany at that time, and I never heard of a Lazarus being raised from the dead!” Or “I was part of that crowd of thousands next to the sea of Galilee listening to Jesus and I didn't see him pop off any miracles.” Paul even challenges his readers to go out and look for some of the eyewitnesses of Jesus' resurrection. In 1 Corinthians 15 he writes, Jesus “was raised on the third day . . . and 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 . . . Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all . . . he appeared also to me.” That is, “Don't believe me? Track down some of the other eye witnesses and ask them what they saw.”

Moreover, if the Gospels were written later, we would expect to see Jesus taking sides in debates that were going on in the early church. For example, one of the great controversies in the earliest church was whether or not Gentile Christians must be circumcised. But Jesus doesn't say anything on that topic, and the most likely reason is because the Gospels were written before the controversy arose, and those who made copies of the four Gospels did not feel free to fabricate things and put words in Jesus' mouth and resolve the controversy.

Moreover, why would the authors make up an account saying Jesus was crucified? Most would conclude that Jesus was weak, or he was a criminal. Why would they make up the account of Jesus begging God in the garden of Gethsemane to get out of this mission? Or why ever make up the part on the cross when Jesus cries out that God had abandoned him? These things only offended and confused many first-century prospective converts. Why invent women as the first witnesses of the resurrection in a society where women were assigned such low status that their testimony was not admissible in court? If you were inventing a tale, it would have made far more sense to have male pillars of the community present as witnesses. Also, why depict the disciples – the eventual leaders of the early Church – as petty and jealous and slow-witted and cowardly? Why play up the spectacular failures of the most prominent leaders of the early church? Why not depict them as loyal and brave, strong and smart? The only plausible reason why all these incidents would be included is that they actually happened. And the biblical writers did not feel free to write a scrubbed up version of history.

In the first half of the last century it was very popular to say the Book of Isaiah was written by multiple authors over a long period of time, some passages added even as late as the first century A.D. One reason for this skepticism is because of the specific prophecies about Jesus in the book of Isaiah. The working assumption, again, was that miracles are not possible, and therefore prophecies that

foretell the future are not possible. Therefore parts of Isaiah must have been written after the time of Jesus. But then in 1947 Bedouin shepherds discovered a cave full of ancient scrolls in the remote and inhospitable land east of the Dead Sea. One of those scrolls turned out to be the entire Book of Isaiah, beginning to end. Pieces of that scroll were carbon-dated four times and each time confirmed it came from several centuries before Christ. And it's the whole book of Isaiah just as we have it, prophecies and all.

Many skeptics like to think that in copying the scriptures over the centuries there have been so many errors and deletions and additions that you can't be sure what is authentic and what isn't. That Isaiah scroll discovered in 1947 was dated to a couple of centuries before Christ. The next oldest copy of Isaiah we have was written nearly 1100 years later. So everyone was wondering how many differences will show up over those 1100 years of copying? There were 13 small changes, most of them spelling errors, but zero changes in meaning.

In your pew Bibles, the English translation of the book of Isaiah is about 108 pages long. If you were to copy it yourself with a quill pen on a papyrus scroll, how many mistakes do you think you would make? And if you were only to make a copy from your last copy, and do that over and over again, how many mistakes do you think would be compounded over a period of 1100 years? And yet, just thirteen spelling errors? These scribes, they were pros. And they were fussy perfectionists. You wouldn't want to be married to one. But they believed they were copying God's Word, and so they also believed they had no right to add or embellish or edit the text to make it easier to read or more believable. And so there were all kinds of checks and balances, tests and evaluations built in to the process to make sure they did it accurately.

Bruce Metzger compared early, verses late copies of Homer's Iliad and it doesn't come close to that kind of accuracy. Most other works from antiquity, such as those from Plato and Herodotus and Aristophanes have one to twenty ancient manuscripts. The New Testament has about 5400

ancient Greek manuscripts that we can compare to determine original wording

Finally, many object to the Bible because it seems so archaic and intolerant. Our values today are so different than they were two or three or four thousand years ago. Today we are more likely to be offended by the Bible. Some parts we find so difficult, blasphemous even to 2016 sensitivities that we toss the whole book aside. First, I would ask, “Why not figure out what you believe about the death and resurrection of Jesus before rejecting the whole book because you don’t like what Paul said about women covering their heads? Let’s get the main things down first. It would be tragic to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Second, “Are you sure the values of 2016 are so superior to any other moment in history?” To reject the Bible as archaic and irrelevant is to assume that we’ve finally arrived. After all these years we, as the human race in the progressive West, finally know what is good and right and beautiful and what is evil, wrong and ugly.

Think for a moment about the late 60’s and early 70’s . . . the fashions of the day, the psychedelic and paisley prints, the bell-bottom jeans, the wide, short ties for men. There are pictures in our archives of some of you wearing this stuff, and though you fit right in back then you wouldn’t be caught dead wearing that stuff today. Think of the architecture of the 60’s and 70’s. UW-Madison is taking the wrecking ball to many of those buildings not because they don’t work anymore, but because they’re so ugly! Think about the music from that era. And the food. Remember the stratified jello bowls? And that’s just fifty years ago.

I wonder how our fashions and architecture and music and food will look like to people fifty years from now. Many of the beliefs of our grandparents and great grandparents seem silly to us today, even embarrassing. That process is not going to stop now. Your grandchildren will find many of your views outmoded as well. The point is this, “Are you so sure that the values and beliefs of American society in 2016 should serve as the plumbline by which we judge the Bible?”

Wouldn't it be tragic if we threw the Bible away over something that in a few decades will look weak or wrong? To stay away from Christianity because parts of the Bible are offensive to you assumes that if there is a God, he wouldn't dare have any views that would upset you. Does that assumption make sense? Is it God's duty to make sure he agrees with every individual on earth?

If a wife is not allowed to contradict her husband, what kind of relationship is that? It certainly won't be an intimate one. If we don't trust the Bible enough to let it challenge us and correct our thinking, how could we ever have a personal relationship with God? In any truly personal relationship, the other person has to be able to contradict you. Now, what happens if you eliminate everything from the Bible that offends you? If you pick and choose what you want to believe and reject the rest, how will you ever have a God who can contradict you? You won't. You'll have a god, but it will be one of your own making, and not a God with whom you can have a genuine relationship. Must God agree with you on everything all the time? Only if your God can say things that you find outrageous and offensive and make you struggle and squirm with discomfort, only then will you know that you have gotten hold of a real God and not a figment of your imagination. So an authoritative Bible is not the enemy of a personal relationship with God. It is the precondition for it.

The Bible is the inspired Word of God. It has stood the test of time. It is the anvil on which many a hammer has been shattered.

Luther wrote, "Dismiss your own opinions and feelings, and think of the Scriptures as the loftiest and noblest of holy things, as the richest mines which can never be sufficiently explored, in order that you may find that divine wisdom which God here lays before you in such simple guise. . . [Then Luther goes on to say that the Scriptures are like those strips of linen with which Mary wrapped the infant Jesus.] Here you will find the swaddling cloths and the manger in which Christ lies, and to which the angel points the shepherds. Simple and lowly are

these swaddling cloths [of the Scriptures], but dear is the treasure, Christ, who lies in them.” (AE 35:236).

That is, if we lose Scripture as the authoritative Word of God, we lose Christ swaddled within. If we lose Christ, we’ll lose everything. If, however, we allow God’s ancient Word to speak to us, if we don’t throw up walls and barriers but allow it to penetrate our minds and hearts, the promise is it will make us wise unto salvation. Amen.

