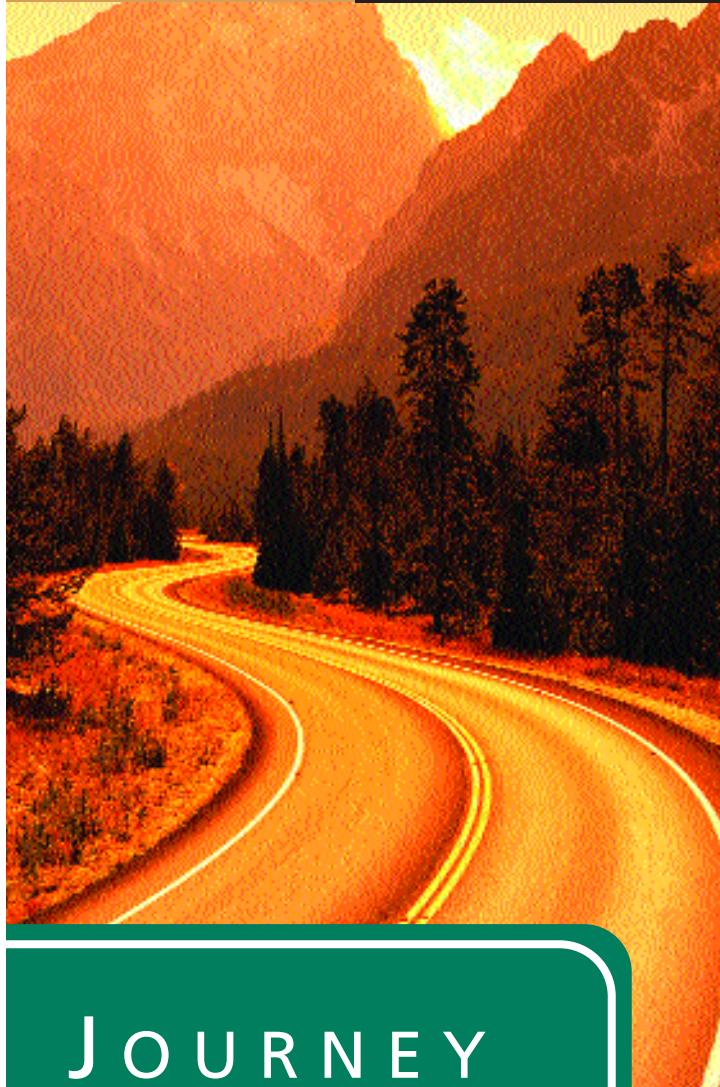


volume 5



JOURNEY
TO FAITH

The Bible

The Bible

A professor at a well-known college was famous for starting each semester by holding up a Bible and asking, “How many of you believe this book is the word of God?” When one or two students meekly raised their hands the professor would then say, “Do you want to know what I think of this book? This is what I think of it”—and he would hurl it out a nearby window.

However, George Washington, the father of our country, believed that “It is impossible to rightly govern the world without God and the Bible.” John Quincy Adams claimed that the Bible was “The first and almost the only book deserving of universal attention. I speak as a man of the world.” Theodore Roosevelt even believed that “A thorough knowledge of the Bible is worth more than a college education.”

Just mention the Bible and you will quickly find people taking sides. Passion will be strong and vocal. While some feel the Bible is trustworthy, reliable and the Word of God, some feel it is just a book of fables and myths passed down by those who wanted to control the minds and thoughts of gullible people.

Chances are that if you haven’t read the whole Bible, you at least own one. According to surveys conducted by the Barna Group, 92 percent of all the households in America own a Bible. This includes most homes in which the adults are not practicing Christians as well as the homes of hundreds of thousands of atheists. Among households that own a Bible, the average number of Bibles in the house is three. According to the same group’s surveys, 60 percent of all adults agree that “the Bible is totally accurate in all of its teachings.” Almost half

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of the population believes that the Bible is absolutely accurate and everything in it can be taken literally. Furthermore, an estimated 75 million adults said that reading the Bible is very important to them. It is clear that most people have at least been exposed to the Bible.

The World's Best Seller

If you were to peruse the *New York Times* top 10 best selling book lists, you would get a list of recent books and their sales. If a book is a blockbuster, it might sell in the hundreds of thousands. If it were a mega-block buster, it would sell in the millions. But in comparison, how many copies of the Bible have been sold? The top ten best-selling books of all time are, in order:

- 1) *The Bible*
- 2) *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*
- 3) *American Spelling Book* by Noah Webster
- 4) *The Guinness Book of Records*
- 5) *The McGuffey Readers* by William Holmes McGuffey
- 6) *A Message to Garcia* by Elbert Hubbard
- 7) *World Almanac*
- 8) *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* by Dr. Benjamin Spock
- 9) *The Valley of the Dolls* by Jacqueline Susann
- 10) *In His Steps: "What Would Jesus Do?"* by Rev. Charles Monroe Sheldon

To make a comparison, let's look at *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* by Dr. Benjamin Spock. This popular book sold almost 40 million copies, yet it was only the 8th best selling book of all time. *The Guinness Book of Records* sold 79 million copies, making it the fourth best selling book of all time. *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, which was compulsory for every adult in China to own, sold 800 million copies, and yet it was only the second best selling book of all time.

The Bible has conservatively sold six billion copies, and that is just keeping track of copies from 1816 to the present. Furthermore, this does not count the number of Bibles that

have been given away, which would also be in the billions. In fact, if all the different versions of the Bible on earth were destroyed in one day, they could almost be completely rewritten using the countless reference books and commentaries that have Bible references in them.

While the Bible is the most widely read book in the world, it inspires violently different reactions in different people. Down through the ages, many notable people have expressed their admiration and commitment to the Bible.

Conflicting Opinions on the Bible

Abraham Lincoln believed that "the Bible is the best gift God has ever given to man." Charles Dickens said, "The New Testament is the very best book that ever was or ever will be known in the world." Lord Tennyson declared that "Bible reading is an education in itself." Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher says, "The existence of the Bible, as a book for the people, is the greatest benefit which the human race has ever experienced: Every attempt to belittle it is a crime against society." French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau wrote, "Behold the works of our philosophers; with all their pompous diction, how mean and contemptible they are by comparison with the Scriptures! Is it possible that a book at once so simple and sublime should be merely the work of man?" Horace Greeley, publisher and journalist, said, "It is impossible to mentally or socially enslave a Bible-reading people. The principles of the Bible are the groundwork of human freedom."

Yet, not all are so complimentary. Isaac Asimov counters, "Imagine the people who believe such things and who are not ashamed to ignore, totally, all the patient findings of thinking minds

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through all the centuries since the Bible was written.

“And it is these ignorant people, the most uneducated, the most unimaginative, the most unthinking among us, who would make themselves the guides and leaders of us all; who would force their feeble and childish beliefs on us; who would invade our schools and libraries and homes. I personally resent it bitterly....”

Asimov brings up a lingering and pertinent question. Can anyone really believe what the Bible says? Are the only people who believe the Bible indeed “ignorant, uneducated, unimaginative, and unthinking” as Asimov suggests?

It was none other than the eminent scientist, Sir Isaac Newton, who wrote, “There are more sure marks of authenticity in the Bible than in any profane history. I have a fundamental belief in the Bible as the Word of God, written by men who were inspired. I study the Bible daily.”

Asimov notwithstanding, brilliant thinkers and leaders over the centuries have believed in and trusted in the Bible. Face it, for those people who have read the Bible, most either love it or hate it, which is what makes it such a fascinating book.

A Unique Book

What could be in a book that would inspire such devotion in its adherents and such fear and anger in its detractors?

The Bible is indeed a unique book—even its origins are unique. What other religious book can claim that it was written over a 1,500-year span, over 40 generations, by 40 different authors from every walk of life? The Bible was written on three different continents, Asia, Africa and Europe, and in three different languages, Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic.

Yet it speaks with amazing unity and conformity on hundreds of controversial subjects. To date the Bible has been translated in part or in whole into more than 1,500 languages, and is now available in 95 percent of the world’s languages and dialects.

What Is the Bible, Anyway?

What life is all about has been a question that has concerned men and women through the ages. Why are we here? Where did we come from? What is the purpose of life? Some answer these questions by saying that there is no great purpose to life—we are simply accidents of nature.

There is no supernatural, no God, nothing beyond the life we can see, touch, taste, hear and smell. Yet for many, this answer is not satisfactory. Even for those who reject the idea of God, some go in search of alien civilizations to find the source of life on earth.

The question then comes, if there were a God, how would he communicate with us? *Would* he communicate with us? If he did, what would he want from us? If we start with the belief that God is by very definition greater in every way than we are, greater in power, greater in knowledge, greater in ability, then we must ask ourselves, how could we ever discover him, or what he is truly like?

We always learn about the unknown by comparing it with what we know. Yet, if God is all powerful, all knowing, and present everywhere at once, with what shall we compare him? It would simply be impossible for us to really understand such a God...unless! Unless he made himself known to us. If God wanted to be known and worshipped by his own creation, doesn’t it make sense that he would seek to reveal himself to us in some way that we could easily understand and that was easily accessible?

The Bible, though indeed written by men, claims to be inspired and authored by God himself. In other words, God chose to speak through people to reveal himself to his creation.

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2 Timothy 3:16 says: “All Scripture is God-breathed...” This means that the words written in the Bible did not originate from the minds of the authors, but were inspired by God. The authors were not unthinking robots, but God was able to use their unique personalities and abilities, and yet still empower them to speak his truths perfectly. 2 Peter 1:20-21 says it this way: “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” Jesus, the Son of God, while he was praying to his heavenly Father claimed in John 17:17 that “Your word is truth.”

In various different ways, and using different expressions, the Old Testament alone declares 3,808 times that it is conveying the literal words of God. (*Inspiration and Authority of Scriptures*, Rene Pache, Moody Press, 1969). (Psalm 119:42-43, Jeremiah 1:9, Isaiah 6:7, Ezekiel 2:7-8, Matthew 24:35, Revelation 19:9, 21:5).

Is the Bible Reliable?

We would expect that the Bible, claiming to be inspired by God, would be reliable. Yet, here is where the Bible has come under the most critical condemnation. Many over the years have claimed that the Bible fails that test. One critic, Thomas L. Thompson, speaks for many when he writes, “We can now say with considerable confidence that the Bible is not a history of anyone’s past...The Bible’s “Israel” is a literary fiction...The Bible deals with the origin traditions of a people who never existed as such.”

Such criticism has come from many quarters. Much of the Bible claims to deal with real historical people, settings and contexts—people, settings and contexts that critics over the years have accused of being “mythical.” In fact, this old argument was raised anew by a *US News and World Report* cover story asking: “Is the Bible True?” The author, Jeffrey Sheler, looked care-

fully at the many arguments raised by critics about the Bible’s historical reliability and came to the startling conclusion that the answer was “Yes!” What caused this striking conclusion? Modern archaeology.

For example, a rather popular and well-known character of the Bible and Israel’s history is King David. Yet, critics had maintained for many years that David was no more than a myth. Outside of the Bible there was simply no other evidence that he ever existed.

Yet, recently, archaeologists toiling in upper Galilee near the ancient city of Dan came upon a Basalt stone with an inscription clearly written on it. The stone was from ninth-century enemies of Israel who identify several of their enemies, one being the “king of Israel,” the other being “the House of David.” The reference to David was a historical bombshell. The reference came not from friendly Hebrew writers, but from Israel’s enemies. For the first time the skeptics had to admit that what they had been proclaiming for many years was wrong. David was historical—a real person—not just a myth. For adherents of the Bible, it was further proof that their faith in the Bible had been well placed.

Again, for years scholars challenged the Bible’s claims that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible. They claimed it was impossible because the time period Moses was supposed to have lived and written in was prior to all knowledge of written law codes. Therefore, the critics claimed, the first five books of the Bible had to be written around 400 B.C., well over 1,000 years after Moses had lived. Yet, an archaeological dig at an ancient site named Ebla discovered that not only did writing exist in Moses’ day, but 1,000 years prior to Moses there were laws, customs and events written down in Ebla. The Bible, ridiculed for so many years, was again vindicated by archaeology.

Other critics had pointed out that in Genesis 14, five cities recorded did not exist, and the kings and events listed were entirely fictitious.

Yet, the Ebla archives refer to all five of those cities, and on one tablet the cities are listed in the same sequence as Genesis 14 with the exact spelling! Archaeology had come to the rescue again, confirming that the Bible was reliable and trustworthy as a historical record.

Critics of the Bible's historical reliability also used the famous Philistines of the Old Testament as proof. For years this argument from critics, like so many, was unanswerable. Yet recent archaeological discoveries have revealed not only the existence of the Philistines, but that the biblical description of them as skilled metal workers was accurate. Archaeological discoveries have now confirmed that the Philistines were superior workers in metal, especially in producing military weaponry.

In the New Testament the critics had always asserted that the account of Jesus' body being removed from the cross and put in a grave was untrue. They had argued that the common practice of Roman executioners was to toss the corpses of criminals into a common grave or leave them on the cross to be devoured

“In extraordinary ways, modern archaeology has affirmed the historical core of the Old and New Testaments.”

by scavenging animals. They claimed that Jesus' body would have been thrown into a pile and eaten by dogs. This would certainly cast doubt on the accuracy of the New Testament historical record. If the New Testament record is unreliable, how could you trust it when it speaks of things like the resurrection of Jesus?

Yet again, recent archaeological discoveries found the skeletal remains of a crucified man in a burial cave. It was a momentous discovery, proving the New Testament's description of crucifixion as well as revealing that on certain occasions Romans permitted proper burial for someone who was crucified. It was now historically possible

that the account of Jesus being crucified and then buried in a tomb was true.

These and many other examples led Jeffrey Sheler, the author of the article, to conclude that “In extraordinary ways, modern archaeology has affirmed the historical core of the Old and New Testaments—corroborating key portions of the stories of Israel's patriarchs, the Exodus, the Davidic monarchy, and the life and times of Jesus.”

Keep in mind, *U.S. News and World Report* authors are not Christians defending Scripture, but investigators looking at the claims of biblical unreliability and checking those claims with modern evidence. These discoveries are just the latest in a long line of archeological finds that have challenged the critics of the Bible. The most notable discovery happened many years ago and confirms that the transmission of the Bible down through the ages has been careful and reliable.

Reliable and Accurate

The discovery in 1947 of the “Dead Sea Scrolls” in Qumran confirmed how accurately the 39 books of the Old Testament had been transmitted over the years. While scholars had Old Testament manuscripts before 1947, these finds were about 1,000 years older than anything else. In fact, a full copy of the book of Isaiah was discovered at Qumran. Although it was 1,000 years older than any known manuscripts, they proved to be nearly identical with the text of the standard Hebrew Bible. The Old Testament we read is virtually the same as when it was originally inspired by God.

As for the 27 books of the New Testament, we possess more than 24,000 partial and complete manuscripts. As Norman Geisler says, “No other book is even a close second to the Bible on either the number or early dating of the copies.” For example, the average secular work from antiquity boasts only a handful of surviving manuscripts; the New Testament boasts thousands.

Furthermore, the average gap between when most books of antiquity were originally written and our earliest manuscript of that book is over 1,000 years. Yet, we have fragments of the New Testament that were copied within one generation of when it was originally authored. We have copies of entire books of the New Testament within 100 years of when they were first authored and copies of the entire New Testament within 250 years of when it was first authored.

If the events are truthfully recorded, the Bible certainly has to be seen as a reliable book of history. If it is reliable in its depiction of people, history and settings, then it is far more likely to be true in other things that it claims.

How Can Fallible Men Write a Book Inspired By God?

One of the lingering questions continually asked of the Bible is how “fallible” men could write a book that was inspired by God. As people, we are admittedly prone to weaknesses, mistakes, mental lapses, errors in judgment, misinformation and many other weaknesses that would seem to argue against writing a faithful representation of what God wanted.

Yet, the fact that men are prone to error does not mean that God could not use imperfect men to reveal his perfect truths in written form. Surely the God whom the Bible claims is our Creator would be able to handle as simple a task as inspiring his creations to accurately reveal his truth.

Furthermore, just because we can err doesn’t mean we always do. It is certainly possible for fallible people to write infallible information down, especially if the source of the information is outside of us. It is quite possible to write down “infallible” instructions on how to operate something, even though the person who wrote down the instructions were themselves fallible. Does anyone think it outside of the power of God to pass on infallible, mistake-free truths to people who are nonetheless prone to mistakes? The God

who claims to have created the heavens and the earth could certainly perform such a small feat.

The Bible—A Letter From God

The Bible is more than just a set of accurate historical accounts. It can be best summed up as a letter from God to man. If God wanted to reveal his truth and claims to his creation, he would have to do it in such a way that anyone could have access to it. He would also have to make sure that there was enough information about him to make it crystal clear to anyone who read it who he was and what he was like.

The Bible teaches that if we are to ever know God, it must be because God reveals himself to us, not because we can discover everything about him by ourselves. He is simply too different from us in every way for us to come to an accurate idea of who he is without his help. If we are to find out about God, it will have to be because he reveals himself to us (John 5:39). The Bible claims to be just that revelation.

But even if you accept the Bible as completely historically reliable and trustworthy, that doesn’t mean you will necessarily believe its claims to be inspired by God. In fact, the Bible makes it quite clear that while God has provided enough information for us to recognize and respond to him, we will still need to respond to him by faith. God gives us a choice. He does not leave us in the dark about who he is or what he wants or how he feels about us. He has taken great pains to give us a complete picture of his nature, character and love. Yet, for all of this, we will still need to exercise faith.

Hebrews 11:6 probably says it best: “Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” We do not have to seek him blindly, He has provided a 66-book trail to follow. He has revealed himself in incredible detail, shown his power, his mercy, his interest in us and his desire to enter into a relationship with us.

Is the Bible Relevant?

Some people might be willing to admit that the Bible is historically reliable and trustworthy, but still don't know how the Bible can really help them. Isn't the Bible just a textbook on God, a history of the divine? How does reading stories of people who lived thousands of years ago help me today? How is the Bible relevant?

The Bible continually speaks of two recurring themes, human nature and God's nature. These are two things that do not change over time. The stories in the Bible deal with greed, lust for power, sexual relationships, treachery, loyalty, family life, parenting, virtue, integrity, treachery and many other common themes of today. Times may change, situations may change, circumstances may change, technology has certainly changed, but human nature has not. The Bible reveals that our nature has "fallen," in other words, it is prone to making mistakes, rebelling and is hostile to God.

In the Bible you read of wars, today you can read of the same things in the newspaper. Immorality and its dire consequences are spoken of in the Bible, and as a culture this is one of the greatest threats to our nation. Prejudice is a scourge that is detailed in scripture. Can anyone today claim that we have overcome that scourge? But more than detailing the terrible themes that we face today, the Bible provides answers that have stood the test of time for thousands of years.

Our world is desperately looking for hope, and the Bible reveals where that hope is found. Our world is looking for answers, and God has provided those answers in the Bible. The truths found in the Bible are timeless, because the Author of the Bible is timeless.

Our world is searching for God; over 90 percent of Americans in a recent poll indicated a belief in God. Does a book that declares that it was inspired by God himself have anything to say to a world seeking God? The answer has to be yes.

The "Living" Book

But the Bible does not just provide answers for our world, it contains the answers for our personal lives as well. A man named Soren Kierkegaard once wrote, "The Bible is a letter from God with our personal address on it." In a sense the Bible is a love letter from God to you. The Bible doesn't just give us an insight into who he is, just as importantly, it reveals who we are.

One of the hardest things is to be objective about ourselves—our ambitions, our motivations and our desires. We tend to view ourselves in the most flattering light possible. While that may make us feel good, it does not always reflect reality. How can we ever get a truly objective assessment of ourselves? God uses the Bible to provide that important reality to us.

The Bible does not claim to be just a lifeless book of dry theological truths. It claims to be alive and active. Hebrews 4:12 makes an amazing claim: "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 attitudes of the heart." This may be the reason that so many feel uncomfortable when reading it.

The Bible does not always tell us what we might like to hear about ourselves. The truths of the Bible strike at secret truths about ourselves that are at times unflattering. It reveals our hidden motives and thoughts and brings them out into the open. If you are only looking for flattering information about yourself, the Bible is liable to provoke a hostile reaction. If you have a preconceived notion about God, the Bible may challenge that notion and provoke a hostile reaction.

On the other hand, the truths in the Bible can make you aware of who you really are and who God really is. They can show not only our dire situation, but God's gracious provision for that situation. In short, it tells the truth. Sometimes the truth is pleasant, at times the truth can hurt. But, at all times, the Bible tells the truth. Anything that claims to be from God could do no less.

One of the questions each of us has to deal with (and maybe for the first time you find yourself struggling with) is: *Can I afford to ignore the Bible?* If it really is the revelation of God and his will for me, can I afford to dismiss it? The impact of the Bible on billions of people in all walks of life throughout the ages can't be overlooked. People's lives have been drastically changed as they come in contact with the Bible.

If you are looking to find God—to find a relationship with God, to obtain eternal life—it makes sense to go looking for him in the place he promises he can be found. If you've been wondering if there are any good reasons to read the Bible, you've found some. The only question that remains is what you will do with what you've found. The Bible—it's just not like any other book. Maybe it's time to take another look.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- 1) What is prayer?
- 2) Why pray if no-one is listening?
- 3) How do you pray to someone you don't even know?
- 4) Isn't prayer just "self-talk"?
- 5) If God knows everything anyway, why do we need to pray?
- 6) What are the benefits of prayer?
- 7) Does prayer really work?
- 8) Does it matter which God you pray to?
- 9) Do all prayers get answered?
- 10) Does prayer really change anything?

These and other questions will be discussed and answered in our next volume, *Journey to Faith, Volume 6: Prayer*.