

God's Word Is Reliable

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning again, and welcome to worship on this All Saints Sunday. My name is Jeff, and I'm one of the pastors here at Church of the Advent. I wonder if when you were a kid, if you were ever at a party or a social gathering, I wonder if you ever played the game Telephone, or maybe you've played this game as an adult with your kids.

If you're not familiar with the game, it's a group game where you line up across the room in a line. Maybe there's two teams because it's a competition, and one person at one end of the line has a word or a phrase, and they whisper it in the ear of the next person in the line, and then that person whispers it in the ear of the next person in the line, and so on and so forth, until you get to the last person.

And then the last person at the end of the line says what they heard out loud to the whole group. And part of the funny, the fun part of the game is sometimes it's a bit funny, it's a bit silly, because the person at the end of the line has often, has often said something that is different than the word or the phrase that was given at the beginning of the line.

In the telephone game, which is a fun kids game, the content of the original message often gets lost in transmission. And in our modern culture today, this is actually how a lot of people imagine that the Bible was written.

This is how a lot of people imagine how the Bible came together. Many people, of course, believe that Jesus was a historical person who lived long ago, but that we can't actually know what reliably what he said or did, because the New Testament documents have been changed or lost over time.

[1 : 50] We're in a sermon series this fall called Read, Mark, Learn, where we're studying the doctrine of Scripture, and we're looking at the relationship that we have with God through his Word.

And so we've sought to understand that relationship by looking at different attributes of Scripture. And so we've looked at the truth, goodness, and beauty of Scripture.

We've looked at the clarity of Scripture, that God's Word is understandable. And last week, Dan spoke about the sufficiency of Scripture. And this morning, we come to the topic or the characteristic of the reliability of Scripture, the reliability of God's Word.

And this is an important topic because many people in our late modern Western culture are skeptical about the Bible as a reliable historical document.

And they often imagine that it came together or that it was written kind of like the kids game, the telephone game. And this idea gets advanced in a number of ways.

[2 : 56] Sometimes it gets advanced in academia and university settings. Although, of course, in sophisticated academic ways. And so some scholars, like Bart Ehrman, who's a professor at UNC Chapel Hill, some scholars have spent their entire careers advancing this idea.

Other times, ideas like this about the Bible get advanced through pop culture. So many of you might remember over a decade ago, many years ago, the fiction novel-turned-movie by Dan Brown called The Da Vinci Code.

It was kind of popular at the time. And this book-turned-movie kind of put forward some ideas about the early church and how the Bible came to be that are similar to the telephone game.

But other people, kind of apart from academia and pop culture, kind of just find this idea to be intuitive. The Bible was written a really long time ago. And so probably the original documents, the original message were sort of just lost or changed over time, lost to time and history.

And so if you've adopted the telephone game view of the Bible, either through academia, your own research, or through pop culture, or through your own intuition, then most likely you've adopted a kind of skepticism towards Christianity as a whole.

[4 : 20] If the documents of the Bible themselves are historically unreliable, then its message probably is too. And so is any organized institution that believes it and teaches it.

But is the telephone game how things actually happened with the Bible? Is the telephone game how things actually came together? Does this make the best sense of the evidence that we have?

Well, our text here in 1 John 1 that was read earlier, and the great tradition of the church, and perhaps most interestingly, much of modern scholarship would all say, actually, no.

This is not how things happened. The witness of Scripture and the best historical evidence and the great tradition of the church and lots of modern scholarship actually all point in the other direction.

And so what I want us to see this morning is that we can have great confidence in the historical reliability of Scripture. And we can have great confidence because we have some really key things.

[5 : 27] We have reliable eyewitnesses, we have a reliable text, and we have a reliable message.

We have reliable eyewitnesses, a reliable text, and a reliable message.

And one kind of quick caveat before we dive in is that for the sake of time and limited space, I'm going to be mainly kind of focusing our attention here on the New Testament and on the four Gospels in particular.

And I'm going to be doing it from our text here in 1 John. But I know that this is a topic that may be of interest to you. And so if you'd like to explore these things more or if certain questions come up as I'm talking that I don't address this morning, I'd be happy to talk further with you or recommend some more books or reading for you or resources.

And actually, some of those books were actually in our most recent Friday email. So I'd encourage you to check those out. So first of all, let's talk about the reliability of the eyewitnesses, the reliable eyewitnesses.

Our New Testament reading, 1 John 1, 1 through 4 says, That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands concerning the word of life, that which we have seen and heard, we proclaim to you.

[6 : 47] That which we have seen and heard, we proclaim to you. This is a statement of eyewitness testimony. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John based their accounts on their and others' firsthand experience.

They saw Jesus live. They watched him do ministry and heal people. They listened to him speak and teach people. They saw him suffer and die.

They watched him be buried in a tomb. And then they touched his resurrected body. And they watched him ascend into heaven.

These people who saw him and heard him and touched him became the authoritative eyewitnesses for the gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And for the gospel writers, these eyewitnesses became like ancient footnotes, like ancient footnotes.

So if today, if you were to write a paper for a class or write a research paper, dissertation, or if you were to write a book, to cite your sources, you would use what?

[7 : 58] You would use footnotes or endnotes. Well, why would you do that? Well, partially to show that you are building on someone else's work, to show that you're not plagiarizing.

But you also use, you also cite your sources. You also use footnotes. So if people want to look up more information about what you're saying or if they want to investigate the argument that you're making, they can check out that source.

Biographers in the ancient Greco-Roman world did the same exact thing, except their footnotes were names of people, names of people. And this was a common literary convention.

This was a literary feature that people in the ancient world would have understood. And so if you read the gospel, you'll notice that it is full of names. Names are everywhere. And this is partially the author's way of saying, if you want more information or if you want to investigate the claims that I'm making, go check my sources.

Go check my sources. You can hear it straight from them. Now, there are dozens of examples all throughout the gospels that you could see, but let me give you one. Let me give you one.

[9 : 08] In Mark chapter 15, there is a scene where Jesus is carrying the cross to be executed and crucified. And Mark tells us that there is a man named Simon of Cyrene in North Africa, Simon of Cyrene who helped Jesus carry his cross.

And Mark makes this interesting editorial detail and he says, Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus. And we kind of read that and go, you know, why include that?

I mean, the whole story is about Jesus being led to be crucified. I mean, why? That seems like an irrelevant detail to talk about like the name of Simon's sons. But if you understand this literary convention in the ancient world, you know exactly what Mark is doing.

Mark is saying, if you want to check my sources, if you want to corroborate this story, go to Cyrene, go to North Africa and talk to Simon. And if you don't, if for every reason he has passed away, if he's no longer alive, you can talk to his sons, Alexander and Rufus.

The recording of these eyewitnesses, the naming of all these names means that the gospel writers weren't writing fiction or legend. They weren't making stuff up.

[10:23] They were actually using the most reliable, authenticating literary conventions of the day. They were trying to record the most reliable account of Jesus's life that they possibly could.

If you paid attention to the gospel reading in Luke chapter 1, this is exactly what Luke tells you he is doing in the first few verses of his gospel. He says, I am writing to you to give you an orderly account of what the eyewitnesses saw and heard.

This is not someone who's making stuff up. This is not someone who's creating a story or a narrative. This is someone who is seeking to create the most authentic, reliable eyewitness account that they possibly can.

Let me say one more really important thing about these eyewitnesses accounts, the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And that is that they were actually written too early to be made up. They were written too early to be legends.

The scholarly consensus today, and this includes secular, non-religious scholars, the scholarly consensus today is that the gospels were all written by the end of the first century.

[11:35] And many scholars actually put most of the gospels within just a few decades of Jesus's life. And this means that the gospel accounts were actually written within the lifetimes of those first eyewitnesses.

This is also important because this also gives us evidence for why the gospel writers couldn't have just made it up. If you're going to make something up, if you're going to invent a story, you would do it after the first generation of witnesses passed away, after they died, so that they couldn't refute your facts, so they couldn't argue with you.

So they can't contradict you. But the fact that modern scholars, both secular and religious, have given the gospel at such an early date means that there is strong evidence that we can trust the historical reliability of these accounts because it means that the eyewitnesses were alive to confirm and corroborate what they were saying.

So what's the takeaway from all this? What's the takeaway from all this? Well, the takeaway is that the gospels weren't written like the telephone game. They were written in a Greco-Roman literary convention that people would have recognized, that would have been authentic.

They were written with authoritative eyewitnesses. And they were written within the lifetimes of those witnesses, which means they would have been alive to corroborate the facts, which means we have every reason to believe that what they were writing was true.

[13:00] So we have every reason to believe that these eyewitness accounts are reliable, but that actually leads to a second question. Well, how can we know that the actual text of the Bible is reliable?

I mean, we don't have what Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John originally wrote, and so how can we be sure that what they originally wrote wasn't somehow changed over time?

So secondly, let's talk about the reliability of the text, the reliability of the text. So let's say this afternoon you are feeling patriotic, and you decided that you wanted to read the Gettysburg Address.

The Gettysburg Address, of course, is Abraham Lincoln's famous speech after the Civil War battle in Gettysburg. And so you go online and you type in the Gettysburg Address, and it pops up, and you start reading it, and your heart starts to become warm, you start feeling patriotic, you're amazed by Lincoln's eloquence, his command of the written word.

Four score and seven years ago, our founding fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. And you're reading this great speech, but then you think to yourself, now, how do I know that what I'm reading on the internet is what Abraham Lincoln originally wrote?

[14:22] I mean, you weren't there to hear the speech. You don't have the original copy that he wrote. Actually, nobody has the original copy, not even the U.S. government. So how do you know

that what you're reading is what Lincoln originally said at Gettysburg?

Well, a good historian would say, among other things, among many things, that two things are really important. Two things are really important. First, the more copies of the original that you have, the better.

And secondly, the earlier those copies are, the better. So if you have lots of copies that say the same thing, and if those copies are close to the timing of the original event that happened, then you can be pretty confident that you're reading the original.

And so when it comes to the Gettysburg Address, scholars agree, we have a pretty high degree of confidence that we're reading the original. Why? Well, we have five copies of the original speech. Two are in the Library of Congress downtown. The other three are in the Illinois State Library, Cornell University, and the White House. And we know that all five of these copies are copies that Abraham Lincoln personally gave to people, to his private secretaries and to other people.

[15:31] And that's about as early of a date as you can get. Now, how about the New Testament? How about the New Testament? Some people might say, well, because we don't have the original copies of the Bible, of the Gospels, we can't reliably know what they wrote.

But every ancient historian worth their salt knows that this is a naive view, that this is naive. Because when it comes to ancient literature, nobody has any of the original copies.

That's impossible. But that doesn't mean that we can't reliably know what the original was. And historians know this. We actually have lots of ancient texts that historians believe to be very reliable. So let me give you just two examples. So the Greek historian Herodotus, who lived in the 5th century BC, he was a Greek historian. We have about 75 copies of his works.

The Roman historian, Suetonius, who lived in the 2nd century AD, we have quite a bit many more copies, manuscripts of his works.

[16:35] We have over 200 copies of his works. And all scholars would say, you know, the writings of Herodotus and Suetonius and lots of other ancient authors are very historically reliable.

In fact, the average ancient historical document has about 20 copies. And that's a very reliable way to know that what we have is the original.

Now, when we apply this to the New Testament, how does the New Testament match up? Well, the Gettysburg Address has five copies. The average ancient document has about 20 copies.

The New Testament has 5,700 copies in the original Greek. And that's not to mention the other copies in other languages that we have, like Latin and Coptic and Syriac, although the Greek copies, of course, are the earliest because that's what they were originally written in.

And so in total, we have about 20,000 handwritten ancient copies of the New Testament. That's over 1,000 times the number for the average ancient work of classical literature.

[17:44] It's astounding. It's astounding. Now, some might say, well, aren't there differences in these copies? Aren't there differences in these manuscripts? Well, yes, there are.

But if you look at what scholars have written about this, the differences between these copies are incredibly minor. They're incredibly minor. Most of them are about word order and spelling errors. None of them constitute any significant point of belief or doctrine. Textual critics know, textual critics in this field know that the copies that we have are actually quite reliable.

If you have any questions about this particular point, I'd be happy to talk with you more about that. So we have about 1,000 times as many more copies as most ancient literature. And in terms of dating, the New Testament, the Bible is actually very early.

We have most of our copies are a lot earlier than also most ancient literature. So all of this, I know we're like nerding out here, but here we go. All of this leads F.F. Bruce, the eminent Bible scholar and historian from Cambridge to conclude this.

[18:57] The evidence for our New Testament writings is ever so much greater than the evidence for many writings of classical authors. The authenticity of which no one even dreams of questioning.

And if the New Testament were a collection of secular writings, their authenticity would generally be regarded as beyond all doubt. Be generally regarded as beyond all doubt.

So what's the takeaway from all this? Well, we have every reason to believe based on the sheer number of copies that we have and based on their dating that what we have here is what the original authors wrote.

And in many cases, we have lots of reasons to believe that actually it's significantly more trustworthy, it's significantly more authentic and reliable than most other ancient historical

documents.

Finally, so we have reliable eyewitnesses, we have a reliable text, and finally we have a reliable message. It's great to have confidence in the Bible as a reliable historical document.

[20 : 00] It's great to know these things, but it's not enough. It's not enough to have a relationship with God. It's not enough to live the Christian life.

It's not enough to face things like suffering and death. For all of that, what we need more than to have confidence in the eyewitnesses in the text, what we need to have more confidence in is the message of Scripture.

The message of Scripture. And so what is that message? Well, John summarizes this message well here in our text in 1 John 1, verses 5 through 9.

And in verse 5, this is what John says. He says, This is the message that we have heard from him as eyewitnesses and proclaim to you, that God is light.

That God is light. And in him, there is no darkness at all. So several weeks ago, I was, it was a Wednesday, and I was getting my house ready to have, to host people later that evening, to have people over for our Wednesday night foundations class.

[21 : 15] And I was doing the responsible thing and thinking, well, the time is about to get close. I should probably maybe clean up a little bit and make sure everything looks good. And as I looked around, I thought, you know, I think everything looks pretty good.

It looks pretty clean. I don't have much work to do. I don't have much cleaning to do before people get here. But as the afternoon and early evening went on, and as the sun continued to dip and drop, the sun got to this angle where the light from the sun shone in through my windows at just the right angle.

And some of you know what I'm about to say. The light came in at just the right angle where you could suddenly see like every speck of dust and every speck of dirt, every spot all over the floor, all over the table, all over everything.

And suddenly I was made aware that my house was not as clean as I thought it was. In that moment, I realized that there was lots that I couldn't see before, that I couldn't see before.

But the light exposed it. I realized that there was more in my house that needed to be cleaned up than I thought there was. Because of light.

[22 : 34] Because of light. And that's part of what God's Word does. The psalm reading that Liz read earlier says that your Word gives light.

God's Word gives light. God's light is His holy, glorious, moral beauty and perfection. And when we read His Word, we see God's light, and His light shines into our hearts.

And it shows us we're not as clean as we think we are. We are way more sinful and broken and jacked up than we ever thought that we were. And the invitation from John is to walk in the light. Is to walk in the light. Now, this might seem like a kind of intimidating invitation at first. If you think about what light does, it exposes, right? So it might seem intimidating to think, I'm supposed to walk in the light and expose myself to God?

What is He going to think? What is He going to do? What is He going to do? But John reassures us, because John makes it crystal clear, that walking in the light does not mean that we have to clean up our own lives, to clean up our own hearts before we enter into the presence of God, before we have a relationship with God.

[23 : 49] John actually tells us here that walking in the light means confessing our sin, acknowledging our sin, acknowledging the messiness, acknowledging our sin before God, exposing it, and bringing it into the light, but letting Jesus do the cleaning, letting Jesus do the cleansing.

Here in verse 9, John says, This is an interesting, curious phrase.

What does it mean that God is faithful and just to forgive us? Faithful and just. How is it that when God forgives us, He is doing justice in the world?

How are those two things related? Well, if you think about, if anyone has ever given you a gift card, if you were to imagine someone were to give you a gift card to your favorite restaurant in D.C., and you go out either with a friend or maybe a spouse or a significant other, and you have a great meal together, and finally at the end of the meal, the bill comes and the waiter comes and gives you, you know, that little black book, and you were to pull out your gift card, and you were to put it in that little black book and give it back, and if the waiter were to come back and say, Sir, ma'am, actually, I'm really sorry, but we are unable to apply this to your bill, what would you say?

You'd say, what? That's not right. That's not fair. That's not just. Why? Because somebody has already purchased the amount on the gift card.

[25 : 39] Someone has already paid for it, and so it is right and fair and just for the restaurant to honor it. For them not to honor that would be unjust. But if the restaurant were to actually apply the gift card to your bill, to your meal, it would be faithful and just of them to do so.

Why? Because it's already been purchased. Because it's already been paid for. Listen, when it comes to God's light that exposes our sin through his word, when it comes to your sin and my sin, we have the most reliable message that the world has ever known, that it is faithful and just of God to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Why? Because it's already been paid for. Because it's already been purchased. Somebody has already purchased our forgiveness. Somebody has already purchased our healing.

Somebody has already purchased our cleansing. And his name is Jesus. And he paid for it and purchased it with his own body and blood at the cross.

And so every time you confess your sin, whether it's the first time or the hundredth time or the hundred thousandth time, it is faithful and it is just of God to forgive you because he's honoring the purchase that has already been made by Jesus Christ at the cross for you.

[27 : 16] How much unrighteousness in verse 9 does John say that Jesus cleanses us from? All of it. Well, how much is that?

All of it. But really, like how much? All of it. All of your sin, past, present, and future, has been paid for and purchased by Jesus on the cross in full.

And that is why, friends, we don't just have, when it comes to scripture, we don't just have reliable eyewitnesses. We don't just have a reliable text.

But we have the most reliable message in the world because we have the most perfectly reliable Savior who is faithful and just to forgive us because he has already purchased it on the cross.

All of your sin paid for and purchased in full. And friends, that is what these eyewitnesses heard, saw, touched.

[28 : 23] It's what they proclaimed. It's what they gave their lives for. It's what the New Testament writers wrote down. What they were inspired by the Holy Spirit to write down.

It's what the church has preserved by the Holy Spirit in this book for thousands of years. And friends, if you can find a more trustworthy, if you can find a more reliable message in this world than that, man, I'd really love to hear it.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.