

Is The Bible Reliable?

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. We're going to be reading from the book of Nehemiah, chapter 8, verses 1 through 13, and verse 18 as printed in the liturgy.

A reading from the book of Nehemiah. I think I better change these. When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, all the people came together as one in the square before the water gate.

They told Ezra, the teacher of the law, to bring out the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel. So on the first day of the seventh month, Ezra, the priest, brought the law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand.

He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the water gate in the presence of the men, women, and others who could understand.

[1 : 45] All the people listened attentively to the book of the law. Ezra, the teacher of the law, stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion.

Beside him on his right stood Mattathiah, Shema, Aniah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maseah.

And on his left were Padaiah, Mishael, Malchiah, Hashem, Hashbadanah, Zechariah, and Meshulam.

Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them. And as he opened it, people all stood up.

Ezra praised the Lord, the great God, and all the people lifted their hands and responded, Amen, Amen. Then they bowed down and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

[2 : 52] The Levites, Joshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akub, Shabbathai, Hodiah, Messiah, Kalita, Azariah, Josabad, Hanan, and Paliah instructed the people in the law so that they understood what was being read.

Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, This day is holy to the Lord your God.

Do not mourn or weep. For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the law. Nehemiah said, Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks and send some to those who have nothing prepared.

This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. The Levites calmed all the people, saying, Be still, for this is a holy day.

Do not grieve. Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

- [4 : 24] On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra, the teacher, to give attention to the words of the law.
- Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the book of the law of God. They celebrated this festival for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.
- This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. I don't know about you, but I thought not many people could have read all those names the way that Joan just read those names.
- So is that not amazing? I mean, I was trying all week and couldn't do it. So way to go, Joan. We are continuing today in this journey of exploring God and looking at these various questions that we have about God, and today's question is, is the Bible reliable?
- Is the Bible reliable? 18th century French philosopher Voltaire said that, he predicted that the Bible would become a museum piece within 100 years of his lifetime, and would be replaced by more advanced philosophies of life.
- [5 : 49] But of course, today, the Bible persists in remaining one of the most popular books, the most popular book in the world. And why is that?
- Well, the Apostle Paul writes in the New Testament, he says this in 2 Timothy 3, he says, all Scripture is inspired by God. All Scripture is inspired.
- It's breathed out by God. And what exactly did God inspire? What did he breathe out in the creation of the Bible?
- Well, over 1,600 years, about the Bible was written by 40 authors on three different continents and two different languages and over two testaments.
- It was written by kings, scholars, philosophers, fishermen, poets, statesmen, historians, teachers, prophets, and doctors. And they all wrote different types of literature, history, poetry, prophecy, letters, and so forth.
- [6 : 54] And throughout the Bible, it makes an amazing claim for itself that on the one hand, it's 100% the work of human authors, and yet it also claims to be 100% inspired by God.
- Now, many people in the secular West, particularly, increasingly have questions about the reliability of the Bible. And maybe that's you, or maybe that's people in your life that you're having conversations with.
- A lot of people I've met over the years in the East Bay say that science has disproved the Bible. And I believe in science, and so I can't believe in the supernaturalism and the miracles of the Bible.
- Or another person may say, as a believer in evolution, I can't accept the Bible's pre-scientific accounts of the origin of life. Or you may say, well, science isn't necessarily my issue, but I see much of the Bible as historically inaccurate.
- And I can't be sure, I don't think any of us can be sure that the Bible's account of events is what actually happened. Or maybe you say, my problem's not so much science or history.
- [8 : 09] My problem with the Bible is that it's culturally obsolete, that much of its social teaching is morally regressive. The things it says about slavery and women and sexuality, all of this is impossible to, makes it impossible for me to accept that the Bible has the complete authority that Christians say that it does.
- And if that's you, we welcome you. A lot of us have those questions too. And I cannot begin to even barely address one of those questions today.
- So sorry to disappoint you. I'm going to lead a lot on the table. But I do hope that you'll come to our Q&A; afterwards. And you can grill me and we'll talk at length as long as you'd like about those questions.

I do want to say up top though that in a way, the Bible is unreliable. The Bible can be unreliable if you read it as an anthology of helpful thoughts and a collection of nuggets of wisdom where we pick and choose different parts to give us comfort and guidance and direction.

If you read the Bible that way, it's going to be unreliable for you. If you come to the Bible as a series of isolated sayings, which you dip in at random and extract little bits with no context, and then you take those fragments and you fit them into the various nooks and crannies of a larger enlightenment story of the world that says reason is going to conquer nature and science and technology is going to help us progress toward a utopia, the Bible is going to be unreliable to you.

[9 : 44] If you try to make the Bible be about a story that's completely different than the story the Bible is actually telling you, it's not going to be reliable for you.

If you come to the Bible without a map, without a framework, and without particular lenses for how the different parts of the Bible fit together in a unified, coherent story of the world, a unified, coherent story of the kingdom of God and the covenants that bring about the kingdom of God, it's not going to make sense to you and it's going to be unreliable to you.

And so I want to turn today to this little book. I'm guessing not a lot of us have read Nehemiah lately. And I want to turn to the book of Nehemiah chapter 8 where we have 50,000 people gathered together to hear, read, and taught the Bible.

And I want to ask the question, why? At least for these 50,000 people, why do they think the Bible is reliable? And what might that mean for us?

How might that help us? So I want to talk a little bit about listening attentively, interpreting faithfully, and responding properly.

[11 : 05] Because I think these are keys to engaging with the Bible in a reliable way. Listening attentively, interpreting faithfully, and responding properly.

First of all, listening attentively. Look at verse 1. It says that all the people assembled with one accord in the square, and they told Ezra, the teacher of the law, to bring out the book of the law of Moses which the Lord had commanded for Israel.

And then verse 3, it says, he read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square in the presence of the men, women, and the others who could understand, and all the people listened attentively to the book of the law.

So this is a gathering of 50,000 men, women, and children which tells us that it assumes that kids have the mental and spiritual capacity to understand the Bible and that these parents have obviously done something to prepare their kids to come and receive whatever's about to happen with some benefit.

They've been working with their kids at home probably on the Bible. And if you don't have any kids' Bibles at home, I brought a stack and I'm going to leave them up here for you to look at afterwards. But it says that they came as one.

[12 : 20] There was a unity. There was a solidarity about this gathering. And what have they come for? They say, bring out the book. Bring out the book.

They summon Ezra. Ezra, is he summoning the people? Is Ezra imposing the book on him? Is he begging people to come to his Bible study? No, it says the people take initiative and they make a demand.

They're eager and they're enthusiastic to come and stand here for six hours from dawn until noon and the heat in the Middle East.

They say, bring out the book. And that's how you know you're in a living church and you're experiencing a revival in the Spirit of God when the Spirit of God comes down and the people are saying, bring out the stinking book.

And what is this book? Well, it's called The Law of Moses that the Lord commanded. Right? The first five books of the Bible, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, The Law of Moses that the Lord commanded.

[13 : 26] And so the question there is who wrote it? Did Moses write it or did the Lord write it? And the answer is yes. Fully human, fully divine. Just like Jesus, it's fully humanly authored and fully divinely inspired at the same time.

And these people come here because they trust that this book is reliable. Why do they trust that? Well, to give you some backstory, last week we looked at Exodus 19 through 24 which is actually the first public reading of Scripture in the Bible.

Israel had just been rescued from Egypt. They were no longer slaves and they needed a new identity. They needed a new story to live by. And so God gathers the people at Mount Sinai and Moses reads the Scriptures aloud and as they hear it they're reminded of where they came from and who they are and the new future that they're being called to live for.

And that wasn't the last time they did that. Like when they finally got to the promised land they did it again. Joshua pulled out the book. He pulled all the people together and they listened to the Scriptures read aloud and they remembered this is where we came from and this is how we're to keep living as part of this new story that God is writing.

Sadly, after Joshua died there are no more stories about people coming together to hear God's Word. You get to the book of Judges and it says that they forgot the story.

[14 : 59] We're told in Judges 2 that the people, a whole generation arose who did not know the Lord or what the Lord had done for them. That went on for centuries. King David brought the Scriptures back to the people and yet they forgot again and then King Josiah discovered the law and the temple and he got excited and called all the people together to practice this reading of Scripture and he sparked this renewal movement but then of course they forgot again and they ended up in exile in Babylon.

And so that is why in this moment when Ezra and Nehemiah come back from the exile in Babylon they know that the thing they need to do above all else is to remind the people who they are and whose they are and how they're to live.

And so reading Scripture together became a core part of Jewish life. It was done every week when they would gather in the synagogue. Jesus Himself participated in this practice and you may know that He launched His public mission during the weekly reading of the Scripture from the scroll of Isaiah when He said today in your hearing this Scripture is being fulfilled.

And this is why the Apostle Paul writes to Timothy and says devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture and to its preaching and its teaching. Do you see why these people are listening so attentively?

Because they know the pain of forgetting their identity. They know the pain of losing track of what story they're living in.

[16 : 41] They know the pain of not knowing who they are and where they came from and where they're going and how they're supposed to live in light of that. So I want you to look at the context and the posture for how they're listening to the Bible.

It says in verse 4 that Ezra the teacher of the law stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion and then in verse 5 it says Ezra opened the book and all the people could see him because he was standing above them and as he opened it the people all stood up.

Now this high platform was practical so that everybody could see and everybody could hear but it was also symbolic to say that the word of God is above us. This word of God is coming down to us from on high.

It has an authority. Now think about that. What's the first question that Satan asks human beings in the scriptures in Genesis 3? He says did God really say?

It's the first question. Did God really say? And in that moment he's tempting human beings to rise above the word of God to put themselves over the word as the critics of scripture and to put themselves in a position where they are the judge and the jury about the truth of God.

[18 : 02] But these people in Nehemiah 8 are doing the opposite of that. They're sitting in humility under the book. They're standing with reverence before the book because they know that these are not mere human words from Moses but that this is the eternal word of God.

You're supposed to say amen at that point. And the reason I know you're supposed to say amen is in verse 6 where it says Ezra praised the Lord the great God and all the people lifted their hands and responded amen and amen.

Then they bowed down and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. I'm not making that up. Like it's not just my preference. It's biblical. Notice that Ezra is not standing up there giving his perspectives on world history or giving his opinions on current events.

He's simply reading the book, explaining the book, applying the book. And notice that the book is neither this cold cadaver in a lab that you clinically cut on nor is it a literary composition in a classroom that you critically comment on.

When the people heard the book it says they along with Ezra praised the Lord who is both the author and the subject of this book. This moment is thick with meaning because the word of Yahweh the word of this great God who has spoken is speaking now.

[19 : 38] The word of I am who I am. this God who is infinite, eternal, almighty, holy, and majestic is speaking to us and he's telling us the true story of the world.

He's telling us who we are and revealing to us where we're going and showing us how we're supposed to live. And this tells us that this is a glorious God who's worthy of our hands being lifted up in praise to him.

And I know that makes some of you uncomfortable but it's right here. This is a glorious God who's worthy of our loud shouts of amen, amen which means yes, yes, I need that, I want that.

May that be true in our lives. You want to practice? Let's say amen, amen, amen, amen. This glorious God is worthy of our bent knees in humility and reverence before him.

He's worthy of our bowed faces and our bowed heads with awe and wonder and worship in his presence. And as I read this I say may the spirit of God loosen our hands and loosen our tongues and loosen our knees and loosen our faces in worship because this is how Jesus read his Bible.

[20 : 59] Did you know this is how Jesus read his Bible as a devout and passionate Israelite? He listened attentively because he discerned in these words the authoritative voice of the Lord and the story of the kingdom of God breaking into this broken world from heaven to earth.

So, do you want to hear from God? Bring out the book. Open the book. Listen humbly and reverently to the book.

Let the book sit above you. Get yourself below and beneath this book. That's the only way you're going to find the Bible to be reliable to you.

And may it be said of us that when we Christchurch opened this book we praised the Lord the great God and we all lifted our hands and responded amen and amen and we bowed down to worship the Lord with our faces to the ground.

If you read the Bible in any other way in any other context with any other posture it's not going to make sense to you. So, they're listening attentively but also it says that they're interpreting faithfully.

[22 : 22] They're interpreting faithfully. It says in verse 7 that the Levites instructed the people in the law while the people were standing there and they read from the book of the law of God making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.

Now, they're not just at home alone in a comfy chair with a cup of coffee reading their Bible by themselves which is great. You should keep doing that but they're gathered together in person with real people who have faces and they're not at home or on their phone Googling questions you know, finding anonymous answers on the internet and believing the first thing that they click.

Right? That drives pastors crazy. It's like when you go to your doctor you're like I've been studying WebMD you know and I have like five minutes of knowledge about this. No, it says that they gather together and Ezra's in the pulpit and they have 13 teachers on the platform and 13 Levites in the pews these are the trustworthy and trained authorized and accountable interpreters of the scriptures and what they're doing is a combination of preaching Q&A; small groups and Sunday school.

They're basically reading the text in Hebrew they're translating it into Aramaic which is the common language of the people and they're turning around after like each chapter going do you understand?

And the people say actually no I don't I have a question about this or a question about that and so they go on to explain the original intended meaning of the text the plain sense of the passage so that everybody can comprehend it and apply it to their lives.

[24 : 02] The technical term for that is exegesis it means to draw out what is actually already there in the text. The opposite of that is eisegesis which is to read your own ideas into the text.

We do not want to do eisegesis we want to do exegesis we're not coming to the Bible to see ourselves reflected back to us as in a mirror we're coming to the Bible to draw out the truth of God that's there and I need to press on this because in the digital age and this Amazon culture that we live in you click a button and a book shows up like an hour later on your doorstep magically these books that are called Christian books with that label or we have blogs or podcasts or sermons and we need to ask more critical questions is this book giving me a feel good message with some life hacks or is it giving me the truth of the word of God is what I'm taking in right now drawing out what the Bible meant and what it means or is it imposing its own meaning on the Bible and baptizing the dominant paradigm and giving to me the modern or postmodern zeitgeist is what's coming into my eyes and what's coming into my ears aligning with the prophets and the apostles can Moses and David and Isaiah and Ezra can Jesus and Peter and Paul and James hear this and say amen and amen that is such an important question for us to ask the gospel of John chapter 1 says that Jesus is the eternal word of God made flesh he's the final word of God and so it's important for us to think about how did the word of God interpret the word of God right when Jesus read the Bible how did he interpret the Bible well quickly you know when he was tempted by the devil

Jesus says it is written and then he quotes Deuteronomy which he has memorized and he says man shall not live on bread alone but what on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God that's our spiritual food that's our spiritual nourishment is the words of God and he opens the sermon on the mount and what does he say he says do not think that I've come to abolish the law and the prophets that I've come to tear them down that I've come to deconstruct them no I've 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 therefore Jesus says anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven whoever unties or relaxes or plays fast and loose or tries to accommodate this word to our time and place you're going to be least in the kingdom of heaven

Jesus says but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven and Jesus continues on in the sermon on the mount taking issue with illegitimate interpretations of the bible confronting head on erroneous interpretations of this book he says later in the gospel of Matthew you're in error because you don't know the scriptures or the power of God he says in the gospel of John scripture cannot be broken so if you believe Jesus is who he claimed to be then we've got to honor the fact that Jesus quoted and alluded to almost every book in the Old Testament authoritatively and that Jesus reads the bible with respect to the original intended meaning of the text but what's so astonishing astonishing it's not so much that every faithful Israelite did that what's astonishing is the way that Jesus interprets the story of the bible because he basically says

I'm the hero of this story I'm the golden key that unlocks this book he says in John 5 you study the scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life these are the very scriptures that testify about me if you believed Moses you would believe me for he wrote about me he goes on and he says that this is after his resurrection from the dead he meets with two disciples and it says that beginning with Moses and all the prophets he explained to them what was said and all the scriptures concerning himself and then he meets with all of his disciples and he says everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the law of Moses the prophets and the Psalms now you might object to that and say well the gospels that you're quoting from these are legends right these are myths that the church made up we don't really have the real Jesus of history he's been lost in the midst of time and none of what he said none of what he did can be historically validated but I would just like to invite you to begin examining the original documents and sources

[29 : 41] I think we actually have a slide if we want to pull that up what you'll find is overwhelming an overwhelming amount of evidence for the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus when you think about the copies that we have and the time it took between the original and the copies and the amount of manuscripts that we have compared with everything else that we know in the ancient world I think we'd have to say that Jesus Christ and the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the most and best attested fact in ancient history I love this that I read this week from Andrew Wilson he says ultimately our trust in the Bible stems from our trust in Jesus Christ the man who is God the king of the world the crucified risen and exalted rescuer

I don't trust in Jesus because I trust in the Bible I trust the Bible because I trust in Jesus I love him and I've decided to follow him so if he talks and acts as if the Bible is trustworthy authoritative good helpful and powerful I will too even if some of my questions remain unanswered or even if some of my answers remain unpopular what we want to do at Christ Church is to help you learn how to read the Bible as one book with one author with one storyline with one subject and we want to teach you how to interpret this amazing book faithfully right they're listening attentively and they're interpreting faithfully and I want to conclude by talking about how they're also responding properly they're responding properly look at verse nine then

Nehemiah the governor Ezra the priest and teacher of the law and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all this day is holy to the Lord your God do not mourn or weep for all the people have been weeping as they listened to the words of the law why were they weeping this word had been reverently read it had been painstakingly interpreted it had been worshipfully received and now they're beginning to weep over their laxity they're beginning to weep over how loosely they've sat to the things of God they're beginning to weep because they're convicted of their sin and their disobedience before God they're beginning to weep because they've not acted in accordance with God's word they're grieved because they realize that they've grieved the heart of God and they've quenched the spirit of God if there's one thing that the Bible can be relied upon to do it's to show us that all the great problems of the world they're not out there they're right here and that's why they're weeping and through the word of God and through the spirit of God

God's grace begins to move upon these people and the spirit of God begins to awaken the sleepy and enliven the dead and quicken the lethargic right all scripture is God breathed Paul says and it's useful for teaching rebuking correcting and training and righteousness and that's what's happening right now they're being taught and corrected and rebuked and trained in righteousness not as detached objective critics who are just receiving a bunch of information but as engaged subjective characters who are being invited to be involved as the people of God in the unfolding story of God but they're not only weeping their weeping is replaced with joy it says in verse 10 Nehemiah said go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks which is why we have donuts and coffee after church he says go and do that because this day is holy to our

Lord do not grieve for the joy of the Lord is your strength at this moment the eternal and infinite joy of the Lord almighty is beginning to flow into the people of God and give them strength for their souls and to fortify them in their inner being why is that because they celebrated with great joy because they now understood the words that had been made known to them the way to get the joy of the Lord is to understand the word of the Lord you know what's amazing is that this was just day one they stayed for seven days to read God's word like this and why did they want more and more of the Lord's word and more and more of his day because they were preparing themselves for the coming day of atonement they say look don't be so sad stop crying and start partying because the holiest day of the year is coming in a couple of days when the great high priest is going to take the blood of the sacrificial lamb into the very presence of

[35 : 22] God and the holy of holies and he's going to make an atonement to cleanse us all from these sins that we're weeping about so stop weeping this is a time for joy it's a time to celebrate the God of all grace and to let his joy become our joy and friends as we prepare to come to this table we have a much greater atonement to rejoice in today we we have an atonement that's not symbolic but that's actual we have an atonement that's not temporary but it's eternal the law of God should come and make us aware of the great and deep problem of our sins so that we weep but the gospel of God brings us this great solution of the priest and the sacrifice Jesus Christ who cleanses us of our sins and makes us one with God and that's why I believe the

Bible is a reliable book because it's telling us about the one author the one storyline the one subject of the book bring out the book open the book read the book understand that this whole book is about Christ and him crucified let's read the book in the name of the Father Son and Holy Spirit Amen