

# Conversations with a Skeptic: How Can You Trust a 2000 Year Old Book?

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Preacher: Rev. Jim Salladin

[ 0 : 00 ]     Okay, I'll kick us off then, shall I? Yeah, give it a go. So, Jim, last week in the Christianity Explored class that I'll look after, somebody said to me, almost verbatim, they said, I don't understand why people think about the Bible as anything more than just a really interesting historic book.

That's what they asked me. And I gave them the definitive answer. So let's just see how you go. Fantastic. Fantastic. Are you going to tell us how you responded after I...

It was very good. It was very good. It was very, very good. I remember that. Fantastic. Fantastic. So the question is, why do we regard the Bible as different than any other really, really good book?

Yeah. Like a classic. Like a classic. Like what's the difference between the Brothers Karamazov? Exactly. And? Showing off. But yeah. Yeah. I don't get a lot of opportunity for that.

No. No. I think I would say a couple things. Two, probably. I mean, we could talk about a lot of different things that make the Bible different than any other, than the other great classics of literature.

[ 1 : 12 ]     I mean, obviously it is a great classic of literature. But it's unique. At least for two reasons that come to mind. One is that it makes a very, very unique claim. And the other is that it makes a, it's had a remarkable impact.

Right? So it makes a unique claim. The Bible, if you read the Bible, it claims to be the story of how God has come to us so that we can know God. Yes.

Now the Brothers Karamazov doesn't make that claim. Right? I mean, other great novels or whatever do not claim to be telling you the story of how God has come to humanity in a unique way, in such a way that it's relevant for all people.

So it's a big claim. And you have to read it evaluating that big claim. And that big claim makes it somewhat unique. The second thing is it's had a remarkable influence. I mean, if you think about it, for the last 2,000 years, in every century, in every generation, in every socioeconomic strata, is that the right way to say it?

Anyway, at every kind of class, in every culture that it's gone into, people's lives have been utterly changed and they've attributed it to what they found written in the scriptures.

[ 2 : 31 ]     And so I don't think you can make, you can't make that claim of any other book that I know. Well, I mean, I think, I mean, I like the second part. I'm not sure if the first part, I'm not sure how convincing the first part is, because to say that it makes a big claim and that legitimizes it.

I mean, I could write a book that makes a big claim. I could write a book called, pasty red-headed men are the most handsome men in the world. And I could say, this is really true.

No, no, seriously, this is a totally true statement. It's not, I am not lying to you. And sort of go about that theme throughout the book. And then we would have to judge it by the amount of giggles that we produce.

So I think, I think the, I mean, the great religions that do have books, they all claim, they all make big claims.

Right. Absolutely. So, so, so I just don't think that's a, I don't think, I don't think people would see that as a valid argument. Right.

[ 3 : 37 ] Okay. Okay. Are you, are you asking, or let, let, let, let me reframe what you just said and put it in a question. Can you tell me if it's. Sure. A valid question. Why would we trust the claim?

Just because it makes a, it makes a big claim doesn't mean you should trust it. It doesn't mean that we should trust it. Totally. Anyone can make claims. Sure. And it might just be a very, it could be, it's a very old claim. Right. You know, why, why trust this particular claim over some other religious claim that some other religion is making?

Yeah, absolutely. Well, I, I think the main, there's a lot of ways to answer that question. Why would you trust the Bible over and against any other sacred book or, or whatever?

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Now, there's a lot of ways to answer that. And it's a bigger conversation than we're going to be able to have in 10 or 15 minutes. We could talk about what makes the Bible unique over and against the Quran, over and against different, you know, the book of Mormon, over and against all, all these other books.

We could talk about how history has validated the Bible. We could talk about all kinds of things. But I think one of the big issues, one of the big ways that you would have to come at this question, I think, is you, you would have to ask the question, to what extent does the Bible make sense of the human condition?

[ 4 : 58 ] To what extent does the Bible, and let me specific, let me focus in on Jesus. To what extent does Jesus make sense of the human condition? Because if you think about humanity, we are weird people, right?

You talk about high maintenance people, you know, high maintenance relationships or whatever. We have got, we are a very high maintenance species, okay? We're confused emotionally, we're confused intellectually, we're weird on all sorts of levels.

The human condition has perplexed humans for as long as we've been self-reflective. And so when you come to Jesus, you need to ask the question, to what extent does Jesus convincingly diagnose and resolve the deepest human problems that we face?

If you're a scientist and you're evaluating a theory, you know, whether or not you can trust a scientific theory, you ask the question, to what extent does it explain the evidence and the natural world that we observe?

So when you come to Jesus, my contention would be that his teachings, his analysis of humanity, his analysis of our world is deeper, more insightful, and more compelling than any of the other alternatives.

[ 6 : 18 ] Just a couple real quick examples, if that's okay. All of us know, like we know this from chick flicks, right? All of us know that real meaning in life doesn't come from like the stuff you have, possessions or whatever.

We all know that meaning comes from relationships, right? Like that's the fundamental basis for all chick flicks. But we also know, like that's pretty intuitive.

You had me at hello. Okay. Very good, very good, very good. Subtle reference, I'm not sure they got it. That's fine. Where was I? Yeah. Okay.

We all know that relationships are where meaning happens. But we also know from our own experience, if we're honest, that our closest relationships are often the biggest disappointments of our lives.

Okay. That's a perplexing phenomenon that is almost universally experienced as human beings. Now when you go to Jesus, I mean, Jesus explains to me why it is that our relationships usually fail or oftentimes are disappointing and how we can have a relationship with God that gives life to all our other relationships.

[ 7 : 27 ] He explains that human perplexing condition. I could have other examples. I see. I think people would say, that sounds really good.

Yeah. You know? I like that. I connect with that. I think people would say that. But we're still talking about a book. Yep. If we bring it back to the fact that it's a book we're talking about here that tells us all this stuff.

Like, so the Christian sort of treaties on this is that God, who, you know, created the universe and made people and did all these amazing things, chose to talk to us through a book as opposed to like, you know, like if I was God, I'd write it in the sky in bright colors or something.

Or like with a laser light show, you know, every night that no one could explain. In red. I mean, it must be God because I can't explain. That's amazing. Or like a voice in my head or something that, you know, I am God and, you know, Jesus, this is the story of Jesus.

Right, right, right, right. Right. You know, like, that would be... And those are voices you occasionally hear. That's right. That's right. See, that sounds... I think that sounds... I think people would say, why didn't God do that?

[ 8 : 42 ] Because it's a lot more spectacular, it's a lot more kind of like God-like as opposed to a book, which there are millions of.

Yeah. So why a book? I think it's pretty straightforward. I mean, it's a totally valid question, but I think it's relatively straightforward.

Just think with me just a second. If God wanted to set something up so that he could be in relationship with people.

Yes. Okay. Relationship requires communication, right? Yes. I'm pretty sure it does. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, okay. That's what my wife tells me.

Yeah. Constantly. Yeah. Talk to me. Yeah. Aaron, listen to your wife. In the ad break. In the ad break. Yeah. That's not true, by the way. That's, yeah. Okay, moving right along.

[ 9 : 42 ] Okay. Relationship requires communication, right? Yes. And so if God is going to communicate with humans, God needs to, humans communicate through language. So God's going to have to communicate to us through language.

Yeah. Okay. And if God is going to, if that communication is going to be recorded at all for the generations, it's going to eventually have to be written down.

So it would make sense that if God was going to communicate to humans, eventually a book of some variety or writing of some variety, permanent writing of some variety would have to happen one way or the other.

So I don't think it's very surprising that God would come to us or could communicate to us through a book. And in fact, you mentioned how big and grand and wonderful God is.

Part of God's power is that he could humble himself and come to us in a way that we can understand. So I mean, I think the fact that God would communicate to us through a book is not irrational at all.

[ 10 : 50 ] It would be actually exactly what we would expect. Okay. Okay. Well, we know the Bible didn't come just, didn't just fall down from heaven, right? It didn't magically appear.

Right. They didn't dig it up in a small town. Right. In a whole vague reference. So let's say you brought up Jesus.

So let's focus in on the stuff about Jesus in the Bible. Okay. There are four stories about Jesus, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But we know there were a lot of other stories about Jesus or that talked about Jesus.

A lot of other gospels. Gospel of Mary. Gospel of Thomas that, you know, people talk about a lot today. Well, you know, it comes up in conversations, you know? Right. And Time magazine sort of invariably sort of pulls one of these out around Easter time.

Every Easter. Every Easter it pulls out. Look for it. It's coming. It pulls out one of those. And so we know that at some point the church kind of decided which stories of Jesus to put in the, you know, to collect.

[12:00] Okay. And which to not collect. Which to say were not cool. Yeah. So I guess my question is this. Why? Because I know there's a lot of conspiracy theories about this.

You know, they kind of like pick these ones. Yeah. To sort of support church's hierarchy or stuff like that. I don't want to get into that too much. But why these gospels when there are a lot of other things about Jesus that could have been said in the other gospels?

Sure. Sure. Absolutely. Well, you know, if you look over the, again, if you look over the past 2,000 years, more books have been written about Jesus than any other individual in history.

Right? I mean, there's lots of books about Jesus. And that did, you know, that's not just recently. That's been going on from the beginning. Okay. The thing with the gospels, again, it's pretty straightforward.

All the evidence that we have suggests that the four gospels that we have in the New Testament were written very, very, very early. Certainly before the end of the first century.

[13:00] So they were written first by all evidence that we can gather. They were written first. And they were written within the lifetime of the eyewitnesses.

So legends develop after eyewitnesses are dead. History is written during the lifetime of eyewitnesses. So everything we can find indicates that the gospels were written within the lifetime of the first eyewitnesses.

And there are four independent accounts that broadly tell a very similar story. They present a picture of Jesus that corroborates each other. And so very, very early on, they were gathered together and they spread, they were copied, they were spread all over the Roman Empire.

And when subsequent books were written, like the gospel of Thomas, for instance, was written, as far as we can tell, about a hundred years after at least the first gospel was written.

So first gospel is probably around 60 AD, gospel of Thomas likely somewhere around 160, something like that, so far as we know. And so the later accounts of Jesus were just held up to the standard of the first four gospels.

[14:13] And if they didn't corroborate the earliest accounts, they just were mostly ignored. So they just never gained the following. And if you read, say, this past week I reviewed the gospel of Thomas, it's pretty straightforward why not a lot of people gave it a big hearing.

That's wacky? Yeah, I just encourage you, read the gospel of Luke and then read the gospel of Thomas. And it will not be very, very troubling to you why the gospel of Thomas is not included.

I mean, I was mentioning this, I was talking to Robert just earlier, the last line in the gospel of Thomas is about how Peter says to Jesus, send Mary away because she's not worthy of life because she's a woman and not a man.

And Jesus' response is, don't worry, Peter, I'll turn her into a man. I mean, really, it's fairly ridiculous.

That's not very nice. And if you know the history and whatnot, it presents a worldview that just was utterly foreign to first century Palestinian Judaism. So it's not, historically, it's pretty straightforward why it wasn't included.

[ 15 : 35 ] Okay, well, let's say this. Let's go with what you've said. Let's assume that the early church made good decisions on what to include in the Bible and what not to include, right?

And let's say they chose four really great books about Jesus and they pulled together some other letters that a few other guys wrote, which were really good. So let's say the first stuff that went out there is great.

We're 2,000 years later. Right. Like, how do we know that, how do we know nothing's been changed? How do we know that in, like, you know, fiddle the books, so to speak?

Sure. Like, intentionally, the church's hierarchy intentionally doing it. Sure. Like, adding stuff about, you know, give lots of money or something or whatever. Or, unintentionally, just like, one of the monks was having a few beers and, you know, and sort of got passed on over a few hundred years.

Yeah. Like, how do we know that hasn't happened? Yeah. Because there's no original copies. There's been no photocopy machines for most of the 2,000 years. We have no original documents. So how do we know? Right.

[ 16 : 39 ] Nothing's been changed. Very, very good question. One of the great things about the Bible, and it is just an interesting thing about studying the Bible, is that we have vastly, I mean, just vastly, more copies of it than we have of any other ancient document.

So, I mean, there's literally, my understanding is there's somewhere around 2,000 copies of the Gospels that were actually penned before the year 500.

I mean, we just have thousands and thousands and thousands of copies of very, very ancient manuscripts of the Bible. And so what scholars do, it's a thing called textual criticism.

They take all these very, very, very ancient texts that we have in museums and things like that, and they compare them. So you take an account of the Gospel of Luke penned in the year 200 and compare it to one that was penned in 600 A.D.

and one that was in 1,000 A.D. and one that was in 1,500 A.D. and so on and so forth. And you ask the question, has it changed? Like, where are the discrepancies? And when you do that, it's very reassuring and there's great consistency.

[ 17 : 56 ] Most of the differences are like spelling, misspellings. You know, the monk didn't know how to spell. But other than that, most of them, it's substantially very, very, very consistent.

So the texts, the English texts that we have are very, very, very good texts. Okay, well, let's change text a little bit here. This is a different sort of question, and it relates to the believability of the whole thing.

Because if you're a Christian, you've got to go for, you sort of, the Bible's a package, you know. You believe it all, you don't. Right. You can't sort of go, oh, that bit is believable.

Well, this part is clearly a lie, but let's just focus on the stuff, you know. But you've got to take it as a whole package. It lives or dies as a whole. And there is some very odd stuff in there that it asks you to believe.

It asks you to believe that a serpent talks. That a man, the certain man grows stronger as his hair grows.

[ 18 : 59 ] That another man was swallowed by a whale and was spewed up again onto shore a few days later. That a giant sea parted. I mean, there's some, to 21st century ears, I mean, it just, I think it can sound very silly.

And like a fantasy. So, what do you say to people that bring that stuff up? Oh, sure. Yeah. Well, first of all, the way you just framed the question, those examples that you gave, you purposefully framed them in a more silly manner.

I opened the Bible in four places. No, I mean, some of the reason that that sounds so silly is the way you framed them. And when you read them in context, it's not as silly as the way you just described it.

That's fair enough. Okay. Yeah, that's fair enough. Okay. But, nonetheless, it's a good question. And I think I'd say a couple things. The first thing I would say is that it, if the Bible really is God communicating to humanity.

I mean, you mentioned before, God is huge and beyond us and, you know, all that kind of stuff. If he's going to speak to humanity, you should expect that your assumptions about life are going to be challenged.

[ 20 : 25 ] Like, if you opened up a book that God gave you that was going to describe who he is and what it means to be in a relationship with him and that kind of thing, and all you got was, you know, a kind of Oprah-esque believe in yourself, everything you've ever thought is right, and that kind of thing, I mean, that would be fishy.

If it really is God coming to us, you should expect that it will challenge your assumptions. That's part of what makes the Bible worth reading.

Okay. So that would be the first thing. The second thing I would say is you're right. There are bits of the Bible that are more obscure, that bring up a lot of difficult questions and things like that.

But what I encourage people to do, and I'm going to talk about this in just a second, a little bit more. The main point of the Bible is Jesus. And so if you're trying to figure out what you think about the Bible generally, the best thing to do is go to the main point.

Go to Jesus. Figure out what you think about Jesus. And when you figure out who Jesus is, he makes sense of the rest. Okay. Go to the main point. After you figure out the main point, then the details make sense.

[ 21 : 38 ] And so I would say go to Jesus, and he will explain a lot. Once you understand him, he provides the context that makes the rest of it make sense.

Now, I could go through all of those different examples one by one, but I think that might be a little bit. We might be, yeah. Maybe not. But if anybody has questions about specifics or whatever, come chat with me afterwards.

I'd love to talk about those things. Any time of the day or not. I'm not giving out my cell phone. 7, 7, 8. Yeah. Next question. Next question.

Okay. This relates to the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament. And this is a very good question, I think. This is the last question. Rationalists argue that there is a moral inconsistency in the Bible between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

And when you read the whole thing through, we see in the Old Testament, these sort of like, it's quite really violent. And you see this kind of just God who was just really seems kind of angry or something.

[ 22 : 44 ] And in the New Testament, you've got this real kind of Jesus who's kind of hugging people and healing people and stuff. And so rationalists argue that there is a moral inconsistency. And so they, you know, it's kind of, it lends itself to not being believable, the whole thing.

So how would you respond to that moral inconsistency? Yeah. Yeah. Aaron, very good question. Thank you. Very good question. Are you going to preach out of this question and keep going? No, I think I'm going to answer this question.

Okay. And then, anyway, I would say that the people that say that there's a moral inconsistency between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament, it's a fairly superficial reading of the two texts.

The Bible, Old Testament and New Testament, present a very, very coherent, unified vision of who God is.

In the Old Testament, what you have is you have a God who is totally, totally good and totally, totally loving. Okay? He's totally, totally good, which means, okay, his goodness implies that he's hostile towards evil.

[ 23 : 58 ] Utterly hostile towards evil. Right? You can't be good and tolerate evil because if you tolerate evil, you start participating in it. Okay?

Like, if you tolerate the Nazis, you're participating in them. Okay? So God's goodness in the Old Testament lends himself to be very, very, very hostile towards any kind of evil.

But at the same time, all through the Old Testament, you see that God is absolutely loving. He's extremely patient, extremely kind, continually calling the people who deserve to be punished, calling them back to himself.

Okay? So he's totally good, totally loving. And that's exactly what you see in Jesus. When you get to Jesus, he's absolutely good. Okay?

And that makes him utterly hostile towards evil. And he's particularly, interestingly, he's particularly, you know, he gets really mad at religious leaders, like corrupt religious leaders.

[ 24 : 55 ] You remember the time where he goes into the temple and the temple's all, there's all kinds of wacky things going on in the temple. And he grabs a whip and he runs people out of town, or at least out of the temple.

Jesus, you see him as being absolutely good, which means he's absolutely hostile towards evil. But at the same time, he's totally loving. You know, when he's dying on the cross, he looks at the religious leaders that put him there.

And he says, Father, forgive them. So in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, you have an extravagantly good God who is extravagantly loving. And it all fits together very, very nicely if you read it, if you read the whole thing through with Jesus at the center.

Oh. Well, that was a good answer. Good way. Okay. So that's the last question for right now. Okay. Good. Everybody, if you would turn in your service sheets to the second page.

Thanks, Aaron. And I mentioned before, if anybody has more questions about these things, certain parts of the Bible that trouble you, whatever, do come talk to us.

[ 26 : 06 ] I'd love to have a conversation. So I didn't mean to, I hope I wasn't skirting that issue. But it would take a while to go through each of those. I think it would be tedious. Okay. Look at the service sheet here.

Okay. In the next five minutes, I am going to tell you the whole story of the Bible. I dare you to time me. Okay. That's what I'm going to do.

But don't start the timer until after I read the text. Okay. So second page, down at the bottom, the reading from Luke. We'll read it and then I will tell you the whole story of the Bible in five minutes.

This is Jesus talking to his disciples. Then Jesus said to them, Jesus said to the disciples, These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you. That everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. And he said to them, thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead. And the repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

[ 27 : 10 ] You are witnesses of these things. Okay. A little bit of context of where we are. You can start the timer if you want to. A little bit of context of where we are.

We're right at the end of the Gospel of Luke. And Jesus has already died. And he's risen again. This is the day he rose from the dead.

This is the first Easter day. It's in the evening by this point. They've just had dinner. Jesus has just had dinner with the disciples. I think they have roasted fish. I don't know if you've had dinner yet.

But that might make you hungry. It kind of made me hungry as I was reading it earlier. But the disciples are really, really confused. And they're confused about the scriptures. They're confused about Jesus.

I mean, they're looking at a guy who was dead and now he's alive. And they haven't known very many people to go in that progression.

[ 28 : 05 ] So they're just utterly perplexed. And so Jesus kind of breaks things down for them. And he says in verse 45, 45 and 46, he summarizes the entirety of the Bible.

And he says the whole message of the Bible, disciples, St. John's evening service, is this. Jesus came. Jesus died. Jesus rose again in order for you and I to be forgiven and so that we can be children of God for forever.

That's the whole point of the whole Bible. Every single passage in the Bible, in some respects, gives us some perspective on that central truth.

So the Old Testament, what he says is, in the reading he says, the law of Moses, the Psalms, the prophets, that's all the Old Testament. The Old Testament is intended, designed to get us ready to understand who Jesus is.

And the New Testament is all about explaining who Jesus is and how we're to respond to him. Okay, let me explain it in just a little different way.

[ 29 : 16 ] All good stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end, right? The story of the Bible begins with God creating us, designing humanity so that we would be in relationship with him and relationship with other people.

Okay? Perfect relationship with God, perfect relationship with other people. That's the beginning of the story of the Bible. But then in the Bible there's a big middle section. And the big middle section is all about how we have consistently rejected a relationship with God and broken our relationship with other people.

So that now, most of the Old Testament is a long description of how we as humans are utterly incapable of resolving and healing our relationship with other people and healing our relationship with God.

We're stuck. We know we need better relationships with other people and with God, but we can't get there. Okay? That's the middle of the story of the Bible. But then there's the end. And the end is when Jesus comes.

God comes to us. We can't fix our relationship with God, but God can fix his relationship with us by coming to us in the person of Jesus Christ in such a way that Jesus restores our relationship with God, restores our relationship with other people.

[ 30 : 29 ] And that's why, as Christians, we are so utterly excited about Jesus is because that deepest relationship that is at the core of who we are and all that we need and desire, that is the relationship that is addressed and healed by Jesus.



Now, the point is, the Bible, oftentimes it's thought this way, but the Bible is not a book of morality, primarily.

It's not a book just of rules. It's not how to be a better you. The whole Bible is about Jesus, how God has come to us in Jesus so that we can know him.

Okay? Now, if that's the centerpiece of the Bible, if the centerpiece of the Bible is Jesus, then that changes the way we read the Bible and it changes how we evaluate the Bible.

Okay? Some of us here are uncertain about the Bible. You're kind of like, well, I don't know.

[ 31 : 30 ] You know, it's a good book, maybe. Good historical reading. But should it be the measure of my life? I just don't know. If that's who you are, what I would say is focus on the Gospels.

Okay? The Bible is a big book. Okay? You can kind of get lost in it. I'll grant you that. Focus on the Bible, on the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Read Jesus, what he said, what he did.

And ask yourself this question. To what extent does Jesus address the biggest issues in the human heart, in the human dilemma, in the human history, in human experience?

To what extent does he address those issues, diagnose the problem, and give us a solution? Because the Christian contention is that Jesus addresses, diagnoses, and resolves the deepest human problems better than anyone else.

So read it, and ask yourself that question. Others of us have been Christians for a long time, and all this stuff is, you know all this stuff.

[ 32 : 39 ] And what I would say to you is, when you read the Bible, when you read the Bible, you need to read the Bible all the time with Jesus in mind. Even if you're reading the Old Testament, even if you're reading parts of the New Testament that aren't explicitly about Jesus, ask yourself the question, how does this passage help me understand Jesus and why he came and what he did more clearly?

And as you answer that question, I guarantee you all the best insights will come from that question. Okay? Aaron? I'm done. Thank you.