

Likely Story

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- [0 : 00] Well, please take your Bibles and open them up to the book of John. We've been preaching through the gospel of John, our passage today.
- We've made our way to chapter 7, verse 53, and we'll read through verse 11 of chapter 8. But I'm going to begin by reading the footnote. There's a little note above verse 53 because that note is very important and it impacts how we're going to read and understand this passage.
- So if you would, I want your Bibles open and look there with me starting in chapter 7, verse 53. Follow along with me as I read. It says, The earliest manuscripts do not include 7, 53 through 8, 11.
- Chapter 8. They went each to his own house, but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them.
- The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst, they said to him, Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery.
- [1 : 16] Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say? This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him.
- Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.
- And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones. And Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.
- Jesus stood up and said to her, Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? She said, No one, Lord. And Jesus said, Neither do I condemn you.
- Go, and from now on, sin no more. Father, if you would, bow with me. Let's pray once more. Father, we pray now again and ask for your help.
- [2 : 17] And ask for your wisdom. And ask, Lord, that you would give us a spirit of understanding. And I pray, God, that a miracle be done. That you would take my weak words and empower them for the good of this people.
- I pray in Christ's name. Amen. There's a poem by a man named John Clifford that I thought of as I prepared this message.
- It goes like this. Last eve I passed beside a blacksmith's door and heard the anvil ring the vesper chime. When looking in I saw upon the floor old hammers worn with beating years of time.
- How many anvils have you had, said I, to wear and batter these hammers so? Just one, said he. Then with twinkling eye, the anvil wears the hammers out, you know.
- And so, I thought, the anvil of God's word. For ages skeptics blows have beat upon. Yet though the noise of falling blows was heard, the anvil is unharmed.

- [3 : 24] And the hammer's gone. We preach God's word at this church. It is my commitment to you.
- Every week I study. I still can't believe that this is what God has called me to do. This is what I get to spend most of my time doing. Every week I open up this book. I pray. I read. I write.
- I study so that I can come here on Sunday morning, open it up for about an hour, and try to say what this book says. And the blessing and the curse of preaching the way that we do here at Seaweed Bay, of just walking straight through passages of the Bible, straight through books of the Bible, is that I cannot skirt myself around difficult passages.
- I can't avoid hard topics, hard passages. That's a blessing and a curse, isn't it? I'll be honest with you.
- If I were just flipping through the Bible and thinking through passages to preach, if I were thinking through topics to talk about, this would probably not be high on my list of passages that I would naturally choose on my own.
- [4 : 35] Not because we don't need to hear it. We do. But because I feel so inadequate to rightly explain this to you, and so much hinges on it.
- Our confidence in the Word of God that what we have here is Scripture, is truth, is everything to us as a believer.
- If we can't trust that this Word is true, then everything else falls apart. Our entire lives hang in the balance on the trustworthiness of the Word of God.
- So let me say this as clearly as I can to you now, and let the record show that my aim for us this morning is confidence in the Word of God.
- That's my prayer, is that this morning we would leave more confident in this book than when we came in. Before a minute, this message might feel like a hammer coming against the Word of God.
- [5 : 41] But if you hang with me, my prayer and my promise to you with the help of the Spirit is that we will leave here with a deeper, firmer conviction and trust that this Word of God is an unbreakable anvil of the truth.
- So here's the issue that we have to deal with. We'll get right to it. I'll just read that inscription, that insertion there, the little note there in your Bibles above chapter 8, and then we'll talk about what that means.
- So look there again with me. Right above chapter 8, there's a note that says, The earliest manuscripts do not include 753 through 811.
- The earliest manuscripts do not include our passage this morning. Again, we have to talk about this. Yeah, I can't in good faith just skip right over this.
- I can't in good faith just treat this and preach this like any other passage that we've addressed so far in John, because it's not like any other passage that we've addressed so far in John.
- [6 : 47] And so, Lord willing, we will talk about the passage itself briefly at the end. But I think we have to spend the bulk of our time today talking about this textual issue.
- Why is that note there? What does that note mean? And what does it mean for how we can trust our Bibles? If you're using the ESV, that's the translation that we use here at the church, you'll see that note is there in brackets.
- And then the entire section, actually, 753 through 811, is bracketed off all the way until you get to verse 12. Other translations, I believe the NRSV takes this passage and puts it entirely as a footnote.

It takes it out of the main body of the text all together. Other translations, the NIV, the CSB, the NASB, the HCSB, basically every modern translation of the Bible, with the exception of the KJV, sets this passage off in some way to let you know that the earliest manuscripts do not include this passage.

Meaning, they are telling us that it is highly doubtful that John wrote this passage. It's highly doubtful that this section of Scripture is actually a part of John's original gospel.

[8 : 14] You should know that I love my friends who stick with the KJV. I have several. I think it's a great translation. Overall, I have very few issues with it, but I would agree with the others on this one.

I do not believe this passage belongs in John's gospel. And in my opinion, I think it would better serve us if it were probably placed as a footnote, like the NRSV does.

There's several reasons for this. I'll give you several. For one, no Greek manuscript includes this passage before the 5th century. No Greek manuscript that we have of any quotations of Scripture before the 5th century include this passage.

That's incredibly significant to me. And those who argue that it should be included do so because there are several manuscripts that have it. But all of those manuscripts show up late to the party.

They're all after the 5th century. On top of this, not a single one of the earliest church fathers quotes or references or preaches from this passage in any of their sermons or writings.

[9 : 22] All of the earliest church fathers, they all quote John. They preach from John just like we're doing, beginning to end. But all of them, all of the earliest church fathers, skip straight from 7:52 right to chapter 8, verse 12.

As if this passage weren't even there. Which, by the way, if you did the same thing, you would notice that chapter 8, verse 12, it picks up seamlessly from where chapter 7, verse 52 leaves off.

It's a seamless transition. If we go to the Eastern Church, we have no record of any Eastern Church father quoting this passage before the 10th century.

It was simply not on their radar. Many of the places where it does show up in these manuscripts, it's marked off with markings, much like it is in our Bible, to show us that communicates some skepticism as to its authenticity.

And in places where it does show up, it's kind of a mixed bag where it might be found. Some have it here at the end of chapter 7. Others add it after 7, verse 36.

[10 : 27] Others tack it on to the end of John. And one very confused scribe put it all the way at the end of the book of Luke, Luke 21, 38. All of this together builds a very strong argument that this passage, as loved as it is, and despite the sentimental attachment that many of us may have with it, does not belong in John's gospel.

It's not original to what he wrote. Which means, as beloved as this passage is, it's questionable at best whether it is Scripture.

That's what this note is here to tell us. That's why it's marked off there in our Bible, is to alert you to this fact. Now, that feels a little bit like a hammer, doesn't it?

Striking against the Word of God. How do we understand this? Well, to understand what's happening here, we have to dive into a highly complex, deeply nuanced, supremely technical field of study called textual criticism, of which I am not an expert.

And so what I'm going to do is I'm going to lean on the experts this morning because they're going to be a lot more helpful to you than I would be on my own. So, a couple of admissions first.

[11 : 49] I want to hand some hammers over into the hands of those who would question the Bible. A couple of admissions here. For one, hammer number one, we do not have the original copies of the books of the Bible.

We do not have the original copy of John's gospel. There is no first draft existing anywhere on earth that we know of.

We don't have a first edition, original copy of John's gospel anywhere on the earth. That's hammer number one. Hammer number two. Amongst the manuscripts that we do have, there are thousands of differences.

Thousands upon thousands upon thousands of differences called variants. That's places where they say different things. And the estimations are all over the map as far as how many variants there might be.

But it's in the hundreds of thousands. To my knowledge, nobody has ever sat down and actually counted the individual differences. But it's in the hundreds of thousands.

[12 : 55] Hundreds of thousands of differences in these manuscripts of Scripture. And here, again, is where opponents of the Bible will take this information and use it as a hammer to strike against the Word of God.

And say, well, how can you trust this book? How can you believe anything that this book says? How do we know whether or not this is actually what John said?

How do we trust that John even wrote? How can you base your life on a book with such unreliable testimony? Are you kidding me? If you haven't heard that yet, you will.

But I want you to know that the anvil of God's Word has heard those blows before. Years and years and years and years and years of hammer strikes against this Word.

And it has not been moved a single inch. So let me tell you how I would respond to someone who said something like that to me. How I would respond to a skeptic of the authority of the Bible.

[14 : 02] I want to give you four responses here. Track with me. First, I would say consider the number of copies we have.

Consider the number of copies that we have. No, we do not have the originals, but we have an unbelievable number of ancient manuscripts.

See, the job of a textual critic is to analyze thousands upon thousands upon thousands of ancient texts. Some of them are copies of the original manuscripts.

Some of them are quotations in sermons from the church fathers. Some of them are complete. Some of them are fragments. But textual critics, they take all of these documents, thousands of documents, and they analyze them.

And from those copies, they're able to reconstruct what we believe to be what was originally written. And our Bibles that we have is the fruit of their labor.

[15 : 06] This is the work of textual critics searching through thousands of documents to uncover what was originally written. And it should make sense, I think, that the more copies we have, the higher our degree of confidence that we can get down to the bottom of what was actually written.

Do you see that relationship here? The more copies we have, the higher our confidence. Because we have a high number of manuscripts, we can be highly confident that we know what John and all of the other authors of the biblical books said.

Just think about it with me like this. If all we had was one copy, one copy, one manuscript existing, well, we would not have a very high degree of confidence whether we could deduce if that was original or not.

If we had two copies, if they agreed 100%, we might have better confidence. But if there's even the smallest difference, we'd be left with a 50-50 chance. So which one will we go with? If there's 10 copies existing of the original manuscripts, then we would have a better idea.

And if only one had a variant, then we'd say, well, we'd probably side with the nine. Do you see where I'm going here? The more copies we have, the higher our degree of confidence.

[16:20] I want to put a slide up here. Y'all know I don't normally do this, but I want you to actually see it. Here, I gave Randy a slide. Here we go. No, no, we'll go to the first one. There we go.

Can y'all see that? That's better. Okay. Just an advertisement. Breeze, can you see that? He's in the first row.

If y'all screwed up, you'd be able to see it. After church, if y'all email me, if you want to see these slides, I can get those to you. But up here at the top, Homer's Iliad is one of the best preserved ancient works.

We have over 600 copies of the Iliad, and that's pretty impressive. Some of Plato's works. He's one of the most famous Greek philosophers. We have less than 10 copies of Plato's works.

But nobody seems to question whether or not Plato wrote any of those copies. Nobody seems to have an issue with the content saying, well, yeah, of course Plato wrote this.

[17:24] This is what he said. They saved that level of criticism for the New Testament. But look there at the bottom. Let's go to the next one. There at the bottom. See, we have over 5,000 ancient copies of the New Testament.

That's just an embarrassment of riches compared to any other ancient text. And that's only the Greek manuscripts, too. There's thousands upon thousands of Latin manuscripts. Some say over 10,000 Latin manuscripts.

Not to mention the direct quotations and sermons from the church fathers, which adds up to over 1 million scripture references. From these copies, thousands upon thousands upon thousands of written documents, we can have an extremely high degree of confidence that what you have in your Bible is exactly what the original text said.

Here's the point. Do not listen to anyone who would say, well, we can't trust the Bible because we don't have the original documents. That is ridiculous.

I'll give you an example. I watched a video this week, and it was a guitar showcase. And these two guys were showing off some incredibly rare and valuable guitars.

[18:44] And this guy brought out the original Fender Stratocaster. Like, the very first one. And if you know anything about guitars, you know that the Stratocaster is probably the most famous, the most iconic guitar ever made.

And this guy comes out with copy number one, the original. Made in April 1954. And the video told me all about the guitar. It told me all the different parts. It told me how many pickups it had, what type of strings were on it, what type of wood it was made of.

The guy actually plugged in that guitar and played the very first Stratocaster. Now, I have no idea where they keep that guitar. And it would be a terrible thing if anything were to ever happen to it.

I hated to see the guy even hold it and touch it and plug it in. It was scary for me. But imagine if I were to sneak into the museum, take that guitar, the original Stratocaster, and smash it into a thousand pieces.

Like Jimi Hendrix. Take a lighter, light all the pieces on fire, take all the ashes and scatter them out into the ocean. If the original Stratocaster was nowhere to be found, would we have any idea what a Stratocaster was?

[20 : 05] Of course we would. Why? How? Because this is one of the most highly reproduced, highly copied, highly mass-manufactured guitars in the world.

If you go into any music shop, any guitar shop, you're going to see Stratocasters on the shelf. If you go to any concert, you'll probably see somebody playing a Stratocaster. We have millions of tracks that tell us what a Stratocaster sounds like.

We have videos like the one that I watched that tells us down to the finest details what that original Stratocaster was like. Yes, it would be nice to have the original, sure.

But here's the point. We have more than enough evidence from existing copies to reconstruct that original guitar all the way to the finest details.

Now the same holds true for the New Testament. Consider the number of copies that we have. Second, not only this, I would say consider the age of the manuscripts that we have.

[21 : 09] Let's look at that chart again. Can you go back to the first chart? Not only does the New Testament outpace every other ancient text in number of copies, it also outpaces them in the age.

There's a much smaller gap between the originals and the copies. So go back to the first one. I want to see Homer's Iliad again. The gap there between Homer's original text and the first existing copy is about 400 years.

And given the way that ancient texts were preserved and circulated, honestly, that's really not that bad. The others here, Herodotus, Plato, Caesar, they're all upwards of 1,000 years.

Go down to the second slide. The oldest manuscripts that we have for the New Testament are dated around 100 to 150 A.D.

That's a gap in the smallest estimation of about somewhere between 30 to 75 years between the original and the earliest copies that we have.

[22 : 14] And that is next to nothing. Now you go back to my Stratocaster example. Every guitar has a serial number etched into the neck. It tells you the model.

It tells you the number. It is in the line. If you can track down guitars that are only one or two or three model numbers away from the original, you can have a pretty good idea of what the original was like.

So no, we don't know for sure, but it's highly possible, probable, I would say, that even some of the earliest manuscripts we have may well be direct copies of the original.

So here's the point from these first two responses. If you disregard the Bible because of textual reliability, if you disregard the Bible because of the age of the manuscripts that we have, then by that same logic, you have to disregard every single other ancient text that we have in existence, which nobody does.

Critics who want to tell you that we have no idea what the original substance of the Gospel of John said, how many changes it's gone through, who the real author was, what it actually says, you ask them, well, who wrote the Odyssey?

[23 : 31] What are they going to say? Homer, of course. The age and the number of manuscripts that we have allow us to know with great confidence that what we have is what John actually wrote.

Now, to go even further, I would say third, consider the actual variance. Consider the actual variance. So how do we deal with all these differences?

Thousands upon thousands upon thousands of differences in the manuscripts? What do we do with that? And here's where I love the ESV Study Bible.

If you don't have one, I highly recommend getting one just for the articles in the back. It's worth the purchase. There's an article in the back that I was able to find by somebody named Daniel B. Wallace.

And he gives us four different types of variance in the manuscripts that we have. Let's put this other chart up here. I found this chart online, and you probably can't see the writing, but you can see the colors, and that's good enough.

[24 : 35] Four categories of variance. Category number one, out of all the variance, the largest group by far is differences in spelling and nonsense errors.

That accounts for 70 to 75% of all the differences in our manuscripts. Technical, textual criticism is highly technical, but every single one of us could spot these out and know which is original and which is not.

You don't have to be a genius to figure these out. So spelling errors, they amount to the difference of maybe just one letter. If I asked every single one of you to write down Jonathan's Donut Restaurant, go ahead and write that down.

If I asked every single one of you to write that down, and then after the service, I collected all the bulletins and looked at all the spelling differences. I mean, my name in and of itself, no Starbucks barista has ever gotten it right.

There's about a thousand variations of how we might spell Jonathan's Donut Restaurant. We could take up your notes after church, compare them, identify the spelling errors, and then write them off as inaccurate while still keeping the message of the text intact.

[25 : 48] That's spelling errors. And then there's nonsense errors, which these are actually pretty funny. When you look into them. This is when a scribe accidentally writes something that's close, but not quite.

Maybe he didn't have his coffee yet. I don't know. Wallace gives one example from 1 Thessalonians 2.7, which says, we were gentle among you.

The Greek word there is *epioi*, gentle, *epioi*. One manuscript accidentally replaces *epioi* with *hippioi*, which says, we were horses among you.

Now, you don't need an advanced degree in textual criticism to know that that is a mistake, but it's a variant. It exists. It happens. It's there. And so they have to take it into account, but they hold it up against the thousands and thousands and thousands of manuscripts that don't think that Paul behaved like a horse in Thessalonica, and they say, well, that's probably not accurate.

So that largest category is 70 to 75% of all variants in the manuscripts right there. Category two, the second largest group is minor language changes that do not affect the meaning at all.

[27 : 04] So synonyms, for example, or adding an article. Greek will often add the article the before a proper name. So it might say the Jonathan's Donut restaurant.

In the Greek, that's totally normal. Sounds strange to us, but that would not affect the meaning at all, but we have to count it as a variant. Word order. Now, here's a big one.

Word order counts for a large number of variants. The Greek is not as strict as English is. You can rearrange the order and the order of the words in the sentence, and it doesn't really change much.

So shop Donut Jonathan. It would make just as much sense in the Greek. Donut. Shop Jonathan. Jonathan shop Donut. All of those, you can rearrange them in the Greek, and it would be just fine.

But they all count as variants because they are different but not in meaning. Wallace gives the example of this sentence, Jesus loves John.

[28 : 04] And he says that that one simple sentence, Jesus loves John, in the Greek, it can be rearranged in 16 different ways without affecting the meaning at all.

And when you consider that, it's, I think, surprising that there aren't probably more variants than what we have. So that category there is about 20% of our existing variants.

So that's 90% out of the way, and we haven't touched the meaning of the passage at all. There are two more categories here. Category three are what they call meaningful but not viable.

So these are variants that would present a meaningful change in our understanding if they were viable, meaning if they had a case, but they're so overpowered by the sheer volume of evidence against them that they're not considered accurate.

So again, Wallace gives the example of 1 Thessalonians 2.9, where instead of the gospel of God, one late manuscript says the gospel of Christ. Now certainly, that would be a meaningful change, but one manuscript late in the game stacked up against the mountain of earlier manuscripts that say gospel of God and makes it not viable.

[29 : 19] So, that is over 99% of all variants in all early manuscripts that we have, which brings us to the last category here, category four, which is changes that are both meaningful and viable.

Meaningful, meaning it alters at least some of our understanding of the text and viable, it has a case. Now all of these, again, should be noted in your Bibles. They should be.

If you have a good translation of the Bible, you'll have footnotes, you'll have markings that tell you anywhere there's even the slightest question. Now out of these, most are small variations, but there are two large variants in the New Testament.

Mark 16, 9 through 20 in our passage today. John 7, 53 through 8, 11. If the Lord allows me one day in the future to preach through Mark's gospel, when we make it all the way to chapter 16, you will hear this sermon again.

But I'm thankful that although these differences matter, although this is a hugely important field of study, I'm grateful for those who the Lord has called to this work, I'm grateful that I only have to preach this sermon twice.

[30 : 44] And I'm grateful that no Christian doctrine is impacted in the slightest by any of these variants. Do you realize how unbelievable that is?

that no Christian doctrine is impacted at all by any variant. So I would say fourth, consider what the book says.

Consider what this book says. Nothing that we hold dear is threatened in the least by any single issue in textual criticism. Not the divinity of Christ, not His perfect obedience, not His death on a cross, not His resurrection from the dead, and not the thousands and thousands of years of creation and providence and preparation through the Old Testament that blossomed forth into the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Not sin, not grace, not glory, not the gift of faith, not the Holy Spirit, not the church. None of it is lost. None of it is in question.

We don't have to wonder what this book teaches. It's clear. So I would say move this to a footnote. That's fine. What's your response to the other 99%? What's your response?

[31 : 59] Do you receive it as the word of God? Do you believe what it says? Is it your treasure? Is it a lamp unto your feet and a light unto your path?

This living and active word sharper than a two-edged sword? God breathed useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, training in righteousness. Do you hunger and thirst for this word and for the Christ of this word?

Do you hunger for the God of this word? Will you consider what it says about your sin and your need for a Savior? Here's where we finally come to our passage and here's where we close.

I don't believe our passage today was written by John. But I do believe that we have good reason to think that the story actually happened. Church history seems to think so.

That's why this sermon is titled Likely Story. So don't base your life on it. Rather, let it confirm for you what we already know to be true of our Savior from the rest of Scripture.

[33 : 08] Namely, that Jesus Christ is a friend of sinners and a defender of the accused. And we love this story because it's so relatable.

All of us are guilty. On all sides, we see ourselves in the adulterous woman, guilty, caught red-handed, face-to-face with her accusers, wondering what Jesus will do when he sees her sin and all of his ugliness, wondering how we could ever escape the punishment that we've deserved for our sin.

We see ourselves in the adulterous woman, don't we? And we see ourselves in the scribes and the Pharisees, sinful to the core, but blind to our own sin.

Far more concerned with the sinfulness of others than our own sin. Blind to our own sin but hyper-aware and angry about the sin of others. That's us. The only hope for either party is this man, Jesus, who loves sinners, who came to save sinners from their own guilt, who came to rescue them from a punishment far worse than social shaming, to rescue them from a punishment far worse than the pain of a hundred rocks thrown our way.

He came to save sinners like us from the accusations of the devil and the wrath of God. So he died for us. He took our punishment and he rose and he now stands in the presence of God to intercede for sinners like us so that if we are in him, no case can be made against us.

[34 : 53] No accusation can stand. We are sinful to the core but Christ has chased away every possible accuser. There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

So church, let this story be a reminder for you of the glorious hope of the gospel of Jesus Christ to which all the scriptures bear witness.

Are you guilty? Turn to Jesus. Are you accused by your thoughts, by your actions, by your enemies? Turn to Jesus.

Receive his forgiveness and his pardon. Sin no more and rejoice when Satan tempts me to despair and tells me of the guilt within.

Upward I look and see him there who made an end to all my sin. Because a sinless savior died, my sinful soul is counted free for God the just is satisfied to look on him and pardon me.

[36 : 01] Let's pray. Lord, we thank you. Father, how firm a foundation you saints of the Lord has laid for our faith in your excellent word.

We thank you for your word. We thank you for what this story teaches us and shows us and reminds us of the goodness of Christ and our need for him. We thank you that Jesus is a friend of sinners and a defender of the accused.

We pray if there are any here this morning who need the forgiveness and the pardon of Jesus that only he can provide, we pray you would turn their hearts to him now in faith. We pray in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.