

THE BIBLE IS ORGANIC

- A. Introduction: We are working on a series about the importance of becoming a regular reader of the New Testament. To that end we're addressing issues that keep sincere people from reading the Bible effectively.
1. I've given you a simple but effective way to approach Bible reading. Set up a short period of time to read (at least 15 minutes), at least several days a week (preferably every day if possible).
 - a. During this time, don't read random verses. Start at the beginning of the first book of the New Testament and read as far as you can in your allotted time. Leave a marker where you stop and pick up there tomorrow. Do this each day until you reach the end of the book. Then move on to the next book. Continue this practice until you reach the end of the New Testament. Then, start over.
 - b. Don't worry about what you don't understand. Just read. You are reading to get familiar with the text. Understanding comes with familiarity and familiarity comes with repeated reading. If you do this you'll be a different person a year from now with more peace, joy, understanding, and faith.
 2. II Tim 3:16—The Bible was given by inspiration of God. Inspiration literally means God breathed. God imparted something of Himself when He gave men the words they wrote in Scripture. God, by His Word, works in and changes those who hear, read, and believe it. I Thess 2:13; Matt 4:4; I Pet 2:2; etc.
 - a. The Bible is a supernatural book. Supernatural means of or relating to an order of existence beyond the observable universe (*Webster's Dictionary*). The Bible is a book from God.
 - b. Because the Bible is a supernatural book it can help you as you begin to become a regular reader—even before you become familiar with it. Consider an example from my life.
 1. Early on, as I was in the process of becoming familiar with the New Testament, someone dear to me was slandered by several other Christians who caused a great deal of damage. I was troubled by the incident and struggled with how so-called Christians could do what they did.
 2. I was in much mental torment and one day, as I was praying, a verse I'd read recently came to my mind—they have zeal for God but not according to knowledge (Rom 10:2). At that moment, I was instantly filled with peace.
 3. This verse has nothing to do with the type of situation that so troubled me. Even now, when I read this verse, I don't really see how or why it brought me such peace. All I can tell you is that God was able to work through His Word and minister comfort to me.
 3. Recently we've been talking about claims critics make that the Bible is filled with errors, contradictions, and myths. Such charges can undermine your confidence in the Bible and dampen your enthusiasm to put forth the effort to read it. You need to know that you can trust the information in the Word of God.
 - a. When you understand who wrote the New Testament and why, it helps you realize that the Bible is trustworthy. The men who wrote the New Testament documents were all eyewitnesses of Jesus (or close associates of eyewitnesses). They saw Jesus alive after He was dead. Luke 24:44-48
 - b. Jesus commissioned them to go tell the world that, because of His death and resurrection, salvation from sin is available to all who believe on Him. They wrote to facilitate the spread of this message.
 1. We've looked at the Gospels and discovered that when we read them with some understanding of 1st century culture and the way that ancient writers wrote, the seeming contradictions vanish.
 2. We also looked into the idea that myths were added to the New Testament years after it was written (the ideas that Jesus is God and that He raised from the dead). We examined early creeds that date to within a few years of the resurrection. These creeds confirm that the first Christians, from the very beginning, believed that Jesus is God and that He rose from the dead.
 - c. The men who wrote the New Testament knew that they were interacting with God become man without ceasing to be God. They recognized that God was the Father of Jesus' human nature. As John stated clearly in his gospel, they knew that the Word (Jesus, who is God) incarnated or took on flesh (a human nature) in the womb of the virgin, Mary. John 1:1; John 1:14

- B. We have more to say tonight about why we can trust the truthfulness and accuracy of Bible. Remember, the New Testament writers did not set out to write a religious book—its development was organic. The writers were real people who were concerned with communicating a vital message to other real people—and the New Testament writings developed out of this effort.
1. The first five New Testament books (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts) are historical records. They report events, people, and places in 1st century Israel that are rooted in verifiable records and artifacts.
 - a. Secular historical (or non-biblical) records make reference to Jesus and to events reported in the New Testament. Tacitus, a Roman historian, and Josephus, a Jewish historian (neither of whom was a believer in Jesus), both report that Jesus actually existed and was crucified.
 - b. Archeological evidence consistently confirms the historical accuracy of the New Testament. More than 25,000 finds that relate directly or indirectly to the Bible have been unearthed. Archeology has confirmed the existence of 30 individuals named in the New Testament and 60 in the Old.
 1. Sir William Ramsey (one of the world’s greatest archeologists who began as a skeptic of the Bible’s accuracy), at the end of his career stated: “Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements trustworthy...this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians...Luke’s history is unsurpassed in respect of its trustworthiness”.
 2. Just a few of the names of people and places mentioned in the New Testament and confirmed by archeological discoveries include: the court where Jesus was tried (John 19:13); the pool of Bethesda (John 5:2); Pontius Pilate as prefect and governor of Judea (Matt 27:2); Erastus, a Corinthian city official (Rom 16:23).
 3. A slab of stone with a decree issued by Emperor Claudius (AD 41-54) was found in Nazareth. It stated that no bodies or bones were to be removed from graves under penalty of death (an unusual penalty for this kind of act). A reasonable explanation: While investigating riots in Israel (a consistently unruly area to govern), Claudius possibly heard of the belief that Jesus rose from the dead and that the Jewish authorities maintained the body had been stolen (Matt 28:11-15). He wanted nothing like that to happen on his watch so he forbade grave tampering.
 - c. The New Testament books were written over a fifty year period (roughly AD 50 to AD 100). The writings aren’t arranged in the order in which they were written. But there’s reason to the arrangement—the gospels are first, followed by Acts, then the epistles, and lastly Revelation.
 1. The gospels are located at the beginning because they are historical biographies of Jesus. Acts is a historical record of the activities of the apostles as they went out to proclaim Jesus’ resurrection. The epistles are letters written to communities of believers established during the period covered in Acts. Revelation records a vision given to John about Jesus’ second coming.
 2. Matthew’s gospel is placed first (even though Mark’s is earlier) because it’s a good bridge between the Old and New Testaments. As we pointed out in an earlier lesson, Matthew’s purpose in writing was to persuade fellow Jews that Jesus is the promised Messiah of the Old Testament.
 2. When we understand how the New Testament writings came into existence, it adds support to their credibility. Previously we discussed why the gospels were written. Now, let’s consider the epistles. Some of them predate the gospels (written mostly in AD 55-68; John’s was later, AD 80-90).
 - a. The epistles are letters written to churches (communities of believers) that were established during the years covered by the Book of Acts, as the first apostles went forth to proclaim the resurrection.
 1. Although the epistles have letter-like openings and closings, most of them are actually sermons. When the author could not be there in person to deliver his message, he sent an epistle.
 2. The epistles were meant to be delivered orally to a number of people at once. Paul expected one of his co-workers such as Timothy or Titus to proclaim the contents. Acts 15:30; Col 4:16

3. Epistles were written to be read aloud. Ancient letters were filled with literary devices such as alliterations (by the babbling brook). This made the document easier to listen to and also to memorize. (They lived in an oral culture where information was spoken and memorized.)
- b. The epistles are not arranged in the order in which they were written. Paul's 13 epistles are placed first because he was the most prominent apostle in spreading the gospel through the Roman Empire.
 1. His epistles were sent to specific churches and individuals and are known by the name of the church or person. They are arranged according to the rank or importance of the places and the people to whom they were sent.
 2. Although there is some dispute as to who wrote Hebrews (the author doesn't self identify in the text), most scholars believe Paul wrote it so the epistle is located at the end of his epistles.
 3. The rest of the epistles (7) were written by James, Peter, John, and Jude and are titled with the name of the authors. They are known as the general epistles because they were not addressed to a particular church or individual, but to Christians in general.
3. The epistles were written primarily to remind hearers and readers of what the writer taught them when he visited in person. They explain doctrine (what Christians believe) and give instruction on behavior (how to live in a way that glorifies God). For example:
 - a. The earliest epistle (James, AD 46-49) was written to Christians scattered throughout the Roman Empire—primarily Jewish pilgrims who became believers when the Holy Spirit was poured out in Jerusalem at Pentecost (Acts 2). They returned home at some point, but needed further instruction and encouragement in their new faith. Others left Palestine when persecution broke out.
 - b. Paul wrote Galatians (AD 48-49) to a group of churches he established in the Roman province of Galatia (in Asia Minor). A report came to him that false teachers were affecting the churches, claiming Christians must keep the Law of Moses to be right with God. Paul wrote to address this.
 - c. Paul wrote I and II Thessalonians (AD 51-52). He established a church Thessalonica (a city in Greece), but persecution broke out after only a few weeks and he was forced to leave. Paul wrote to his new converts to encourage them and to provide further instruction in the faith. (Acts 17:1-15)
4. I made reference earlier to the famed archeologist Sir William Ramsey's comments about Luke as a historian. Luke not only wrote the book known as the Gospel of Luke, he also wrote the Book of Acts. Acts provides the historical context for the epistles as it chronicles the activities of Jesus' first followers.
 - a. The first one-third of Acts focuses primarily on the ministries of Peter, James, and John as they led the new church in Jerusalem and their efforts in Palestine (Israel).
 - b. However, when Paul is converted to Christ (in Acts 9) the book shifts focus to his activities because he carried the gospel throughout the Roman world. The Book of Acts recounts three specific trips Paul made, known as his missionary journeys. Luke traveled with Paul on some of the journeys.
 1. Working from his home base in Antioch, Syria Paul traveled through Asia (modern-day Turkey), Macedonia and Achaia (northern and southern Greece), and Europe (Italy and Spain).
 2. Luke's narrative describes the establishment of churches in Galatia (a region in modern-day Turkey) and in Greece, in the cities of Philippi, Thessalonica, and Corinth in Greece.
 - A. Note that these regions and cities are the names of some of Paul's epistles. We can read Acts and see how specific churches to which the epistles were written were established.
 - B. Archeologists have unearthed most of the ancient cities mentioned by Luke in connection with the apostles in Acts and confirmed the existence of people named in the book.
 - c. Luke also recorded a number of sermons preached by the apostles as they proclaimed Jesus. These sermons give us an idea of the things they believed and taught—and they give us an idea of the doctrines that they considered important. (Acts 2:14-40; Acts 3:12-26; Acts 4:5-12; Acts 7; Acts 10:28-47; Acts 11:4-18; Acts 13:16-41; Acts 15:7-11; Acts 15:13-21; Acts 17:22-31; Acts 20:17-35; Acts 22:1-21; Acts 23:1-6; Acts 26; Acts 28:17-20)

5. We've made this point repeatedly in our series, but it bears repeating. These men were not writing a religious book or a book of stories. Their writings were a natural outgrowth of the commission that the Lord Jesus gave them. He sent them out to tell the world what they saw and then make disciples of all nations by teaching their converts what He had taught them. Matt 28:19-20
 - a. Bible reading is difficult for us because of all the strange names and the references to things we have no clue as to what they mean. But the writers of the New Testament weren't writing to you and me.
 1. They were writing to men and women two thousand years ago. The names and geographic references were familiar to all of them, as were the cultural phrases and references.
 2. The epistles are easier to understand when you realize that they had a context to them. The writer didn't have to spell out every detail of every point he made. He only had to remind them of what he taught when he was present with them.
 - b. These documents were written to encourage, clarify, and address specific issues of doctrine and behavior. They also deal with challenges Christians faced that came from the culture they lived in.
 1. In his epistles, Paul made many statements about eating meat that was offered to idols. When Rome took control of Palestine (Israel) they introduced the practice of eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols. This was a huge cultural issue for Jewish people who became Christians. Some thought it was acceptable to knowingly eat such meat while others did not. I Cor 8:1
 2. The epistles also make references to circumcision and keeping the Law of Moses (observing feast days and dietary regulations). The early church struggled with how non-Jews (Gentiles) fit into God's plan of salvation and what was the place (if any) of the Law of Moses? Rom 2
 3. False teachings also began to develop early on (just as Jesus predicted, Mark 4:15). The apostles had to address and correct these various errors and did so through the epistles.
 - c. Although these unfamiliar words, customs, and cultural issues can make Bible reading challenging, regular reading can help. Regular reading helps you get familiar with the text which helps you make connections and figure some of these things out. (Getting good teaching also helps.)
 - d. And, even though many of the situations, circumstances, and behaviors addressed in the epistles are culturally specific, there are general principles behind much of the teaching the apostle give—principles that can guide us today.
- D. Conclusion: We can trust the New Testament. Its documents were written by men who for three and a half years interacted with God incarnate—God in human flesh—the Lord Jesus Christ.
1. With the exception of Mark and Luke, all of the writers were eyewitnesses of Jesus. Paul was not one of the original twelve, but the resurrected Lord appeared to him numerous times over the course of several years. Mark got his information directly from Peter. Luke interviewed numerous eyewitnesses. And James and Jude (half-brothers of Jesus and unbelievers at first) were persuaded when Jesus rose from the dead. Acts 26:16; Gal 1:11-12; I Cor 15:7; Luke 1:1-4; etc.
 - a. Their writings are filled with statements such as: We saw, we heard, we touched. We witnessed. (II Pet 1:16-18; I John 1:1-4; etc.). Outside information sources such as archeology and secular historical records consistently confirm what wrote.
 - b. What these men witnessed transformed their lives to the point where they left all to follow Jesus and willing died horrific deaths as martyrs for what they believed. If they made up the information in the New Testament, then they died for what they knew to be untruthful. Men aren't willing to die for what they don't believe and what they know is not true.
 2. The way in which the New Testament came into being makes it clear that it is not a concocted book. It was and is a natural outgrowth of the efforts of the eyewitnesses to tell people what they saw and heard so that they too could see can know Jesus and believe on Him. John 20:30-31