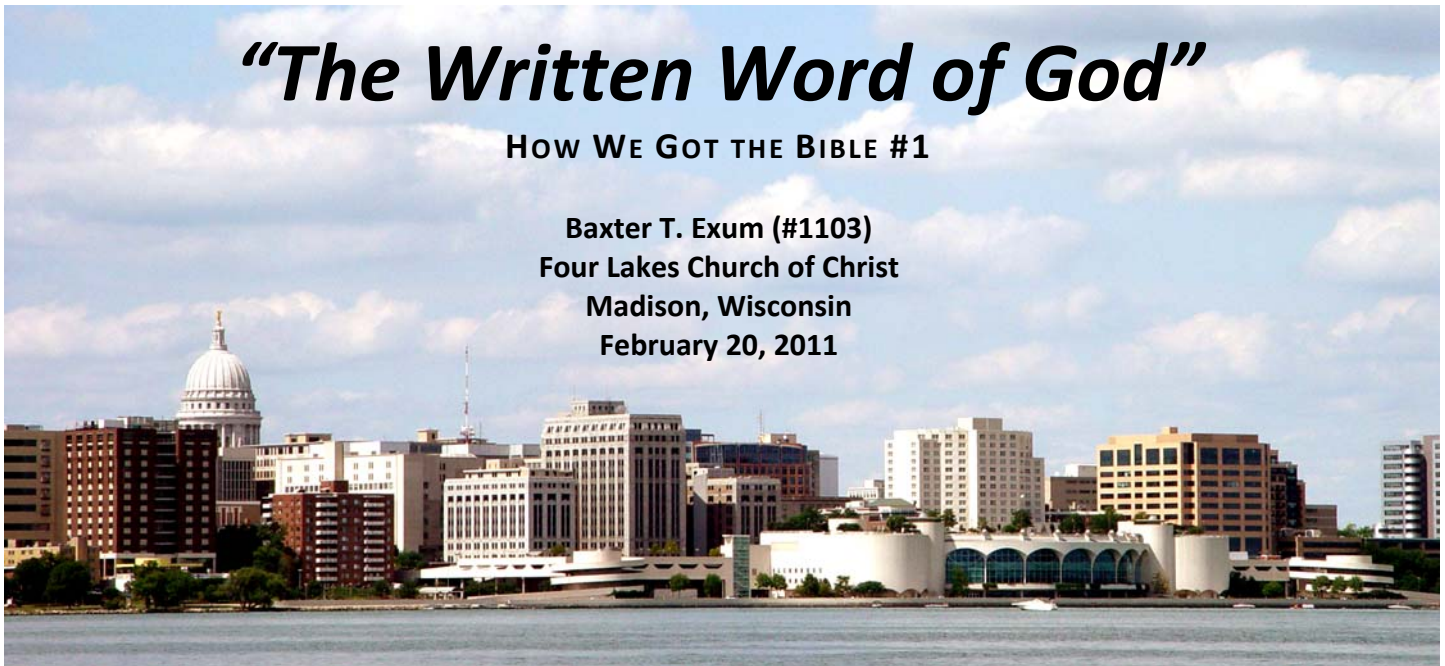


“The Written Word of God”

HOW WE GOT THE BIBLE #1

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This morning I would like for us to start a series of lessons as we answer several questions that have come up over the past several months. Over and over again, our members have been asking questions concerning how we got the Bible in its current form. One member has asked about the meaning of the word “Bible,” and others have asked how we know that the Bibles we have today are accurate even though we do not have a single original manuscript. What about the various translations? How do we know that there are really only 66 books? Did the Bible come from a printing press in heaven, and if not, then how did we come to have it in its current format? What about the apocrypha? How do we know that the original text of the Bible has been properly preserved through the years? All of these are some very important and very relevant questions.

As I was preparing for this series of lessons, I listened to a debate on-line that was held in Connecticut back on March 5, 2006. The debate was between Dan Barker and a leading denominational minister. As many of you know, Dan Barker is married to Annie Gaylor and helps lead the Freedom From Religion Foundation here in Madison. It was this group that contacted the school district and tried to get us banned from renting the library at Elvehjem Elementary School for worship every Sunday morning. Nevertheless, it was in a debate representing this group that Dan Barker made the point in his opening comments that the books of the Bible were written and copied and translated by human beings. Human beings make mistakes, and so therefore (according to Mr. Barker anyway), the Bible is full of mistakes. That was his opening argument, and it is an argument that we hear quite often. So, there is a benefit to studying some of these questions not only for our own benefit, but also so that we can be prepared to answer these objections that others may make. This morning, then, I would like for us to start a brief series of lessons where we will take several weeks to study these very important questions.

- This morning I would like for us to consider the importance of God’s written word (both in the Old Testament and the New Testament).
- Next week I would like for us to study the making of ancient books in general. We will also take a few moments next week to briefly consider the reliability of the ancient manuscripts.
- Two weeks from today I would like for us to consider several methods for dealing with variations between the ancient manuscripts.
- We then need to consider how we know which books should really be in the Bible along with the issue of translating the Scriptures into our modern language.

We looked at some of this information in our Wednesday evening class back in the summer of 2006, however, many of those who are asking the questions were not here five years ago, and there is a huge benefit to all of us looking again at some incredibly important material. This morning, though, as we begin, we need to start simply by looking at the importance of God's written word. Why did God choose to communicate to us in writing?

And for our lesson this morning, I would like for us to divide our thoughts into three basic categories. First of all, we will look at some very specific examples of God's written word in the Old Testament. Secondly, we will look at some specific examples of God's word being written down in the New Testament. And then finally, we will consider the fact that all through the Bible we have some examples of God's written law being accurately handed down through multiple generations—even across language barriers, and even spanning hundreds of years when God's people were not even faithful.

I should let you know here at the beginning that we will be looking at a number of passages this morning, and when I say "a number," I mean 89! So, I will list the references on the wall back here if you would like to write them down, but let us all do the best we can to look these up together...

I. But first of all, let us please look at some specific examples of GOD'S WRITTEN WORD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT.

And specifically, we will find even in the Old Testament that God's word was written with the purpose of being faithfully passed along to large numbers of people. Why did God write? He wrote so that many people would have access to it. We have always told our children that the main point of going to school is to learn how to read so that they can read the word of God for themselves. God's written word is important. In fact, one of the first references to writing in the Bible comes in Exodus 24. In Exodus 24:3-4, we find that Moses wrote the ordinances from God in a book,

Then Moses came and recounted to the people all the words of the LORD and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice and said, "All the words which the LORD has spoken we will do." Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. Then he arose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain with twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel. And please notice verse 7, "Then he [Moses] took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, 'All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!'"

It was written down so that the people would have access to it. Later, we find that this written record is authoritative; that is, the book was a law that had to be followed by the next generation. Toward the end of his life, Moses said that the book was to be read publicly as an authoritative standard. Please notice Deuteronomy 31:9-13,

So Moses wrote this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and to all the elders of Israel. Then Moses commanded them, saying, "At the end of every seven years, at the time of the year of remission of debts, at the Feast of Booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place which He will choose, you shall read this law in front of all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people, the men and the women and children and the alien who is in your town, so that they may hear and learn and fear the LORD your God, and be careful to observe all the words of this law.

Their children, who have not known, will hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, as long as you live on the land which you are about to cross the Jordan to possess.”

Later in the chapter, we find that the written word of God was to be put in a place of honor and was to be used to convict future generations of sin. Please notice verses 24-29,

It came about, when Moses finished writing the words of this law in a book until they were complete, that Moses commanded the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, saying, “Take this book of the law and place it beside the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, that it may remain there as a witness against you. For I know your rebellion and your stubbornness; behold, while I am still alive with you today, you have been rebellious against the LORD; how much more, then, after my death? Assemble to me all the elders of your tribes and your officers, that I may speak these words in their hearing and call the heavens and the earth to witness against them. For I know that after my death you will act corruptly and turn from the way which I have commanded you; and evil will befall you in the latter days, for you will do that which is evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking Him to anger with the work of your hands.”

Not only that, but we are specifically told in Deuteronomy 17:18-20 that hundreds of years after Moses died, the kings were to make a handwritten copy of the law for their own personal use, and we find that the handwritten copy of the law would serve as an authoritative standard. Speaking of the kings that would rule hundreds of years in the future, Moses said,

Now it shall come about when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. It shall be with him and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, by carefully observing all the words of this law and these statutes, that his heart may not be lifted up above his countrymen and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, to the right or the left, so that he and his sons may continue long in his kingdom in the midst of Israel.

Can you imagine that happening today? Imagine the new president taking the oath of office, and then he holes up in the Oval Office for several weeks as he copies the entire Bible by hand so that he can use that copy as his own personal authority. What an impact that would have—to have a copy of the Bible in your own handwriting!

Later in the Old Testament, God commanded Jeremiah to write in a scroll all the words that God gave him, and the purpose of writing the scroll was to spread the word of God far and wide. Please notice Jeremiah 36:1-4,

In the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying, “Take a scroll and write on it all the words which I have spoken to you concerning Israel and concerning Judah, and concerning all the nations, from the day I first spoke to you, from the days of Josiah, even to this day. Perhaps the house of Judah will hear all the calamity which I plan to bring on them, in order that every man will turn from his evil way; then I will forgive their iniquity and their sin.” Then Jeremiah called Baruch the son of Neriah, and Baruch wrote on a scroll at the dictation of Jeremiah all the words of the LORD which He had spoken to him.

In the book of Isaiah, we are specifically told that God's words were to be written down so that the record would last forever. Please notice Isaiah 30:8 where God said to the prophet, ***"Now go, write it on a tablet before them and inscribe it on a scroll, that it may serve in the time to come as a witness forever."*** The spoken word is fleeting, but the written word can last forever! Several chapters later, Isaiah would go on to say (in chapter 40:8), ***"The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever,"*** a verse that is quoted in the New Testament in 1 Peter 1. And speaking of Peter, as Peter referred back to the Old Testament, he said in 2 Peter 1:20-21, ***"But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God."*** And so as he looked back on it, Peter could clearly see that God was guiding the process of inspiration throughout the Old Testament.

II. **With that, let us please consider a number of passages concerning the importance of GOD'S WRITTEN WORD IN THE NEW TESTAMENT.**

Probably one of the most well-known explanations of the importance of writing God's word in the New Testament is found in John 20:29-31. Speaking to Thomas, Jesus said, ***"Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed."*** And then John goes on to say (in verses 30-31), ***"Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name."*** In other words, John wrote the book of John so that people who were not there (that means us) could have an eyewitness account of Jesus' miracles and could thereby believe, even though they had not seen the Lord personally. John, therefore, was writing his book for us. And then in the closing verses of the book of John, he says, ***"This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and wrote these things, and we know that his testimony is true. And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written."*** In 1 John, John continues to emphasize writing. Please notice 1 John 1:1-4,

¹ What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life— ² and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us— ³ what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. ⁴ These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete.

John wrote so that his readers would have an opportunity to have faith in Jesus. That book was written to us. John, of course, also wrote the book of Revelation, and the emphasis on writing continues. In Revelation 1:1-3,

¹ The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John, ² who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. ³ Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near.

The book of Revelation, then, was written to communicate a message from Jesus. The book continues to emphasize the importance of the written word. Notice Revelation 14:13 where John says, ***“And I heard a voice from heaven, saying, ‘Write, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on!” “Yes,” says the Spirit, “so that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow with them.””*** John continues in Revelation 19:9, ***“Then he said to me, ‘Write, “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.”’ And he said to me, ‘These are true words of God.”*** He continues in Revelation 21:5, ***“And He who sits on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new.’ And He said, ‘Write, for these words are faithful and true.”*** Again, Revelation was written to communicate a message from the Lord.

In Ephesians 3:3-5, we discover that when Paul received a revelation from the Lord, he wrote it down so that people could understand it. In that passage, Paul spoke of the grace of God and said, ***“...by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit.”*** Paul wrote it so that we could understand it. There is understanding in the written word!

In Luke 1:1-4, Luke tells us that he wrote so that we would know about Jesus and the early church. Luke says,

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.

Luke was writing so that we would know the ***“exact truth”*** about the Lord.

This past Wednesday evening, we studied the one-chapter book of Jude, and in verse 3, please notice again the emphasis on writing. Jude said, ***“Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.”***

In 2 Peter 1:12-15, Peter specifically said that he was writing so that his readers could know God’s will even after Peter himself had died. Please notice 2 Peter 1:12-15 as Peter said,

Therefore, I will always be ready to remind you of these things, even though you already know them, and have been established in the truth which is present with you. I consider it right, as long as I am in this earthly dwelling, to stir you up by way of reminder, knowing that the laying aside of my earthly dwelling is imminent, as also our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will also be diligent that at any time after my departure you will be able to call these things to mind.

Peter, then, wrote the book of 2 Peter so that his readers would know God’s will even after Peter had died. He wrote it down so that the message would be permanent.

Bible writers also wrote things down so that they could be easily passed around between congregations. As Paul wrote in Colossians 4:16, ***“When this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea.”***

In 2 Thessalonians 3:14, we find that the words written in Paul's letters were to be the basis for church discipline, ***"If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame."***

And of course, going back to Jesus Himself, the Lord said in John 12:48, ***"He who rejects Me and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day."*** The words of Jesus will judge us on the Last Day. So, those words and sayings of Jesus must be preserved so that we can know the basis for our judgment.

And then finally, as I alluded to earlier, Peter quoted the passage from Isaiah and he applies it to the gospel—1 Peter 1:22-25,

Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart, for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God. For, "ALL FLESH IS LIKE GRASS, AND ALL ITS GLORY LIKE THE FLOWER OF GRASS. THE GRASS WITHERS, AND THE FLOWER FALLS OFF, BUT THE WORD OF THE LORD ENDURES FOREVER." And this is the word which was preached to you.

Peter, then, quotes the passage from Isaiah about the word of the Lord enduring forever, and then he says, ***"This is the word which was preached to you."*** In other words, as Peter and the other apostles preached and wrote those letters, they were writing Scripture, they were writing the word of the Lord which would continue to endure forever...just as the Old Testament had done.

III. **So, we have studied the importance of God's written word in general, we have looked at some passages from the Old Testament, we have looked at some passages from the New Testament. But before we close our study this morning, I would like for us to consider SEVERAL EXAMPLES OF GOD'S WRITTEN WORD BEING ACCURATELY HANDED DOWN THROUGH MULTIPLE GENERATIONS, EVEN SPANNING GENERATIONS (sometimes hundreds of years) WHEN GOD'S PEOPLE WERE NOT FAITHFUL.**

Just last week, we studied a lesson from Joshua 1. About 40 years after Moses wrote the Law, God told Joshua to meditate day and night on those words and to observe those words without change. In other words, God was confident that those words had been accurately preserved.

Only be strong and very courageous; be careful to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, so that you may have success wherever you go. This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success.

Twenty or 25 years after this (which would have been roughly 60 years after Moses wrote the Law), Joshua died, but right before he died, you might remember how Joshua told the people to keep the Law exactly as it had been written. In other words, over the 60 years since it had been written down, the Law had been accurately preserved and it was to be studied and obeyed in its current form. Please notice Joshua 23:6, ***"Be very firm, then, to keep and do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, so that you may not turn aside from it to the right hand or to the left."***

We now fast-forward to 1 Kings 2:3, which takes place around 930 BC, about 400 years after Moses wrote, and David commanded Solomon to keep God's commands as they had been recorded by Moses—those words were still accurate and authoritative. As David said to Solomon, ***“Keep the charge of the LORD your God, to walk in His ways, to keep His statutes, His commandments, His ordinances, and His testimonies, according to what is written in the Law of Moses, that you may succeed in all that you do and wherever you turn.”***

We now move forward to roughly 605 BC, roughly 800 years after the death of Moses. The people had wandered away from God, and as a priest is cleaning out the temple, he discovers something. Please notice 2 Chronicles 34:14-19, ***“When they were bringing out the money which had been brought into the house of the LORD, Hilkiah the priest found the book of the law of the LORD given by Moses. Hilkiah responded and said to Shaphan the scribe, ‘I have found the book of the law in the house of the LORD.’ And Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan. Then Shaphan brought the book to the king....”*** Notice, then, verses 18-19, ***“Moreover, Shaphan the scribe told the king saying, ‘Hilkiah the priest gave me a book.’ And Shaphan read from it in the presence of the king. When the king heard the words of the law, he tore his clothes.”*** Eight-hundred years after it was written, the written word of God was still changing lives.

We then come to Nehemiah 8, nearly a thousand years after the Law was written. The people were returning from the Babylonian Captivity, and the people once again restore the worship of God by looking to the written words of Moses. The passage is found in Nehemiah 8:1-4,

And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel. Then Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men, women and all who could listen with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month. He read from it before the square which was in front of the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of men and women, those who could understand; and all the people were attentive to the book of the law. Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium which they had made for the purpose....

Not only were they reading from the Law, but they translated it right there on the spot. The people were no longer speaking the same language they were speaking a thousand years earlier when the law was first written. This, by the way, proves that a translation can still have the authority and approval of God. Please notice Nehemiah 8:8, ***“They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading.”***

So, we have the written word of God spanning a time from roughly 1450 BC to the mid 400's BC. As time goes on into the First Century, we find that copies of copies of copies of the Old Testament were widely circulated as an accurate revelation from God. So, we now fast-forward to roughly 30 AD. As Jesus comes on the scene, He enters the synagogue and reads from the prophet Isaiah. At this point in history, the scroll would have been a copy of a copy of a copy, and yet Jesus referred to the copy as “Scripture.” Please notice Luke 4:16-21,

And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read. And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book and found the place where it was written, “THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED, TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE

YEAR OF THE LORD.” And He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Even though the Lord was reading from a copy of a copy of a copy, He still referred to it as being “**Scripture.**”

Conclusion:

There is so much more we could consider, but the basic idea this morning is that God has communicated to us through His written word. I would simply end with the passage that brother Al read for us earlier from 2 Timothy 3:16-17, “**All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.**” If the Lord wills, hopefully we can spend some time next Sunday looking at how ancient books were made and considering the issue of whether the Bible manuscripts that we have are reliable.

The Bible teaches that all of us will be held accountable for our sins. God sent His only Son as a sacrifice, and we accept the offer of salvation by obeying the good news about His son. We reject sin, we allow ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins, and then we resolve to do the best we can to live like Jesus. If you have any questions, please let us know, but if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

Recommended Reading (in order of helpfulness)

Scribes, Scrolls, and Scripture: A Student’s Guide to New Testament Textual Criticism by J. Harold Greenlee
(out of print, but this excellent book was highly recommended by the Greek professor at Freed-Hardeman University—written in a way that everyone can understand—it can still be ordered used at www.amazon.com)

How We Got the Bible by Neil R. Lightfoot *

You Can Trust Your Bible by Neal Pryor *

The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable? by F.F. Bruce

Archaeology and the Bible by Jack P. Lewis *

The Canon of Scripture by F.F. Bruce

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