

Why should I believe the Bible? (John 8:12-18)

If you could ask God one question... (Graham Cousins)

Sunday Morning 10:45am 8 June 2008

It was probably one of the most famous weather forecasts ever: "Earlier on today apparently a lady rang the BBC and said she heard that there was a hurricane on the way. Well don't worry if you're watching, there isn't." Michael Fish 15 Oct 1987

It confirmed that we can never be that sure of what we are told by experts in the weather. But, of course, it is not only weathermen that make mistakes: "You will never amount to very much" 10 year old Albert Einstein's school report.

Even scientists don't always get things right: "Theoretically, television may be feasible, but I consider it an impossibility--a development which we should waste little time dreaming about." Lee de Forest - inventor of the cathode ray tube.

The more times you hear something like that - the more you realise that you can't even be sure of what you are told by experts. But of course, not all errors are so innocent:

"But I want to say one thing to the American people. I want you to listen to me. I'm going to say this again: I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky. I never told anybody to lie, not a single time; never. These allegations are false, and I need to go back to work for the American people. Thank you. Jan 26 1998

Even our politicians mislead us. It sometimes seems that we can't trust what anyone says. In fact, I think that has become a hallmark of our society. We are bombarded by so much information, and opinion, we are so used to spin, used to what Winston Churchill once described as "terminological inexactitude", that the safest thing is not to trust anything you hear or read unless you have some way of checking it out for yourself.

So it's not really that surprising that the same doubts face us when we come to the Bible. There may have been a time when most people did believe the Bible - but that has been chipped away. Dab Brown's book 'The Da Vinci Code' highlighted the way that many people do now view the Bible - and here is Sir Leigh Teabing explaining it is the film of the book.

CLIP

The Bible is just a collection of books that was put together by Emperor Constantine in . It was the council he called that decided which books were part of the Bible, and which ones were rejected.

And if that was true - it would leave us with a big question - why should I believe the Bible? And in our series 'If you could ask God one question', that's the question we are asking today - 'God, why should I believe the Bible?'

To help us think about that - let's hear something that Jesus said.

READING

What Jesus says here can help us to answer three questions - what is the Bible? Can I believe the Bible? And why should I trust the Bible.

First - what is the Bible? The Jews of Jesus' day had a problem. Why should they trust what Jesus said? The Pharisees challenged him, 'Here you are, appearing as your own witness; your testimony is not valid.' They wanted some way of being able to prove that what Jesus said about himself was true. Just as we want some way of knowing whether what the Bible tells us is true. And Jesus' answer was that he did have someone else who spoke on his behalf - I am one who testifies for myself, my other witness is the Father who sent me. What did Jesus mean by saying that God was his witness?

What is the Bible? A lot of people think that the Bible is a rule book. The American writer A.J. Jacobs spent a year trying to put into practice everything the Bible says, and then wrote about it His blurb for his book says: 'The Year of Living Biblically is about my quest to live the ultimate biblical life. To follow every single rule in the Bible - as literally as possible. I obey the famous ones:

- The Ten Commandments
- Love thy neighbor
- Be fruitful and multiply

But also, the hundreds of oft-ignored ones.

- Do not wear clothes of mixed fibers.
- Do not shave your beard
- Stone adulterers '

So is that what it means to trust the Bible?

There was another time when Jesus was talking to the Pharisees about this question of whether he could be trusted, and he told them, You diligently search the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me. (John 5:39) Jesus' answer to what the Bible is all about, is that it is all about him. And so when he tells the Jews that the Father was his witness, he meant that the Bible is God's word about his Son Jesus.

And that is where we need to start with the Bible. Actually - it's a pretty strange thing for Jesus to have said. If you've read much of the OT, you'll know that it doesn't really seem to be about Jesus. It's about the creation of the world, about people turning away from God, about God rescuing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, about, yes, all those rules. It's about the history of Israel, it's about how to live life with wisdom, it's about how to praise God and to pray - in fact it seems to be about just about anything but Jesus.

It would take far too long to go into it in detail, but if you dig a bit, you find that the whole story of the OT is pointing towards Jesus. In a way the OT flags up the big questions of life - where do we come from, where are we going, what is the meaning of life? How can we live well? And one thing it shows us pretty clearly is that when it comes to living well - people are just not capable of doing it.

Of course, I don't need the Bible to tell me that, I only have to look around me. Actually, if I'm honest, I don't have to look around me, I can look inside me! And just having a rule book doesn't help me - I might read the OT, I might agree that doing certain things are wrong - but that doesn't stop me doing them. In a way the question 'why should I trust the Bible?' becomes academic - because even if I do trust what it says about how to live life well - I just mess up.

But all the way through the OT there are pointers that God was going to do something to solve the problem. And when we come to the NT, we find that the solution was Jesus.

So - what is the Bible? It's God's word about his Son Jesus.

But can I believe the Bible? After all, books and films like the Da Vinci Code say that what the Bible tells me about Jesus was made up 300 years later.

Well, on a purely factual level - that's not actually true. The gospels were all written within the lifetime of Jesus' disciples - the other gospels you might have heard of - the gospel of Thomas, of Philip, of Mary Magdalene, of Judas, are actually all much later.

The books we have in our NT were accepted as Scripture long before the council of ??? published its official list, whilst these other so called gospels were only ever accepted by small groups. But more importantly, what we read in the gospels, and in the rest of the NT, actually ties in with the OT.

You have no idea where I come from or where I am going. You judge by human standards. I think that today, judging by human standards means starting by disbelieving, and asking for some proof that will change your mind. But that is hopeless, and we just don't live like that.

Can I prove that the Bible is true? Can I prove that what it tells me about Jesus and what he said and did is true? On one level, the answer to that has to be 'no' But, that's true of virtually everything you read.

This is one of my books from when I was studying Chemistry. How do I know that what I read in here was true? Well - I had to trust that it was. A lot of other people had used it, and they reckoned it was right. And as I read through it, it did make sense, sometimes. I couldn't prove that it was right - I wasn't clever enough. Lot's of it I just didn't understand. But at times I would do an experiment, and would get the result the book said I would. So I had no reason not to believe it.

Can I believe the Bible? Well - I can't prove that what the Bible says is true - but at the same time I've never seen any convincing argument that it isn't true. But more

importantly - as I have trusted things that the Bible says, I have found them to be true, and that encourages me to believe that the rest - bits I might not understand - are true as well. After 25 years of reading and studying the Bible - I have no reason not to believe it is true. And I have plenty of reasons for believing that it is.

What is the Bible? It is God's word about his Son Jesus. Can I believe the Bible? Yes - because my experience of it makes sense of my life.

But finally - why should I trust the Bible? You see - I might believe my old chemistry book - but at the end of the day it doesn't matter much. It doesn't make any difference to me whether I believe it or not.

But with the Bible it is different. When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'

The claim of the Bible is that in here are the words which will throw some light onto your life, words which will make sense of your life. Jesus said just the same thing a few verses later, in John 7:31 - To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you really are my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'

How can we know the truth that will set us free? That truth isn't a set of rules, or a philosophy of life. That truth is Jesus. The Bible is God's word about him, and we can believe it. But just believing it academically is never enough. Because the Bible points us beyond itself, to Jesus. And that is why the question of trusting the Bible is so important. God doesn't expect us to believe the unbelievable - the Bible isn't a collection of stories that we just can't believe. It makes sense. Becoming a Christian isn't a blind leap of faith - God gives us enough here to be able to make a reasoned decision to trust him. But you'll only ever know that you can trust the Bible when you have been willing to do just that. To trust it. I've done that - and it has made sense of my life. You can do it as well.