

Introduction / The Inspiration of Scripture

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[0:00] Let's say I've written a book. It's a relatively short book. Even a little moisture can ruin it.

I should also mention that I have not used a conventional writing style that we may be used to.

There are no paragraph breaks. There's no punctuation.

I haven't even put spaces between my words. So all 16,000 words are one long run-on sentence, if you will. Now this book is extremely important, so I need as many copies to be made as possible.

However, no one is allowed to use a copy machine. You can't scan it. You can't use a computer.

Can't use a copy machine. You must copy it by hand on a similar piece of papyrus.

Or if you can afford it, you're welcome to use parchment made from animal skins. Either way, you will not use a regular sheet of paper. So here's what I'll do. I'll give my copy to someone, say, toward the front here.

[1:32] And you have to be very careful with it because it's the only copy at this point. Your job then is to make a copy for yourself. But ideally, you want everyone in this room to have a copy.

So like I said, this is a really important book and everyone needs to read it, not just once but over and over again. So hopefully, you can make multiple copies and then pass them on.

So eventually, others are going to have copies and they will make their own copies and they will make even more copies to pass on to others, inevitably. Some of you are going to lose your copies. You spill some coffee on it or maybe the dog eats one. And let's say some of you toward the middle here, you don't even speak English. It's all hypothetical, of course, so why not?

So when you make a copy, you're going to have to translate it into your language. And then down the road, someone else is going to receive your copy and it's not in English, so they're going to have to translate it back into English.

[2:40] And anyone who has ever played with Google Translate knows the words are not going to come out exactly the same. So this whole exercise is very similar to the telephone game, if you remember that from school, where a message is whispered from one person to the next and on to the next until it moves through the entire room.

Obviously, copying written text is going to be more reliable, but there will still be some problems along the way. People will miss words.

They might skip entire lines of text. They might misspell words. Perhaps they make little notes in the margin for themselves, only that the next person who receives their copy thinks that that could be part of the original text, so they copy it as though it's part of the original text.

And then from then on, everyone else assumes that it's supposed to be there. There's no reason to question it. So by the time we make our way all the way to the back of the room and everyone has received a copy and maybe those of you in the back, you start comparing your copies and you realize, wait a minute, there's some differences.

Charlie's copy is not the same as Ollie's copy and so on. And you're now questioning which is accurate. Now obviously, the thing to do is to take your copies and compare it with the original.

[4:07] But in this case, unfortunately, the original has been lost. We don't know what happened to it. It seems that maybe someone left it in a damp basement or something.

So now it's been ruined. So how do we determine which copy is most accurate? How do we know what the original actually said? Well, let's grab every copy from every person that we possibly can, whatever's left.

And let's say there's 50 copies remaining among us. And what we'll do is we'll just lay them out on a table and compare them. Ollie, do we have the slides ready or not?

Let's get this first slide, if you will. I didn't grab the remote. Okay. So let's say there's a sentence in one of the copies that says, we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children.

However, some of the copies read a little differently. Some say, we were little children among you, not gentle, but little children, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children.

[5:16] And oddly enough, there's one copy that says, we were horses among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children.

So which is it? Should the word be gentle, little children, or horses? Now, if we were to guess based on what sounds right, we'd probably go with gentle, maybe.

To use little children makes the sentence sound a little redundant. We were little children among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. It seems a little odd to call yourself a child and a mother in the same sentence.

So gentle, perhaps, sounds better. Who knows where horses came from, but it doesn't seem to fit at all. I think one of you may have been very distracted when you were making your copy.

But you know, we want to be careful here. Maybe we shouldn't settle for what sounds right to us. Maybe it sounded right to me when I wrote it, but it doesn't sound right to you.

[6:21] So what's a better way of settling this? Maybe as we're looking at these copies laid out on the table, we should arrange them a little differently.

Let's put them in chronological order. So on the left side of the table, we have the oldest copies moving to the newest copies on the right side of the table.

So now we can see this progression throughout time. And what does that tell us? Would you take us to the next slide? Well, in this case, we look down and we see the five oldest copies all use the term gentle.

It's not until we get to the sixth copy that we read little children. And then every other copy after that, with the one exception that says horses, they all say little children.

So the five oldest copies say gentle, 44 of them say little children. And of course, we have the one that says horses. So which one most likely reflects the original book that I wrote?

[7:27] In fact, let's just see a show of hands. Who thinks I wrote gentle? Okay. Who thinks I originally wrote little children? Okay.

And who thinks I originally wrote horses? Horses seems like the least likely choice, doesn't it?

But there are a couple of ways we could evaluate the other two. On the one hand, gentle is found in the oldest copies, which means it could point to its accuracy because it had less time for it to get changed through that multi-layered copying process.

On the other hand, little children is found in most of the copies. Now, they may not be the oldest, but what if there were older manuscripts that said little children?

And maybe we lost those along the way. And now the majority of the copies actually reflect the original. That's a possibility. And by the way, this is a real example from the Bible.

[8:35] 1 Thessalonians 2.7 in the ESV says, We were gentle among you like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. But there's also a footnote that says the word gentle could be infants or little children.

Why? Because out of the thousands of manuscripts, not 50, but thousands of manuscripts containing 1 Thessalonians, that is the hand-copied Greek manuscripts on papyrus or parchment that still exist today, some of the manuscripts say gentle.

Some of the manuscripts say little children. And at least one of the manuscripts says horses. And if you're wondering about that one manuscript that says horses, well, take a look at these words in Greek if we go to the next slide.

You might be able to see how similar they are, but they sound very similar. Epooi, nepoi, and hippoi.

So whoever wrote horses, I think we can cut him some slack.

After all, the job of a scribe who's copying the Bible is not to judge the text. It's not to interpret the text. But to simply copy it word for word, whether he understands it, or whether it makes sense to him in the moment or not.

[9:56] And in this case, he thought he saw the word hippoi. He thought he saw horses. So that's what he wrote. And it's quite possible that he was working with a less than ideal manuscript.

Maybe it was smudged. Maybe he was working in low lighting, you know, with a lantern. I mean, he's a human being. And like all human beings, he makes mistakes.

And that gets to the heart of what we will be considering over the next few weeks. I want to answer a very simple question. How did we get the Bible?

Now, I say that's a simple question. But my illustration this morning was designed to show you that the answer to that question isn't so simple.

And why is that? Well, as it happens, all 66 books of the Bible did not fall out of the sky in English, bound in leather with gilded pages.

[10:59] Now, no one would actually make that claim. But that is essentially how many Christians think we got the Bible or some version of that. We know that God inspired the text.

We believe that he preserved the text. But when we talk about God preserving the text, we don't always stop to ask, how did God preserve the text?

And without knowing any of the Bible's actual history, we naturally assume that he guided men to make one perfect word-for-word copy, one after another, generation after generation.

Maybe it wasn't in English, and maybe he didn't put a leather cover on it, but we may still assume that the inerrant text that he inspired remained perfectly intact, never changed, not one iota, throughout thousands of years of fallible men copying it by hand.

Well, that's not exactly what happened. And it's not really good for us to hold that assumption, and I'll tell you why.

[12:09] So, I come from a King James-only background. My church believed that God preserved a perfect line of manuscripts, and that the text of those manuscripts was then translated perfectly into the King James Bible.

So, they would not use any other translation of the Bible. As far as they were concerned, every other translation was from corrupted text. The NIV, the ESV, the New King James Version, all of them.

Well, I eventually studied the matter in depth, and I came to the conclusion that King James-onlyism was indefensible. Now, to be clear, I could still, and I will still, defend the King James Bible.

But I could not defend King James-onlyism. But I will confess that there was a moment in my study when I thought, uh-oh, is this going to undermine my confidence in the Word of God?

After all, I'm reading about all of these thousands of textual variants in the many manuscripts of the Bible that is all of these differences from one manuscript to the next.

[13:22] Even the text that was translated by the King James translators underwent some pretty significant changes in the century before it was translated. So, I'll admit that I grew a little concerned that, or what this information could do to my faith in Scripture.

But I pressed on in my study, and to make a long story short, my confidence in Scripture was not undermined. In fact, my confidence in Scripture has grown significantly.

And if for no other reason, it's because I feel that I have the weight of historical evidence behind me.

I understand the process now. I'm no longer making mere assumptions about how we got the Bible.

I feel like I know how we got the Bible, and it truly is an incredible story of God's providence. But over the years, I've also been contacted by people in my former denomination.

Even when I was still with them, I became vocal about my opposition to King James onlyism. So, people occasionally reach out to me about this, and their messages usually go something like this.

[14:34] I started digging into the history of the Bible, and now I don't know what to think. Can I really trust the Bible? Well, you see, one moment, they think they're holding God's perfectly preserved, inerrant word in their hands in the form of the King James Bible.

But the next moment, they're not sure whether 1 Thessalonians 2.7 says gentle, or little children, or maybe even horses. They're looking at modern versions of the Bible, and compared to the King James, they think there's verses missing.

And what about the ending of Mark? What about the story of the woman caught in adultery in John chapter 8? What are these brackets around them that are suggesting that they don't belong in the Bible?

You see, some people have never stopped to think about these things. They've never had to think about these things. They've never had to wrestle with these kinds of issues. Before now, they could just trust that every word of their Bible, their King James Bible, was trustworthy without any thought to textual variance, or textual criticism, or the so-called critical text, versus the *textus receptus*. And don't worry, I'll explain what all of these terms mean eventually. I mean, there's enough to make your head spin, assuming you don't know anything about the history of the Bible going into it. [15:58] And more to the point, it's enough to shake one's confidence in the Bible. But, if you're familiar with the true history of the Bible, well, that's another story.

And let me illustrate what I mean here. Let's imagine a scenario where we have only one version of the Bible. So, every Bible, every single one of them, is exactly the same.

But we don't have any ancient copies from hundreds, if not thousands of years ago. And because of this, we're forced to assume that our Bible has remained unchanged for thousands of years, but we really don't know.

We don't have any evidence of it. Now, compare that scenario with the reality of our situation today. Today, not every Bible is exactly the same, but we have thousands, again, thousands upon thousands of ancient copies going back thousands of years.

Of course, things get pretty messy. There are differences between them. And we have to work through those differences to get a clearer picture of what the original writings of Scripture actually said.

[17:15] But between the two scenarios, which would you rather have? Would you rather have one universal Bible with no evidence of where it came from or how it got here, or thousands upon thousands of copies from around the world with really minor and only a handful of differences here and there that have any substance to them that we can compare and we can study and we can actually trace the history of until it got to us in the 21st century?

For me, I'll take the latter. The former scenario has the advantage of being very simple, right? The latter has the advantage of not only evidence, but historical authenticity.

And if the Bible is anything, it is historically authentic. Both the contents of the Bible and the story of the Bible itself are really the story of our sovereign God working in history.

He's working in real places with real, albeit fallible people. And if you need proof of that, just look at the family history of the Messiah. Here comes Christ from a long line of messy stories and sinful people.

By the way, Muslims claim the Quran is perfectly preserved. In fact, this is the argument they will often use against Christians. They will say, look at the history of your Bible.

[18:49] Look how many mistakes scribes made over the years. How can you trust it? But what they won't tell you is why the Quran seems to have been perfectly preserved.

It's because most of their manuscripts with any kind of variance have been intentionally destroyed over the years. In other words, they claim the Quran has been perfectly preserved, but they've destroyed all of the evidence that it actually hasn't, not in the way they claim.

We have no way of tracing its history. We have no way of knowing what other versions or older versions of the Quran actually said. But not so with the Bible.

Yes, scribes made mistakes, but we can know what mistakes they made by comparing the many, many manuscripts still available today. We can even understand why those mistakes were made. But if we had only one version or one copy, we would never know. 1 Thessalonians 2.7 could say horses and we'd have to accept it.

[20:03] But before we get into matters of differences between the manuscripts and how all of that gets sorted out, let's go back to the beginning. First of all, let's talk about how the Bible was inspired.

Of course, the clearest passage on this point is found in 2 Timothy 3. 3. This is where Paul in verse 16 says, all Scripture is breathed out by God.

Now, some translations such as the King James or the New King James will say all Scripture is given by the inspiration of God, which is an acceptable translation, but doesn't quite carry the full meaning of the word Paul uses.

literally, the word means God breathed. In other words, Scripture's origin is something more than what we would typically think of as inspiration.

You know, I might see a beautiful sunset and be inspired to write a poem about it, but that's not what Paul means here. He says the words of Scripture are God breathed.

[21:11] Now, what exactly does that mean? I have to give a lot of credit to B.B. Warfield in the 19th century for his extensive study on this word.

Now, today, most Bible translations render it as God breathed out, which is very helpful. But some have suggested that God isn't breathing out Scripture, He's breathing into Scripture.

So, it would be similar to the way Adam was created in the Garden of Eden. His body was formed and then God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living creature.

So, the suggestion is that human authors wrote the Bible and then God breathed life into their words. But as Warfield pointed out, the word Paul uses is passive.

God is not enhancing the words of man by breathing life into them. No, he himself is breathing out the very words of Scripture. In short, the Bible is of divine origin, not human origin.

[22:25] Now, with that said, what role did the human authors play? How exactly did God breathe his words through them? did he put them in a trance and they just began writing down precisely what he told them to write?

That's what we would call mechanical dictation. But if you notice in the Bible, that's pretty rare. I mean, there are moments like in Revelation when Jesus says to John, to the angel of the church in Ephesus, write, write, and then he proceeds to tell them exactly what to write.

But that's not the norm for most of the Bible. Instead, what we see happening is what is sometimes called double authorship. So this is when you might say two authors are working simultaneously.

And listen to how the Apostle Peter frames this. This is 2 Peter 1.21. He says, For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

So clearly, God is the author of the words. He is breathing out those words as the Spirit carries the human authors along. The words are not produced by the will of man, as Peter says, yet the Spirit is not completely bypassing the human authors either.

[23:58] How do we know this? Well, look at the books of the Bible. We see the human authors' personalities. We see their experiences reflected.

We see their writing styles being different from one to the next. In English, it may not be as obvious as it was in the original languages, but the writing styles can be drastically different between books. When we read the book of Amos, we're reading the words of a blue-collar shepherd, if you will, and his writing style reflects that. His Hebrew is unpolished.

All of his metaphors are agrarian. But when we read another book like Isaiah, it reads like an aristocratic statesman who strolls the royal courts of Jerusalem.

It contains some of the most sophisticated, refined poetry in all of Hebrew. So God didn't force his words through the human authors of the Bible.

[24:58] He didn't use them like typewriters where they were just passive instruments as God pounded away on the keys. No, I think a better illustration, though not perfect, most illustrations are not going to be perfect, but a better illustration would be to think of a ship.

You know, someone built the ship. It has sails. It has a rudder. Someone is steering the ship. But the wind is moving it ultimately where it needs to go.

And that sounds a lot like what Peter said. The human authors of the Bible were carried along by the Holy Spirit. But to really understand this concept of double authorship, we have to understand the providence of God in all of life.

And I think Wayne Grudem captures this very well when he writes, in cases where the ordinary human personality and writing style of the author were prominently involved, as seems the case with most of Scripture, all that we are able to say is that God's providential oversight and direction of the life of each author was such that their personalities, their backgrounds and training, their abilities to evaluate events in the world around them, their access to historical data, their judgment with regard to the accuracy of information, and their individual circumstances when they wrote were all exactly what God wanted them to be.

So that when they actually came to the point of putting pen to paper, the words were fully their own words, but also fully the words that God wanted them to write, words that God would also claim as His own.

[26:45] In other words, God breathed out Scripture, not exclusively in the very moment the words were written on the page, but He providentially prepared the authors over the course of a lifetime to write the precise words He wanted them to write when the time came.

And this helps us to understand how the various books of the Bible were written. In some cases, the authors were declaring, thus says the Lord. They are writing exactly what they heard God say. But in other cases, the writing appears to be mere human effort. Take Luke's gospel, for instance. Consider what he writes in the introduction.

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

So Luke, he spent a lot of time studying the life of Jesus and the events surrounding him. He read the accounts. Evidently, he went around interviewing witnesses, and he ultimately compiled this, what he calls, orderly history of Jesus' life.

[28:22] So, he's not suddenly receiving a vision from heaven as he writes this. God's not forcing the words through him. He's not in a trance here.

Instead, God has been preparing him to write these God-breathed words, possibly years before, through his investigation and through a lot of hard work.

So when it came time for Luke to actually sit down and write these words, they would be precisely what God wanted them to be. isn't that amazing?

Isn't that amazing? And this was true for all 40 or so human authors of the Bible writing across three continents over 1,500 years.

And there's a reason it's good for us to understand this about the inspiration of Scripture. As I said, we're prone to think of the Bible as just dropping out of the sky as though all 66 books were written in heaven and delivered to God's people already bound and ready to go.

[29:29] And when we think this way about its inspiration, not to mention its canonization, and we'll talk about that as well, it's only natural to think its transmission and its preservation over the years worked in a very similar way.

In other words, when many Christians think about the Bible, they tend to think of God working in a vacuum, completely apart from the messiness of human beings and human history.

But again, that's not what happened. Despite man's sinfulness, despite the messiness of this world, from the inspiration of Scripture to its canonization, to its transmission throughout history, and even to its translation into other languages, God has been providentially working through fallible men through very ordinary means and through the real circumstances of history to give His people exactly the word He intended them to have.

In short, when it comes to the big question of preservation, and we start digging into scribal errors and textual variants and these confusing topics, this shouldn't lead us to question the reliability of Scripture.

This is the way God has always worked. Look at the history of Israel. Look at the history of the New Testament church. Look at the way God fulfilled His plan of salvation.

[31:07] Consider the way He inspired Scripture in the first place. His words didn't just fall out of the sky. He providentially guided the lives of the Bible's human authors as messy and imperfect as so many of them

were, as all of them were, so that they would eventually write the very words of God at just the right time.

Now, before we move on from the inspiration of Scripture, it's worth emphasizing the wisdom of God in the medium He chose. In a time when oral tradition was very common, He chose the written word as the medium for His inspired word.

In Exodus 17, 14, He tells Moses, write this as a memorial in a book. And later in Exodus 31, He would demonstrate this by personally inscribing the Ten Commandments on stone tablets.

We're told He gave to Moses, and He gave to Moses when He had finished speaking with Him on Mount Sinai the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone written with the finger of God.

Now, why is it that God would choose the medium of writing for His word? Why not rely on oral tradition? Well, I'll give you three very practical reasons, and if we could get that last slide.

[32:33] First of all, writing is more accurate for preservation than oral repetition. As many mistakes as we might make when passing a scroll to one another to be copied, imagine how many more mistakes would be made if we were whispering the same message to one another.

By putting His words into physical written form, God provided a permanent, abiding record of those words, and not only is it more effective to pass down to future generations, but it also expands the volume of what we're able to pass down.

You know, it's been argued that people today are not using nearly as much of their mental capacity as they could because so much of technology does our thinking and our remembering for us.

So we're not utilizing our brains like we could, but regardless, the human mind will always have limits. Imagine trying to commit the entire Bible, all 66 books to memory.

Very few people in this world could do it. Now second, the written word provides us with widespread accessibility and dissemination.

[33:54] You see, if God's revelation were entirely oral, it would be strictly limited to those who are physically present to hear it. We would need a prophet, we would need an apostle to speak to us from God, but writing allows the words of the prophets and of the apostles to be sent to other geographic locations, even on the other side of the world, making God's communication accessible to vastly more people.

And lastly, the written word allows for repeated inspection, for study, for meditation. And what I mean by that is we can easily study the words on the page.

This is why I've been transcribing my own sermons for years now, long before there was AI to do it for you. When we're listening to sermons, we can only retain so much, right?

Even if you're taking notes, there are going to be things you miss, but if you have the text of the sermon in front of you, later on anyway, you can go over every word of it as many times as you like. In fact, this is why a preacher years ago cautioned me not to transcribe and publish my sermons. He said, how did he phrase it? You may suffer by the words you speak, but you can die by the words you write.

[35:13] In other words, if you say something wrong, it'll be much worse if you give it the permanence of print. Of course, God is not going to make the kinds of mistakes we make in speaking.

So he wants the permanence of his word. He wants us to return to it time and time again. Blessed is the man whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.

And this is made possible for us because God has given us his word in tangible form. He has given it to us in writing. Now, a part of me would love to spend quite a bit of time, more than you'd be interested in, in talking about the innovation of the alphabet, the wisdom behind the alphabet, beginning with the Hebrew alphabet.

I mean, I think we take for granted the utility of the alphabet. Think about how cumbersome and challenging it was for written languages that relied on symbols or hieroglyphics.

I mean, you'd have to memorize thousands upon thousands of symbols for each and every word or phrase in order to communicate in writing.

[36:28] But with an alphabet, you only have to remember 22 or 26 letters depending on the language. And with those relatively few letters, you can form any word you need.

And I believe the alphabet itself is a gift from God. It is by his providence that we have an alphabet, if for no other reason, so that he could give us his inspired word in writing.

And maybe at the end of this series, I can give you some book recommendations in case you want to study any of those subjects further for now. Let's close in prayer. Next time, we'll talk about the canonization of the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments, and then we'll move on to the transmission of the Bible throughout history.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you that you have spoken and that your word has been faithfully preserved by your sovereign hand. Even through ordinary means, even through fallible people, you have kept your truth for your church.

Strengthen our confidence in Scripture, I pray. Guard us from doubt. Give us humble, believing hearts that trust what you have said. And deepen our love for your word and teach us to treasure it more and more each day.

[37:45] And it's in Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.