

Nothing More Important: Biblical Truth Isaiah 55:6-11

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March 19, 2017 Luke 16:19-31

Today we are in the middle of a three-part sermon series called "Nothing More Important." We are looking at three things that I believe are the most important elements of your faith – especially as I take time to look back over my ministry and consider what legacy I want to leave with you. Last week we considered the person and work of *Jesus as central to your faith*. Next week we will conclude with *your calling as response to your faith*. Today we're going to look at *biblical truth as the foundation of your faith*. Jesus, the Bible and your calling. Nothing is more important than these three things.

These are huge topics. We cannot possibly exhaust this material in the short time we are given. So I am focusing on the way you can explain it to someone else. What questions are people asking? Today, in particular, why are so many regarding the Bible as *an* authority – one among many – or as no authority at all? What are the barriers between people you know and belief in Scripture? So once again, I'm going to ask you to take out pen or pencil and use the back of your bulletins to jot down bullet points that you can use to build an elevator speech. You need to get it out there in brief terms; a few points that will help dismantle those barriers.

Biblical authority is a huge topic. I encourage you to dive deeper into it – there are many resources. For today, this is how we will approach it. We will set the context and then take a look at our Scripture readings for today. Then we'll hear from two witnesses – briefly from Bonhoeffer (Lutheran pastor who participated in the Resistance against Nazi Germany), and more deeply from Nabeel Qureshi, modern-day convert from Islam to Christianity, and now one of Christianity's strongest defenders. (Link: <https://youtu.be/DND-AwVa1wc>) Check it out.

Let's set the context. As Christians, our authority for everything we claim is the Bible, our Sacred Writing. We believe it is authoritative for matters of life and faith. We heard it today in 2 Timothy: *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness...* All Scripture is God-breathed – or “inspired.” We believe in the divine inspiration of Scripture.

But that is not the conviction of many in our society. These days, it's your opinion that counts. You decide what is fake news or not. People talk about *what is true for you* as opposed to *what is true for me* – and what is that, but opinion? And one opinion is as good as another. Very little is considered absolute truth anymore.

When we lose our authority for truth, we will founder in faith. We become an open target for any whim or fad that comes along. With that loss of authority we suffer other losses: a moral compass, values and goals, a greater vision for life. We must be wary of this trend, or we will become like Israel, when there was no king and (as the Old Testament tells us) “everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” Chaos. As a church we need to be clear on our authority, lest (as Paul told Timothy), we retain a “form of godliness but deny its power.” My friends, there are already a lot of churches going down that road, and they are dying.

So let's begin with Scripture itself and what our lessons teach us today. Isaiah tells of the power of God's word. He says that when God speaks, he accomplishes his will. In Genesis, when God created, he simply spoke – and it was. When Jesus healed, he did so without magic wands or formulas – he just spoke, and people were healed. God's word, itself, is powerful. One word of God's can have a multi-dimensional results. He speaks – and the result is seed to the sower and bread to the eater. It results in faith, healing and hope. He multiplies the results in ways that we don't even expect. God's word, itself, is active and powerful.

Paul writes to Timothy that Scripture acts, not just to comfort, but also to correct. To teach and to train. And, as we heard, he says that "all Scripture is inspired by God." We, as Lutherans, believe that Scripture is both human and divine – divinely inspired but written down by humans. Not inerrant, but inspired. That's a very helpful distinction.

And what about the parable Jesus told in our Gospel lesson today? A very interesting story about a rich man who went to hell; and a poor man, named Lazarus, who went to "Abraham's side," clearly a much more pleasant place. Like all parables, there is one key that unlocks its meaning. It's not about the relative merits of being rich or poor. It's not about heaven and hell. It's about Scripture. Jesus is saying that if people don't believe on Scripture's say-so, then they won't believe a messenger from the dead, either. Scripture alone is the authority for faith.

There are many, many witnesses to the reliability of Scripture and the power of God's word. Today, I will highlight the comments of two. First, Bonhoeffer, who said (as you heard a few weeks ago) that you can read Scripture in various ways. You can read it as a piece of literature. You can read it for information. You can read it as a narrative, the story of God's salvation. All well and good. But most importantly, he said, read the Bible as God's word *to you*. As you read, dwell on it; listen for God's voice, speaking to you. Bonhoeffer, like Luther and many people before and since, took his daily Bible reading quite seriously. He used to pray over one verse for a half hour each day. He taught his seminary students to do the same, and this was the basis for their community life together, and their academic life as they trained to be pastors. Let Scripture be your prayer book as you talk to God. (We've talked about this before.) Listen to him as he speaks his word to you.

That's Bonhoeffer. The other witness for today is Nabeel Qureshi, a devout Muslim, whose sacred writing was the Qu'ran. Growing up, he had learned a lot *about* it – but had never really read *through* it. The Qu'ran reads like a collection of sayings. To you and me it might seem random. It's not easy reading because there's no narrative, no context. Qureshi himself admits that his authority was really his parents and the imams, who would channel the Qu'ran to him, using a collection of stories about Mohammed, called the *hadith*, to fill in the context. He says Muslims need an informed interpreter to read the Qu'ran. So imagine his surprise when he began to read the Bible and found it set its own context, provided its own narrative. He couldn't put it down! He came away thinking, "Wow – anyone can read the Bible!"

These are his words, not mine. And I think, that because he comes from the perspective of a skeptic who set out to disprove the authority of Scripture, and also as one who read the Bible for

the first time, he gives us a view that we need to see. It helps us to understand the questions people tend to bring to Scripture and help us to formulate answers. So for the next few minutes, I'm going to borrow from Qureshi some of his research and results, hoping it will also help us in our exploration of the authority of the Bible.

We're looking at the reliability and validity of the Bible here, not specifically at its message. That, we have explored elsewhere. The root question for us today is this: what makes the Bible more authoritative than any other resource? Why do we *not* say for example, that the Qu'ran, or the Book of Mormon have the same authority? What makes the Bible stand apart?

First, the question of reliability, authenticity. There are many manuscripts and translations. Let's just think about the New Testament at this point (we have to narrow our focus somehow!) You should be aware that the earliest manuscripts were eyewitness accounts. The letters of Paul are the earliest. The Gospels, too, were written down during the first century. The fact that these are eye-witness accounts, corroborated by people who had been there, makes them very reliable. If folks started to fiddle with the facts, there were those who could and would call them on that. Think, by comparison, about what we know about Alexander the Great. His biographies were written 400 years after his death. But the New Testament books were written during the first century, when eyewitnesses were still alive.

You should know that whatever differences you might find are usually the result of translation and stylistic variances – and that the Bible we have now is closer than ever to the original languages, because in recent years we have discovered earlier copies. The differences that still remain are very few and none affect the central message of the Gospel.

So that helps address the reliability of the New Testament in particular. What about its veracity? How do we know what the Bible says is *true*? Here are a couple of comments: first – and this applies to the whole Bible – is its inner witness. Unlike other writings of the same period, the Bible is surprisingly honest. You have prayers in there that say, "God, wake up! Where are you? Why are you silent while I suffer?" It's not all sweetness and light. Its writers are honest about their feelings toward God; they are also honest about its heroes – prophets and kings. Even their failures are laid out for all to see, not just their successes. Prophets who didn't want to be prophets and argued with God. Jonah ran away! Kings who didn't turn out so well. Even King David, arguably Israel's greatest king, had his flaws and weaknesses and the writers didn't hold back. This is not what you find in Babylonian and Egyptian writings of that time. The fact that the Bible is brutally honest gives you reason to believe that it's true.

It is also credible in the sense that no one would make this stuff up. Think of it – the first witnesses to the Resurrection were women, who were widely considered to be unreliable. No one at that time would have even thought of making them the first witnesses. Also, prophets say and do things that don't make sense – and often don't get resolved in their own lifetime. It's not what you would expect. Further, the variations we find in Scripture often add to their credibility, rather than detract from it. Looking just at the Gospels for a moment: variation in detail is just what you would expect from different witnesses. Everyone sees and remembers an event somewhat differently. And every Gospel writer had a different audience in mind, different

sources. So they emphasize different details, tell different stories. If their witness had been exactly the same, you would suspect the fabrication of a lie, but that is not the case.

I will add just one more thought to the veracity of Scripture, and it is this: the witness of many Christians over the centuries who have found this to be the true Word of God. It has the ring of truth – it goes beyond our human experience and paints a picture that is bigger than the one we can see. It has changed lives – and will change your life, today. As the Word of God, it confronts and convicts you just as often as it comforts you; it acts (as it says of itself) as a two-edged sword. It does what God says it will do. And in the hands of the Holy Spirit, it becomes God's living Word.

So, what can you say to those who are asking questions? Here's what I know: many of you have been here for some time, in worship, in Bible study and small groups. On the one hand, you know more than you think you do; on the other, you can't know it all. Me neither, nor Pr Dan nor Pr Jim. You don't need a Ph.D in Biblical Theology to answer a few questions. If you get stumped you can always say: "I'm going to check on that; I'll get back to you." Such an answer demonstrates that you are listening; that you care; that it's important to you. You can also say, "I don't know about that, but this is what I *do* know..." (I used to tell that to my Confirmation students all the time). Realize that if a question sounds impossible to answer, it's often because the question is framed in such a way that no one can answer. So take a step back; look at the bigger, underlying issue – answer that.

Here's the bottom line: you can believe the Bible: it is authoritative, reliable and true. And most important, God speaks and acts through his Word. So do all you can to get to know it; take it very seriously as the foundation for all you believe. There is nothing more important. Amen.