

Rick Sparks, The Reliability of the Bible
Reading: 2Timothy 3:16-17

March 6, 2016

There's been one passage of Scripture in particular that has been emphasized this morning already. It was quoted on the front of the bulletins that were passed out to many of you from II Timothy chapter 3 verses 16 and 17. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for" a number of things. That passage was quoted by the teacher of the class this morning, brother Paul, quoted by somebody else I think as we went along, and it's been quoted again a little bit of it by me because it is so important. Everything we do together we're trying to base on the foundation of the word of God. How did we go from holy men of God speaking as they were moved or motivated by the Holy Spirit to the leather bound or digital editions of the Bible that we have now in our time?

The Bible is an amazing book with a history all its own. The history of the Bible is one of toil and sacrifice on the part of a great many people who love the word of God. Because of inspiration by God, and preservation both divine and human, you are able today to take your Bible in your hand and say "I know that I have the word of God. I know what to do to be saved. I know what to do to stay saved. I know how to go from earth to heaven and live with God forever, because the Bible tells me how to do that." Now the Bible was transmitted through the years by means of writing. Man had spoken language almost from the time that he was created. Language was given to man by God. No one has ever spoken who was not first spoken to. We speak because people first spoke to us. Not everybody in this auditorium at this time had English as their original language, but whatever language your parents or caretaker spoke to you was the language that you picked up and mimicked and that was the first language you spoke. The Bible shows us that God spoke to man first. I don't know what language he was speaking, but God spoke to man, and then man spoke to God using oral language. This was the first communication from God to man, and it was oral. I don't know whether Adam and Eve had a written language. They may have, but I can't prove it. Certainly Adam and Eve were quite bright and they were perfectly capable of discovering or introducing or developing a written language if they needed to, but whether they ever bothered to develop one or not during their lifetime I don't know. I do know that as often as husbands and wives seem to need to leave notes for one another, it wouldn't surprise me if Adam and Eve had developed a written language, but I can't prove that they did that during Adam's long life. Somebody may have developed a system of writing. We just don't know. But if Adam and Eve did not have a written language, then at least writing was developed not long after their time.

Writing originally was done in pictures and hieroglyphics. It was done over time. Alphabets were developed. We have inscriptions and monuments on rocks that go way, way back. We know that writing existed, for instance, in the days of Abraham, a couple thousand years before Christ, which is an interesting point because critics of the Bible used to say that Moses could not possibly have written the Pentateuch because writing didn't exist in the days of Moses, 1500 years before Christ. Now today in our time archaeology has proven conclusively that written language existed in Abraham's day

2000 years before Christ and even hundreds of years prior to that. So we're getting back to within a few hundred years of Adam's time. Adam himself lived to almost 3000 BC.

Early writing was done on stone as it was done at Mount Sinai by the finger of God. It was also done on clay. Huge libraries containing thousands of clay tablets have been unearthed in Mesopotamia and elsewhere. Soft clay was made into tablets; writing was impressed on them with a stylus, then they were baked in ovens to harden them. In the fourth chapter of the book of Ezekiel, we find an example of this. The prophet sketched a plan of Jerusalem on clay in this manner, but also leather scrolls were used. Historically, writing was done sometimes on animal bones. It was done on wood. It was done on metal. It was done on potsherds, pieces of broken pottery, done on any material where writing could be placed. The most used writing material when the New Testament was being written was papyrus. Papyrus plants grew along the Nile River in Egypt in great abundance and along other rivers as well. In the 8th chapter of the book of Job verse 11, the question is asked can the rush grow up without mire? In other words, can the papyrus grow without a marsh? Probably the bulrushes that were used in the construction of the ark that little baby Moses was placed into by his mother so that she could be discovered by the daughter of the Pharaoh in Egypt at that time, probably that little ark was made out of papyrus plants, bulrushes. They grow 12 to 15 feet tall with a triangular stalk about as big around as a man's wrist. And when they are harvested, then they are cut into pieces that are about a foot long, and they're split down the middle. The pith is removed from the interior of the papyrus stock and this is made into thin strips. These thin strips are placed down horizontally on a table and another bunch of them is placed vertically to those on a table and these are pressed together with glue and moisture and pressure and then after polishing and drying that, you have a piece of what we would call paper. Paper made from trees had not been invented at that time, but they would call this paper. It was very much like a sturdy piece of what we call paper in our time. It was a good thing to write on. But the worst trouble with writing on papyrus was that it was relatively fragile and it was subject to deterioration over time, especially in rainy climates and that's why we don't have as many papyri manuscripts from the ancient days as we would like to have. We just haven't been able to discover them because they have gone out of existence before we started looking for them. Later, writing was done on parchment or on vellum which are much, much more durable than papyrus. Parchment was made from animal skins, but it was not tanned which is the thing that made it different from leather. Vellum was a higher grade of parchment, and it was made from the skins of younger animals. Sometimes vellum was even made from the skins of animals that hadn't even been born yet. In New Testament times, often a sheet of papyrus was just used by itself. Short letters like II John and III John were almost undoubtedly written on single sheets of papyrus. For a longer work, papyrus sheets would be joined together at both the left and the right hand margins, so that you had a long series of sheets connected together and these could be wrapped up in a scroll. The maximum length for a usable papyrus scroll was about 40 feet, and a scroll of 35 feet would hold one of the longer books of the New Testament like Matthew or Luke or the Book of Acts. As long as the roll form was being used, it was never possible to have the New Testament in one volume. The

New Testament copied out fully would require a roll of more than 200 feet, so the New Testament in its earliest stages was a collection of scrolls. These would be stored ordinarily in a cabinet or in a bucket. In the first or second century A.D. the papyrus roll began to give way to the codex. A codex is just what we call a book. In a book you don't have the sheets connected both at the left and right margin. They're only connected at the usually the left margin all the sheets connected at the left margin then you can turn the sheets as we do today in a book. This is much more convenient than using a scroll. Why we didn't think of it sooner I don't know, but it didn't happen for quite some time. The book form was just a lot easier to use than a scroll was, so when the apostle Paul wrote an inspired letter and sent it to a church, what he was sending was absolutely perfect. It was exactly what the Lord wanted the church to have. Inspiration ensured that; inspiration meant God-breathed, hence this idea we were talking about-- God breathing, moving holy men of God who were going to write down what he wanted them to say. When Paul was sending out the word of God in this manner, he knew that it was the word of God he was sending. He said to the recipient sometimes you need to acknowledge that what I'm writing to you is not the word of man, but it is the word of God. Paul as an apostle of Jesus Christ was both authorized and empowered to write the word of God. And so were the other apostles and prophets, prophets both Old Testament and New. The original writings were called autographs and they were absolutely perfect.

The Bible was originally written in three different languages: Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. A major portion of the Bible was written in the Hebrew language, written from right to left, and that was an alphabet without even having any vowels. A system of vowels has been added to it now, but originally it didn't have vowels. Aramaic was a kindred language to the Hebrew; about 500 years before Christ, it became the common language in the Promised Land. About nine chapters of the Bible are written in the Aramaic language, mostly in the books of Ezra and Daniel. There are a few words of Aramaic that have been scattered throughout the New Testament as well, but the New Testament books primarily and overwhelmingly were written in the Greek language, the most versatile beautiful free-flowing language the world has known. The Greeks had more descriptive terms than any other language. They could discriminate between nuances of thought in a marvelous way, so that when we read that "when the fullness of times was come, God sent forth his son made of a woman, made under the law to redeem them that were under the law," we should know that one of several factors contributing to the fullness of the time was the development and well-nigh universal use of the Greek language in the Roman Empire. The gospel was to be proclaimed to every creature under heaven in the first 30 years of the church. Yea, their line went out into all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. The New Testament writers made use of a language that was known almost everywhere that it was being sent. So when Paul wrote an inspired letter to a church, either with his own hand or through an amanuensis, an assistant who would take dictation from the lips of Paul and write down what Paul had said. Before Paul released that, he would place his signature on it, showing that it was written as he intended it to be written, guided by the Holy Spirit. The letter was then sent to a church that it was addressed to. Then it was read publicly in the next available assembly of that church, and you can imagine the reaction. If we came with

an inspired letter to this congregation, and somebody read it out from up here, what would your reaction be? This is the word of God. Would you read it again? I didn't get it all the first time. This was read to the church over and over again. How long do you suppose it was before somebody made a copy of that letter? I think that surely this must've happened almost immediately. If this was happening today, we would just take it down to a copy machine and make as many copies as you wanted. They made all their copies by hand. These were manuscript copies. I sure would've wanted one. I know that many of you, if not all of you, would've wanted your own copy too. So if I could write, I'd sit down and make my own copy of Paul's letter as soon as I possibly could. It wouldn't take long to write out a copy of the average New Testament letter, so I'd make my copy, you'd make your copy, soon they were making copies of copies, but it was all done by hand.

The question becomes would everyone of these copies be exactly the same made by multiple members of the congregation, would they all be precisely alike or would there be little differences creeping in through human error? Maybe a word misspelled. Maybe a word left out. There would be variations, but these would be variations which would almost all be trivial and not affecting the meaning of the letter. Until the invention of printing around 1450, the Bible was copied by hand, letter by letter, word by word. Each new copy would be limited by its parent copy, the copy that it was made from. It was limited by the variance in the manuscript on which it relied. We can easily understand that this process virtually ensures that no two copies would be exactly alike. Each one of them would have little changes and each one of these changes is called a textual variant. A variant is a single difference between two manuscript copies. It can involve a single letter or a whole word or a verse or a block of verses. For example, let's say that a person was making four copies of the book of Colossians, nice little four chapter book. A minute ago I quoted from Colossians 1:23 which said that the gospel was preached to every creature which is under heaven. Suppose a person in the first three copies that they made of the book of Colossians writes "every creature which is under heaven," but when he gets to the fourth one, he's so familiar with the text that he's just sort of going by memory instead of looking back at the text as often, so he uses a synonym that means the same thing, it's the same thought, but he uses a different word when he writes. Instead of "every creature under heaven," he put "every person under heaven" just in our example here. Whoever in the future copied from that fourth manuscript would be unable to reclaim the word "creature"; they would only have the word "person." They would just perpetuate the use of the word "person." All copies made from his copy would also be limited by that same change. So each new generation of copies would include these kinds of tiny changes that would make each manuscript differ from the original that came directly from Paul, and remember all these manuscripts were written in the Greek language.

Sometimes people are alarmed by the fact that we don't have any of the original documents of the Bible. The autographed copies written by the apostles or the secretaries of the apostles are completely gone. We don't have any of them; as far as anybody knows they're gone forever and they're never coming back; we're never going to find them. Probably they have gone out of existence, so that all we have now are

copies-- maybe in some cases we had actual copies, but mostly we have copies of copies or copies of copies of copies. There is no reason for us to be concerned about this. There's no reason at all to jump to the far-fetched conclusion that we don't have the New Testament as the Lord intended. That is simply not true. I stress this because that idea gets a lot of press in our time. It's an uninformed conclusion that's being advocated by people who in some cases know better than that. There's plenty of evidence to establish the integrity of the text of the New Testament, so that we can confidently conclude that we have the Bible as God intended for us to have it.

And I want to stress that point just because of the current atmosphere in our society at this time which almost assumes now that the text of the Bible has been corrupted. How often have you heard people say well we can be sure that we have the Bible in its original form and look at how many translations there are. They all differ from one another too. Moslems tell us that the Bible has been corrupted and only the Quran is fully God's word. Mormons tell us that the Bible is corrupted where it differs from the Book of Mormon. Liberal theologians, skeptics, atheists-- they all insist that the Bible was altered in transmission over the centuries. Take just as an example, a statement by Suzanne Haneef in her book, *What Everyone Should Know about Islam and Muslims* on page 21: "Although parts of earlier revelations such as segments of the Torah given to Moses, the Psalms revealed to David and the evangel revealed to Jesus still remain, they are so heavily intermixed with human additions and alterations that it's very difficult to determine what part of them constitutes the original message as many biblical scholars admit only too readily, much less to guide one's own life by them." Akbar Ahmed, professor of Islamic studies at American University in Washington DC, wrote this: "These religious systems wandered from the straight path and eventually needed further divine instruction. Islam came in at the end filling in all the gaps, correcting all the errors, dotting the I's and crossing the T's." That's in his short introduction to *The Muslim World*, page 25. The Book of Mormon says in first Nephi chapter 13: "For behold, they have taken away from the gospel of the land many parts which are plain and most precious and also many covenants of the Lord, have they taken away." And the result of that, he stated later in the same chapter: "best and exceeding great many do stumble; yea in so much that Satan has great power over them."

Now when I was a boy back in the 1950s growing up in America, most Americans believed that the Bible is the word of God, but attacks against it began to escalate, resulting in the erosion of American attitudes and beliefs about the reliability of the Bible and the fact that it has been transmitted accurately over time. Some of you if you're as old as I am might remember *Look Magazine* from years and years ago. Here is an article from *Look Magazine* February 26, 1952, entitled "The Truth about the Bible" and immediately under that big title were these words: Students of the Scriptures say the New Testament we read today may have 50,000 errors. Here is the story of a far-reaching study by leading theologians to get an authentic text. Let me read just a few words from this article so you can catch the flavor of its insidious tone. "How accurate is the holy Bible that we read today? Was there really in Jesus' time an adulteress whose accusers were sternly told 'he that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone at her'? Did Jesus really say ' go ye into all the world and preach the gospel. He that

believes and is baptized shall be saved'? Did John himself write the reference to the Holy Trinity attributed to him? From information modern scholars have developed, the answer to each question is probably No."

Now the impact of this kind of writing over time has been catastrophic. Professor Bart Ehrman at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is a very popular and well published author at this time. Bart Ehrman as a young man grew up over in Lawrence, Kansas, just a few miles down I 70. He went to Lawrence High School and when he was a sophomore in high school, Bart Ehrman had a born-again type of experience like so many people have, and later he studied at Moody Bible Institute. Then he studied at Wheaton College up in Illinois and then he studied at Princeton Theological Seminary. I've often said that the seminaries should be called cemeteries because so much faith is buried there and that's what happened to Bart Ehrman. And now he has written at least five New York Times bestsellers, challenging the integrity of the text of the New Testament, in particular. One of his books is entitled *Forged*. He has another one called *Misquoting Jesus* and these are having an impact in our time, just as the *Da Vinci Code* had a tremendous impact and still continues to.

Not too long ago I was in a long conversation with a driver of a hearse while we were on to the cemetery that was a long way from where we were, so we got to talk quite some time, but he had bought into the message of the *Da Vinci Code* lock, stock, and barrel. Writers like Dan Brown, who wrote the *Da Vinci Code*, count on people's ignorance and they count on people's gullibility. So we've come to the place where now many Americans no longer believe that the Bible is the divinely inspired word of God, and many, many more aren't sure about it. Sometimes if you ask, they'll say well yeah, but when you question, when you probe further, you find that they believe that errors and contradictions have crept into the point where it makes the text, all uncertain; we can't have any possibility of knowing what was actually being said there. So we're talking here about a critical question of our time--has the Bible from its inception, over the centuries as it's been transmitted from generation to generation, been corrupted with errors? And this can be a complicated discussion, but it pays big dividends if you understand the facts. Although no two manuscript copies agree in every detail, the degree of accuracy achieved by most scribes was remarkably high. It's easy for a person to get an inflated sense of these changes that we're talking about and quickly jump to the rash conclusion that God's word has been corrupted. That is simply not the case.

I want to read to you--I'll take time to read this and we'll stop and Lord willing, go on with the same subject tonight. I want to read to you an illustration used many years ago by JW McGarvey. I don't know how many times I've been sitting in Jerry's barber chair, and Jerry will say something about something he had recently read from the pen of JW McGarvey. JW McGarvey was a preacher of the gospel of Christ who did a lot of work in areas not too far from where we're sitting right now. He died in 1911; what I'm going to read to you was written over 100 years ago, but I think the language hasn't changed too much, so that you'll be able to understand what he's saying. He formulated this comparison and I can't improve on it, so I'm just going to steal it from him. It gives us a

sense of the transmission of the New Testament. Here's what JW McGarvey had to say. "The case is like that of a certain will. A gentleman left a large estate entailed to his descendents of the third-generation, and it was not to be divided until a majority of them should be of age. During the interval, many copies of the will were circulated among parties interested, many of those being copies of copies. In the meantime, the office of record in which the original was filed was burned with all of its contents. When the time for division drew near, a prying attorney gave out among the heirs the report that no two existing copies of the will were alike. This alarmed them all and set them busily to work to ascertain the truth of the report. On comparing copy with copy, they found the report true, but on close examination it was discovered that the differences consisted in errors of spelling or grammatical construction, some mistakes and figures corrected by the written numbers, and some other differences not easily accounted for. But that in none of the copies did these mistakes affect the rights of the heirs in any essential matters for which the real will was written in the first place. The representations of all the copies were precisely the same, and the result was that they divided the estate with perfect satisfaction to all, and they were **more** certain . . . [This is an important part of the point here]. They were **more** certain that they had executed the will of their grandfather than if the original copy had been alone preserved. For it might have been tampered with in the interest of a single heir, but the copies, defective though they were, could not have been. Why? Because one was in your attic. One was in my dresser drawer. We all had copies, but nobody could get to them all in order to change them all to make them say what you wanted them to say. So [says McGarvey] was it with the New Testament. The discovery of errors in the copies excited alarm, leading to inquiries which developed the fact that he who has the most imperfect copy has in it all that the original contained of doctrine, duty and privilege." JW McGarvey, *Evidences of Christianity*, page 17. That's an excellent illustration showing by parallel circumstance that our New Testament has not been corrupted, even though we do not have the originals and it has been copied over the centuries, and I hope to get more specific about this this evening at 5 o'clock, Lord willing. Sorry to leave this hanging there, but it's time for us to conclude.

The reason this is such an important subject is the Bible is such an important book. The Bible is God's message to mankind, the sword of our warfare, the lamp to our feet, the light to life's pathway, the source of true wisdom, and the textbook of ethics. In the Bible we learn what God wants us to do. We learn about the centrality of Jesus Christ, the most significant figure of history. He and he alone can cause us to be saved from our sins and redeemed from the awful fate that would be ours without him. So today if you are outside of Jesus Christ and would come to him in simple trusting faith, if you believe his gospel, if you repent of your sins and if you want to confess him before this assemblage this morning and be immersed in water to have your sins washed away so you can rise and walk in newness of life, or if we can assist you with anything else, let us know what your needs are by coming up front as we stand together and sing . . .