

**Questions: How often do you try to read the Bible? How well do you succeed?
What goals do you have?**

A while ago I heard a woman speak here when we had the old hall downstairs. She had been a prisoner for her faith in the north of China for fifteen years before she was released. Her only crime: being a Christian. Things like this can occur in any country, at any time, as political currents and religious affiliation of leaders change. One should never take our freedoms for granted. One of the things that moved me was her explanation of the things that kept her going through what was a long and trying ordeal. I have heard the same from various Christians who have been imprisoned. Primary amongst these was her love and appreciation of the Scriptures. Any Bibles or religious material she had, had been forcibly removed on imprisonment. Over the years she built up large parts of the Bible from pages smuggled into the prison camp by visitors. Each visit she would get a new page to treasure, to hide, and to go over and over in detail. For her the words of the Scriptures brought new life, new hope, new promise. I understood something of her feeling, though not imprisoned. When I as a young Christian I had overdone it between working, studying and running a summer sports program. I was hospitalised for dehydration. I don't remember getting there but the one thing I wanted when I woke up was I desperately wanted a Bible. Ever since becoming a Christian I've had a thirst for God's Word. What is it about the Bible that is so vital for Christians and why do we place so much trust in it? When you talk to people about your faith, this is one thing that you do need to be sure about, and it is what we are going to look at today: why is the Bible so important and why do we consider it reliable?

For starters the Bible is extra-ordinary in multiple ways and unique amongst all the literature on earth. That's quite a claim but let's see why. Professor F.F. Bruce observes that the Bible is a collection of written materials written over some 1500 years, across multiple lands from Italy to Mesopotamia to Persia. The writers were not only separated geographically and chronologically they came from a wide range of socio-economic settings: kings, herdsmen, soldiers, legislators, fishermen, statesmen, courtiers, priests, prophets, a tent-making rabbi and a Gentile physician plus who knows how many others. Likewise, the text covers a wide range of literary styles: history, various types of law, religious poetry, parables, allegories, biographies, personal correspondence, memoirs and diaries, and classically Biblical prophecy and apocalyptic writings. Then of course it is written in three different languages: Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. Yet, for all of this, there is an incredible cohesion and consistency. Hebrew is a wonderfully pictorial and graphic language that is hard to translate literally. Aramaic is a similar language but more extensive language than Hebrew allowing more specific definition. Like Mandarin and Cantonese, Hebrew and Aramaic use the same script but are different. Aramaic is the longest, continuously used, language on the planet. Greek is one of the greatest languages ever used in terms of its fullness, definition, vocabulary and use in literature, the arts, philosophy and argument. Greek became the common language of Roman

Empire much like English and Mandarin have become default languages in much of the world today..

In its composition, breadth and scope there is no other book on the planet like the Bible. Scholars also point to the unequalled influence the Bible has had on Western society in history and increasingly throughout all of the world today. It has influenced art, music, political thinking, standards of morality and societal values and millions of lives across the globe.

So, apart from its diverse origins, how did the Bible come together? In the Hebrew world there is a long history of scholarship. When God wrote it was on stone but the original transcript never survived getting off the mountain. When Moses wrote on parchment it lasted centuries. The reality is that the Biblical sources have come to us recorded on stone, papyrus, parchment, vellum (essentially treated animal skins), pottery, stones, clay tablets, wax tablets and even copper scrolls. Throughout this time scrolls and codex (an early form of book) have been the most popular. Some scrolls were quite unwieldy reaching 144 feet in length. Codex, bound sheathes of paper, were much easier to handle and read and eventually became the modern book. Alongside the recorded texts, the Hebrew people have a level of oral rote repetition that is extraordinary. Even today, there are Hebrew scholars who can recite whole books of the Old Testament word perfectly. It was no surprise that when scrolls were found at Qumran that were thousands of years old the wording was all but identical to the texts used today.

Who then decided what we have in our Bibles today? The accepted books of the Bible (Old and New Testament) are technically called the “canon” of Scripture. The term came from an old Hebrew term ‘ganeh’ which referred to a reed used for measuring. In other words the Scriptures were to be the *canon* or standard against which everything else of faith and life could be measured.

The Old Testament, as we call it, is essentially the Hebrew *Tanakh* although it is organised differently to the Old Testament as we have it. The Tanakh and therefore the Old Testament, comprise three parts: the Torah (or Law), the Nevi’im (or Prophets) and the Ketuvim (or writings). Essentially no individual or group decided on what books were to be included. From the time of Moses books that were considered to be authoritative and inspired by God were collected together. When the Septuagint, that is the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures was formally put together by a group of seventy (actually 72 according to legend) Rabbis and Hebrew scholars, the fixed compendium of the Hebrew text was effectively established. This essentially became the Old Testament. When Jesus spoke of the Scriptures He was referring to the Law, Prophets and Writings. The Pharisees and the community at Qumran, from whom we get the Dead Sea Scrolls, considered these works authoritative, whereas the Sadducees only regarded the Pentateuch, the first five books of Moses, to be authoritative for the life of faith.

The New Testament’s formation was not dissimilar. Collections of works about Jesus, our Gospels, were considered authentic and vital by the early church, as was Luke’s historical record in Acts and collections of Paul’s writings and letters by known church leaders. This resulted in a collection of biographical, historical, correspondence and prophetic materials. When the New Testament was collated, the editors selected only works of the first century that were by first or second hand witnesses and were considered

reliable. When the Old and New Testaments, or Covenants (that of Law and Grace) were put together we have our Bible.

It is worth noting that the Roman Catholic Bible has a few additional books within the Old and New Testament. These texts have enormous historical significance but are generally third hand records not considered reliable by the Protestant church from a faith perspective.

In the Presbyterian Church the Scriptures are formally recognised as the Word of God in the word of man. It's a subtle distinction but recognises that there may be errors or mistranslations over the ages and if there is fault it is through human processes. Over time, biblical scholarship has become highly skilled and there is much agreement on the vast bulk of the text of the bible. Interpretation and application however are very different stories.

So far we have outlined something of where and how long it took for the Bible to come together and all that would make it an interesting book but there is far more to it than that. One of the critical aspects that make Scripture so important is that it tells us in various levels of detail about the interaction of God with the created order and with humanity and not only the history of the world but also the purpose and future of humanity. Some have seen Scripture as an onion; whenever you peel off a layer there is another one underneath. In the big picture the Bible tells us that God created everything out of nothing; the Hebrew '*bara*' is from nothing, as opposed to creating something from something '*asa*', which is what people do. (Genesis 1:1, Romans 4:17) God created us and has purpose for our lives in God's plan that is being worked out on earth. All of that would be fascinating in its history and interactions but there are always skeptics. It is easy to look back and re-envise the past. But Scripture does something fascinating that we will look at in more detail later. It records prophecies about things that will happen in the future. Specific prophecies not generic thoughts or dreams. And never more specifically than about the One God would send to save the world: the Messiah. These prophecies include such things as when and where Messiah would be born, who would come before Him, what would happen in His early years, His mission and work, His betrayal, His passion and manner of death, His resurrection, His ascension and His return and future. As these events have been played out through history one can almost tick them off on a chart. There is no other work in human history that comes close. There is then an integral connection between this promised Messiah and the Scriptures. The Old Testament points to Him, His is the pivot point, and the New Testament tells of His life, His work, His fulfilment of many, many prophecies, many of which, like His birth and place of birth, He could not make any personal impact on. But more, the New Testament continues the Old Testament in further defining what awaits us in the future.

The Scriptures then are not only reliable at multiple levels but they are validated in the way Jesus used, understood and correctly defined them for us. They are worthy of study and as a critical guide for our lives. They tell us not just what to do and how to live, with multiple examples and encouragements, they tell us of the love our God has for us and how over millennia God has been working out His plan so that we can be with Him for eternity, as we give out hearts and lives over to Him.

This then is the challenge of the Scriptures to us. If they have been so accurate and reliable in the past, why should they not be equally as reliable now and for the future?

There is no comparison anywhere else on earth. When we talk to people about the Scriptures we can tell them how reliable God's Word is.

For us personally this is also important as the Scriptures could and should speak into our lives daily as we read them. In Hebrews 4:12 the author states: "**For the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart**". In reading and meditating on God's Word we are challenged at the core of our being as to our motives, our intentions, our behaviours, our social and spiritual condition. Are we walking with God the way He wants us to walk with Him? Are we an active part of His mission? Are we following His agenda or our own or someone else's? And are we watching how the world is unfolding just as God has told us it will, and what implications does that have for us?

The Scriptures are the Word of God, embodied in Jesus Christ, and given to us as one of the greatest gifts God has given us. If we are to "**[a]lways be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have**" as the apostle Peter instructs in 1 Peter 3:10 then we need to know God's Word and embody it in our lives. The wise know this and spend time daily in God's Word because the Holy Spirit speaks through it and it brings life. "**Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path**", says the psalmist (Ps 119:105) Jesus knew this as He meditated on God's Word each day, and so I pray, do each of us. The Scriptures are God's ageless gift to us – a guide and an encouragement so make use of them!

Amen