



TIME OF GRACE®

Skeptical Faith: Can I Trust the Bible?

Study Notes

Summary

What makes the Bible believable? How do we know it's unique among all the beliefs, books, and religions of the world? In this sermon you'll be reminded that Christianity is based not on blind faith but on historical facts.

- **Acts 17:17:** So he *reasoned* in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.
- 3 Reasons to Believe in a “Holy” Bible:
 1. The _____ knowledge
 - **Isaiah 53:2-11 (select verses):** ² He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. . . . ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. ⁷ He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter. . . . ⁹ He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death. . . . ¹¹ After he has suffered, he will see the light of life.
 - **2 Peter 1:21:** For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.
 2. The _____ witness
 - **1 Corinthians 15:3-8:** ³ For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

- **Acts 26:22-26:** ²²“I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—²³that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles.” ²⁴At this point Festus interrupted Paul’s defense. “You are out of your mind, Paul!” he shouted. “Your great learning is driving you insane.” ²⁵“I am not insane, most excellent Festus,” Paul replied. “What I am saying is true and reasonable. ²⁶The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner.”
3. _____ uniqueness
- **Isaiah 53:5:** He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.

Points to Ponder

1. What questions have you had over the years about God, the Bible, or the Christian faith? Were you able to discuss them instead of dismiss them? Why or why not?
2. Read the apostle Peter’s message in Acts 2:14-41. Find all three reasons from today’s message that Peter used with his skeptical audience.
3. Read the apostle Paul’s message in Acts 13:13-43. Find all three reasons from today’s message that Paul used with his skeptical audience.

Homework for Next Week

Read Romans 8:7; Romans 5:8; Revelation 21:5.

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Acts 17:17, Isaiah 53, 2 Peter 1:21, 1 Corinthians 15:3-8
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Pastor Mike Novotny

You know, there are other religions, there are other books, and lots of them kind of say the same thing, don't they? That we should be nice to each other, we should love our neighbor as ourself, we should treat others as we want to be treated. So, Pastor, what do you think about all that?

When I was a kid, I had lots of questions about God. That's why during my teenage years - maybe my sophomore, junior year in high school - I challenged myself to actually read this entire book from cover to cover. And after I did, I had way more questions about God. Like what does that mean? And how could a good God say that or allow this or how does that fit together with that and this passage with that chapter? The questions bothered me so much that I actually wrote them down in a notebook that I had in my bedroom and one day, I took that notebook to my pastor's office, I opened it up, and I threw every skeptical, tough question I had at this man of God. And in that moment, my pastor had to make a really, really important choice: To either dismiss it or discuss it. I mean, he could have just dismissed it; I was just some kid from a pretty big church. I wasn't super involved or active or generous. He was the guy with all the degrees on the wall; I was the young man who had just read this book for the very first time. He could have been too busy and blown me off and dismissed it but he didn't. Thankfully, that day he was willing to discuss it. In fact, I remember at that meeting my pastor recommended to me this book called, "When Skeptics Ask." And it was the first book that really led me on a journey to explore the tough questions about the Christian faith and the solid answers that we can find. You know, this book led me to that book, which led me to another book, and I took all the books off my shelf that are really about skeptical, hard questions, and I counted, I think, 33; maybe a couple more. I read questions about where the world came from, was it an evolutionary process or was it a creator God? I've read books about the problem of evil and suffering, how can that happen if there's a good, all-powerful God who loves all of us? My pastor that day really launched me on a journey to see if the Christian faith was defensible and reasonable among all the options. And I'm so glad that he did because having all that knowledge and having read all these books, I can tell you that the Christian faith is not a blind faith and it's not a belief that you have to turn off your brain to follow and embrace in its entirety. There's something beautiful and true and reasonable about Christianity.

And essentially, that's what I'd like to share with you over the next few weeks because I'm guessing at some time in your life, you're going to have to do the exact same thing as my pastor. You're going to have to make a decision to either dismiss a hard question or discuss it. You know, when that hand comes up in class or your teenager gets the boldness to ask, "Mom, why are we Christians?" Or your friend or your roommate or that question in the comments section kind of challenges traditional Christian belief, you can dismiss it but I can tell you what's going to happen because I've talked to a lot of people who used to be Christians and who used to go to church and who used to be there every Sunday but they had a tough question that no one was

willing to answer. They were simply dismissed and told to just believe but in the end they did the opposite.

That's why today and for the weeks to come instead of dismissing tough questions, I want to discuss them. I want to throw out three to five of the toughest questions that Christians face and see if there's any true and reasonable answers for us to follow because the truth is, Christianity has some incredibly reasonable, powerful, and supernatural claims. And this is the kind of teaching that Jesus' friends and followers have been doing for centuries.

Let me prove it to you, actually. In Acts 17, the apostle Paul showed us how he reached out to people who had skeptical questions. It says in this verse, "Paul reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there." Paul didn't just preach, he didn't say "believe it." He didn't share his story and expect you to accept it. Instead, he reasoned with people - with the church people in the synagogue, with non-church people in the marketplace. He was willing to show them how Christianity, even though it was supernatural, it was also rational and reasonable.

The Bible; because it's the question, right? Why prioritize the Bible? There are many religions, there are many good people, there are many different cultures, many beliefs. Why would we think this one is just not a holy book but the holy book to be trusted and followed? How would you answer that question? If your roommate said, "Hey, I see you on your Bible app all the time. Why do you read that?" Could you give a better answer than, "That's how I grew up?" If you're challenged in a world religions or comparative religions class in college, "Why are you a Christian instead of a Buddhist or a Hindu or nothing at all?" What would you say? The first good, logical reason I think for you to trust the Bible is this: The prophets' knowledge. The prophets' knowledge. Specifically, what those B.C. prophets knew about the A.D. Jesus is a persuasive argument to believe that this book actually comes from God.

To prove it though, I suppose we have to talk about Jesus. Do you know the basic story of Jesus? He is conceived in the womb of a woman named Mary, born in a little town called Bethlehem. He's raised in Nazareth, this dinky little village up in Galilee where he grows up. And there's nothing about the way Jesus looks - he doesn't glow, he doesn't float, his appearance is totally normal, he's not majestic or glorious, he doesn't look all that divine. But then when he was just a little bit younger than I am today, Jesus started to teach and to preach publicly. And even though he taught with authority, people for the majority didn't accept him. Instead, they rejected him and they dismissed him and they oppressed him. Actually, history tells us that Jesus was arrested and he was mocked and he was abused and he was tortured. He was crushed and he was pierced and he was put on a cross. But he didn't defend himself. Instead of opening his mouth to defend his innocence, Jesus just stood there and took it. He said that he had to for you and for me. And they put him in a grave. A rich man named Joseph of Arimathea buried him in his own tomb but according to the witnesses, three days later Jesus didn't stay there. He busted out of the darkness of the grave and he saw the light of life. That's the basic story of Jesus, right?

Some of you know that and apparently, the prophet Isaiah did, too. Look what Isaiah wrote in chapter 53 of his prophecy. Referring to Jesus, he said, "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him; nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by

mankind, a man of suffering and familiar with pain. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was on him and by his wounds, we are healed. He was oppressed and afflicted yet he did not open his mouth. He was led like a lamb to the slaughter. He was assigned a grave with the wicked and with the rich in his death. After he has suffered, he will see the light of life."

That's crazy! Just incredibly specific of what would happen to Jesus. But here's the crazier thing: Isaiah was not a first century eyewitness reporter who saw that happen to Jesus. No, Isaiah lived 700 years before Jesus was born. So how did he know that? And how did he know the other stuff? In Isaiah 7, Isaiah somehow knew that Jesus would be born of a virgin. In Isaiah 9, he somehow knew that Jesus would bring light to a dark place called Galilee, where he grew up. In Isaiah 11, he knew that Jesus would come from the family of Jesse and King David, which is Mary's family line. How did he know that? And how did the rest of the prophets know that? How did the prophet Micah, hundreds of years before Jesus, know that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem? How did the prophet Daniel know the time and history when the Savior would be born? How did the prophet Jeremiah know that Jesus would be betrayed by one of his closest friends? How did the prophet David know the very words that Jesus would speak from the cross? That he would be pierced in his hands and his feet and that his body would not stay in the grave and decay? How did he know that? Now, reason with me for a second. Was he like a good guesser? Or did he have a connection; a connection with God?

That's what the apostle Peter said in a rather famous passage from his second letter. Peter said these words: "Prophecy never had its origin in the human will but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." Were Isaiah and Moses and David and Jeremiah just men? Yeah. But did they have help when they wrote the Bible? Yeah. They were carried by the Holy Spirit and that's why we believe this is a holy book.

Many decades ago, a mathematician tried to calculate the odds of Isaiah just being a good guesser. He put together just eight of the prophecies and there are more than 100 of them in the Old Testament. What are the odds that this just happened to be true? You know, there's a guy who happened to be born in this town, happened to move to this town, happened to come from this family line. You know, what if it's just a crazy chance? And this mathematician calculated the odds and here is his comparison. He said if you would cover the entire state of Texas with quarters, over a foot deep - all of Texas; big state - if you'd take one quarter, mark it with an "x," bury it somewhere in the great state of Texas and then have a blind man go wading through all the quarters and he gets to pick one, the odds of him finding the quarter with the "x" are the same as the odds of just eight of the prophecies of Jesus happening to come true. Is that reasonable to you? Nope. The prophets' knowledge is the first really good reason why Christians believe the Bible is a holy book. And grab your pen cause here's the second - not just the prophets' knowledge. The second reason to trust in this book is the apostles' witness; what the apostles, Peter, James, and John, saw and touched and heard is incredibly unique and persuasive.

About a decade ago, I read this book: The Koran, the sacred text of the Muslim people. And as I read it, I also learned the origins of where this book came from. You know, who came up with these words and how are they written down? And here's the story that Muslim scholars will tell you. That in the early 600's A.D., about 600 years after Jesus, a guy named Mohammad was in a

cave near the city of Mecca and there the angel Gabriel spoke to him. He revealed the word of Allah, or the word of God. And that was the first in a series of revelations that ended up as this book. Now, Mohammad himself was illiterate; he couldn't read and he couldn't write so he spoke the words of these visions and revelations to his friends who memorized them and eventually put them down in the Arabic language, which is where the Koran comes from today.

Now the challenge with that is that we can't prove it. Did God speak to Mohammad or didn't he? I don't know; I wasn't in the cave and neither were you. There was no one that saw, no one that heard, no one that touched. This entire book lives and dies on the single experience of a man that simply can't be repeated or proven. And when I heard where this book came from, it made me really interested in where this book came from because when the apostles talked about where these messages came from, it wasn't some like dream or revelation or experience. No, instead it was what they witnessed. I love how the apostle Paul put it in 1 Corinthians 15. He said, "What I received," so this is the Christian message, "what I received, I passed on to you as a first importance. That Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than 500 other brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, although some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Then last of all, he appeared to me also as to one abnormally born."

Why believe in Jesus? Paul would say because we saw him and we heard him and it wasn't just me and my buddy here who made up the story. It was all the apostles and it was Mary and it was the women and then it was 500 people and you know what? Most of them are still living if you want to go interview them for yourself. There was so much evidence and proof that whether you were a follower of Jesus or a skeptic, like his brother James or even the apostle Paul himself, there was something you could investigate; something true and rational about the Christian belief.

And if you'd open the Bible today after church, you'd find out that this is exactly how the early Christians shared the message. In Acts 2, Peter gets up to preach and there's a bunch of skeptics who think he's drunk and he says, "No, no, no. I'm just telling you about Jesus; the one that you saw." In Acts 13, Paul gets invited to speak to some skeptics who don't trust in Jesus and he's in a synagogue; he does the exact same thing: Let me tell you what we saw, what we heard, what you witnessed. My favorite though happens at the end of the book of Acts. Paul's been arrested, he's awaiting his trial in Rome, and he actually gets to speak to a king named Agrippa and a very powerful politician named Festus. And here's Paul, his hands are chained, and he's trying to explain why he follows Jesus and I want you to look at what he says. "I'm saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen." There's point one, right? "That the Messiah would suffer and as the first to rise from the dead would bring the message of light to his own people and to the gentiles." At this point, Festus interrupted Paul's defense. "You're out of your mind, Paul." He shouted. "Your great learning is driving you insane." "I'm not insane, most excellent Festus," Paul replied. "What I'm saying is true and reasonable. The king is familiar with these things and I can speak freely to him. I'm convinced that none of this has escaped his notice because it was not done in a corner."

What does Paul say to the king? Well, Jesus has to be true; I just feel it in my heart. I used to be a bad man and now look at how good I am. No, he said, "King, you know what happened. You heard. You saw. This wasn't done in a cave or in a corner. It was done on a cross for all to see and you know it." So how would you explain that? What happened 2,000 years ago to turn our world upside down? Why did these Jewish men start to believe in Jesus? Why were they willing to suffer, even to the point of crucifixion and death for their message? Why would they change their day of worship from Saturday, the Sabbath that had been pounded into their little Jewish heads since they were kids, and they'd flip and call Sunday the Lord's day? Unless something really happened on a Sunday; something that gave living hope to people who were dead in sin when Jesus stepped out of the grave and saw the light of life. Wow, you put those two things together - like what are the odds the prophets weren't helped by God and what are the odds that Jesus didn't actually appear to the disciples, the apostles? And you have powerful proof that this book, written by the prophets and the apostles themselves, comes from God.

And I thought that was a pretty good argument until he told me it wasn't. There's this guy I know, a fellow pastor, who's like - he's read this many books on this topic. He was a philosophy major and professor before he decided to get into ministry and he knows so much about all the arguments for the Bible and against the Bible. So I called him up and I gave him my pitch for today's message. Alright, what do you think? The odds, the prophets' knowledge, the apostles' witness, that's pretty good, right? And he said, "Is that how you became a Christian, Mike?" Like, ugh, I hate you; now I have to rewrite my sermon. No, it's not, and I actually wrote down his quote. Here's what he said. He said, "I think it's great that God gave us all that evidence but we trust the Bible because Jesus did." The reason Christians cling to this book is not just because there's great evidence. What gives us hope in the first place that this is the word of God is that Jesus believed it was. He read this book, he quoted this book, he looked to this book, he obeyed this book. He said the word of this book cannot be broken. And the reason we trust Jesus that much to hold onto this book is because Jesus is unlike anyone. His teaching and his offer is unlike anything.

In fact, the third is probably the most powerful reason I think you should trust the Bible. Here it is: It's Jesus' uniqueness. Because Jesus offers a beautiful and unique answer to the hardest and most frequent questions we ask ourselves. If you're anything like me, you know, you might be bothered on occasion by creation and evolution or, you know, where the Bible came from or did Jesus really rise from the grave. But I bet you're hounded by a more frequent skepticism. The question, "Is God still for me?" and "Is God still with me?" and "Does God still love me?" and "Does God have a plan for me?" As you sit in your bed at the end of the day and you wonder, as you think about your life and the things that you've done and you question the biggest questions of all, "Is God still with me, for me, and on my side?" You know what this book would tell you? If you broke it, you better fix it. That's what Allah told Mohammad. That on the judgment day, giant scales will be dragged out and everything good you've ever done will be placed here and everything bad and God knows so you better be good. Do you know what the teaching of karma would tell you? You better fix it. What goes around comes around and the universe knows what you think, the motives of your heart, every word that's come out of your mouth, so if you don't fix that fast, the universe is going to get you. You know about reincarnation? Good people are brought back and given a better life; bad people are not. So are you sure that you're good and not bad? All these different philosophies and beliefs get back to the same place: If you messed up

and, come on, we're all messed up, how are you going to clean up the mess? Where Jesus offered something radically different; Jesus offered something that we call grace. No strings attached love. Free forgiveness. We fall on our knees, we reach out to Jesus, and he does what no one would expect. What's almost unbelievable and irrational. His love isn't logical but he still gives it.

I love how Isaiah said it in chapter 53; he says, "He," Jesus, "was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was on him and by his wounds we're healed." How do you make up for what happened last night? How do you stand before God when he knows every thought, every motive of the heart? The answer is the unique teaching of Jesus; by his wounds we are healed. At his cross, we see the compassion of God. We reach out to God and he responds to us with grace; with unconditional love. So you don't have to have the pressure on your back of trying to be a good person and doing good things, which really you're trying to do just to get out of hell yourself. Instead, you can serve freely with love because you have first been loved by a Jesus who said what no one else would say.

Mohammad says in the Koran that Jesus didn't die on the cross; he passed out. That's why they saw him alive. I refuse to believe it. Not just because historically it couldn't happen - Romans were good at killing people - but because we needed it to happen, right? If he wasn't wounded, crushed, pierced, and died, we would not have hope and life and an eternity with God. And so, I speak respectfully to people of other religions, other backgrounds, other cultures, but you have to know this isn't apples to apples; there's something unique and powerful and magnetic about the teaching of Jesus.

And that's what I said to that young man last week. He launched that tough question on me in the lobby - I thought I was going to shake a hand and not to answer what makes Christianity different. He said, "Pastor, don't all sorts of books tell us to love each other and keep the golden rule?" And this was my response to him: Yes. But only one book helps when you don't. There's only one book that gives you unconditional love from a crazy good God and it's the teaching of this one. That God so loved the world he gave his only Son, that whoever would believe in him would not perish but have eternal life because by the wounds of Jesus, we have been healed.

I read a lot of books. Next to my bed stand right now are, I think, six more that I'm trying to read before the end of this series. And those books will be read and put back on the shelf but there's one book that will always stay by my side; the book that gives me hope, confidence, peace, joy, and forever with God. And you can read it, too. The Holy Spirit inspired this so you would never have to live with fear, regret, or shame but to know that eternal life is yours because this is not just some book; it's a holy book, a book from God.

Let's pray.

Dear Lord, thank you so much for your grace. If you treated us as we deserve to be treated, we couldn't make it. We'd have to lie to our self, God, and we could never find rest in your presence. So thank you for mercy, thank you for salvation, thank you that it's by grace we're saved and not by works, so that we don't boast and so we don't have to be afraid.

God, help us to hold onto this book. Help us to believe that it's a lifeline; it's a power source. Your word is living and active and faith comes from hearing this message. We want our faith to be stronger so in the midst of our chaotic and busy lives, God, help us to always prioritize and carve out time for this. That you'd strengthen our faith and we'd find joy and peace because of it.

Jesus, thank you for the evidence. You could have whispered to the apostles and prophets but you didn't. You gave us something so powerful and logical that we can be like Paul and say to people who think we're insane that this is true and reasonable because you hung on a cross and didn't hide in a corner. We thank you for the evidence that backs up our faith and we thank you for the uniqueness of grace. We ask it all in your name and all God's people said Amen.