

September 8, 2019

THE TRUTHFULNESS AND AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

Systematic Theology 1

(2 of 12 in a series on the doctrines of Scripture and God)

Last week we began this class arguing that because God needs nothing outside of himself for anything, then that means that God is self-attesting. That is, God appeals to nothing outside of himself to attest to the truth or authority of what he is saying. In fact, the author of Hebrews tells us in Hebrews 6:13 that “when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself.” And that’s the key; since there’s no one greater than God to attest to God, then God attests to himself. Consequently, if the Bible is *God’s Word*, then the Bible must also be self-attesting, and indeed it is. The Bible claims for itself to be God’s very words. We looked at a number of places where we saw that last week.

This week, then, I simply want to continue to lay a groundwork for how we understand the Scripture. Specifically this week I want to address the truthfulness and authority of Scripture. I want us to understand that the Bible is true, trustworthy, and an authority in our lives. After all, if we miss this then we are not going to relate to the Scripture as we should, and we will definitely go awry in our theology. So, let me walk through some thoughts where I hope to unfold a doctrine of the truthfulness and authority of Scripture. I want to walk us through this in steps. So, here we go.

The God of the Bible is trustworthy and true

I don’t think anyone would really want to push back on this, but I want to show this to you in the Scripture. The Scripture specifically says that God cannot speak untruth; his words are always true. So, for example, we read the following:

Numbers 23:19 – “God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?”

2 Samuel 7:28 – “And now, O LORD God, you are God, and your words are true, and you have promised this good thing to your servant.”

Psalms 12:6 – “The words of the LORD are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times.”

Proverbs 30:5 – “Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.”

Titus 1:2 – “. . . in hope of eternal life, which God who never lies, promised before the ages began . . .”

Hebrews 6:17-18 – “So when God desired to show more convincingly to the theirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.”

The Bible then presents God as one who is always trustworthy and true. The Bible also presents one who is ignorant of nothing. He knows all things.

In fact, not only does God *know* all things, but the psalmist tells us that he actually *wrote down* all the days of our lives before any of them had been lived:

Psalms 139:16 – “Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.”

In Isaiah 40-48 the Lord mocks the false gods because they cannot declare what is going to happen before it happens, but God can.

Now, why make these points that God is always true and knows all things? Well, because you will speak untruthfully if you simply are deceitful, but clearly God is not. He is always true and trustworthy. And we will sometimes speak erroneously if we are ignorant of something. So, I might say that the state tree of Kentucky is the coffee tree because that’s what I was taught when I was younger. Therefore, I’ve said that for years as this important topic of state trees comes up again and again!

However, I realized a few years ago that Kentucky changed its state tree to the tulip tree, thus negating the education of generations of students. I spoke erroneously not because I was full of deceit but simply because I was ignorant of this change. Well, God is not deceitful or ignorant, therefore his words are always trustworthy and true.

If God is always true and trustworthy, then so is God’s Word – the Bible

This is sound logic:

1. God's words are always true and trustworthy.
2. The Bible is God's Word.
3. Therefore, the Bible is true and trustworthy.

However, the Bible explicitly affirms this as well. The following texts serve as a few examples:

Psalm 119:43 – “And take not the *word of truth* utterly out of my mouth, for my hope is in your rules.”

Psalm 119:60 – “The sum of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever.”

John 17:17 – “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.”

This means then that when we are describing the Bible:

Words like Inerrancy and Infallibility are helpful descriptions of Scripture

Perhaps you've heard these words “inerrancy” and “infallibility” when people have referred to Scripture, and you don't know what they mean. Well, the meaning of each is simple. When someone claims that God's Word is “inerrant” they mean that it is without error; that is, it is true. When one claims that the Bible is “infallible” they *should* mean that the Bible is *unable* to be false, precisely because it is God's Word and God is unable to speak untruthfully.

Now, I say that the person *should* mean that the Bible is unable to be false because there were a group of theologians who started using that word “infallible” to mean something weaker than without error. They used it to mean that simply in matters of salvation the Bible was true. So, for example, they argued that the Bible might be false in claiming that the plagues happened in Egypt, that a fish swallowed Jonah, or the like. However, they continued to argue, because these things aren't really important to salvation, it doesn't matter that they were untrue. We just need to affirm that the Bible is true in everything that it affirms regarding matters important to salvation.

There are a few problems with that that I will discuss in a second. But one problem is that they chose a really bad word to use to represent their view that the Bible is only true in some places. After all, for something to be infallible means that it is unable to be false, unable to err. Therefore, I say we take that word back and rightly argue that the

Bible is inerrant (without error – i.e. true) because it is infallible (God is unable to speak untruth and the Bible is *God's Word*).

Now, with this said, there are some elements we need to understand within this. Here are a few:

By arguing the Bible is without error, we don't mean every copy of the biblical text is without error, but we do mean the biblical text as originally written is without error

So, what we are saying when we rightly note that the Bible is without error is that the biblical text that the author's wrote is without error. That is, when Paul first wrote the letter to the Romans, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, what he wrote was without error. However, what eventually happened is that scribes began to make copies of that letter (and the other biblical books) so that they could be dispersed throughout the churches. And eventually copies of copies are made and at certain points there started to appear some variations in documents. So, for example, as I was writing this sentence I looked down at my Bible and read John 16:27 where Jesus says, "For the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God." But then, in the ESV pew Bible I read there is a footnote by the last word "God" that says, "Some manuscripts [read] *from the Father*." So, obviously, as the gospel of John began to be copied, some copies began to diverge at this point and read "from the Father" while others read "from God." What then do we say to this?

Well, first, we need to acknowledge that this is quite rare. Wayne Grudem notes that "for over 99 percent of the word of the Bible, we *know* what the original manuscripts said."¹ That is, there is simply no question for over 99 percent of the words of Scripture as to what the original documents said. Moreover, when you do have these variations, on most occasions there is pretty strong evidence what the original manuscript said. So, for example, if the oldest and most of the manuscripts say a certain thing and another later manuscript says something else, then our Bibles will include a footnote like the ESV does in John 16:27, but it doesn't mean that we don't feel confident about what the original manuscript said. Finally, there's never a place where there's a variant that leaves us questioning matters of doctrine. The Bible is a repetitive, redundant book concerning doctrines, and that's a blessing.

So, we can be confident that our Hebrew Old Testament and Greek New Testaments are accurate. They represent the inerrant text that the biblical authors wrote. And then our

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 96.

English translations that attempt to translate these Greek and Hebrew texts accurately are reliable as well.

Another note I want to make where people may misunderstand inerrancy is in recognizing that the Bible speaks truthfully but,

The Bible it is not concerned with scientific and technical precision

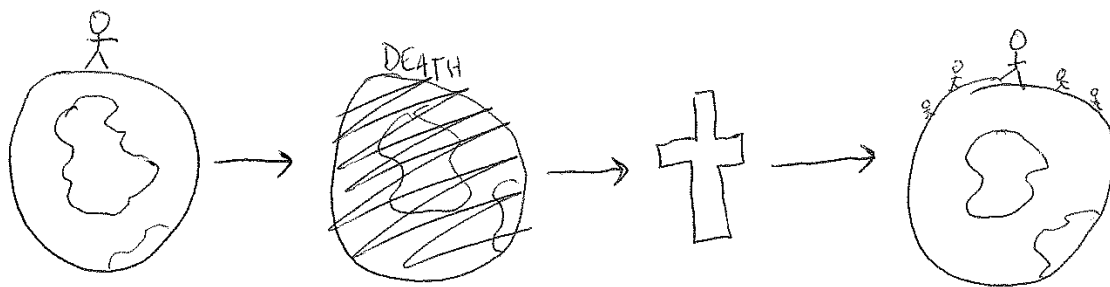
Now, what I mean by this is that God spoke in a way to be understood. So, for example, when we speak of the sun rising, we're not being untruthful, even though the sun doesn't technically rise at all. This is language in which we talk and how we understand reality. The Bible uses this language as well.

Moreover, when we say that a book is 300 pages, we aren't being untruthful if the book is actually 297 pages. We're intending to speak generally and no one would accuse you of being untrue in stating that you read a 300 page book if the book were only 297 pages. So, the Bible will at times speak in round numbers or say that "all Judea" went to hear John the Baptist. Therefore, we have to read the Bible as it intends to be read, and it's not intending to be a scientific manual.

One other important detail to note about the Bible is that,

Bible comes to us progressively

That is to say, the Bible didn't just come to us at one moment in a complete whole. Rather, the Bible was written over thousands of years as the Spirit utilized multiple human authors. Amazingly, though, the Bible tells one story. It's the story of creation, the fall, redemption, and new creation. I've pictured this story before in the following poor illustration:



So, we might simply sketch the biblical story out in these steps:

1. God created the world.

When God created the world, all was good. Mankind imaged God, perfectly reflecting, resembling, and representing him as we reign over creation. This was paradise. Mankind was with God, delighting in God, and obeying God. However, we know that soon everything went wrong; paradise was lost.

2. Man sinned and creation fell.

In Genesis 3, we are told that Adam and Eve sinned. And when they sinned, they and everything else in all of creation was cursed. The ground starting bearing thorns and thistles. Death reigned over the earth. And humanity's nature was corrupted with sin. I mean, in the very next chapter after the fall, Cain kills his brother Abel, and in the chapter thereafter we have a record of everyone living a while and then dying. Now, that is common to us, but before the fall death wasn't even in the picture.

However, God began promising coming redemption. Some of these promises were explicit. In Genesis 3:15, for example, God promised that there would be a son who would be born from the woman's line, and he would crush the head of the serpent, that which we recognize as Jesus being born and conquering Satan by his life, death, and resurrection from the dead.

But there are other less direct promises as well. In fact, most of the Old Testament predicts this promise of coming redemption in *indirect* ways, just by giving us pictures, types, shadows, and symbols of what is coming. You have pictures of who Jesus is and what he will do in persons, institutions, and practices in the Old Testament that seem great in themselves but always point you toward more. So, for example, you see the sacrifices of bulls, goats, and lambs for sin. That's great. But you realize that these are just types and shadows because we have to keep repeating them. But they're helpful types and shadows because they're giving us a picture of what God must do for us. His own Son must come and make atonement for us through the sacrifice of himself. And then he comes.

3. Jesus comes, lives, dies, and is raised to redeem us from sin and judgment.

Jesus is the answer to how a sinful people can be reconciled to a holy God again and dwell with him in paradise. He comes and obeys God at every point, living a perfectly holy life, dies on the cross to pay the penalty for the sins of anyone who would repent of their sins and believe in him, and then he is raised from the dead on the third day,

conquering death forever. Therefore, if anyone believes in him, we are united with him by faith so that the blessings that Christ receives come to us as well. And because he's coming back to make the earth new again and reign over a new creation, we will get to reign with him with no more sickness, sin, pain, disease, or death. This leads us to our last point in the Bible's storyline.

4. Jesus will come back to raise the dead and make a new perfect creation where we reign with him forever.

The Bible doesn't scrap God's good creation but redeems it. One day God's children will be raised from the dead and the earth made perfectly new so that we can reign with the Lord forever.

Now, why go over this storyline? Well, a few reasons. First, it helps us understand the nature of the Bible. The Bible tells a story that works kind of like a mystery novel, where you get a number of clues in the early books as to who Jesus is and what he will do, but you never understand clearly until you get to the pages of the New Testament. Someone has said that the Old Testament is simply the New Testament concealed, and the New Testament is the Old Testament revealed. So, after you see who Christ is, you go back (like in a mystery novel) and read more about those clues that were given, understanding even more what they teach us about the nature of who Jesus is and what he has done for us.

Another key reason for mentioning this progressively revealed story that makes up the Scripture is that it means that we can't treat the Bible like a textbook of truths. That is to say, it is true that the Bible is trustworthy and true in everything it says, but you can't just open to a page of the Bible, read it, and always apply it directly to your life and theology.

Now, that sounds a little strange to say, so let me illustrate what I mean. Genesis 1:31 says that everything that God made was good. Now, the last thing God made was mankind. Therefore, can we say that mankind is good? Well, no of course not. In fact, the Bible later affirms that there is none good and all have sinned (Romans 3:1-23). Well, what has changed? What has changed is that we are living at a point in the storyline of Scripture after the fall. And since the fall all men are corrupted with a sinful nature.

Here's another example. You could read in a number of Old Testament books how God commands the sacrifice of a lamb, bulls, or goats for sin. So, is this how we understand atoning for sin? Of course not. Why not? Well, because we are living at a point in the

storyline of the Bible on this side of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. And after the sacrifice of Jesus, we are told that there is no longer any sacrifice needed.

Let's look at one final example. Revelation 21-22 paint a picture where Christ is reigning and there is no sickness, pain, sin, or death. So, should we develop some theology that says that we should never be sick or feel pain, never sin, and even never die? Of course not. Why not? The answer of course is because Revelation 21-22 is describing a scene that has not yet come in the Bible's storyline. One day Jesus will return from heaven and bring about this world of paradise, but that day hasn't come yet. And today we still struggle with sickness, pain, disease, sin, and death.

So, it's important as we rightly note that the Bible is true and trustworthy in all it affirms that we also note that the Bible tells a story, progressively revealed, and at any one point it is crucial for us to understand where we are in the Bible's storyline.

So, let me make one final point before we end this morning:

Because the Bible is God's Word we don't stand in judgment over the Bible; it stands in judgment over us

When Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, the problem was that they thought they could stand in judgment over God's Word. The serpent approached her and challenged what God said, questioning whether God was trustworthy and true in what he had stated. And Eve's first wrong step was thinking that she was capable to stand in judgment over God's Word.

You and I as well cannot stand in judgment over God's Word. God gave his Word to be accepted and obeyed. We can't receive part of it, for it is God's Word, it's not given to us to be judged and obeyed in part. It's made to be accepted and obeyed.

Years after Adam and Even stood in the garden and faced temptation, there was another, Jesus of Nazareth, who stood and heard lies from the devil as well, but he showed us a different path. Instead of judging God's Word, he simply quoted it again and again, noting that there is no need to argue: God had spoken, his Word was trustworthy and true, and it must be obeyed. There was no need to go into further discussion with the devil. That must be our position as well. We must see God's Word as what it is: trustworthy, true, and as that which stands not to be judged by us but as that which stands as an authority over us. Amen.