

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

April 30, 2023

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Time-Tested Truths for Our Times

Taken for Granted No More

(Many passages. Really.)

Study #1

Introduction: Taking it for granted...

Growing up in the United States, I have enjoyed certain luxuries that I know are not “givens” in other places.

Things like clean drinking water, dependable electricity, toilets. Stuff like that.

When I have traveled to some of these other places (or when I go camping), I drink bottled water (or treat the water), do without dependable electricity, and make use of different bathroom arrangements.

Convenient utilities are so normal here that I take them for granted.

I am aware that hundreds of millions of people don't have access to these conveniences, but I don't give thanks every time I get clean water from the tap, turn on a lamp, or close the bathroom door.

It is true, though, that without these amenities, my life would be not simply different, but more difficult.

They bring great benefits. So, something like gratitude would be perfectly appropriate every time I use them.

They should not be taken for granted.

For the next few minutes, we're going to focus on another treasure that we here today are blessed to have. It is a treasure to which hundreds of millions of people today don't have access.

I hope that by the time we're done, we'll never again take this treasure for granted.

In the weeks ahead...

Beginning this morning, we're starting a six-week series of studies that will be a bit more topical in nature than is the norm here at Northwest.

Each of these messages will highlight time-tested truths that we believe are essential for 2023 **IF** we are going to shine bright for Jesus.

Today's message focuses on the Bible. (Each week, I prepare written copies of my messages. They are available in the lobby and online. A good bit of what is written will not be said out loud today, due to time constraints, but you might find some things helpful in what is written down. You can also find lots of great resources online to supplement today's message on the reliability of the Bible.)

My message divides into two sections, “*What?*” as in “*What is the Bible?*” and “*So what?*”

To begin with, Christians, like Jews, have always been known as a “People of The Book” - whether in the form of a scroll, a leather-bound book, or an app, we are people of the Book.

However, while we refer to the Bible as a book, it is actually an astounding collection of books. So, for a few minutes, let's think together about the Bible.

The Bible: What?

The Bible is Old, but Reliable

(The Bible we read is the Bible that was written)

Both the Old and New Testaments are very old.

And, while we do have the original Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights of the United States under glass in the National Archives museum, we do NOT have the original documents penned by the biblical writers.

What we do have, though, is a very large collection of ancient manuscripts of both the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament.

With respect to the New Testament

In libraries around the world, we have thousands of Greek copies of portions of the New Testament dating from the second centuries.¹

And compared to the lack of copies of secular writings we have, the manuscript evidence for the Bible is very impressive.²

We can say with confidence that the New Testaments we read today are essentially what the original writers wrote in the first century.

With respect to the Old Testament

We would say the same thing for the Old Testament.

But, since the copying of the Old Testament texts was handled with the utmost care due to the reverence of the Jews for the written

¹ Papyrus fragments of John's Gospel date to as early as AD 117. The time span for most of the New Testament is less than 200 years from authorship, some of it less than 100 years. We also have thousands of Latin manuscripts, which consist of citations of the New Testament in the writings of the early church fathers.

² Author	Date written	Earliest copy	# of copies
Homer	850 BC	no ancient copies	
Herodotus	450 BC	AD 900	8
Thucydides	420 BC	AD 900	9
Plato	380 BC	AD 900	7
Aristotle	350 BC	AD 110	5
Livy	10 BC	no ancient copies	
Tacitus	AD 100	AD 1100	20
New Testament	AD 60	AD 130	14,000

From I'm Glad You Asked, Ken Boa and Larry Moody, Victor Books, 1994. p. 93.

Word of God, when a copy of the Old Testament was made (by hand, remember) the original was destroyed. Any damaged copy was also destroyed.

For that reason, until recently, we had very few ancient manuscripts of the Old Testament.

Then, in 1947, a discovery was made at the Dead Sea.

Hundreds of Old Testament texts that had been preserved by first-century Jews in caves at the site of the community of Qumran near the Dead Sea were discovered.

These texts pre-dated the oldest texts we had by as much as one thousand years.

Yet scholars found that when they compared the copies of the sixth century AD with these Dead Sea Scrolls from centuries before Christ, there were virtually no differences.³

So, for both the Old and New Testaments, except for the translation factor, our English translations are faithful renderings of the originals of Genesis, the Psalms, Isaiah, the Gospels and Paul's writings.

But we can say more about the Bible than this. For one, the Bible is uniquely influential.

The Bible is Uniquely Influential

The Bible tends to standardize languages into which it is translated. Martin Luther's Bible (Die Heilige Schrift) standardized the German language for hundreds of years.

The 1611 King James Version did the same for English. It's been the same in other cultures.

³ Hebrew scholars (the Masoretes) were charged with copying the OT from 500AD until the printing press was invented. These scholars gave such care to accurate copying that the words written by the OT writers were faithfully preserved for as much as a thousand years to reflect exactly what the author had written.

And the Bible's teachings have profoundly influenced western philosophy, morality, art, music, literature,⁴ education and law.⁵

OK. The Bibles we have are virtually identical to the original writings and the Bible is influential.

But are the words that we read in our Bibles accurate? Are they historically reliable?

The Bible is Historically Accurate

Well, archaeologists have repeatedly confirmed the historical accuracy of the Bible.

I could give dozens of illustrations here, but I'll restrict myself to two or three.⁶

ONE, for most of the 19th century, some scholars discounted any references in the Bible to the Hittite Empire, because there was no

⁴ I graduated from college with a degree in English. One of my professors told our class, *"If you want to understand great literature, read the Bible. Don't believe it! But read it."* He went on to make the point that the writings of every great English author from Chaucer to Shakespeare and beyond was saturated with biblical imagery.

⁵ Philosophers like Rene Descartes and Immanuel Kant were guided by the Bible's teachings. Even if their works were taken to unbiblical conclusions, these fathers of western philosophy were guided by a generally biblical worldview.

⁶ 1 - Tablets discovered at a site called Ebla confirm the accuracy of much of the later chapters of Genesis which record the stories of Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

2 - Excavations at places like Nuzi, Mari and Alakh, provide information that fits well with the Genesis stories and sheds light on patriarchal customs.

3 - The Moabite stone yields information about the reign of Omri, king of Israel, which agrees with the Bible.

4 - The Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III depicts how King Jehu of Israel had to submit to the Assyrian King, just like the Bible says he did.

5 - The Ras Shamra tablets (found in Ugarit) help us understand Hebrew prose and poetry as well as Canaanite culture.

6 - The Taylor Prism has an Assyrian text which describes Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem when Hezekiah was King. (recorded in Isaiah and 2 Kings)

7 - The Lachish letters refer to Nebuchadnezzar's invasion of Judah and illustrate the life and times of Jeremiah the prophet.

8 - Luke's accuracy as a New Testament historian has been repeatedly validated.

extra-biblical evidence that there had ever been a Hittite people - until 1906, when archaeologists unearthed the capital of the Hittites.

It has since been proved that the Hittite Kingdom was a major dynasty in the Ancient Middle East, gaining ascendancy right when the Bible said it was. (Around the time of Moses.)

TWO, for years, some people believed that Moses could not have written the Genesis - Deuteronomy portion of the Bible (what Jesus referred to as *"Moses' writings,"* John 5:46-47) because, they said, writing had not been invented when Moses lived.

Then came the discovery of the pre-Moses Law Code of Hammurabi to confirm that Moses could indeed have written the Pentateuch.

In fact, writings have now been discovered that pre-date Moses by a thousand years.

THREE, in the 1800's, some scholars taught that Jesus was a legend and did not actually live.

Today, nobody believes this. There is more historical evidence for the life of Jesus than there is for Julius Caesar.⁷

In short, archaeology undergirds and confirms the accuracy and historical reliability of the Bible.⁸

And another thing. There is an internal consistency to the Bible's flow and story and teachings despite lots of obstacles to consistency.

⁷ A letter by an imprisoned Syrian, Mara Bar-Serapion, dated AD 73 references the deaths of Socrates, Pythagoras and Jesus. The historians Tacitus and Seutonius, the Roman governor Pliny the Younger and the Greek satirist Lucian mention Jesus, as does the Jewish Talmud. As well, the Jewish historian Josephus mentions Jesus.

⁸ One of the foremost archaeologists of the 20th century, and a renowned student of the ancient world, Nelson Glueck, wrote: *In all my archaeological investigation I have never found one artifact of antiquity that contradicts any statement of the Word of God.*

The Bible is Internally Consistent Despite Challenges...

For instance, the Bible...

...consists of sixty-six books,⁹ and is made up of historical narrative, apocalyptic prophecy, law, poetry, wisdom, parable and didactic.

...was written by over forty authors who came from vastly different walks of life.¹⁰

...includes theological masterpieces, quick notes to friends, angry letters, books written in courtly language while others were written in a style fit for an unschooled fisherman, others spanning the emotional spectrum from fury to grief to ecstasy.¹¹

...was written over a two-thousand-year time span on three continents.¹²

...addresses all the grand themes of life, including the nature of both God and man, judgment, Heaven, Hell, demons, angels, the natural world, salvation, the future - and more.

Yet, despite all of this, the Bible speaks with one voice on the many subjects it addresses.

Amazing.

It is not uncommon to hear our family members, or our friends question the reliability of the Bible or its accuracy.

They have good questions - and we can give good and helpful responses.

⁹ Recall, too, that one of the books (Psalms) is made up of 150 songs.

¹⁰ These authors include Old Testament writers Moses, Samuel, Ezra, Nehemiah, David, Asaph, Solomon, and the prophets. New Testament writers were Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the apostles Paul and Peter, and Jude. These writers were kings, peasants, philosophers, fishermen, poets, statesmen, scholars, and farmers.

¹¹ Paul seems angry through much of his letter to the Galatians, but he's tender and fatherly when he writes to Timothy. He jots off a quick note to Philemon and then sits down to write a theological masterpiece to the Romans. Isaiah's Hebrew style is courtly and majestic. Peter's Greek is what you might expect from a fisherman. David's Psalms span the emotional spectrum from fury to grief to ecstasy.

¹² The earliest writing was probably Job, who was a contemporary of Abraham (roughly 2,000 BC). The Apostle John finished writing the New Testament with the book of Revelation near the end of the first century, a time span of 2100 years. Parts of the Bible were written in Europe, parts in Palestine, parts in the lands of captivity (Near East), and parts in Egypt (Africa).

Yes, the Bible is old, but just because it is old doesn't mean it is old-fashioned. It is not outdated at all.

Rather, it speaks with relevance to the matters of the heart in 2023 just as surely as it did thousands of years ago.

And that continuing relevance is due to another "What?" about the Bible that rises from its reliability, influence, accuracy and internal consistency.

The Bible was written by human authors - and their writing was overseen by God.

The Bible isn't a magic book, but it is of supernatural origin. The Bible is inspired by God.

The Bible is Inspired by God

Internal claims (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21)

For instance, Paul writes this about all of Scripture:

[2 Timothy 3:16-17] All Scripture is inspired by God...

The thought there is that God "breathed" the words that the writers of Scripture wrote.

The result is that when they wrote what they wrote, using their own personalities and life experiences and writing styles, they wrote exactly what God wanted them to write.

Scripture - like Jesus - is a perfect combination of the divine and the human.

The Apostle Peter has his own way of saying essentially the same thing in his second letter:

[2 Peter 1:20] But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture becomes a matter of someone's own interpretation, [21] for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

That claim to inspiration is a claim. OK. Is it a valid claim?

Well, there are different lines of evidence to say that it is more than a claim.

I'll just touch on the argument from fulfilled prophecy.

Fulfilled prophecy

I'm not talking about vague and general Nostradamus-like predictions that can be tied to any situation as convenient. I'm talking about specifics.

For instance, the prophet Nahum predicted that the city of Nineveh would be destroyed by fire and flood. (an odd prophecy...)

Nahum wrote this prediction sometime around 650 BC. In 612 BC, Nineveh was destroyed by fire and flood, just like Nahum said.¹³

Then there was Ezekiel's prophecy (chapter 26) that the city of Tyre would be destroyed and thrown into the sea - quite a prediction.

Tyre was one of the great cities in the world in the days of Ezekiel, but it was destroyed by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. So, the citizens of Tyre moved out to an island just offshore and re-established Tyre.

Then, two centuries later (in 332 BC), Alexander the Great brought his army to Tyre, and built a causeway with the rubble from the destroyed, original city of Tyre.

That causeway allowed his army to get to the island and totally obliterate all evidence of Tyre - an exact fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy.

Or consider the prophecies that speak to the coming of the Messiah of Israel that were all fulfilled in the life and ministry of Jesus.

¹³ The city straddled the Tigris River, and its walls were broken down by a sudden spring flood on the Tigris. The Babylonian army, joined by the Persians, who had been waiting patiently outside the seemingly impregnable walls, rushed in, ransacked, and then burned the city.

There are predictions as specific as:
 the miracle of His conception (conceived of a virgin).
 the place of His birth (Bethlehem).
 the course of His ministry (heal the sick; give sight to the blind; release to the captives).
 the character of His arrest (led as a lamb to the slaughter, silent as a sheep before its shearers)
 the manner of His death (pierced through)
 the site of His burial (a rich man's tomb).
 His resurrection from the dead.¹⁴

This is just a sampling of the many biblical prophecies that have been fulfilled, all of which speak of a divine Author behind the human writers.

The Bible is a book unlike any other book for all kinds of reasons. Primarily, though, because its contents are all inspired by God.¹⁵

That's the "*What?*" So what?

For one thing, the truths set out in the Bible and the wisdom we find in the Bible and even the stories we read in the Bible produce change.

They are not inert. They don't just sit there. They are powerful and authoritative.

The Bible: So What?

The Bible's Truths Produce Change

Internal claims

¹⁴ Many of these prophecies are from Isaiah 53. Also, Psalm 22, Isaiah 9, Micah 5.
¹⁵ (from our *Statement of Faith*) We believe that God has spoken in the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, through the words of human authors. As the verbally inspired Word of God, the Bible is without error in the original writings, the complete revelation of His will for salvation, and the ultimate authority by which every realm of human knowledge and endeavor should be judged. Therefore, it is to be believed in all that it teaches, obeyed in all that it requires, and trusted in all that it promises.

The Apostle Paul wrote this: ***[2 Timothy 3:16-17] All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; [17] that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.***

These are just some of the life-changing ways in which Scripture changes those who pay attention to it.

Hear, too, what the author of the book of Hebrews says about it: ***[Hebrews 4:12] ...the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.***

The Bible's truths and teachings are like a sharp sword. They have the ability to expose motives. They go below surface level.

And we see the life-changing nature of the Bible's impact repeatedly in its stories. Here's one from the Old Testament and another from the New.

Examples from Scripture

The life and times of Ezra and Nehemiah

In the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, the need was for safety and security in Jerusalem AND for spiritual revival. So, in these two short books, we read about the need for the Word of God over fifty times.

The returned exiles living in the times of Ezra and Nehemiah gave attention to the Law and revival broke out.

Their submission to Scripture brought about changed lives and a secure future for Israel.

In the days of the early church (first chapters of Acts)

Then, moving from the Old Testament, we find that there was a lot of attention given to the apostles' teaching in the early church.

That teaching would have included teaching from the Old Testament (Scripture), especially as it related to Jesus.

It would have also included the stories the apostles could tell from their personal experience with Jesus (stories and teachings that would soon make their way into Scripture).

All this teaching laid the foundation on which the church was built. The early church of Jesus flourished precisely because it was founded and grounded on what was or soon would be Scripture.

The church was built on Scripture's truths about Jesus. So, it was built on love and generosity and compassion and justice and prayer.

Can you imagine a more beautiful, winsome, attractive community than one built on these stones? No wonder people were coming to faith in Jesus day by day. Impact!

And given that the early church preached the exclusivity of Jesus as the only way to have life with God, no wonder they soon experienced persecution. Impact!

Today

We find the same life-changing and culture-changing transformations today when the Bible is introduced to a people group that has not previously had access to it.¹⁶

Here are just two stories from the website of The Seed Company that illustrate this:

- After hearing the Bible story of Cain and Abel, two warring tribes in the Democratic Republic of Congo forgave each other past offenses. The Bible brought about reconciliation.
- After listening to an audio recording of the Gospel of Mark, a Nigerian widow forgave the men who murdered her husband.

¹⁶ These two stories and more like them can be found on the website of The Seed Company, a ministry committed to translating God's Word into the heart language of those peoples who don't yet have access to it.

Where Scripture is unleashed, God's life-changing power is at work to do what only He can do:
 Save the one who believes in Jesus.
 Build families that build disciples.
 Meet human need in Jesus' Name.
 Comfort grieving hearts.
 Create communities that shine in the darkness.

This is the power of the Word of God. But there is more.

The Bible's Truths Bring Liberation...

From sin's penalty

Were it not for the Bible, we would not know the path of freedom from the penalty of sin. The Bible lays out the way to forgiveness: Believe in Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Now, we would know some things about God even if we didn't have the Bible. We'd know about His power in nature, His creativity and His majesty.

But we'd know nothing of His grace and love, nothing of His holiness and justice, nothing of how He bridged the gap between us by sending His Son to live, die, and rise again to give all who believe the gift of eternal life.

But we have the Bible, so we do know this.

From sin's mastery

And because we have the Bible, we also know how we who have come to know God through faith in Jesus can lead God-honoring lives and NOT be mastered by sin as we submit to Him and follow the liberating message of the Bible.

The teachings of the Bible liberate in the most practical ways we could imagine.

And, as God's gift to the whole human family, the Bible gives what is often called "common grace" in the form of a roadmap to human flourishing.

The Bible's Truths Promote Human Flourishing

We (humans) are dependent beings. We were not created to chart our own path, but to follow a path mapped out by the Creator.

When we follow the path He created for us, we flourish. When we don't follow that path, we don't flourish, either as individuals or as cultures.¹⁷

For instance, the Bible provides wisdom that directs us into healthy styles of relating with each other.

It gives us dramatic stories of loving friendships and of ugly betrayals, the beauty of loyalty, caution against dangerous relationships, and a host of relational "Do's" and "Don'ts."

We learn from these to our benefit.

The wisdom provided by the stories and the instructions of the Bible also charts a path to emotional health.

I say this after years of talking with people about a host of emotional and psychological challenges. The Bible equips us to deal with life maturely and courageously and beautifully, with grace.

Our culture is sexually confused - and the wreckage is heart-breaking. Open the Bible, though, and we find clarity. There is helpful teaching and helpful wisdom.

There are beautiful stories where sexual expression takes place within the guardrails of marriage and there are devastating stories where sexual expression is taken outside those guardrails.

¹⁷ The worst of all possible situations is one in which we all do "*what is right in [our] own eyes*" (Judges 17:6; 21:25), a phrase used to describe life in the period of the Judges when the people were not following God's Word.

The Bible's instructions about sexuality both protect and liberate. It speaks helpfully to sexual confusion. Our world needs this liberating wisdom.

The Bible, more than any other document, champions the beauty of diversity of races and ethnicities and cultures.

While all people are flawed, and Christians have often been guilty of the sin of racism - along with all sorts of other sins! - the solutions to the problems caused by racism are found in the Bible.

It commands that we love ALL people and looks forward to a day when those from every tribe, tongue, people and nation gather in worship around God's throne.

In these and in many other arenas (for instance, family, human authority, self-control, self-image, physical health and care of the body, and more), God gave His Word that we might thrive in the world He created for us.

Conclusion:

For a few years, around the turn of the millennium, I traveled to Russia to teach a course on the Minor Prophets in a Bible school setting.

Each year, I taught the book of Amos, which includes this:

***[Amos 8:11] "Behold, days are coming," declares the Lord GOD,
"When I will send a famine on the land,
Not a famine of bread or a thirst for water,
But rather for hearing the words of the LORD.
[12] People will stagger from sea to sea
And from the north even to the east;
They will roam about to seek the word of the LORD,
But they will not find it.
[13] On that day the beautiful virgins
And the young men will faint from thirst.***

Each year when I would read those words and look at the students who were gobbling up Scripture like men and women who hadn't had food for a long time.

I couldn't help but think of the damage done during the seven decades when the Soviet Union did not allow access to Scripture.

There had been a famine for the words of God and that famine took a devastating toll on the Russian people.

It is a good thing for you and me to grieve for the people who live in places where there is no easy access to the Bible. A famine for ***"the words of the Lord"*** is a terrible famine.

- I saw it when I went to the country of Guyana, South America.
 - It is increasingly difficult to use the Bible openly in India.
 - In Iran, the Bible is banned.
- (Thank God our church was able to send \$15,000 to purchase Bibles for Iranians in January because of your generosity!)

The very opposition of these regimes to the Bible shows their belief in the power of Scripture. The presence or the absence of Scripture makes an enormous difference in a person's life and in the life of a culture.

As we saw in the first part of our time together this morning, the phrase *"Taking something for granted"* can refer to not being grateful for something valuable.

So, here's one *"So what?"* to the *"What?"* we've seen today. Let's be sure that we won't ever be guilty of taking the Bible for granted.

But the phrase, *"Taking something for granted"* can also mean something like *"Duh. Everybody knows that."*

We take it for granted that the earth is round. It revolves around the sun. We take it for granted that tomorrow will bring a sunrise.

For a long time, it was taken for granted in our culture that the Bible was reliable and accurate and inspired.

I'm not suggesting that this was universal. But, for the most part, people accepted the influence and the teachings of the Bible as "*givens*."

It is no longer viewed this way by many people, and by many of our culture's core institutions. That the Bible is reliable, true, and inspired is no longer "*taken for granted*."

But we believe it.

You believe that the Bible is reliable, true, accurate, and influential.

You believe that it is inspired by God, and that it is therefore life-changing and impactful, therefore liberating, therefore essential for human flourishing - yours and others.

And we also live in 2023, a time distinctive for its 24/7 news cycles. We have access to countless newsfeeds and news sources.

These newsfeeds search us out. They are invasive. They pursue us and intrude into our mental space.

In 2023 we are spectators to experiments about how to order society. Many of these experiments and novel ideas run contrary to the Bible's wisdom.

And, again, we are bombarded by them with the "noise" from print and digital sources all the time.

Prominent voices in government, industry, entertainment, and education traffic in "spin", change positions weekly (or weakly), and advocate ideas the Bible doesn't.

We are torn.

We want desperately to pay attention to Scripture.

AND we are drawn to pay attention to cultural noise that is increasingly out of step with Scripture.

So, we'll end with another "*So what?*"

Given what you believe about what Scripture is and what Scripture does, will you decide today to accept as your authority for the ultimate meaning in life and for your life's direction the guide that God has given you in the Bible?

If you say, "*Yes, I will!*" today to that question, will you also prayerfully examine your life and ask yourself if you are giving the Bible space to be pre-eminent?

Or are you giving equal time and space (or even more time and mental space) to cultural noise that keeps you from your goal of living for the One who loves you best?

What changes might you make to your daily schedule to allow more input from God's Word? What new behaviors might you put in place to help you grow in your heart's desire to "***seek first God's kingdom***"?

To not decide that is to decide to be pushed and pulled by every new wind that blows, it is to build your house on shifting sand.

Jesus is the Rock on which we stand, and He has given us His Word to guide, to instruct, to warn, to equip us with the "news" we need to thrive for Him.

The call is for you to choose to NOT be subject to the changing winds of culture, and to DO as faithful Christians have done for the last two thousand years:

Shine for Jesus as you learn from His Word.

Live out what the Bible tells us is for God's glory and our flourishing.

And lovingly, creatively, graciously, and compassionately tell your friends and family the liberating message of the Bible!