

How do we know our version is accurate?

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[0 : 0 0] All right, now in part one, what I did was last week, I started out by saying that essentially if you want to know anything about the truthfulness and the reliability of the Bible, we need to start by asking, well, what does the Bible actually say about itself?

I suggest that that's the way to start out. And we did that. And amongst other things, we came to the conclusion last week that despite the fact that it is a human book written by human authors, it claims to be from God.

It claims to be the very word of God inspired by God or God breathed out. And because of that, secondly, it is reliable.

It is true. It doesn't have any mistakes because it reflects God's character. Jesus points out that the words of a man or a woman reflect his or her character.

That is why the Bible, if it is the word of God, it must be true. It must be right. And we need to therefore take it seriously.

[1 : 1 1] And of course, I also pointed out that the purpose of the Bible is not necessarily to show us how to repair our computers or you're not going to find any information in the Bible on how to repair your refrigerator or your motor car or whatever.

However, the purpose of the Bible is to point us to Christ. It is to teach us about God and it is to help us to come to a point where we enter into a relationship with God.

And that is why I said last week, the gospel is at the center of everything. Now, today in part two, we're going to spend a little bit of time.

I'm not going to teach on a particular passage. I'm going to talk a little bit about translations and how our modern Bibles came down to us. And I suppose our real question today is how do we know that the English translations or other translations we have today is really the same Bible that the ancient church used hundreds or even a couple of thousand years ago.

And it's going to be my purpose today to show you that if you're worried or you're doubtful, you've got nothing to worry about. That's going to be my purpose. But before I get to the good news, I'm going to give you the bad news.

[2 : 3 4] So I hope you're ready for the bad news. And the bad news on this particular issue is this. We do not have, believe it or not, a single copy of any original manuscript from the Bible.

That's the bad news. In other words, we do not have the original gospel of Mark. We do not have the original gospel that Luke wrote.

We do not have the original, original, original book of Genesis. We do not have the original book of Jeremiah that Jeremiah wrote.

We do not have an original book from the Bible at all. That's the bad news. In fact, I think the oldest fragment from the Bible that we have dates to around about 125 AD John's Gospel.

I think it's sitting in the library in the University of Manchester, if my memory serves me correctly. So that's the bad news. By the way, if God is sovereign, and if God is in charge of everything, then it is part of God's plan, by the way, that we don't have the originals.

[3 : 49] Now, why is that the case? Ask yourself that. Why has God ensured that we don't have the originals? Well, I think the answer is that if we did have the originals, we would probably be so impressed with them.

We would worship them. You know, some people get confused. Some Christians get confused. You hear stories of an alleged original piece from the cross of Jesus.

And somebody stands up and says, I've got an original piece of wood that comes from the cross of Jesus. And they put it in a room in a monastery somewhere. You heard stories like that? They call it a relic.

And people from all over the world go there and bow down and worship these funny artifacts. Well, I think in God's good wisdom and providence, we don't have the originals because if we did, we'd be all confused and we would worship them.

So that's the bad news. All right, what about the good news? Well, the good news is we have more copies and fragments of the Bible.

[4 : 55] And for the purposes of today, to keep things straightforward, we'll focus on the New Testament. We have more copies and fragments of the New Testament than any other ancient document.

In fact, we've got around about 6,000 copies and fragments of the New Testament dating from around about 200 AD to 1700 AD.

So again, more than any other document, ancient document in the history of the world. We've got more copies of the Bible. And that's even before the printing press was invented.

So the printing press was invented in the 15th century. And of course, that made the books a lot cheaper and knowledge became circulated more widely.

In fact, we could suggest perhaps that the invention of the printing press was even more revolutionary than that of the internet. But before the printing press, the Bible, the New Testament was copied out by hand.

[5 : 58] And there are literally thousands of those fragments and copies. But of course, the question is, what about mistakes? Were there mistakes in these original copies?

You know, the monks who copied out the books of the Bible in the Middle Ages were men who dedicated all of their energy and their lives to this task.

They were exceptionally fastidious and careful. Let me give an illustration. A monk would take a page from the New Testament or the Old Testament.

He'd put it on his big writing desk called a scriptorium. And what he would do is he would then take the original and he'd put the original there. Sometimes it would be read out to him. Sometimes he'd read out the original to himself or just read it out silently.

But before he started copying, what he would do is he would assign every letter in the alphabet a number. For example, A is 5, B is 10, C is 15, D is 20 and so on.

[7 : 05] And then he would run random calculations across the original. And then he'd copy it out and he'd run the same calculations through the copy.

And if they didn't match up perfectly, he would abandon the copy and throw it away. That's how fastidious they were. And we don't really understand that because we're not living in that kind of society today.

In a society of the internet and copy and paste and Microsoft Word, we don't really think like that. Certainly don't think in such a fastidious way.

But in the Middle Ages, that's what they did. So were there errors? Well, of course there were. If I take 10 folk from the congregation today, those of us who are awake, and if I put you in 10 chairs in a line, and we've got our business manager here, so we'll pick on Pua Mani.

So we take Mani, our business manager, and we put Mani on the one end and we, let's take Pua and Nick and put Nick on the other, and we've got eight people in the middle, in this row.

[8 : 11] So we've got Mani and we've got eight other people and we've got Nick on the end. And I asked Mani to take a piece of full-scap paper and give me a summary of his weekend.

He writes out his summary. And when he's done, I say, right, now I want person number two to take Mani's original and copy it, and then give the original back to Mani.

Then I want person number two to take his copy and give it to person number three, who then copies person number two's copy, and so on and so on.

By the time we get to Nick's copy and we compare Nick's copy to Mani's copy, will there be mistakes? Well, I think there will be mistakes because we're human, aren't we?

It doesn't matter how fastidious we are. There are mistakes. But again, I don't think we need to be particularly worried about that because we have a very, very large amount of copies.

[9 : 18] And that helps us to circumvent the problem of the mistakes. So I'm going to give you an illustration of how that works. We're going to do a little bit of a mathematical exercise.

I don't know about you, but I didn't like maths at school. But let's persevere. We're going to do a little bit of an exercise in the copying of manuscripts this morning. So let's say that the church council take 50 of you folk and we book you into a nice five-star hotel.

Say the Cape Grace. I hear that's a lovely hotel above my pay grade. And we book 50 of us into a hotel and we arrive and 10 of us are now separated from the other 40.

And each of these 10 folk are given a single blank page on which they're invited to write down a summary of their Christian testimony by hand.

Then much to their disappointment, we send them home. And the 40 remaining individuals are then separated into two groups.

[10 : 35] Now we've still got the copies. We haven't sent the copies home. We've still got the 10 copies of the first 10. But the 40 remaining individuals are then separated into two groups.

So what do we got now? Well, we've got two groups of 20. Separated into two groups. We then get all of the first group of 20.

We say, take your time. Take as much time as you need. Might take a few days. What we want you to do is write out by hand 10 copies of the original 10 testimonies written out by the 10 who went home.

Take your time. We want you. We're going to show you the originals. We want you to do 10 copies each of the original 10 testimonies. So what do we got now?

Well, we've got 20 times 10 copies of the original 10. So that works out to a total. I might have to ask Manny to come up here and help me.

[11 : 40] But Manny's looking confused. Okay, not really. It equals a total of 200 copies of the original 10. 200 copies. Now what do we do with those 20 folk?

Well, much to their disappointment because they're going to miss the supper. They go home too. So now what do we got? Well, now we've got only 20 members of the original group remain.

But we do possess the original 10 testimonies and the 200 copies of the original 10. You with me?

Great. Now what do we do to those last 20 folk? We ask them to complete a task similar to the original 20.

We ask them to individually also make 10 copies of the original 10. So what does that give us? Well, that now gives us another 200 copies of the originals.

[12 : 44] And guess what we do now? God forbid. We destroy the original 10. The original 10.

We destroy those 10. All we've got now are 400 copies of the originals, but no originals. Now we're to take those 400 copies and compare them to the originals.

Will we find mistakes? Of course we will. To be human is to err. But if we had to employ handwriting experts, even psychologists who specialize in handwriting, we do employ documentary scientists to carefully compare the 400 copies.

We do. It's a very careful process of comparison and elimination. Even though we don't have the original 10, we'll be able to figure out what the originals said.

And remember this, we don't have 400 copies or fragments of the New Testament. We have thousands. Thousands. 400 years after the Lord Jesus Christ, 400 AD, the New Testament documents were being published professionally.

[14 : 10] Often a reader would read out the original slowly and up to eight or so professional scribes would copy out what he said.

And again, by 400 AD, there were thousands of fragments and copies all over the empire. So how can we know that the Bible we use today, if it is a reputable translation, how can we know that it is accurate to the original?

Well, there is a very specific discipline, a scientific discipline that scholars give their lives to sift through the copies in order to arrive at the original reading.

It is a process and a discipline far more sophisticated than my illustration of our 50 members of the congregation going to a hotel for a couple of days.

And the discipline is called textual criticism. Not criticism in the sense that the scholars are critical of the Bible. That's just the word they use. It's called textual criticism where highly qualified scholars, many with a couple of PhDs, study the ancient biblical manuscripts in order to arrive at what the original said.

[15 : 30] And they use the most incredible principles of comparison to figure it all out. Some of them study the makeup of papyrus.

So the earliest paper that was used was papyrus, which is a kind of plant. It's a reed plant that's grown in North Africa by the Nile.

And you would open up the stems, unroll the stems of these papyrus plants, and you would dry them out. And you would cut them into strips. And you would place some on top of the other perpendicularly.

And you would push them into one another. And you would actually make a page. There are scholars who look at how the papyrus was made.

And they can actually figure out where it comes from in the empire. They can figure out with carbon dating how old it is, and so on. There are other scholars that just examine the handwriting techniques.

[16 : 30] Which I had more time to tell you that handwriting in the ancient world evolved over time. The earliest kind of handwriting was different to the handwriting used much later.

So they can figure out exactly not only where the manuscript comes from, but how old it is on the basis of the handwriting. From there they can figure out where in the ancient world a particular fragment of the New Testament comes from.

And how old they are, as I've said. Other handwriting types became specific to certain parts of the world. Scholars would be able to look at a manuscript and say, that manuscript is about 300 years after Jesus, and it originates in that part of the empire, in Byzantium.

Or another scholar would pick up another document and say, well, that handwriting is different. The paper is different. That probably comes further from the West.

And then from there they'd be able to figure out there are these different traditions. Different manuscript traditions that come from different parts of the empire. And from there they figured out that certain manuscripts that came from certain parts of the empire had the same mistakes.

[17 : 44] So they could eliminate those mistakes very easily by comparing them to other manuscripts from other parts of the empire, and so it goes on. Certain texts from North Africa got certain characteristics.

The same with Byzantium and other parts of the empire. So my point is that it is possible, through a very careful process of comparison and elimination, to identify what the original would have said.

You can easily do that if you've got enough copies despite the mistakes. And that's good news. That if you use a reliable, good translation, you can be comfortable with your Bible, which is a wonderful thing.

Now, I don't have time to talk about translations themselves in great detail, but perhaps I can say that there are some reputable translations that you can use. I love the NIV, and we use it here in the church, and that is a great, reputable translation.

There's also a new international reader's version, which I only discovered a couple of years ago, and apparently it's great for children. There's the English Standard Version.

[18 : 52] There's the New King James Bible. There's the Good News Bible. There's the Revised Standard Bible, and so on. Then you might ask, well, Mark, that's great, but why do the Bibles in English read slightly differently?

They mean the same thing, but why is it that the ESV's reading would be very slightly different to the NIV on a particular point? Why is that the case? Well, the answer is that when scholars translate the original language into English, they take into account two main factors.

And the way they look at those two factors, that accounts for the slight variance in the way the translations read. Now, the first factor is obviously making sure that the translation is true and accurate to the original language.

That goes without saying. But sometimes if you use exactly the same word in the original in the copy and exactly the same next word in the original, and you use the copy and it's exactly the same word, it'll be a very, very accurate translation, but it won't necessarily read all that smoothly in public.

That's what I love about the NIV. It reads so nicely. It's accurate and it reads so great. The New American Standard Bible is a wonderful Bible and they are very, very, those translators are very, very worried about accuracy.

[20 : 10] In fact, it's so accurate it's almost Greek-ish more than English. It's so precise and accurate. It's wonderful for Bible study, but it doesn't flow so well if you stood up and read it out in public because there are folk perhaps who don't know if English is their first language in the congregation.

And so probably the NASB, the New American Standard, is not, it doesn't flow that well. So the first criterion when you're trying to draw up a translation is, is it accurate?

But the second criterion is just as important and that is, well, does it flow nicely in the new language? And you've got to balance those two factors and you've got to bring them into the middle.

So the New American Standard is very accurate, the NIV is very accurate, the ESV is very accurate, but how the translators balance those two critical factors differ depending on the style of translation and what the translation is for.

So the Good News Bible is a wonderful Bible, but it is more for children than for adults. Very helpful. Very helpful. Whereas the NIV is perhaps a little bit better, the English is a little bit more sophisticated, a little bit better for adults and so on.

[21 : 28] But the bottom line is that we can be satisfied this morning that if we've got a good translation, we've got a very accurate copy of the original.

All right, I want to wrap up now and I want to ask the question as I close. What have we learned over the last couple of weeks? Because as I said to Nick a little bit earlier on, you know, at the end of the day, if the Bible is true, it's not just an academic question.

It's not just the kind of thing that I would discuss with my students in a dry lecture at the George Wittwell College. Not at all. If the Bible is the word of God and if it is accurate, as I suggested last week, it is a very, very critical issue and it has huge implications for us this morning.

Whether we are believers and even whether we are not believers, whether we trust the Bible or not. And so we have to look at the implications of this issue.

If God has gone to all of this length to ensure that in his providence there are all of these fragments and copies, if God has gone to all of this effort to raise up the right kind of scholars to make sure that we are not distracted by the originals but we have a reliable copy.

[22 : 57] If God has done all of this to ensure that the gospel message is reliable, well, what are the implications of this for us? At the end of 2018 here in Cape Town, what are the implications?

Irrespective of where I stand before Christ, irrespective of my background or where I am right now with the Lord, what are the implications of that? Think about it.

Just let it sink in. If the Bible is true, wow. I mean, that's quite scary, isn't it? In a sense, it is actually quite scary.

Have you ever thought about that? That every time you open up your Bible and you read a few words, the Bible is read out to us earlier on in the service, have you ever occurred to you that when you open the Bible, it is God talking to you?

I mean, that is hectic. That is hectic stuff, isn't it? I mean, that is really scary stuff. You know, if the Bible is not true, we can say, oh, well, you know, maybe it is God's word or maybe it isn't God's word.

[24 : 11] I'm not going to take the pastors too seriously. You know, there are so many mistakes in the Bible. A lot of people use that as an excuse, as a cop-out. But if the Bible is true, which it is, well, there are some serious implications.

I'll give you just a couple as I wrap up. Number one, if the Bible is true, then Christianity is true, all of it must be like that.

It must be that everything that Jesus taught must be true. The resurrection must be true.

It means that the cross and the gospel and the fact that it offers forgiveness must be true. Even those parts of the Bible that we don't like, even the warnings of Jesus about hell, they must be true.

It also, of course, means that if the Bible is true, then injustice, death, brokenness and sin no longer have the last word in the world. But hope does.

[25 : 21] I say that for those of us who are suffering today, those of us who are going through difficult times, who are struggling with injustice in the workplace, those of us who are grappling with sickness, some of us just get down, don't we, when we just look at the brokenness and the wickedness of the world.

It really can get us down, doesn't it? I remember a lady who came to me for counseling some years ago in my congregation in Pretoria. She was in tears and I asked her what had happened.

She said nothing had happened. She was just so tired of the brokenness and the suffering in the world. It gets to us, doesn't it? But my friend, if the Bible is true, then hope is the last word.

It means that whatever you're going through today, if you trust in Jesus, your life matters. It means that you can face your life and you don't have to be afraid.

You know, one writer said this, it really struck me this week. He said this, if the resurrection is true, you don't have to be afraid anymore.

[26 : 29] I've read that particular commentator many times. It's so striking. The Bible is true. Everything you do for Jesus counts. No matter how seemingly small or seemingly inconsequential or futile, if the Bible is true, it means that we are called to build something, to be part of something that is infinitely greater than the fading hopes of this world.

It means that getting involved in the St. Mark's evangelistic outreach over December is worth it if the gospel and the Bible is true. And then the final implication, because of time, if the Bible is true, but you have not taken the gospel seriously, you're in serious trouble.

You know, one day I read about one of the worst road accidents in German history. It actually happened on a cold winter's night and the surface of the Autobahn, it was a road accident, and the surface of the Autobahn was slippery due to the sleet and the ice.

And a motorist travelling at around 160 kilometres an hour and he came charging around a long bend, a long sweep in the road and he lost control of his car and it rolled and it came to a halt upside down in the middle of a blind spot in the bend, in the Autobahn.

And there were these other motorists who were about a kilometre around him and they were also coming along at some incredibly high speed and they came hurtling around the bend and they tragically just smashed into his car because they never saw it.

[28 : 08] And within minutes this terrible pile-up developed and the death toll kept rising. And in the story there was this very distressed bystander and he witnessed it all and he was so overcome by what he saw and he tried everything in his power to warn the oncoming traffic of what awaited them around the bend, the death and destruction that awaited and he was gesticulating at the oncoming cars and they just didn't listen to him.

They ignored him and they kept on hurtling around the corner and the pile-up just got worse and in desperation you know what this guy did he looked around for stones and for rocks on the side of the autobahn he actually ran into the oncoming traffic shouting at them and throwing stones and rocks at their cars and shouting out to them to slow down and to stop because they were rushing to their deaths and apparently they just ignored him.

You think to yourself but how can people just be so silly? Maybe they were just busy or maybe they were distracted or perhaps their minds were on other things but as a result many of them died.

Folks, we're all travelling aren't we? We're all travelling on our own future of the autobahn not the autobahn in Germany but the autobahn of life. And if the Bible is true it tells us that judgment is in the future for all of us around the bend and you don't know when that's going to be.

But I want you to do something just before you leave today that as you drive down the journey of your life I want you to slow down I want you to look out of the window of your car more perhaps more precisely the window of your life.

[29 : 58] Will you do that? Can I ask you just to slow down in terms of where you're going what you're thinking about maybe you're thinking about lunch or the end of the year you leave I want you to slow down I want you to stop thinking about those things and I want you to look out of the window will you do that right now in your mind's eye?

See if the Bible is true and if you look out of the window of your life not your car your life you'll see somebody there waving at you. Do you know who that is?

It's Jesus Christ He's calling to all of us today and He's essentially saying slow down because you have to repent and make right with God before it's too late If the Bible is true then that is the case then Jesus is the judge but my question to you as it is to those silly motorists are you really listening?

I think the devil is sometimes invented this busy life we live here in Cape Town simply to get us distracted enough so we don't listen to the warnings of the gospel If the Bible is true perhaps you need to slow down today because you're distracted by life's silly priorities don't be silly don't be determined to do nothing about the gospel don't be a fool If you come along here and you're a visitor and you're not a Christian you don't take the Bible seriously perhaps you need to do that today If the Bible is true and if the gospel is true and you're not right with God then you need to repent and you need to come speak to Nick or to John or to Alan or one of our elders before you leave today If the Bible is true hear the voice of the gospel for it's too late Amen

Far heard of the gospel and you're not right. have even to John Webb have us as to have youón languages through that