

CHAPTER 1

WHY YOU SHOULD BECOME A SERIOUS AND DILIGENT STUDENT OF THE WHOLE BIBLE

³¹ *but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name*

John 20:31(RSV)

⁹ *How can a young man keep his way pure?
By keeping it according to Your word.
Psalm 119:9 (NASB)*

¹⁸ *Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law.
Psalm 119:18 (RSV)*

¹⁰ *For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.
Ezra 7:10 (NASB)*

*Surely the Lord GOD does nothing,
without revealing his secret
to his servants the prophets.
Amos 3:7 (RSV)*

*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.
Matthew 24:35 (ESV)*

²⁴ *for "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, ²⁵but the word of the Lord remains forever." And this word is the good news that was preached to you*

1 Peter 1:24-25 (ESV)

¹³ *Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.
1 Timothy 4:13 (ESV)*

¹³ *Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.*

2 Timothy 1:13 (ESV)

²⁰ *And they rose early in the morning and went out into the wilderness of Teko'a; and as they went out, Jehosh'aphat stood and said, "Hear me, Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem! Believe in the LORD your God, and you will be established; believe his prophets, and you will succeed."*

2 Chronicles 20:20 (RSV)

*He who despises the word brings destruction on himself,
but he who respects the commandment will be rewarded.
Proverbs 13:13 (RSV)*

*"He who gives heed to the word will prosper....."
Proverbs 16:20 (a) (RSV)*

***“Hear, O earth: behold, I am bringing disaster on this people,
The fruit of their plans,
Because they have not listened to My words,
And as for My law, they have rejected it also.
Jeremiah 6:19 (NASB)***

For the average 'churchgoer', in the West, the Bible is just dipped into at a shallow, surface level. Very few people study it seriously or deeply. We do also hear short readings in church, but generally only of well known passages. Some of us read the Bible for ourselves, but usually we are only looking at favourite books and avoiding the rest.

That's the inadequate and superficial way that most of us handle the Bible, even assuming we look at it at all. I spoke recently to a young woman of about 24 who told me she had read "*Genesis, the gospels, some of the Psalms and Proverbs, and bits of Corinthians*". That was all. Yet she claimed to have been a Christian for many years.

When she told me how much (or rather how little) she had read, she wasn't embarrassed. On the contrary, she felt she was doing well, as she had read more than most other people in her church. She expected me to be impressed and didn't feel she was failing in any way. The truth is that most of us need to take the Bible much more seriously than we do. It is the most important book in the world. Without it you cannot grow as a Christian. It is our greatest possession and the key to finding eternal life and to being effective as a disciple. In fact, it is the key to everything.

The advantages and benefits that come from studying the Bible.

God makes many promises about how you will grow if you are willing to study the Bible persistently and thoroughly. It will change your life, mainly by changing your character. It does this by re-shaping all your attitudes, habits, values, thoughts, speech and actions. When you read the Bible, it is 'reading' *you* and working on you, to bring about change wherever it is needed.

We are also promised that if we fear the LORD and take delight in His commandments, then a wide range of blessings will come to us. These come firstly as a direct reward for our love of the Bible and our obedience to it. They also come indirectly, from the changes that the diligent study of God's Word makes to our character. Those changes alter the way we live and therefore bring God's blessing on us as a consequence:

***¹Blessed is the man who fears the LORD,
who greatly delights in his commandments!
²His descendants will be mighty in the land;
the generation of the upright will be blessed.
³Wealth and riches are in his house;
and his righteousness endures forever.
Psalm 112:1-3 (RSV)***

Psalm 119 is famous for being the longest psalm. It is filled with a variety of statements about the many benefits that flow from studying God's Word. Let's look at just some of the main claims that the Bible makes for itself and let's take them seriously. For starters, we see from verses 1-7, that studying the Bible will cause us to:

- a) be blessed,
- b) walk in God's ways,

- c) avoid unrighteousness,
- d) not be ashamed,
- e) have uprightness of heart.

***¹How blessed are those whose way is blameless,
Who walk in the law of the LORD.
²How blessed are those who observe His testimonies,
Who seek Him with all their heart.
³They also do no unrighteousness;
They walk in His ways.
⁴You have ordained Your precepts,
That we should keep them diligently.
⁵Oh that my ways may be
established
To keep Your statutes!
⁶Then I shall not be ashamed
When I look upon all Your commandments.
⁷I shall give thanks to You with uprightness of heart,
When I learn Your righteous judgments.***
Psalm 119:1-7 (NASB)

According to verses 98-105, the Bible will also:

- f) make us wiser than our enemies,
- g) give us more insight than our teachers,
- h) give us more understanding than the aged,
- i) enable us to hate every false way,
- j) be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.

***⁹⁸Your commandments make me wiser than my enemies,
For they are ever mine.
⁹⁹I have more insight than all my teachers,
For Your testimonies are my meditation.
¹⁰⁰I understand more than the aged,
Because I have observed Your precepts.
¹⁰¹I have restrained my feet from every evil way,
That I may keep Your word.
¹⁰²I have not turned aside from Your ordinances,
For You Yourself have taught me.
¹⁰³How sweet are Your words to my taste!
Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth!
¹⁰⁴From Your precepts I get understanding;
Therefore I hate every false way.
¹⁰⁵Your word is a lamp to my feet
And a light to my path.***
Psalm 119:98-105 (NASB)

Every one of these claims is important in itself, but when they are all combined together, they are truly life-changing. Why not work your way through all 176 verses of Psalm 119? There are many

other assertions about how the Bible helps, guides, informs, instructs, improves and strengthens us. For example, here is another verse which refers to two more benefits, i.e. that the Bible will give us great peace and prevent us from stumbling. Let's examine each of these claims a little more closely:

***Those who love Your law have great peace,
And nothing causes them to stumble.
Psalm 119:165 (NASB)***

So, the Bible will also:

k) give us great peace:

The only way we can ever get real peace is from knowing God. We get to know Him primarily by knowing His Word, or His 'law', as the Psalmist refers to it. But we can only get that knowledge if we *love* the Bible. It will not come to people who merely read it passively. It applies only to those who love God's Word. It takes time for us to develop such a love, but anyone can get it, provided they really *want it* and are willing to study the Bible *diligently*, like the Psalmist did.

l) prevent us from stumbling:

The Bible tells us of very many things which would otherwise trip us up if we had not been forewarned. These warnings enable us to benefit from the wisdom of God without having to learn every lesson for ourselves, first-hand, through bitter experience. That is assuming that we could ever learn such things for ourselves, which is most unlikely.

Consider the situation of the prophet Daniel and his three friends, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. They were all young men from the tribe of Judah who were taken into captivity by the King of Babylon. They were taken to work for the King and that meant they had to spend some years in study and preparation. They did that alongside other young men, most of whom were Babylonian. However these four young Hebrew men also had the Scriptures to study. Their knowledge of the Bible gave them a huge advantage over all their competitors. It enabled them to operate at a far higher level in terms of wisdom and understanding:

¹⁷As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all letters and wisdom; and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. ¹⁸At the end of the time, when the king had commanded that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. ¹⁹And the king spoke with them, and among them all none was found like Daniel, Hanani'ah, Mish'a-el, and Azari'ah; therefore they stood before the king. ²⁰And in every matter of wisdom and understanding concerning which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom.

Daniel 1:17-20 (RSV)

The consequences of ignoring or despising God's Word

We have seen some of the many and varied benefits that come from loving and studying God's written Word. It follows therefore that if we ignore, undervalue or despise God's Word then those benefits will not come to us. However, we need to put it more strongly than that. If a person avoids or ignores God's Word then there will also be direct adverse consequences. In fact, if a person claims to be a believer but ignores or does not bother to read God's Word, then we are told that the prayers of such a person are an '*abomination*' to God:

***If one turns away his ear from hearing the law,
even his prayer is an abomination.
Proverbs 28:9 (ESV)***

What exactly does this mean? There are two possible groups to whom it could apply:

- a) Those who *claim* to be Christians, but who are not really. They say they believe, and they may attend church etc, but they are not genuine.
- b) Those who *really are saved* but who, for one reason or another, ignore God's Word and do not value it. Therefore they do not read it diligently, or even at all

I personally believe that the above verse applies to *both* groups. That is that the prayers of people in either group are unacceptable to God. We cannot afford to be so complacent as to assume that it only concerns unbelievers. If it does refer to us all then it is of profound importance to every genuine believer. In short, it means we cannot ignore or despise God's Word and yet still expect Him to hear our prayers and to answer them

Moreover, to despise God's Word, (i.e. to be casual about it, devalue it or treat it as unimportant) will also lead us into all sorts of other sins. There are always consequences. People who ignore God's Word and disobey it will usually end up doing so to a greater and greater extent, committing ever larger sins. That is the reality, as we see in this next passage. Such people begin by despising God's Word but their sins then develop and become increasingly gross:

¹³ Yet the LORD warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, "Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you by my servants the prophets." ¹⁴ But they would not listen, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been, who did not believe in the LORD their God. ¹⁵ They despised his statutes, and his covenant that he made with their fathers, and the warnings which he gave them. They went after false idols, and became false, and they followed the nations that were round about them, concerning whom the LORD had commanded them that they should not do like them. ¹⁶ And they forsook all the commandments of the LORD their God, and made for themselves molten images of two calves; and they made an Ashe'rah, and worshiped all the host of heaven, and served Ba'al. ¹⁷ And they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings, and used divination and sorcery, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger. ¹⁸ Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel, and removed them out of his sight; none was left but the tribe of Judah only. ¹⁹ Judah also did not keep the commandments of the LORD their God, but walked in the customs which Israel had introduced. ²⁰ And the LORD rejected all the descendants of Israel, and afflicted them, and gave them into the hand of spoilers, until he had cast them out of his sight.

2 Kings 17:13-20 (RSV)

The Bible contains God's Word to us. It is full of His promises, instructions and warnings. It reflects Him and what He stands for. Therefore, to be casual about the Bible is to be casual about God. To neglect it is to neglect Him. To ignore it is to ignore Him. Many would deny that and insist that they are very devoted to God, in their own way, but that the Bible is just "*not their thing*" or they "*don't get much from it*" and so on. They might seek to justify themselves in those ways but the fact is that that is not how God sees it.

God strongly approves of those people who value Him to such an extent that they take His Word seriously. He loves it when we really believe His promises and rely on them. Conversely, it angers Him when we are flippant or casual about His promises and instructions. An example of this is Isaac's son, Esau, who was a few minutes older than his twin brother Jacob. Therefore the promises made to Abraham and to Isaac were due to be inherited by Esau. One could say that he should have been the son through whose family line the promises of God would pass.

If Esau had valued God's promises properly and if they had mattered to him sufficiently, then he would have been longing for God to build a nation through him. His descendants (the Arabs) were, at

that time, in line to be the chosen people and to inherit the Promised Land. In theory, the Messiah could then have been born into Esau's family line.

Those things are just some of the enormous promises that were made to Abraham and Isaac and, as things stood at that time, it was Esau's birthright that these should be fulfilled through him. You might imagine that that extraordinary privilege would have really mattered to him and that his mind would have been constantly focused on God's promises, as was the case with Abraham and Isaac. However, that was not how Esau saw it.

Esau's principal fault was *not* that he did not *believe* God's promises. He certainly *did* believe them. He also believed in God. His fault was that God's promises did not really *matter* to him. Esau was casual. He obviously knew all about the promises. We can be sure that he heard all the stories told many times over as he sat around the camp-fire with Abraham and Isaac as he grew up. He must have known them all by heart, just as Jacob did.

Nevertheless, by the time Esau had become a man he had begun to take these momentous promises for granted. He had grown dismissive and even uninterested. The promises did not grip him as they did Jacob, or as they had gripped Abraham and Isaac.

Esau's lack of regard for God's promises must have been apparent to his younger brother, Jacob. He sorely wished that they could be fulfilled through him. He longed to be the one who could inherit the Promised Land and become the ancestor of God's chosen people and of the Messiah who would one day bless the whole world. The prospect of all of that excited Jacob and it held his attention deeply.

He could not have failed to notice Esau's complacent attitude and it must therefore have rankled with Jacob all the more to think of Esau inheriting all of that rather than him. Then, one day, Jacob made the request of Esau, as recorded in Genesis chapter 25 that Esau should "*sell*" the birthright to him in exchange for a bowl of soup (pottage). That was a strange offer, but it did not come from nowhere. There was a history to it. Jacob already knew that Esau cared very little for God's promises and that it was not unrealistic to think that he might actually be willing to accept such an absurd offer:

²⁹ Once when Jacob was boiling pottage, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. ³⁰ And Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red pottage, for I am famished!" (Therefore his name was called Edom.) ³¹ Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." ³² Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" ³³ Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. ³⁴ Then Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentils, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Genesis 25:29-34 (RSV)

That whole conversation about the soup and the birthright must have seemed very light-hearted to Esau. No doubt he did not really mean what he was saying, and would not have said it if he had only paused to think for a moment. But he did not stop to think and he did say it. In doing so, he '*despised his birthright*'. In that apparently unimportant conversation, Esau spoke disrespectful words about the promises of God. In doing so, he altered the whole course of his life and of world history.

All of the promises of God were then transferred from Esau to the family line of Jacob and then on from him to the whole Jewish people. That had, actually, been God's intention from the outset. Nevertheless, it was Esau's own actions and attitude which brought about the circumstances that caused the transfer to take place. Therefore it was Esau's own fault.

Although that 'sale' of his birthright may have seemed insignificant to Esau, or even a joke, that was not how God saw it. God was appalled by Esau's indifference to the enormous promises that He had made. They were Esau's to inherit, if only he had *valued* them. That is why God was so angry with Esau. It was not because he did not *believe* the promises but because they weren't *important* to him.

We must all learn a vital lesson from the way that Esau despised God's promises. Or, you could say, from the way he despised God's *Word*. We must ensure that, unlike Esau, we truly *value* all of God's Word. We must cherish it, long for it and be preoccupied with it, as Jacob was. Jacob obviously chose the wrong *way* to go about getting God's promises transferred to him, behaving carnally and dishonestly in the process. Later on he also tricked Isaac into giving the blessing of the first born to him, rather than to Esau (See Genesis 27:1-40). That dishonesty obviously displeased God and it was not what God had wanted Esau to do.

However, the operative point is that, although Jacob behaved badly in the way he sought to get the promises transferred to himself, his *underlying attitude* did please God. The fact that Jacob valued the promises and cared about them touched God's heart. Jacob believed what God had promised and *took it really seriously*. That is what pleased God and caused him to value Jacob highly, for precisely the same reason that Esau's indifference had angered Him.

The same wholehearted attitude that Jacob had was also seen in his son, Joseph. He too had character faults. For example he was insensitive and tactless in the way he spoke to his brothers. That partly explains why they hated him so much that they sold him into slavery. However, the fact remains that he shared his father's passionate interest in the promises that God had made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He *believed* God and *fully expected* those promises to be fulfilled.

Joseph did not doubt that the family line of Jacob would become a nation and would live in the Promised Land at some time in the future. He took it completely seriously. Joseph also expected that he personally would, one day, be resurrected and that he himself would live in the Land.

His devotion to God's promises, and his seriousness about them, is illustrated by the fact that when Joseph was about to die he gave strict instructions to his family to preserve his *bones*. He told them to bring them to the Promised Land and bury them there when they eventually went to live in it. He knew that would not be until over 400 years in the future, because that had been told to Abraham by God.

But that fact did not prevent him from taking God's promises completely seriously and *acting on them*. He knew that one day the Israelites would possess the Promised Land and he wanted to be buried in it. More than that, Joseph wanted to be resurrected in the Promise Land. That was how seriously he took all of God's promises. They were utterly real to him:

²⁴ And Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die; but God will visit you, and bring you up out of this land to the land which he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." ²⁵ Then Joseph took an oath of the sons of Israel, saying, "God will visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here." ²⁶ So Joseph died, being a hundred and ten years old; and they embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt.

Genesis 50:24-26 (RSV)

The seriousness with which Joseph had viewed this request concerning his bones, such that he required his brothers to swear an oath about them, is also reflected in the way that Moses, over 400 years later, carried out Joseph's wishes. He brought the bones with him when they all left Egypt to go to the Promised Land:

¹⁷ When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, "Lest the people repent when they see war, and return to Egypt." ¹⁸ But God led the people round by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. And the people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt equipped for battle. ¹⁹ And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him; for Joseph had solemnly sworn the people of Israel, saying, "God will visit you; then you must carry my bones with you from here."

Exodus 13:17-19 (RSV)

Likewise, in the next generation, when the Israelites were allowed to enter the Land, Joshua took this request seriously and had Joseph's bones buried in the Promised Land:

³² The bones of Joseph which the people of Israel brought up from Egypt were buried at Shechem, in the portion of ground which Jacob bought from the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for a hundred pieces of money; it became an inheritance of the descendants of Joseph.

Joshua 24:32 (RSV)

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews also refers to Joseph's request concerning his bones. He describes it as *faith* and includes Joseph within the 'hall of fame' of Hebrews chapter 11. He does so because the earnest way that Joseph viewed the matter, and the care he took over his burial requests, demonstrated how very seriously he took God's Word, just as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had done before him:

¹⁷ By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, ¹⁸ even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." ¹⁹ Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death. ²⁰ By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future. ²¹ By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff. ²² By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions concerning the burial of his bones.

Hebrews 11:17-22 (NIV)

Which of these two attitudes most closely resembles yours? Do you *care deeply* about God's Word as Jacob and Joseph did? Or are you casual, such that you can take it or leave it, like Esau? That is a question which each of us needs to reflect on. And we must not be too quick in answering it, because the truth is that, even in the church, there are far more Esaus than there are Jacobs. Therefore each of us needs to consider very seriously the possibility that God may view us as an Esau rather than a Jacob.

For every Christian who spends many hours every week studying their Bible there are probably nine, or nineteen, or even ninety nine, who spend only minutes, even assuming they open their Bibles at all. If that is the case, then on what basis can such a person assume that God will be any less angry and displeased with them than He was with Esau? That is a question for us all to reflect upon carefully.

The effect that study of the Bible will have on your life and character

It is impossible to exaggerate the improving effect that the Bible will have on every part of your life if you are willing to study it properly. Good qualities and habits will grow. Bad ones will fade, or even disappear. The Bible will also help you to resist sin and to reduce its grip on your life:

*¹¹ Your word I have treasured in my heart,
That I may not sin against You.*

Psalm 119:11 (NASB)

Knowledge of God's Word is also able to save us from perishing. It does that firstly by showing us how to find salvation through Jesus, and secondly by helping us in every kind of difficulty:

*⁹² If Your law had not been my delight,
Then I would have perished in my affliction.*

*⁹³ I will never forget Your precepts,
For by them You have revived me.*

Psalm 119:92-93 (NASB)

God is able to use the Bible to change your *character*, but only if you will *allow* that. He will not impose these benefits on us. It is purely voluntary. We need to cooperate with the Holy Spirit and allow Him to use the Bible to its maximum effect. In fact, we should positively ask Him to do so, and go on asking, for the rest of our lives. It is a process, and it does not end until we die. It is up to us to make sure we don't miss out on any of it.

You need to long, with all your heart, for understanding of the Bible and to ask God to open your eyes to grasp it

Note the wholehearted intensity of the Psalmist's love for the Bible. He doesn't just *like* it, he *treasures* it. That is the attitude that God will really bless. So, if we are to benefit fully from the Bible, we must do much more than merely skim its surface. We must pursue with zeal everything that it has to offer. Seek to imitate the Psalmist's passionate heart-attitude, as revealed in this next passage:

*¹⁰With all my heart I have sought You;
Do not let me wander from Your commandments.*

*¹¹Your word I have treasured in my heart,
That I may not sin against You.*

*¹²Blessed are You, O LORD;
Teach me Your statutes.*

*¹³With my lips I have told of
All the ordinances of Your mouth.*

*¹⁴I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies,
As much as in all riches.*

*¹⁵I will meditate on Your precepts
And regard Your ways.*

*¹⁶I shall delight in Your statutes;
I shall not forget Your word.*

*¹⁷Deal bountifully with Your servant,
That I may live and keep Your word.*

*¹⁸Open my eyes, that I may behold
Wonderful things from Your law.*

*¹⁹I am a stranger in the earth;
Do not hide Your commandments from me.*

*²⁰My soul is crushed with longing
After Your ordinances at all times.*

*²¹You rebuke the arrogant, the cursed,
Who wander from Your commandments.*

*²²Take away reproach and contempt from me,
For I observe Your testimonies.*

*²³Even though princes sit and talk against me,
Your servant meditates on Your statutes.*

*²⁴Your testimonies also are my delight;
They are my counsellors.*

Psalm 119:10-24 (NASB)

We need the same heart-attitude as the Psalmist. However, it will not come automatically. Neither is anybody born with it. It is up to us to acquire it, mainly by effort, choice and persistent diligence.

We must also ask God to help us to value His Word, and to love it more and more. Make a decision to pursue the greatest possible knowledge of God's Word and to learn to take delight in it.

This should not be done moderately or reluctantly, but abundantly. The Psalmist did not merely dabble in God's Word. He wanted *everything* that it has to offer and with an intensity that puts most of us to shame. Here he continues to express how strongly he feels:

²⁵*My soul cleaves to the dust;
Revive me according to Your word.*
²⁶*I have told of my ways, and You have answered me;
Teach me Your statutes.*
²⁷*Make me understand the way of Your precepts,
So I will meditate on Your wonders.*
²⁸*My soul weeps because of grief;
Strengthen me according to Your word.*
²⁹*Remove the false way from me,
And graciously grant me Your law.*
³⁰*I have chosen the faithful way;
I have placed Your ordinances before me.*
³¹*I cling to Your testimonies;
O LORD, do not put me to shame!*
³²*I shall run the way of Your commandments,
For You will enlarge my heart.*
Psalm 119:25-32 (NASB)

Although your own effort in studying the Bible is essential, you can't rely solely on yourself to find your own way through the Bible. Cry out to God for Him to give you the ability to understand it. Ask Him to open it up to you so that you can fully grasp all that He wishes to teach you. The Bible is a supernatural book. Therefore, although effort is needed, it can only properly be understood with God's help:

³³*Teach me, O LORD, the way of Your statutes,
And I shall observe it to the end.*
³⁴*Give me understanding, that I may observe Your law
And keep it with all my heart.*
³⁵*Make me walk in the path of Your commandments,
For I delight in it.*
³⁶*Incline my heart to Your testimonies
And not to dishonest gain.*
³⁷*Turn away my eyes from looking at vanity,
And revive me in Your ways.*
³⁸*Establish Your word to Your servant,
As that which produces reverence for You.*
Psalm 119:33-38 (NASB)

Resolve to do whatever is necessary to develop a longing for God's Word, such that you cannot live without it

This deep longing and passion for God's Word does not come overnight, or by a single decision. It comes from intensive, ongoing study of the Bible and from persistently asking God, over many years, to give you that kind of heart. It will never come merely by the passage of time alone. We have to seek for it *actively*.

But however long that process takes, it always has to begin with an initial decision of your *will*. That requires a setting of your heart to study God's Word with determination. If all you have is a mild or half-hearted desire to learn the Bible, you will never achieve what the Psalmist did. There must be no half measures or lukewarmness:

***⁴⁴So I will keep Your law continually,
Forever and ever.
⁴⁵And I will walk at liberty,
For I seek Your precepts.
⁴⁶I will also speak of Your testimonies before kings
And shall not be ashamed.
⁴⁷I shall delight in Your commandments,
Which I love.
⁴⁸And I shall lift up my hands to Your commandments,
Which I love;
And I will meditate on Your statutes.
Psalm 119:44-48 (NASB)***

Unless we ask God to give us a proper understanding of His Word we will miss a lot of what it is saying. Many of us read the Bible too passively, just picking up whatever is easy to grasp because it is on the surface, and ignoring anything more complicated. Instead we need to ask God to give us deeper and deeper insights and *we must keep on and on asking, until we have them*. Even within Psalm 119, the Psalmist asks repeatedly for more understanding, despite already being an accomplished scholar of the Bible by anybody's standards:

***Your hands made me and fashioned me;
Give me understanding,
that I may learn Your commandments.
Psalm 119:73 (NASB)***

***Let my cry come before You, O LORD;
Give me understanding according to Your word.
Psalm 119:169 (NASB)***

Many of us see reading the Bible as if it was a chore, and therefore don't look forward to it. Instead, we need to get to a place where we long for God's Word intensely, in the same way that a man in a desert would thirst for water:

***I opened my mouth wide and panted,
For I longed for Your commandments.
Psalm 119:131 (NASB)***

Anyone who prays for understanding of God's Word with that kind of commitment, and who is willing to *keep on and on* doing so, will certainly receive what they have requested. God delights to answer such a prayer. He will pour out understanding on any person who *really wants it*. But He will not do so for the casual or passive person who is only mildly interested.

Therefore, from now on, ask God to help you to match the zeal of the Psalmist. Why shouldn't you? He was only an ordinary person like us. He just had an extraordinarily good attitude. Therefore there is no reason why you cannot be like him. You are free, and able, to adopt any attitude, *if you really want to*.

Remember that when the Psalmist was pleading with God for more understanding of the Scriptures, he had already got enough understanding to have written Psalm 119, plus other psalms. Most of us would consider that he had already fully 'arrived' as a student of the Bible and did not need to go any

farther or deeper. But the Psalmist clearly did not think so. He never stopped seeking for more and more knowledge of God's Word. Therefore we must never imagine that we have reached a point where we do not need anything more from the Scriptures. Such a time will never come, at least not until after we die.

King David's passionate, wholehearted attitude to the Bible

We are told that King David was "a man after God's heart". It makes sense therefore to imitate him, as well, not just the writer of Psalm 119. David sets out the intensity of his own feelings about God's Word in Psalm 19:

*⁷The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure,
making wise the simple;
⁸the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is pure,
enlightening the eyes;
⁹the fear of the LORD is clean,
enduring for ever;
the ordinances of the LORD are true,
and righteous altogether.
¹⁰More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.
¹¹Moreover by them is thy servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.
Psalm 19:7-11 (RSV)*

Look as well at what King David says in Psalm 139 about the preciousness of God's thoughts:

*¹⁷How precious to me are your thoughts, God!
How vast is the sum of them!
¹⁸Were I to count them,
they would outnumber the grains of sand.....
Psalm 139:17-18(a) (NIV)*

King David was on the same wavelength as the writer of Psalm 119. That is one of the main reasons why God felt such approval for David and made him so successful. But that heart-attitude is entirely available for you to adopt as your own, just like David. You do not need to be gifted or clever. It is purely a matter of *choice*. It has nothing to do with ability or genetics.

If you really wanted to, you could choose to be like King David, at least in this respect. Nothing is stopping you, except your own lack of willingness. The Bible needs to become something you love and value above every other possession. Remember what it is - God's own Word to us, containing the key to everything we need in life. It is worth more than any other asset, even fine gold. David says so above, and so does the Psalmist:

*¹²⁷Therefore I love Your commandments
Above gold, yes, above fine gold.
Psalm 119:127 (NASB)*

This is not exaggerated poetic language. It is plain fact. God literally intends that the Bible should become our delight, and our greatest treasure. That applies to all of us, not just to supposedly 'special' people like King David and the Psalmist.

The need for effort and diligence in studying God's Word

What you get out of the Bible will be directly proportional to the effort you put in and the intensity of your desire for understanding. It requires persistence and enthusiasm. It particularly means long and regular periods of time spent alone studying God's Word. That is the kind of person God is looking for, and to whom He will respond.

He will not give deep knowledge of the Bible to anybody who is not willing to work hard to get it. God's heart is touched by those whom He sees making an ongoing effort to study His Word. He has put so much of Himself into the Bible that to seek for knowledge of the *Bible* is the same as to seek for *Him*. It contains His very words:

***¹⁴⁷I rise before dawn and cry for help;
I wait for Your words.
¹⁴⁸My eyes anticipate the night watches,
That I may meditate on Your word.
Psalm 119:147-148 (NASB)***

Only the Bible is totally and perfectly true. Every other book, however worthy, contains only the ideas and opinions of human beings who are as flawed as we are. But the Bible as a whole is the infallible truth. Even if you reach the age of 90, you will still be nowhere near to exhausting what the Bible has to offer.

Like a coalmine, there are things available to be dug out at all levels. Some of it is on the surface and can be picked up quite easily by anyone. The rest is deeper and requires varying levels of excavation work. Some truths are very deep indeed, like coal which is 1000 metres underground, and can only be found by those who are willing to keep digging for decades, not just for years.

God actually hides things in the Bible deliberately, as if it was a '*treasure hunt*'. He wants to find out whether you are willing to keep on searching for those things, for as long as it takes, until you find them. It is a contest. God hides things intentionally and it is then up to us to find them, if we are sufficiently motivated to do so:

***²It is the glory of God to conceal a matter,
But the glory of kings is to search out a matter.
Proverbs 25:2 (NASB)***

Never lose heart or stop searching, just because some parts of the Bible are hard to understand. Some of it is *meant* to be difficult, so do not be surprised or discouraged by the fact that you struggle. Sometimes God wants you to struggle, even for a long period of time, to see whether you will be tenacious enough to overcome your difficulties. He also wants to *find out how much it matters to you* to find the truth and how long you are willing to go on searching.

However, most of the time, if we come across passages which do not make sense to us, it is because of one or more problems or errors on our part. It is certainly not the fault of the Bible. When we meet such problems God expects us to deal with them. Some examples of these are as follows:

- a) wrong ideas about how to interpret the Bible
- b) unbelief or scepticism

- c) factual errors and wrong ideas that are fixed in our minds due to poor teaching
- d) wrong ideas which are fixed in our minds due to church traditions. These come from men, not from the Bible
- e) lack of diligence in searching for answers
- f) errors by the translators
- g) lack of knowledge of ancient history
- h) lack of knowledge of the culture and conventions of Bible times

Therefore persist and deal with every one of these potential stumbling blocks. Deep understanding of God's ways will only come to those who are willing to keep on and on working to find it. God has said that He is *"a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him"*:

But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

Hebrews 11:6 (NKJV)

The importance of doctrinal accuracy and having a correct understanding of Scripture

There is a widespread view in Western churches, even among some real Christians, that it doesn't really matter much what we believe, *"as long as we love God"*. Getting our doctrine right, i.e. correctly understanding what the Bible teaches, is not generally considered important. The minority who do consider doctrine to be important are frequently viewed as narrow-minded or dogmatic. But the truth is that it really *does* matter whether we understand or misunderstand the Bible.

All sorts of consequences will flow from getting it right and, likewise, from getting it wrong. It is not just an academic subject that can be left to theologians to worry about. On the contrary, it is every individual's solemn responsibility to gain a correct understanding of Scripture and to avoid being mistaken or deceived. Otherwise you could find that you are believing things that are not true. If so, you could be labouring in vain and *"to no avail"*:

⁸"Behold, you are trusting in deceptive words to no avail.

Jeremiah 7:8 (NASB)

What we believe, or don't believe, in the Bible and what we know, or don't know, about it will have a profound impact at every level of our lives. The Psalmist was not satisfied to have just a "rough idea" of what the Bible means. Neither should you be. Aim for exact definitions, and for full knowledge and understanding. Seek to fill all gaps, and eliminate all errors, so far as you possibly can.

Likewise, we are commanded to be on the alert, watching out for any false teaching so that we can recognize it and reject it. This is really important, because what we believe has profound consequences in our lives. That is why Jesus warned the disciples to beware of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees, because their teaching was false and would do them great harm if they believed it:

⁵When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. ⁶Jesus said to them, "Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." ⁷And they began discussing it among themselves, saying, "We brought no bread." ⁸But Jesus, aware of this, said, "O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? ⁹Do

you not yet perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? ¹⁰Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? ¹¹How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” ¹²Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Matthew 16:5-12 (ESV)

God expects and requires us to know the whole Bible very well

God has gone to enormous trouble to give us His Word and He expects us to make the effort to know it thoroughly. He will hold us individually accountable for how hard we try to gain a full and accurate knowledge. That is not just true for Bible teachers, though they will be judged more strictly. It applies to all of us. It is true that He will judge each one of us according to what we personally knew. But He will also judge us according to how diligently, or casually, we pursued a thorough knowledge of His Word.

Thus, we cannot avoid God's disapproval by deliberately *avoiding* knowledge, so that we cannot be held accountable for it. That trick won't work. God would judge us instead for the fact that we deliberately *chose not to learn*. Apostle Paul tells Timothy that one of the things he should do, in order to be approved, is to study God's Word to such an extent that he can handle it correctly:

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

2 Timothy 2:15 (NIV)

We must not neglect or ignore God's Word or harden our hearts to it

God will hold us accountable for the attitude that we choose to adopt towards His Word. As we have seen, the way we treat His Word is a very accurate proxy for how we treat Him. Therefore we cannot claim to love God any more strongly than we love His Word. We cannot pay Him any higher honour than to study his Word. Conversely, to ignore or despise His Word is to ignore or despise Him. Thus it is crucially important that we adopt the right heart-attitude towards the Bible.

The Bible summarises this by saying that we should “*listen diligently*”. In the original Hebrew this is expressed by repeating the verb to ‘listen’. Thus it is rendered in Hebrew idiom as to “*listen listening*”, because the way they emphasise a word is to repeat it. It then means that you are doing that activity very emphatically or diligently.

So, to “listen listening” means to *really* listen or to listen *very attentively*. The thought behind it is that we are to humble ourselves in the sense that we incline our heads to the side, as we do when we are really trying hard to listen to a very quiet sound:

*Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;
incline your ears to the words of my mouth!*

Psalm 78:1 (RSV).

That that is how God wants us to act towards His Word. The attitude He wants us to have is one where we so strongly want to hear what God is saying that we are straining our ears and inclining our heads to the side to listen as closely as possible. Anyone who does that is paying a compliment to the speaker. They are showing that they are hanging on his every word, not wanting to miss the slightest bit of what is being said.

A person who has that attitude towards God and wants to hear and understand everything that God is saying can be described as having a soft or tender heart. They are open to all that God has to say. They value the Bible and respect it very highly. The opposite of that is to be hard-hearted or indifferent, such that we despise His Word. If we adopt that attitude we will bring destruction upon ourselves:

***Whoever despises the word brings destruction on himself,
but he who reveres the commandment will be rewarded.***

Proverbs 13:13 (ESV)

This ‘destruction’ will arise in two ways, i.e. directly and indirectly. Firstly, we need to make clear that to *despise* God’s Word doesn’t mean that we hate it or are strongly opposed to it. It means that *we ignore, neglect or undervalue* it. If we have that attitude we will miss out on the guidance and wisdom that the Bible contains. Therefore we will encounter all sorts of additional and unnecessary problems in our lives due to our ignorance of what God wants us to know, or our failure to take it seriously. Thus, we would have brought destruction upon ourselves *indirectly*.

However, there is also a secondary meaning to it. Anyone who despises God’s Word will also bring destruction upon himself *directly* by incurring God’s anger and causing Him to oppose us, punish us and even destroy us. We see an example of this in the life of King Rehoboam, the son of King Solomon. We are told that he “*forsook the law of the LORD*”:

When the rule of Rehobo'am was established and was strong, he forsook the law of the LORD, and all Israel with him.

2 Chronicles 12:1 (RSV)

That casual attitude which caused Rehoboam to neglect and ignore God’s Word led to his downfall. He lost nine of the twelve tribes of Israel. The northern tribes rebelled against him and the nation was split into two parts, with Rehoboam only having the small Southern Kingdom consisting of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, plus many of the Levites who moved south.

The prophet Zechariah spoke to the people of Judah about the way that they and their ancestors had neglected and ignored God’s Word, as expressed by all the earlier prophets. They had hardened their hearts and deliberately resisted and ignored God’s Word because they did not *want* to hear it:

⁴Then the word of the Lord of hosts came to me: ⁵“Say to all the people of the land and the priests, When you fasted and mourned in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted? ⁶And when you eat and when you drink, do you not eat for yourselves and drink for yourselves? ⁷Were not these the words that the Lord proclaimed by the former prophets, when Jerusalem was inhabited and prosperous, with her cities around her, and the South and the lowland were inhabited?”

⁸And the word of the Lord came to Zechariah, saying, ⁹“Thus says the Lord of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, ¹⁰do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart.” ¹¹But they refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears that they might not hear. ¹²They made their hearts diamond-hard lest they should hear the law and the words that the Lord of hosts had sent by his Spirit through the former prophets. Therefore great anger came from the Lord of hosts. ¹³“As I called, and they would not hear, so they called, and I would not hear,” says the Lord of hosts,

Zechariah 7:4-13 (ESV)

The Jewish people hardened their hearts to God’s Word and He responded in judgement and showed His anger towards them. It resulted in them losing their right to live in the Land and being exiled from

it for many years. If that is how strongly God felt about their neglect of His Word, what basis have we got to assume that He will view our attitude to His Word any less seriously?

The main reason Jesus spoke in parables was to withhold the truth from those who did not want it or care about it

Have you ever wondered why Jesus spoke in parables, especially in the latter stages of His ministry? He tells us Himself that He was doing so because there were many people in His audiences who *did not really want the truth, or care about it*. Such people do not have the love of the truth. They have no genuine desire to understand what God is saying. God will eventually take steps to hide the truth from those who have already shown that His Word does not matter much to them. Here is how Jesus explained this:

¹⁰Then the disciples came and said to him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” ¹¹And he answered them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. ¹²For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. ¹³This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. ¹⁴Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says:

*““You will indeed hear but never understand,
and you will indeed see but never perceive.”*

*¹⁵For this people's heart has grown dull,
and with their ears they can barely hear,
and their eyes they have closed,
lest they should see with their eyes
and hear with their ears
and understand with their heart
and turn, and I would heal them.’*

Matthew 13:10-15 (ESV)

It is important to get the sequence of events in the right order. It does not *begin* with God hiding or withholding the truth. On the contrary, it begins with Him speaking clearly to us. It could be through His written Word, or our consciences, or even through the wonder of His creation. However, if we are uninterested or indifferent, or if we aren't willing to obey the things we do already understand, then eventually God will begin to hide all further truth from us. In the end, He will even take away the very ability to understand at all.

But that only happens if we first despise or ignore what we *already know* about His Word, in the way Isaiah prophesied about. Thus we need to take this very seriously and not allow ourselves to be complacent or to assume that Jesus is only referring to other people and not to us.

We see another examples of this principle in operation in the way Jesus deals with the Pharisees in Matthew chapter 21. They had refused to face up to the truth that had already been revealed to them concerning John the Baptist. Therefore Jesus refused to answer their questions and would not give them any further information:

²³And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” ²⁴Jesus answered them, “I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?” And they discussed it among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ ²⁶But if we say, ‘From man,’ we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet.” ²⁷So they

answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.

Matthew 21:23-27 (ESV)

If they had been honest enough to admit that John the Baptist was sent by God, and that his message of repentance applied to them, then Jesus would have revealed more truth to them concerning Himself. But they would not, so He would not. It is essential that we recognize this vital principle and begin to take seriously, and obey, whatever we *currently* know about God's will, however little that may be. If we will do that, then God will reveal more of His will to us and correct any errors in our current understanding of His will.

God's inevitable response when we despise Him by disobeying or ignoring His commandments

Consider also what God did to bring judgment on the people of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and note His reasons for doing so. God caused the King of Assyria to invade the Northern Kingdom because of the way the Israelites had "*despised His statutes and His covenant*":

¹⁴But they would not listen, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been, who did not believe in the Lord their God. ¹⁵They despised his statutes and his covenant that he made with their fathers and the warnings that he gave them. They went after false idols and became false, and they followed the nations that were around them, concerning whom the Lord had commanded them that they should not do like them.

2 Kings 17:14-15 (ESV)

Their neglect of God's Word had caused the Northern Kingdom of Israel to degenerate further into all kinds of other sins. Let's look at a lengthy passage which addresses this. It is a clear warning to us today about how strongly God feels. The Assyrians were therefore allowed by God to invade the Northern Kingdom. This was God's deliberate punishment upon them for their sin but, in particular, for their neglect of His Word:

⁵Then the king of Assyria invaded all the land and came to Sama'ria, and for three years he besieged it. ⁶In the ninth year of Hoshe'a the king of Assyria captured Sama'ria, and he carried the Israelites away to Assyria, and placed them in Halah, and on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes.

2 Kings 17:5-6 (RSV)

This invasion by the Assyrians arose because the Northern Israelites were unfaithful to God. In particular, they served other gods in the form of idols and imitated the ways of the neighbouring pagan nations:

⁷And this was so, because the people of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and had feared other gods ⁸and walked in the customs of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel, and in the customs which the kings of Israel had introduced. ⁹And the people of Israel did secretly against the LORD their God things that were not right. They built for themselves high places at all their towns, from watchtower to fortified city; ¹⁰they set up for themselves pillars and Ashe'rim on every high hill and under every green tree; ¹¹and there they burned incense on all the high places, as the nations did whom the LORD carried away before them. And they did wicked things, provoking the LORD to anger, ¹²and they served idols, of which the LORD had said to them, "You shall not do this."

2 Kings 17:7-12 (RSV)

In doing all these wicked things the people of the Northern Kingdom of Israel had ignored and disobeyed God's commands. These were set out clearly in the Bible by the prophets whom God had

sent. As God saw it, their sinful behaviour meant the people had "*despised His statutes*". He viewed their actions as sinful enough in themselves.

However, they also signified a deliberate rejection of His written Word, which He had given them. That is why God took it even more seriously. We need therefore to learn from what happened to them as a result of ignoring the Scriptures. And we must take care not to do likewise:

¹³Yet the LORD warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, "Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you by my servants the prophets." ¹⁴But they would not listen, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been, who did not believe in the LORD their God.

¹⁵They despised his statutes, and his covenant that he made with their fathers, and the warnings which he gave them. They went after false idols, and became false, and they followed the nations that were round about them, concerning whom the LORD had commanded them that they should not do like them.

¹⁶And they forsook all the commandments of the LORD their God, and made for themselves molten images of two calves; and they made an Ashe'rah, and worshiped all the host of heaven, and served Ba'al. ¹⁷And they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings, and used divination and sorcery, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger.

2 Kings 17:13-17 (RSV)

The evil things that the Israelites did, especially in the Northern Kingdom, are basically the same as what our own generation is now doing. If anything, our own generation's disregard for the Bible is even greater than that of Northern Israel. Therefore, I see no alternative but to conclude that our generation will be judged just as severely as they were, if not more so:

Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel, and removed them out of his sight; none was left but the tribe of Judah only.

2 Kings 17:18 (RSV)

Let's look briefly at each of the main things the Israelites did. Then let's consider how well, or how badly, we do today in the Western churches in comparison to them:

a) They "*sinned against the LORD their God*". But surely our modern Western churches sin more than they did, and we are even less ashamed about it than they were. They did not have the same levels of pornography, dishonesty, adultery, fornication, divorce, materialism, and financial corruption that we have today.

b) They "*walked in the customs of the nations*" (i.e. the pagan Gentile world). That means they were worldly, rather than being holy and set apart for God. Again, we seem to be even more worldly, carnal, compromised and hypocritical than the people of Israel were. One also doubts if they could have been as brazen about their sin as our generation is, in particular concerning homosexuality.

c) They "*served idols*". But we in the Western churches also serve idols. The only difference is that our idols are not made of wood or stone. We serve things like self, money, comfort, leisure, denominational tradition, career, ambition, power, status, possessions, etc etc. Can you or I truly say that none of those things are idols to us?

d) They "*would not listen* (to God's warnings by the prophets) *but were stubborn*....." Here we can make a very direct comparison. The Israelites refused to listen to the prophets, but we have far greater access than they had to what those same prophets said and wrote. Plus we also have the later prophets and the apostles. We even have the direct words of Jesus, which

they had not got. Yet we undervalue, ignore, and even disobey, all of these. Therefore many of us are ignoring more of God's Word than they did, and with less excuse.

e) They "*burned their sons and their daughters as offerings*". Some of the Israelites did this as part of their pagan worship, sacrificing their own babies as burnt offerings to demon gods like Molech and Baal. Some would protest that we are, at least, innocent of this. But are we? Even in Great Britain alone, 200,000 babies are killed every year in abortion. In America it is over 1,400,000 babies per year. For the vast majority of those abortions the only real reason is the convenience of the mother and/or the father and/or grandparents. It is done because it doesn't fit in with their career plans, or their social life, or because it is economically difficult.

If so, quite apart from being murder, it is being done for the sake of those 'gods' or 'idols', i.e. career, finance, convenience, self-interest etc. Therefore, how is the abortion industry of our day any less sinful than sacrificing babies to the god Molech? If anything we are far worse, because the numbers are so much larger. The Jewish people, even in the Northern Kingdom, never killed anywhere near the number of children that we kill in the Western world today. Our abortions are conducted on an industrial scale. Worst of all, abortion is happening today even amongst those who claim to be part of the Church.

Israel degenerated because they ignored God's Word

What is the cause of all this? Why did Israel degenerate into such dreadful sins? The answer is contained within the passage above from 2 Kings. It is that:

- a) they did not listen to the warnings of God's prophets;
- b) they were stubborn;
- c) they despised God's statutes;
- d) they despised the covenant God had made with them through Moses.

The prophet Hosea also alludes to this problem when he says:

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me. And since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.

Hosea 4:6 (RSV)

Hosea then adds:

"..... and a people without understanding shall come to ruin..."
Hosea 4 14(b) (RSV)

When it says in 2 Kings 17:15 above that the people of Israel "*despised*" God's statutes, it does not mean that they hated or actively opposed them. It simply means that, like Esau, they considered them to be of little importance. But that is exactly what our own generation does, at least in the West.

The Israelites also put too little importance on the covenant which God had made with them through Moses. Although the Law of Moses is no longer in operation, we now have a much greater and even more important covenant. That is the '*New Covenant*', which Jesus brought into operation by His death on the cross. That covenant is permanent. The Church in our own day is despising and undervaluing the New Covenant far more blatantly than either Israel or Judah despised the lesser (and only temporary) covenant that God made with Moses.

Alongside the covenant made with Abraham, the New Covenant is now one of the two main covenants which concern us today. Unlike the covenant made with Moses, it is eternal. But, the Western churches today place far too little importance on this. Most of them rarely even mention, let alone emphasise, the cross, or the death of Jesus, or His blood which was shed in order to bring the New Covenant into being. If the Jewish people's sin in despising the temporary covenant with Moses angered God, how much *more* angry must He be when so many of us in the Western churches in our day undervalue, ignore, or even deny, what Jesus did for us on the cross?

The main way that we devalue or despise the New Covenant is when we ignore or fail to study God's Word. Remember that the very name we use for the books of the Bible from Matthew through to Revelation is the '*New Testament*'. That is simply another way of saying the '*New Covenant*'. The words '*covenant*' and '*testament*' mean the same. So, when we despise God's Word, especially in the New Testament, we are automatically also despising the New Covenant itself, that Jesus made for our benefit when He died on the cross. What is more, in despising the New Covenant, we are also despising the earlier covenants too.

It is our duty to try to understand God and it is possible to do so

Although there is always more to learn, we can, reasonably expect to reach a place where we do genuinely have a good understanding of God and His Word. It is not a hopeless project, at which we can never succeed. It can be done. We can realistically aim to reach a place of maturity and thorough knowledge, even though that knowledge is never complete or perfect. But most of us are not achieving that. Our problems, and our failures to achieve God's purposes, mainly come from not understanding God. In particular we fail to understand the following things about Him:

- a) His character and nature
- b) His ways
- c) His principles
- d) His aims and objectives
- e) His priorities
- f) His standards
- g) His holiness and righteousness
- h) His hatred of sin and wickedness
- i) His judgment and anger
- j) His mercy and grace
- k) His love for the Jewish people
- l) His love for the Church
- m) His love for the lost
- n) His ultimate plans and purposes for world history

The importance of accurate doctrine

The above list of subjects, and more besides, which we are all meant to know and understand, is what we might call 'doctrine'. It is largely about understanding God's character, ways, plans and intentions, so that we can truly know Him. If our doctrine is wrong, then our view of God will also be wrong. If so, then we are in deep trouble, because wrong beliefs about God always have some adverse consequence. We are likely to end up degenerating further into more error, or even into apostasy, whereby we cease to believe the truth and live in such a way that we are worse than those who have never believed.

The Bible speaks of a generation on this earth in the last days, before Jesus returns, who will display all these characteristics. Consider the following passages from Paul's second letter to Timothy. Ask yourself whether we might, perhaps, be that particularly apostate and godless generation which Paul describes:

¹But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: ²For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, ³unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, ⁴traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, ⁵having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!

2 Timothy 3:1-5 (NKJV)

If there was ever a generation in the Church who were "lovers of themselves", it is surely us in the Western churches. Plus, the sins and characteristics that Paul lists seem to fit today's Church exactly, more so than with any previous age. Given the awfulness of what Paul describes, note his proposed response to it all. Paul's advice to Timothy is to *focus on the Bible*.

He urges him, in the face of all that is coming, to *devote himself to the Scriptures*. But Timothy already knew the Scriptures better than most of us do. Therefore, Paul's advice to us would be even more emphatic. Paul then sets out what the Bible has to offer and why we need it:

¹⁰But you have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance, ¹¹persecutions, afflictions, which happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra— what persecutions I endured. And out of them all the Lord delivered me. ¹²Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. ¹³But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived. ¹⁴But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, ¹⁵and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, ¹⁷that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:10-17 (NKJV)

Also, when Paul is telling Titus what qualities and characteristics an elder or overseer needs to have, he places great emphasis on his being able to hold firm to God's Word and *sound doctrine*:

⁷For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, ⁸but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. ⁹He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

Titus 1:7-9 (ESV)

But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine.

Titus 2:1 (ESV)

Furthermore, have you noticed in 2 Timothy 3:10 above that when he refers to how Timothy has imitated his life, Paul focuses, first and foremost, on *doctrine*? He puts it ahead of all the other qualities that Timothy was also seeking to acquire. That would surprise many people today. If you were seeking to imitate Paul, as we all should be, what single characteristic would you put at the top of the list?

You might choose any of his other qualities such as faith, courage, perseverance etc, but you probably wouldn't have said doctrine. Yet that was first on the list for Paul, and also for Timothy. It should therefore be first on our list too. But most of us would have to admit that it isn't, and that we are often shaky and vague about what we believe.

Indeed, many of us are in an even worse condition. We live in an age when sound, biblical teaching and accurate doctrine are particularly rare and undervalued. In fact many of us seek the very opposite and immerse ourselves in false doctrine and foolish myths. Apostle Paul prophesied that the churches would one day degenerate in this way:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: ²preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. ³For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, ⁴and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

2 Timothy 4:1-4 (ESV)

Paul did not view doctrine as being something obscure or technical, the study of which we can safely leave to others. His approach was the opposite of what we see today. In the modern Western churches, standing up for accurate doctrine is often seen as 'hair splitting', or even bigotry. Anyone who stands up for truth today, even within the Church, let alone outside it, will receive more abuse than praise.

We are a generation which has little or no regard for truth and which cannot see why it matters so much to get our beliefs right. It actually makes sense for Paul to place so much emphasis on the accuracy of our doctrine. Ultimately, everything we do stems from what we *believe*. Therefore if our beliefs are wrong, then other things will also end up being wrong.

It is absurd to suggest that nothing is objectively true or false and that all things are relative or subjective. The reality is that some things are true and some are false in objective terms. There are some things about which we have to be 'black and white' and where any wooliness or compromise is wrong. Therefore we must change our attitude towards doctrine and make the pursuit of objective truth a very high priority, especially when it comes to gaining a correct understanding of God's Word.

Note also the very troubling words written by apostle John in his second letter about any person who "*does not abide in the doctrine of Christ.*" John warns us to avoid such a person, i.e. not to let them into our homes, or even greet them, because of the serious harm that false doctrine causes. He even refers to what they teach as "*wicked work*":

⁹Anyone who goes ahead and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God; he who abides in the doctrine has both the Father and the Son. ¹⁰If any one comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into the house or give him any greeting; ¹¹for he who greets him shares his wicked work.

2 John 9-11 (RSV)

The excellent Bible teacher, Jacob Prasch, says that there are twice as many verses in the New Testament which urge us to develop accurate doctrine than there are verses which urge us to good

behaviour. Jacob makes the further point that that is probably because it is accurate doctrine which leads us to good conduct, whereas false doctrine will always lead us to bad conduct and wrong lifestyles. In other words, there is a strong correlation between what we believe and how we live.

The authority of Scripture

Let's remind ourselves of what Paul said to Timothy about what Scripture is:

¹⁶All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, ¹⁷that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NASB)

This second letter to Timothy was written very shortly before Paul was executed. He knew he was imminently about to die. He was taking his last opportunity to advise and encourage his right-hand man, on whom so much depended. That fact alone must give this passage a special significance. Therefore, note carefully what Paul chooses to emphasise. Ahead of all the other things he could have emphasised, Paul zooms in on the importance of the Bible. He tells Timothy that"*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God.....*".

Paul means that every verse is inspired by God. It is all God-given and it all reveals what God thinks. It is not just the thoughts and ideas of men. That is the uniqueness of Scripture. We have to remember that it is God's own Word and realise, therefore, what immense authority and importance it has.

Some of us might respond that we already know that the Bible is God's Word. But do we really? For many of us our actions don't suggest that that is what we really believe. Surely, if we truly believed that Scripture was God speaking to us, then it would play a far greater role in our lives? It would be at the centre of all that we do. But for very many of us who claim to be Christians, the Bible is only at the margins of our daily lives and has very little influence on our decisions and actions.

The Bible is not merely to be "*taken into account*" or applied "*to the extent that we agree with it, or consider it to be relevant*". It has infinite authority. There is nothing else that is equal to it, let alone higher than it. We must always bring our lives into line with it, never the other way round. What else can we do if we believe that it sets out God's thoughts and commands? Anything less than full obedience would be illogical.

How can any of us be so ridiculous as to '*disagree*' with God? Likewise, how can we have the arrogance to pick and choose which parts of His Word to accept? Only a fool would do those things. The reality is, however, that most of us do all of those things, much of the time, without even realizing it. If we did ever stop to think about it, we would have to admit that such an attitude is absurd.

The infallibility of Scripture - it contains no errors at all

The Bible has total authority. It is completely infallible, and there are no errors in it, i.e. in the original Hebrew or Greek. Many ordinary books are authoritative, to some extent, even though they are only written by men. But the Bible goes much further than that. It claims to be all of the following and more:

- a) perfect - it is never wrong and contains no mistakes or inaccuracies at all;
- b) morally/ethically accurate;

- c) historically accurate;
- d) scientifically accurate;
- e) prophetically accurate - it tells us what will happen in the future;
- f) totally reliable - it will never fail or let you down.

Many of us, including church leaders, have lost sight of the truth about the infallibility of the Bible. The majority of professing Christians in our day, even real ones, do not believe that the Bible is totally true, accurate and reliable. Few churches teach that at all, let alone emphasise it. Most Western church leaders today do not have enough confidence in the Bible to be able to say any of (a) to (f) above.

On BBC Radio 4 in 2011, they were doing a series of readings from the King James Bible to mark its 400th anniversary. Each reading was introduced and discussed by a supposed expert who commented on it. On one particular day the theological "expert" was patronising and condescending about the Bible. He informed us that although the reading for that day was: *"of course, not literally true, but merely myth, that 'myth' still has importance for us"*. That was how that theologian saw the Bible. He spoke as if it was a book of children's stories and fables.

He is not alone. Millions would agree with him, even within the churches. But his view of the Bible was illogical. If the Bible isn't true, but is merely a 'myth', then we should not honour it at all. We should get rid of it. We would be better off reading the newspaper because that does, at least, contain some facts. Myths have no use at all, especially if they are falsely pretending to be facts. If the Bible is just myth, rather than genuine, literal truth, then we should leave it alone completely. We need the truth, not interesting stories.

How do we know that the Bible is true?

The truth may be what we are looking for, but the question is does the Bible provide it? Is the Bible really infallible or isn't it and how can we know? What proof is there? The answer is that there are many ways in which we can know that the Bible is absolutely true. Let's consider just a few of these:

a) Jesus said it is true

On many occasions Jesus quoted from the Hebrew Scriptures, which we call the Old Testament. When He did so, it was always with full and unqualified approval. He also endorsed it as true and spoke of it as fact, never as mere stories. For example he spoke of Satan's fall, creation, Adam, Noah, the worldwide flood, Lot, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Moses and his miracles, the Exodus from Egypt, Jonah and the huge fish, and much more. *There is not a single example of Jesus failing to take the Bible literally.*

Jesus also validated the prophets. In particular, He validated Daniel, by referring to him as *"the prophet Daniel"*. But if Jesus endorsed Daniel in that way, and accepted his prophecies as genuine, as He also did with many other prophets, then who are we to doubt them or to reject what they wrote? Jesus knew the whole Old Testament and He never called any of it into question. So why should we?

b) Apostle Paul said it is all true

As we've seen above, Paul said that all Scripture is inspired by God. That is simple enough. It means *all* of it, without any exception. That being so, how can *any* of it be wrong? God does not make mistakes. Neither does He lie or exaggerate.

c) Apostle Peter validated the writings of Paul and referred to them as 'Scripture'.

There is an important passage in Peter's second letter in which he refers to the letters of apostle Paul. Peter commends Paul's letters to us and equates them with "*the other Scriptures*". Thus, he clearly saw Paul's writings as being equal in authority to the Old Testament Scriptures, even when they were first written:

¹⁵And count the forbearance of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, ¹⁶speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.

2 Peter 3:15-16 (RSV)

Note, by the way, that even apostle Peter recognised that Paul's letters are sometimes "*hard to understand*". That remark ought to encourage all of us who have ever found Paul complicated. We are in good company.

d) Apostle Peter also validates all the Old Testament prophets and all the other apostles too

Consider this next passage from Peter. He tells us that *every* prophecy in the Bible is *from God*:

²⁰First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, ²¹because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

2 Peter 1:20-21 (RSV)

If that isn't clear enough, Peter then goes on to give his personal seal of approval to all the Old Testament prophets and to all the apostles too. He refers to the LORD Jesus as having given *His* commandments *through* the apostles:

¹This is now the second letter that I have written to you, beloved, and in both of them I have aroused your sincere mind by way of reminder; ²that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Saviour through your apostles.

2 Peter 3:1-2 (RSV)

The sufficiency of Scripture

The Bible may be authoritative, and it may be infallible, but is it *sufficient*? Does it provide *all* that we need, or do we need something else as well? Does it have any deficiencies, such that we need to fill the gaps by also looking at the teachings of men?

The answer is that the Bible contains everything we need in order to achieve all the objectives that God has set for us. But what are those objectives? What exactly is the Bible sufficient for? We can answer that by looking once more at what Paul told Timothy:

¹⁶All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; ¹⁷so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NASB)

Let us take each of these things in turn and examine what exactly the Bible is profitable for:

1) for teaching (i.e. doctrine)

The Bible contains all the *doctrine* that we need to be taught. There is nothing missing from the Bible that we *need* to know about. Of course, there are hundreds of other things we would *like* to know, but which God doesn't choose to tell us about. There are also some secret things that God does not want us to know about yet. Or they may be dangerous for us to dabble with.

It is just as in a family, where the parents do not choose to share all their thoughts, concerns or plans with their children. God does the same with us. Some things are too deep or complicated for us. They may fascinate us, but they could distract us, or even harm us, if we looked into them. It would be like telling a five year old child all about nuclear weapons, cancer, witchcraft and pornography.

There are some things which it is best for a child not even to know about, let alone dwell upon. We are like children in God's eyes. He wants to shelter us from certain things. It is for our good, and we should be thankful for it. So, God has filled the Bible with every doctrine that we need to know in order to do His will and achieve His purposes for us.

But He chooses not to go very far beyond that. God deliberately ignores some issues and leaves certain intriguing questions unanswered. Even so, the Bible is still '*sufficient*'. It contains all that we *need* to know in order to do the things that God wants us to achieve, which is all that really matters.

2) for reproof

'*Reproof*' is an unfashionable word, especially to our petulant and self-obsessed generation. However, the Bible also contains all that we need in order to be able to challenge or confront ourselves, and also those under our care, or to whom we minister. Few people, if asked, would have put reproof second on their list of the things for which the Bible is useful. Not many would give it that much significance, or indeed any significance.

Few would even see reproof as a benefit at all. But Paul does, because God sees our great need for it. He intends the Bible to be used for that purpose. In other words, the Bible contains all that we need in order to expose and challenge our own faults, sins, foolishness, transgressions, iniquities and rebellion. Then we can reprove ourselves, and each other, about those things.

So, we may not have been looking for a 'manual of reproof', but we have got one, and it is perfect for that purpose. Our problem is that we don't like reproof. But that is another matter. Whether we like it or not, we need it. Therefore, from now on, as you read the Bible, begin to pray for the ability to see its reproof in relation to your own life. Go out of your way to ask God for such reproof. Also ask Him to help you to receive it well, and to be willing to repent and to change. You could pray along these lines:

"Lord, please show me today, from your Word, some of my own sins, character faults, bad habits, or anything that displeases you. Open my eyes and help me to see your reproof as applying to me, not just to other people. Help me also to become willing to admit my sins, to repent and to change."

3) for correction

Correction is similar to reproof, but here the emphasis is not on our *sin*, but on the mistakes, gaps and misunderstandings in our *beliefs*. The aim is to correct the errors in our *doctrine*. The Bible puts us right when we are mistaken, or where we have been wrongly taught, or deceived. No matter what we may have been told by others, and however wrong or incomplete our views may be, the Bible is sufficient to correct us. It can get us back on the right track, with the right doctrinal understanding, if

we will allow it to. But that will only work if we are determined to believe the Bible rather than believing what men say, or clinging to our own opinions or traditions.

We must get all our views, beliefs, priorities and understanding from the Bible, rather than from tradition, or from the teachings of our particular denomination. Unless we make a determined effort to do otherwise, most of us will unconsciously absorb our beliefs and practices from the people around us, not from the Bible. Therefore, if they are wrong, you will be wrong.

Instead, we need to be like the Bereans (see Acts 17:11) and check carefully in the Bible for ourselves to see whether things are true or false, rather than just relying on our church's traditional stance. Then we will be capable of correcting ourselves. We can also identify any errors in what we are taught. But if you aren't seeking for the Bible to correct you, rather than to affirm your existing opinions, then you will probably remain in error. You would not even notice, the correction that the Bible contains. What is lacking, for most of us, is a heart that is even *willing* to be corrected, let alone seeking to be. To change that you could regularly pray something like this:

"Lord please speak to me today from your Word. Help me to see any mistakes, gaps, or wrong teaching in the things I currently think or believe. Show me my own errors and those of my teachers. Also show me the things I have not yet seen, or not yet been taught, so that I can change my thinking and enlarge my knowledge and understanding."

4) for instruction in righteousness

The Bible is profitable for achieving *God's* objectives, not necessarily *our own*. We may have all sorts of plans and objectives for our lives, but they may not be the things that God concentrates on in the Bible. Its main focus is on changing us to become like Jesus. That is what God aims for, and that is what the Bible is designed to achieve. So, the Bible is capable of instructing us in righteousness. It contains all that we need to be able to understand what righteousness is.

Firstly it shows us how to get *imputed righteousness*. That is the righteousness that is transferred to us by our being justified. It comes through repenting and believing in Jesus Christ. Secondly the Bible tells us how to become *sanctified*, by gradually changing to become more and more like Jesus in practice, in the way we live and the quality of our character.

Again, the only thing in doubt is whether we really *want* such righteousness. We ought to, because much is promised in the Bible to anybody who really wants to obtain righteousness, to the extent that they hunger and thirst for it and are willing to be persecuted for it:

***⁶"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.
Matthew 5:6 (RSV)***

¹⁰"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹"Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Matthew 5:10-12 (RSV)

There are numerous things that we ask God for, but righteousness is very rarely one of them. For most of us, it is not even on our agenda. It needs to be much more highly emphasised and valued. We need to start pursuing it earnestly. Therefore, if you have already been born again, i.e. justified, by receiving the imputed righteousness of Jesus, you should now begin to pray for practical righteousness, i.e. sanctification. You could perhaps pray something along these lines:

"Father, thank you that Jesus has transferred His own righteousness to me, so that you now see me as if I had all His sinless perfection. Now please also change me in my daily behaviour, speech and

attitudes. Please sanctify me. Give me the power and the grace to change and become more like Him, especially in those parts of my character where, at present, I am least like Him."

However, perhaps you realise, even as you read this, that you are not yet a real Christian at all and have not even had the imputed righteousness of Jesus transferred to you. If so then please refer back to Book One of this series, which explains how to become a Christian and be saved.

5) to equip us for every good work

Finally, the Bible equips and enables us to do every kind of good work that God has planned for us. It sets out what God wants us to do, and how to do it. Again, the only thing in question is whether or not we actually want to do those good works. Many of us, at least in the West, are uninterested in such things and don't even consider good works, let alone dwell upon the subject.

The Bible is the main way that God has chosen to make Himself known to us. And it is the one and only place from which to get our doctrines.

The Bible is the only reliable source of true, accurate doctrine. However, many people actually get their beliefs about God from all sorts of other places as well, such as church leaders, traditions, their own opinions, other people's opinions and even from the use of spiritual gifts. That is, they accept as doctrine things which were said by some person in their church as a word of prophecy, or as an interpretation of tongues.

None of these things, however genuine and valid they may be, can ever be a source of any doctrine. We must get those *solely from the Bible*. If not, we will inevitably become confused and deceived. We will also end up redesigning God and even creating our own god to match up with our own opinions, or the things we have been told, rather than accept the real God who is revealed in the pages of the Bible.

Moreover, we must accept the *whole* Bible and allow all of it to tell us about God and about what He thinks and says. For example, I come across many people who pick and choose which parts of the Bible they are going to accept and believe and which parts they won't. People rarely do that openly and explicitly. Not many people say express words to the effect of "*I do not believe, and will not accept, what the Bible says about.....*" At any rate I rarely ever hear anyone who claims to be a Christian speaking as blatantly as that. They are more subtle, and less honest, about it.

They therefore operate as if the Bible was a *buffet bar*, or a *pick and mix sweet stall*. They feel entitled to choose which parts of the Bible to believe and which parts not to believe. The net effect of this approach is that you will end up making your own god for yourself, in your own image, who shares all your opinions and priorities. For example, I have heard people say "*for me, God is love*" and that "*love is what we need to focus on*".

However, they ignore, or even deny, a host of other things about God's character which are equally real and important, such as His holiness, righteousness, judgment etc. I was discussing this with two different people recently and describing God's holiness and impending judgment. Both of them, separately, said to me "*I don't recognise the God you speak of*".

Neither of them were willing to believe that God would ever judge us or send anyone to the Lake of Fire. They had therefore both created a different god, of their own making, who does not do those things. They felt more comfortable with that alternative god than with the real God, who is as He describes Himself in the pages of the Bible.

Islam does the same thing. The god whom Muslims call '*Allah*' is not the God of the Bible. He is profoundly different in many ways. Therefore he cannot be the same person as the God of Abraham,

Isaac and Jacob. The nature and characteristics of the real God are revealed to us in the Bible, not within the Koran.

In other words, we are not free to design our own god to suit ourselves, removing from the God of the Bible any characteristics or features which we don't like. Many of us do that, but what we end up with is a false god of our own making. Such a god is not worth having because it cannot save you.

So, the Bible is sufficient for everything that God designed it for. Therefore we can have full confidence that the Bible is all we need to enable us to do those things that God is calling us to do. We do not need any further man-made ideas to supplement the Bible. An example of such things being added to the Bible, or substituted in place of what it teaches, is psychological counselling and psychotherapy. These are said to be fields of science, though they are actually just pseudo-science.

What we now call psychology has only really come into existence as a subject over the last 100 years. It has then ballooned in size over the last 50 years. It uses self-centred ideas to attempt to address the problems that come from our sinful, selfish, carnal natures. Psychology is a man-made way of looking at people and their problems, which is not found in the Bible. In fact it is often the direct opposite of what the Bible says. That is why psychology and psychotherapy are so ineffective in dealing with the problems caused by our sins, especially our selfishness and pride.

Apostle Paul says the Bible has provided all that we need for teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness. Accordingly, the Bible is all we need to counsel ourselves, and others, about our personal problems, weaknesses and sins. What else could we need?

We certainly do not need the atheistic, and even occultic, ideas of misguided men like Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow. They were the main founders of what we now call psychology. Regrettably, the beliefs, values and practices of such men have taken deep root in many of the churches in the West.

It is now commonplace for Christians to seek to counsel people using the unbiblical, man-made ideas of psychology, rather than the God-given truth of the Bible. Many churches even regard a degree in psychology as being necessary before one person can be allowed to counsel another. Therefore many theological colleges now offer psychology as a subject choice. They fear that students would not enrol if they did not offer it.

This is particularly true in the USA, where it is said that churches are the biggest referral agencies to psychological counsellors, instead of counselling their own people themselves, from the Bible. Therefore psychology could be said to be the biggest heresy in the world today, because what other false teaching is so widely accepted, even within the real Church?

The majority of what psychology has to say is not true, at least when it comes to sin. At its best, it is a pale imitation of the truth, because it originates from men's minds, not from God. At its worst, it is distorted and deceptive. If you would like to know more about the errors of psychology, please go to the Real Christianity website and find the section for recommended ministries and Bible teachers. There is a section there about Martin and Deirdre Bobgan. They are both former psychologists who became Christians and now expose the falseness of psychology.

Psychology presents us with a false view of ourselves and of our faults, sins, duties and responsibilities. It may have some accurate insights into our behaviour and thinking, which may be of relevance in such areas as marketing or advertising etc. But, in all of the areas that really matter, it teaches the opposite of what the Bible says.

Thus, choose to put your trust and confidence in the Bible, not in man-made ways of thinking such as psychology. Let the Bible alone be your guide. Rely solely on it for instruction on all issues relating to human nature. If you want a manual on how to repair your car, you will need to look outside of the

Bible, but if you want to know about the nature and ways of people, their problems, sins and foolishness, then your enquiries should begin, and end, with the Bible. It is all you need.

But we need to study the *whole* Bible if we want the whole truth. We need the sum total of what the entire Bible says, not just a selection of short passages or verses, here and there, especially if they are taken out of context. In other words, although every verse of the Bible is *true*, only the whole Bible is *the truth*.

***The sum of thy word is truth;
and every one of thy righteous ordinances endures forever.
Psalm 119:160 (RSV)***

The power of Scripture

The Bible stands alone in all literature. No other book is '*living and active*'. The rest are all dead works containing the frozen, captured thoughts of mere men. Other books may well have some value, sometimes a great deal of value, but they are not alive like the Bible is. The Bible is unique in this regard. Its words are filled with power to achieve all of the purposes which God has for it.

The reason it is '*alive*' is because it has been inspired by God. He has put within its pages the power to convict us, move us, correct us and reach deep into us. No other book can do any of that. When we take into account the whole of God's Word and hold it all in a healthy tension, then each part qualifies, amplifies or clarifies the other parts. That way we get the complete truth, without distortions, omissions or errors:

¹²For 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. ¹³And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.

Hebrews 4:12-13 (NASB)

Whenever you read the Bible, the Bible is also reading you. It is engaging with you, responding to you, and probing into you. It is supernatural. God has put into the pages of the Bible some of His own power. He chooses to allow Himself to be represented by it, such that it says what He wants to say. He has chosen to give to the Bible the power to speak to us on His behalf. In addition to all of that God stands ready to bring to life any specific verse at the right moment for us. Then it can stand out to us on the very day when we particularly need to see it.

It could be a verse which you have read 20 or 30 times before, but which has never previously moved or affected you. Then, all of a sudden, God amplifies it or "*makes it go fluorescent*" for you. It then speaks to your need, matches your situation and "*comes alive*" for you. That is a common experience for anybody who loves God's Word and who prays for God to open their hearts to understand it.

Apparent mistakes or contradictions in the Bible

The Bible is a perfect, flawless book. In its original Hebrew or Greek, it contains no errors or contradictions. However, it is not necessarily perfect, or without errors, when you read it *in translation*, such as in English. Then, what you are reading is not the original text of the Bible, which God inspired. Instead it is the work of some committee, doing their best to translate into their own language what the original Hebrew or Greek says. That is not always easy, to put it mildly.

God certainly inspired the prophets and apostles when they wrote the Scriptures, but He does not necessarily inspire the *translators*. They make many mistakes, because translation is a very hard job.

Sometimes it is almost impossible. There are therefore times where the way they choose to translate a Hebrew or Greek phrase into English is wrong, or confusing, or at least misses the real point.

So, we need to be clear about what we mean when we refer to the Bible as being the *infallible* Word of God. It is only infallible *in the original languages*, as set out above. However, some people, including many theologians and church leaders, would challenge even that. They would say that the Bible is "*full of contradictions*", even in the original Hebrew or Greek.

On the face of it they can appear to have a point, because there are times when, quite apart from the translation problems, the Bible does *seem* to contradict itself. It also contains some statements which sound to us to be wrong, or even impossible.

However, when that occurs, you will find that there is always an explanation which completely solves the apparent problem, provided you are willing to dig for long enough until you find it. Every time you look closely at these apparent contradictions or errors, it turns out that the Bible is correct after all. When you discover that, especially if you realize it many times over, it is actually faith-building.

You realise afresh just how astonishing the Bible is. Let us look at a few examples of what some people have thought were errors or contradictions, but which aren't actually errors, or contradictions, at all. On the contrary, they further prove the infallibility and inspired nature of the Bible:

Example 1 - The '*grammatical error*' in the very first verse of the Bible, Genesis 1:1

The book of Genesis opens with what looks like a very peculiar grammatical error. It seems to be a clear mistake, until you realise that it's actually deliberate. The verse uses the plural noun '*Elohim*', which is the Hebrew word for God, immediately alongside the singular form of the verb '*to create*'.

So it basically reads "*In the beginning, God (plural noun) He (singular) created the heavens and the earth*". So, the noun indicates that God is plural, i.e. three or more persons. But then the verb ending used indicates that He is one, or singular. It would be like saying "*The issue was put to the committee and he decided to.....*" We would all call that a mistake.

However, that apparent 'error' in the Hebrew text of the first line of Genesis is no mistake. It is a deliberately provocative statement. It hints, at the very start of the Bible, that God is three Persons and yet one God. The rest of the Bible eventually makes that clear. But the first verse of the book of Genesis just uses this apparent mismatch of plural noun and singular verb, without giving any explanation. God leaves it until much later to explain why. So, if you were to reject the Bible on the basis of that supposed 'mistake', you'd be making a big mistake yourself.

Example 2 - Was Jesus going to Jericho or from Jericho?

In the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, we are told of how Jesus restored the sight of an old blind man, Bartimaeus. The problem is that, according to Matthew and Mark, it was done as Jesus was *leaving* Jericho but, according to Luke, it happened as Jesus was *approaching* Jericho. So, who is right? We shall firstly set out the verses which say it was as He was leaving. The capital letters have been added by me to highlight the key words:

²⁹ *And as they WENT OUT OF Jericho, a great crowd followed him.* ³⁰*And behold, two blind men sitting by the roadside, when they heard that Jesus was passing by, cried out, "Have mercy on us, Son of David!"* ³¹*The crowd rebuked them, telling them to be silent; but they cried out the more, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!"* ²³*And Jesus stopped and called them, saying, "What do*

you want me to do for you?" ³³*They said to him, "Lord, let our eyes be opened."* ³³*And Jesus in pity touched their eyes, and immediately they received their sight and followed him.*

Matthew 20:29-34 (RSV)

And they came to Jericho; and AS HE WAS LEAVING Jericho with his disciples and a great multitude, Bartimae'us, a blind beggar, the son of Timae'us, was sitting by the roadside.

Mark 10:46 (RSV)

But now look at how Luke seems to say the opposite:

As he DREW NEAR TO Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging;

Luke 18:35 (RSV)

This seems like a definite error, for which there can surely be no possible explanation. But it isn't. The answer is quite simple once you realise that *there are two Jerichos*, right alongside each other. One is *old* Jericho, which was destroyed at the time of Joshua. The other is *new* Jericho. That is because Jericho was subsequently rebuilt by Hiel of Bethel (see 1 Kings 16:34).

So, all it means is that Jesus was leaving one Jericho and going to the other when He came across blind Bartimaeus. So, He was both leaving and arriving. Therefore, Matthew, Mark and Luke are all correct. They just have different places in mind when they use the word 'Jericho', i.e. the old one or the new one.

Example 3 – Lack of any evidence of the existence of Pontius Pilate – until a stone slab with an inscription about him was discovered upside down.

During Jesus' active ministry, and at the time of His trial and crucifixion, the Roman Governor of Judea was a man called Pontius Pilate. We first hear of him in Luke chapter three when John the Baptist was starting out on his ministry:

¹In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, ²during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

Luke 3:1-2 (ESV)

Then when Jesus was put on trial, this man, Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor, was one of the people who tried Jesus. It was he who sentenced Jesus to death:

¹Then the whole company of them arose and brought him before Pilate. ²And they began to accuse him, saying, "We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king." ³And Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" And he answered him, "You have said so." ⁴Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, "I find no guilt in this man."

Luke 23:1-4 (ESV)

²³But they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified. And their voices prevailed. ²⁴So Pilate decided that their demand should be granted. ²⁵He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, for whom they asked, but he delivered Jesus over to their will.

Luke 23:23-25 (ESV)

So, that's who Pontius Pilate was and that's what he did. But there's a problem. Although he is referred to very clearly in all four gospels, there is no mention of him in any historical records. That's

actually because he fell out with Caesar who then ordered that every trace of the existence of Pontius Pilate should be destroyed so that his name would be blotted out. Therefore, for most of the history of the Church, the only evidence that we had for the existence of this man was in the Bible. He is not referred to anywhere else. Some might say that that calls the Bible into question.

That was how things stood for 19 centuries, until after the State of Israel had been recreated in 1948. Then, some years later, when archaeological work was being carried out at Caesarea, a large stone slab was found upside down. It had been lost since the first century. On the underside of it was an inscription in Latin which was about Pontius Pilate! It had been discarded but then used as a piece of stone when making another building. So, archaeology yet again proved that what the Bible says is true, regardless of whether there are any other historical records.

Example 4 - Is God peaceful or warlike?

This is typical of the kind of problem which people raise, where the Bible describes God in one way in one passage and then describes Him in the opposite way somewhere else. For example in Exodus we are told:

*The LORD is a man of war; the LORD is his name.
Exodus 15:3 (RSV)*

However, in Paul's letter to the Romans, he speaks of God as the "God of peace":

*The God of peace be with you all. Amen.
Romans 15:33 (RSV)*

One might ask how God can be both a '*man of war*' and '*the God of peace*' at the same time? Is it a contradiction? Not at all. It is really simple, as are all the other examples where God is described in two opposite ways in different passages. The explanation here is that in relation to His enemies, i.e. the wicked, God is warlike. He has said He will destroy them (See Books Five and Six). He will also judge and punish them. But, with those who love Him, God is at peace. He is therefore full of love, mercy, grace and kindness in relation to them.

There is actually no inconsistency. God simply treats the wicked and the righteous in different ways. The difference is not really in Him, but in the people He is dealing with. It also depends on what God is doing at a particular time.

Example 5 – Does Jesus' date of birth match up with what the Bible says about the timings of the reigns of Herod the Great and Governor Quirinius ?

I am indebted to the late Dave Hunt of The Berean Call and also the nineteenth and early twentieth century writer, Sir Robert Anderson, the former head of CID at Scotland yard, for this slightly complicated example. This seems at first sight to be an error in the Bible. But then, when you examine it carefully, you discover that the details are completely consistent. Indeed, it proves that the men who wrote the Bible were eye witnesses who wrote their accounts shortly afterwards, while the information was still fresh in their minds.

That's an important point to note because some critics of the Bible allege that it was written "*centuries later*" and therefore cannot be relied upon as accurate history. However, apostle Peter specifically tells us that he and the other apostles were eye witnesses of the things they wrote about:

¹⁶For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷ For when he received honor

and glory from God the Father and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,"¹⁸ we heard this voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.

2 Peter 1: 16-18 (RSV)

So let us turn now to the question of *when* Jesus was born and how that fits in with the other facts we are told in the Bible about the dates of the reigns of King Herod (the Great) and Governor Quirinius of Syria. If we look firstly at Matthew chapter two, it says that when Jesus was born, King Herod the Great was still alive and ruling over Israel:

¹Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, ²"Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him."

Matthew 2:1-2 (RSV)

We also know that Herod the Great tried to kill Jesus and that Jesus' mother Mary fled with Joseph to Egypt to hide Him from Herod:

¹³Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him."¹⁴ And he rose and took the child and his mother by night, and departed to Egypt,¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt have I called my son."¹⁶ Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, was in a furious rage, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the wise men.

Matthew 2:13-16 (RSV)

However, shortly afterwards, when Herod the Great died, Mary and Joseph took Jesus back to Israel, to live in Nazareth:

¹⁹But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, ²⁰"Rise, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead."²¹ And he rose and took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²²But when he heard that Archelaus reigned over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. ²³And he went and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, "He shall be called a Nazarene."

Matthew 2:19-23 (RSV)

All of that is fair enough so far, but the problem is that we know that Herod the Great died in the year that we call 3BC. Therefore, for Jesus to have been born while Herod the Great was still alive, and for Mary and Joseph to need to spend some time hiding in Egypt to avoid Herod, then Jesus would have to have been born earlier than 3 BC, in say 4 or 5 BC. But that presents a timing problem as a result of this next passage from Luke's gospel:

¹In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. ²This was the first enrollment, when Quirin'i-us was governor of Syria. ³And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. ⁴And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. ⁷And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Luke 2: 1-7 (RSV)

We are told by Luke that Quirinius was Governor of Syria when the decree was made by Caesar Augustus about the census, which required Joseph to travel to Bethlehem in order to enrol. The problem is that the history books said (until the late nineteenth century) that Quirinus was Governor of Syria *from AD 6 onwards*. Therefore our problem is that Matthew chapter two requires Jesus to have been born *before 3 BC*, but Luke chapter two seemed to require Him to have been born *after AD 6*.

The solution is simple, though it was not discovered by archaeologists until quite recently. It is that Quirinus was Governor of Syria *twice*. His second period in office began in AD 6, but he had had an earlier period in office from 4 BC to 1 BC. That therefore fits perfectly with the time when King Herod the Great died in 3BC.

It is also perfectly consistent with Jesus being born, as He was, in the autumn of the year we call 4 BC. That is actually where our calendar ought to start from. However, when our calendar was calculated in the fourth century they got the start point wrong. They thought that Jesus was born in what we might call the year zero. In fact He was born earlier than that in what we would call 4 BC. Thus the real year 2000 was actually in what we call 1996.

We could summarise the problem as follows:

- 1) To fit in with the time when we know King Herod the Great died, in 3 BC, Jesus would have to have been born *before 3B C*, i.e. in 4 BC or earlier.
- 2) But if Quirinius only became Governor of Syria in AD 6, as was thought until recently, then Jesus would have to have been born *after AD 6*.
- 3) However, given what we now know, i.e. that Quirinius had an earlier period in office as Governor of Syria from 4 BC to about 1 BC, then the dates actually fit perfectly.

Therefore we see that these passages from Luke and Matthew, which were thought by some to be contradictory and irreconcilable, match up perfectly once you realise the correct facts. The intricacy and complexity of all of that background detail, and the fact that the Bible turns out in the end to be exactly right on every single point, proves two things:

- a) that the Bible is *flawlessly accurate* and thus inspired by God;
- b) that it had to have been *written at the time by eye-witnesses*. It would have been impossible for any bogus writer to have fabricated a false story even 20-30 years later, let alone centuries later. There is no way that such an imposter writing later on, and pretending to be Luke or Matthew, could have got all of these tiny details to match up with each other. It would be impossible. Nobody would have been aware of all these little facts at any later time, so as to be able to get the dates of King Herod's death and of Governor Quirinius's first term in office to line up correctly, without making any errors.

Example 6 – Why did apostle Paul not seem to know who the High Priest was in Acts chapter 23? How could he have been unaware of who and what Ananias was when he was right in front of him in the Sanhedrin in all his robes etc?

One passage of Scripture that used to puzzle me was in Acts chapter 23 where apostle Paul was brought before the Council known as the Sanhedrin, over which the Jewish High Priest presided. What is curious about it is that it gives the impression that Paul does not realise that Ananias is the High Priest, even though it is a meeting of the Sanhedrin and Ananias was presiding over it. Presumably Ananias was wearing the robes of his office and was also surrounded by elaborately

dressed officials and priests. That would make it unmistakably obvious who and what he was. This is what happened:

But on the morrow, desiring to know the real reason why the Jews accused him, he unbound him, and commanded the chief priests and all the council to meet, and he brought Paul down and set him before them. ¹And Paul, looking intently at the council, said, "Brethren, I have lived before God in all good conscience up to this day." ²And the high priest Anani'as commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. ³Then Paul said to him, "God shall strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?" ⁴Those who stood by said, "Would you revile God's high priest?"

Acts 22:30–23:4 (RSV)

So, Ananias strikes Paul in the face and Paul rebukes him for doing so, because Ananias was breaking the law. But when those around condemn Paul for daring to rebuke the High Priest, Paul makes this strange reply:

And Paul said, "I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.'"

Acts 23: 5 (RSV)

I always used to assume that somehow Paul did not realise who or what Ananias was, despite Paul being a former Pharisee himself and also the official setting and the elaborate garments being worn. Yet I also felt it was odd, because it would be like sitting in front of a High Court Judge, dressed in his red robes, and somehow not being aware that he was a Judge. However, it turns out that there is a simple explanation which comes from the Jewish historian, Josephus.

It is that Ananias had previously been the High Priest, but he had then been replaced by another man. Later on his successor was murdered and Ananias came back and *illegitimately* usurped the position of High Priest. Thus he became High Priest again, but only by grabbing the role for himself by corruption and manipulation, *without ever being validly appointed*. Therefore, once you realise all of that, Paul's strange remark makes perfect sense. It was said *ironically*, as a side swipe at Ananias, referring to the illegitimacy of his usurped position. It means:

- a) It would have been wrong to publicly rebuke Ananias if he had been the High Priest,
- b) However, Paul did not accept that Ananias was validly appointed. Thus he was not truly the High Priest at all. Those present on that day probably knew that very well, though they were not bold enough to say so. At any rate, they would have understood the irony in Paul's voice.
- c) What's more, in the light of all that, it was right for Paul to rebuke him in public as he did.

Again we see a level of precise detail which proves that the book of Acts was written at the time by eye-witnesses. Who could possibly have known of that small detail about Ananias' illegitimacy as a usurper if the book had been written decades or centuries later? Moreover, the fact that that tiny detail turns out to be so perfectly accurate once you examine it clearly, gives us confidence that the rest of the book of Acts is equally accurate and true.

Example 7 - How much money did King David pay for the threshing floor and surrounding land in Jerusalem and whom did he pay?

We are told that King David bought a threshing floor and the surrounding land. The question is how much did David pay for it and whom did he pay? Let's look at two passages which refer to this incident, firstly 2 Samuel. In each passage *I have put the key words in capital letters*:

¹⁸So Gad came to David that day and said to him, “Go up, erect an altar to the LORD on the threshing floor of ARAUNAH THE JEBUSITE.” ¹⁹David went up according to the word of Gad, just as the LORD had commanded. ²⁰Araunah looked down and saw the king and his servants crossing over toward him; and Araunah went out and bowed his face to the ground before the king. ²¹Then Araunah said, “Why has my lord the king come to his servant?” And David said, “To buy the threshing floor from you, in order to build an altar to the LORD, that the plague may be held back from the people.” ²²Araunah said to David, “Let my lord the king take and offer up what is good in his sight. Look, the oxen for the burnt offering, the threshing sledges and the yokes of the oxen for the wood.” ²³Everything, O king, Araunah gives to the king.” And Araunah said to the king, “May the LORD your God accept you.” ²⁴However, the king said to Araunah, “No, but I will surely buy it from you for a price, for I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God which cost me nothing.” **SO DAVID BOUGHT THE THRESHING FLOOR AND THE OXEN FOR FIFTY SHEKELS OF SILVER.** ²⁵David built there an altar to the LORD and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. Thus the LORD was moved by prayer for the land, and the plague was held back from Israel.

2 Samuel 24:18-25 (NASB)

Now look at the seemingly different account in 1 Chronicles:

¹⁸ Then the angel of the LORD commanded Gad to say to David, that David should go up and build an altar to the LORD on the threshing floor of ORNAN THE JEBUSITE. ¹⁹ So David went up at the word of Gad, which he spoke in the name of the LORD. ²⁰ Now Ornan turned back and saw the angel, and his four sons who were with him hid themselves. And Ornan was threshing wheat. ²¹ As David came to Ornan, Ornan looked and saw David, and went out from the threshing floor and prostrated himself before David with his face to the ground. ²² Then David said to Ornan, “Give me the site of this threshing floor, that I may build on it an altar to the LORD; for the full price you shall give it to me, that the plague may be restrained from the people.” ²³ Ornan said to David, “Take it for yourself; and let my lord the king do what is good in his sight. See, I will give the oxen for burnt offerings and the threshing sledges for wood and the wheat for the grain offering; I will give it all.” ²⁴ But King David said to Ornan, “No, but I will surely buy it for the full price; for I will not take what is yours for the LORD, or offer a burnt offering which costs me nothing.” **SO DAVID GAVE ORNAN 600 SHEKELS OF GOLD BY WEIGHT FOR THE SITE.** ²⁶ Then David built an altar to the LORD there and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. And he called to the LORD and He answered him with fire from heaven on the altar of burnt offering.

1 Chronicles 21:18-26 (NASB)

So, we see in 2 Samuel that David paid 50 shekels of silver to a man called Araunah. However, in 1 Chronicles we are told that David paid 600 shekels of gold to a man called Ornan. Which is right? The answer is that both are right. The solution to the first point is that Araunah and Ornan are two alternative renderings of the same name. As for the price, David *initially* paid 50 shekels of silver for the oxen and for part of the land, i.e. just for the 'threshing floor', where he quickly built an altar. However he *later* paid 600 shekels of gold for the whole site, which was much larger.

It had to be large, because the whole Temple was subsequently built on that site. David's initial wish was simply to erect an altar on the threshing floor, where he had seen the angel of the LORD. Later David decided he wanted to build an entire Temple, which meant the whole site was needed. The land, which was the size of a farm, was then purchased and David's son, Solomon, later built the Temple on it. So the solution is that there was one seller, but two transactions – the first smaller, and the second larger. Therefore, there is no error or contradiction at all.

Example 8 - Did Absalom have sons or not?

In 2 Samuel we are told that King David's rebellious son, Absalom, had *three* sons, but later we are told that he had *no* sons. Here are the passages, which appear to contradict each other:

²⁷To Absalom there were born three sons, and one daughter whose name was Tamar; she was a woman of beautiful appearance.

2 Samuel 14:27 (NASB)

¹⁸Now Absalom in his lifetime had taken and set up for himself a pillar which is in the King's Valley, for he said, "I have no son to preserve my name." So he named the pillar after his own name, and it is called Absalom's Monument to this day.

2 Samuel 18:18 (NASB)

The solution to this is very simple. Absalom *did* have three sons, but they all died in infancy. Thus their names were not recorded, which they would have been if they had lived to adulthood. So, when Absalom was older he built a pillar to commemorate himself. He did so precisely because he no longer had any sons to continue his name, given that they had all died as children.

If we had the time and the space we could go on and on giving more examples of apparent contradictions and then solving, or explaining them, as above. There are lots of these. What is extraordinary is that absolutely all of them have an explanation. I have never yet come across even one that could not be fully explained.

Doesn't that strike you as odd? If the Bible was an ordinary book like any other, and was written only by fallible men, it would contain at least some mistakes. I have never come across any book that didn't have some mistakes, however hard the writer may have tried to eliminate them. The fact that the Bible has none is, in itself, proof of supernatural inspiration. It even seems likely that God deliberately put these apparent contradictions into the Bible precisely in order to enable this point to be made.

One benefit of these apparent contradictions is that they prove that each book of the Bible was written at the time by eye-witnesses, not years later, as some liberals and sceptics think they were.

I spent nearly 30 years practising law of one kind or another. I have had particular exposure to the law, and practice, of evidence. When I represent a client and am examining documents or verbal testimony or written statements, one of the key ways of determining whether evidence is genuine or false is to look to see whether it fits alongside, or contradicts, other evidence.

If one sees a series of identical witness statements which use exactly the same phrases, one is inclined to doubt the evidence. That's because it is too similar and is likely to be contrived. The witnesses have probably got together and decided what their story is going to be.

However, if various documents, letters and statements are all written by different people in different ways with their own styles, emphasising different issues or events, and if they even seem, at first sight, to contradict each other, but on closer examination, are actually consistent, then that evidence is very solid. That is exactly how the Bible is. One's initial impression is that some things seem not to fit, but then it turns out that they do. Even the smallest details tally exactly, including names, dates and places.

Moreover, where such small but precise factual details are included in an account, and yet they are completely consistent with various other facts, it is conclusive evidence that it was written *at the time, by eye-witnesses*. That's because even a few years or decades later, let alone centuries later, nobody would have the precise knowledge of those small details that would be needed if they were to try to invent the account without making any errors or including any inconsistencies or anachronisms.

Imagine that you were to try to write a fictional account now of some event in the year 1850, or even 1950. How could you do it without getting some things wrong about the customs of the day, or dates, or technology, or what was the name of the Company's accountant or what was on the radio at the time and so on? That is why novelists always fail to get 100% of the small background details exactly right, however hard they try to research their facts. So, when we see the prophets and the apostles getting *all* the little details *exactly right*, we can be sure they wrote the books or letters themselves, at the time. It verifies their authenticity.

Conversely, if you examine the Koran, it contains very clear and obvious errors. That is because it was composed in the seventh century by Mohammed. He did not have direct, first-hand knowledge of the people and places he spoke about. He therefore made some really major mistakes. For example he confused two women, both called Miriam, and thought they were the same woman.

The first was Moses' sister, Miriam who lived about 1500 years BC. The other was Jesus' mother Mary, whose name in Hebrew is Miriam. So, because Mohammed was not inspired by God, and also because he could not read and write, he had to rely on his own hazy recollection of what he had heard from others about the Old and New Testaments. Therefore he got the facts very wrong on this point, and on many other things as well.