

Believing the Bible

Most people who live in a Western culture don't object to the concept that there is a God, or maybe even multiple gods, but those same individuals may become deeply alarmed at the thought of a moral God who will hold them accountable for their attitudes and actions. Some actually go to "war" with such a God. They silence His moral demands by becoming "atheists." If He doesn't exist, then He can't punish them for violating His standards. Others take a different tactic. They look for a religion that is more flexible on morality, one that will allow a person to be spiritual but still live as they please.

Yet there is an immovable obstacle that confronts those who try to avoid the moral God of the Bible, and that is the relentless approach of death. The person who chooses to be an atheist must face the possibility of complete extinction. And the person who finds a more tolerant religion still cannot completely silence his or her troubled conscience. Every human being is intuitively aware that they may continue to exist after death, and may be held accountable for the way they lived.

I mention these things in a discussion about the validity of the Bible because when we come to this subject, we need to recognize that there is generally a hidden agenda beneath the arguments against it. Many of the criticisms that we encounter have originated with people who desperately want the Bible to be invalid because of the spiritual struggle mentioned above. The Bible is not just a religious book; it is a religious book that claims a moral God created the universe who will judge all humans based on His own moral standards. And it demands that I make a decision: Do I accept its claim to be God's Word, or do I reject that claim and risk being judged by the God it presents?

There are individuals who have virtually dedicated their lives to trying to prove that the Bible is wrong. We can see this in the field of science by the fixation of some on finding life on other planets or teaching human evolution in spite of the growing body of evidence against it. The scientific argument against the Bible in effect says it couldn't be true because science has proven that there is no Creator who could have written it.

There are others who attack the validity of the Bible using two universal moral instincts in humans: fairness and kindness. People who otherwise never read the Bible will scour its pages for examples of "unfairness" in the way God deals with people or for an "unkind" command or action by Him. This approach tries to portray the God of the Bible as barbaric and loveless and therefore morally unacceptable to any reasonable person. The point of this attack is to say that the Bible is clearly the invention of ancient tribal superstitions. The "real" God, if He exists, can't be like the one portrayed in the Bible, particularly in the pages of the Old Testament. This approach is not so much a condemnation of all religion as it is a criticism of the Bible's picture of God. Religions without morals, at least without the threat of accountability for immoral behavior, may be considered by these critics to be acceptable or even desirable.

And there are academic critics who search the Bible for "errors" of content, whether they be scribal mistakes or anachronisms that would prove that a certain passage could not have been written until long after the events it recorded had happened. The focus of this type of criticism is to show how fallible the whole Bible is. If it can be shown that it is full of human

errors, then the validity of everything it teaches can be questioned. It inserts doubt into the reader's mind by asking, "Who knows who really wrote those words, and who knows whether or not that event really took place the way the Bible says it did?"

There are solid answers that can be given to each of these areas that challenge the validity of the Bible, but what someone who is going to teach the Bible needs to realize is that the arguments themselves should not be taken at face value. There is often a hidden agenda behind those who use them. In many cases, they do not arise from honest inquiry but have been motivated by the desire to discredit the Bible in order to escape its moral standards. So, pouring enormous effort into trying to convince those who use such criticisms that they are wrong may end up in endless debate because the motivation behind the challenge isn't intellectual. It's spiritual. It's not ignorance on the critic's part that God exists; it's an attempt to avoid becoming accountable to Him. This is the response Jesus explained to Nicodemus in John 3:19, 20. Listen:

This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light; for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light, for fear that his deeds will be exposed.

But the real issue in dealing with the question of the validity of the Bible is not whether others believe it's valid, but whether you and I who teach it believe it's valid. What does this book represent to us? Do we believe it is divine revelation or human speculation? When all the arguments for and against it have exhausted themselves, the answers we give will always come down to a personal decision: will I choose to believe that this book is God's Word—every verse of it? Do I choose to believe that it is full of spiritual life—every word of it? My answer to those questions invariably determines how I will preach.

How a person comes to genuine faith in this matter is a mystery. It seems easier for some than others, but at some point, in each of our lives, a painful step of faith must be made. It is humbling to choose to trust the words of a book that is thousands of years old. It is frightening to commit my life to proclaiming the message of a book that is consistently and systematically attacked by powerful segments of our culture. It is a difficult decision full of risks but also full of hope. And no one else can make this decision for us. No one can force us to believe. No one can prove that God exists or that He oversees the writing of the Bible. But if you and I are to fulfill His call to preach and teach this book, then we must decide to wholeheartedly commit ourselves to this truth and to the task of letting the Bible speak again to our generation.