

# GOD'S WORD: INSPIRED, PRESERVED, AND LIVING TODAY

Together, we will unpack key biblical truths about *revelation* and *inspiration*, understand how God's Spirit guides our reading through *illumination*, and discover why the Bible remains a trustworthy and life-changing book. Whether you're new to Scripture or have studied it for years, this study will deepen your appreciation for the Bible's power, reliability, and ongoing relevance in your daily walk with God.

## Sources:

*Baker Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms* by Dr. Gregg Allison

*Fragments of Truth* by Faithlife, available on YouTube

*New Testament Survey* by Chuck Quarles

# Is the Bible Reliable? Can We Trust It?

## Introduction

The question of the Bible's reliability is not merely academic—it's foundational. For centuries, the church has looked to the Scriptures as the final authority on matters of faith and life. If the Bible is unreliable, then we are left to navigate spiritual truth and moral guidance based on human speculation. Without trustworthy Scripture, the church has no authoritative message for a broken world.

Recognizing the gravity of this issue, Christian leaders came together in 1978 for a historic summit hosted by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy. From this meeting came the **Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy**, a bold reaffirmation of the historic Protestant belief that the Bible is wholly true and trustworthy.

This statement takes a bold stand in the face of growing arguments against the Bible's **inspiration, infallibility, and inerrancy**, declaring that the Scriptures remain completely trustworthy. It reminds the church that **the battle for the Bible continues**. In a time of widespread doubt and cultural confusion, it is more crucial than ever that believers understand **what the Bible is and why they can trust it wholeheartedly**.

## 1. The Bible's Own Claims About Its Reliability

- **2 Timothy 3:16–17** – “All Scripture is breathed out by God...”
- **2 Peter 1:20–21** – “Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”
- **Psalms 19:7–9** – “The law of the Lord is perfect... trustworthy... right... pure...”

The Bible does not present itself as human opinion but as divine revelation. It claims to be God's very Word, not merely words about God.

## 2. What Did Jesus Say About the Scriptures?

Jesus upheld the Scriptures as divinely inspired and authoritative:

- **Matthew 5:17–18** – “I have not come to abolish [the Law or Prophets]... not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.”
- **John 10:35** – “...and Scripture cannot be broken...”
- **Luke 24:27** – Jesus explained how all the Scriptures pointed to Himself.

Jesus affirmed the inspiration, permanence, and unity of Scripture. He trusted the Old Testament, quoted it authoritatively, and declared it unbreakable and fulfilled in Him.

### **3. The Bible's Historical Reliability**

- The Bible has been faithfully preserved through manuscript evidence, archaeology, and fulfilled prophecy.
- No other ancient text has as much documentary support.
- Though copied by human hands, God's providence has preserved its message.

The reliability of Scripture is supported not only theologically but also historically and textually.

### **4. The Authority of Scripture Today**

- **Hebrews 4:12** – “The Word of God is living and active...”
- **Isaiah 40:8** – “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.”
- **1 Thessalonians 2:13** – “...you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God...”

The Bible still speaks with power and relevance. Its authority is not bound by time or culture.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. **What does it mean to say the Bible is “inspired by God”? How does that affect the way we read and apply it?**
2. **In what ways did Jesus show confidence in the Old Testament Scriptures? Why is this significant for our view of the Bible today?**
3. **What are some common objections to the Bible’s reliability, and how would you answer them?**
4. **Why is it dangerous for the church to lose confidence in the trustworthiness of Scripture?**
5. **What difference does it make in your daily life to know that the Bible is the true and authoritative Word of God?**
6. **How can you grow in your trust in Scripture and help others do the same?**

## **Application Challenge**

- Take time this week to reflect on how you approach the Bible. Do you read it as the living, trustworthy Word of God?
- Choose one passage (e.g., Psalm 19 or 2 Timothy 3:16–17) to memorize and meditate on.
- Share with a friend or group why you believe the Bible is reliable and how it has shaped your life.

## **Closing Prayer**

*Lord, thank You for giving us Your Word. Help us to treasure the Scriptures, to trust in their truth, and to live by their wisdom. Strengthen our faith in Your promises and give us courage to stand firm on the truth of Your Word in a world filled with confusion. May Your Word be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

# How We Got the Bible

## 1. The Bible Is Inspired by God

The Bible is not just a collection of human ideas; it is the very Word of God. Scripture tells us:

- **2 Timothy 3:16–17** – “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness...”
- **2 Peter 1:20–21** – “No prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”

These verses teach that God is the ultimate author of Scripture, using human writers to communicate His truth without error.

## 2. A Library of 66 Books

The Bible is made up of **66 books**, written over **1,600 years** (from about 1500 B.C. to A.D. 100) by **more than 40 authors**—including kings, prophets, leaders, and followers of Jesus.

- **The Old Testament** has **39 books**, written between **1500 and 400 B.C.**
- **The New Testament** contains **27 books**, written between **A.D. 45 and 100**

Although written across many generations, these books tell one unified story of God’s redemption through Jesus Christ.

## 3. Original Languages and Arrangement

- The **Old Testament** was written primarily in **Hebrew**, with small portions in **Aramaic**.
- The **New Testament** was written in **Greek**.
- The **Hebrew Bible** contains the same content as our Old Testament but organizes it into fewer books and groups them differently.

## 4. How the Books Were Recognized

The books of the Bible were not chosen at random. They were **recognized** as authoritative Scripture based on careful criteria by **councils of Jewish rabbis** (for the Old Testament) and **early Christian leaders** (for the New Testament). They evaluated:

- Apostolic authorship or connection
- Doctrinal consistency
- Widespread use among God's people
- Evidence of divine inspiration

## 5. Hand-Copied with Great Care

Before the invention of the printing press, every Bible was copied by hand. Skilled scribes used **detailed methods**, such as counting letters and words, to ensure accuracy. Despite centuries of manual copying, the Bible has been remarkably preserved.

## 6. The Printing Press and the Bible

The **Gutenberg Press**, invented around **1455**, produced the first book ever printed with movable type: the **Latin Bible**. This innovation made the Scriptures more accessible to ordinary people and helped launch the Reformation.

## 7. Preservation and Manuscript Evidence

The Bible is **better preserved than any other ancient document**. Consider these facts:

- **Nearly 5,900** Greek manuscripts of the New Testament exist today.
- Compared to other ancient texts (e.g., Plato or Aristotle), the **Bible has far more manuscript support**.
- The discovery of the **Dead Sea Scrolls** confirmed the **astonishing accuracy** of Old Testament copies dating back over 2,000 years.

While minor spelling and stylistic differences exist among manuscripts, **no variation affects any essential doctrine**.

## 8. Translation and Global Impact

As Christianity spread, so did the Bible. Faithful scholars worked to **translate the Scriptures into the languages of the people**, often at great personal cost.

### Growth of Bible Translations:

- By A.D. 200 – 7 languages
- By 500 – 13 languages
- By 900 – 17 languages
- By 1400 – 28 languages
- By 1800 – 57 languages
- By 1900 – 537 languages
- By 1980 – 1,100 languages
- By 2014 – 2,883 languages with at least some portion of Scripture

Yet today, **over 2,000 language groups** still have **no Bible** in their heart language—a reminder that the work of Bible translation continues.

### Application & Reflection Questions

1. **What encourages you about how God has preserved His Word throughout history?**
2. **How does the inspiration of Scripture affect your confidence in the Bible's authority?**
3. **Why is it important to understand where the Bible came from and how it was formed?**
4. **What role can you play in supporting Bible translation and spreading God's Word to others?**

### Closing Prayer

*Heavenly Father, thank You for giving us the gift of Your Word. Thank You for preserving it so carefully through generations of faithful men and women. Help us treasure the Bible, read it daily, and trust its truth completely. May we also be part of the mission to bring Your Word to every people and language. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

# How the Bible Was Written and Preserved

Understanding the physical history of the Bible—how it was written, copied, and preserved—deepens our appreciation for the remarkable journey of God’s Word from ancient times to today.

## 1. Writing Materials in Biblical Times

### Old Testament (Approx. 1500–400 B.C.)

The Old Testament was originally written on durable materials such as:

- **Stone tablets** (e.g., the Ten Commandments – Exodus 31:18)
- **Clay tablets**, commonly used in Mesopotamia
- **Leather scrolls**, made from animal skins and rolled for storage

These materials were labor-intensive to prepare and write on, emphasizing the sacredness and significance of recording Scripture.

### New Testament (Approx. A.D. 45–100)

The New Testament was written on:

- **Papyrus**, a writing surface made from the pith of the papyrus plant. It was lightweight and more portable than leather or stone.

The earliest fragment of the New Testament that survives today is part of **John 18**, written in **Greek** on **papyrus** and dated around **A.D. 110–130**. The fragment is known as **P52**, and its early date is a powerful witness to the swift spread of the New Testament writings.

## 2. Scrolls and Codices

- **Scrolls**, typically made of leather or papyrus, were the standard format for sacred texts for centuries.
- Over time, scrolls were replaced by the **codex**, a more modern book-like format that consisted of:
  - Folded **sheets sewn together**
  - Sometimes a **cover** was added for protection
  - Easier to carry, reference, and copy

By **A.D. 100**, codices began to surpass scrolls in popularity, especially among Christians, who widely adopted this form for spreading the New Testament.



### 3. Vellum and Parchment: A Leap in Quality

From approximately **A.D. 300 to 1400**, scribes used high-quality animal skins for Scripture copying:

- **Vellum** – made from calf or antelope skin
- **Parchment** – made from sheep or goat skin

These materials were more durable than papyrus and allowed for precise, long-lasting copies. Two of the oldest vellum manuscripts still in existence are:

- **Codex Vaticanus** (circa A.D. 325–350)
- **Codex Sinaiticus** (circa A.D. 325–350)

Both contain significant portions of the Bible and confirm the textual reliability of Scripture over the centuries.

### 4. Hand-Copied Bibles Before the Printing Press

In the 1300s and 1400s, before printing technology, **John Wycliffe** and his followers translated the Bible into English from Latin and **hand-copied** each manuscript onto vellum. These copies were:

- Painstakingly slow to produce—often taking **10 months to 2 years**
- Extremely costly—many equaled **a full year's wages**

Wycliffe's work was instrumental in making Scripture accessible to ordinary people, despite great opposition.

### 5. The Printing Revolution and Beyond

- In **1455**, the **Gutenberg Bible** became the first book ever printed using **movable type**.
- This Latin Bible marked a turning point in accessibility, literacy, and mass communication.

From that moment forward, the Bible spread rapidly across nations and languages. Today, the Bible is:

- **Printed on paper** in thousands of languages
- **Accessible in digital formats**—on apps, websites, audio, and video platforms
- **Read daily** by millions around the world, fulfilling God's promise that His Word would endure forever (Isaiah 40:8)

## **Reflection & Discussion Questions**

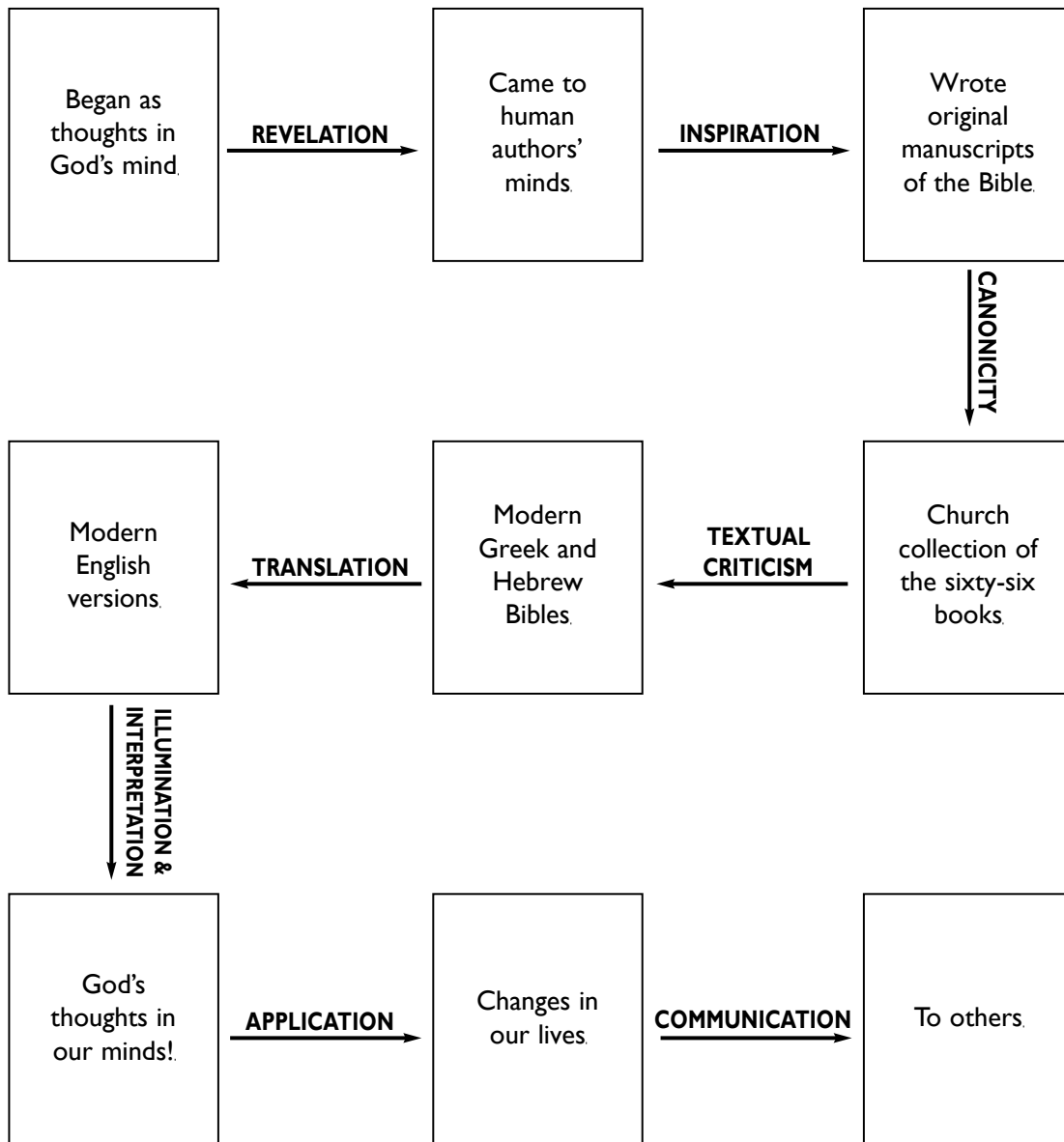
1. **How does knowing the physical history of the Bible deepen your appreciation for God's Word?**
2. **What stands out to you about the sacrifices people made to preserve and share the Scriptures?**
3. **How can we faithfully steward the gift of easy access to the Bible today?**
4. **Have you ever taken for granted the availability of the Bible? How might that change after learning its history?**

## **Closing Thought**

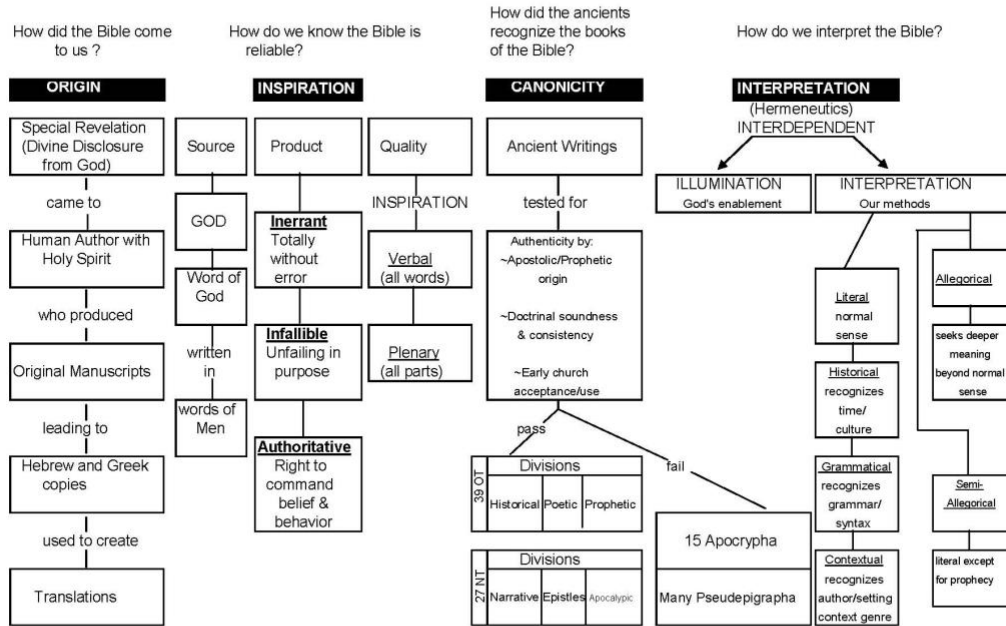
From stone tablets to digital screens, God has faithfully preserved His Word. Every material—whether leather scroll or glowing screen—testifies to His desire that His truth be known and trusted across every generation, language, and nation.



# HOW OUR BIBLE CAME TO US



# Bibliology



# The Canon of Scripture: God's Authoritative Word

To call the Bible the “**canon of Scripture**” means that its sixty-six books function together as the **ultimate authority** for the Church. The word *canon* comes from a Greek word meaning *measuring rod*. The Bible is not just one standard among many—it is **the standard** by which all doctrine, teaching, and life are measured. It is not subject to any other authority and cannot be judged by human opinion, culture, or tradition.

Importantly, the canon was not something the Church invented *after the fact*; rather, it was **woven into the fabric of God's redemptive plan** from the beginning. God always intended to give His people a trustworthy and complete written revelation.

## The Canon Was Received, Not Created

A key concept in understanding how we got the Bible is the idea of **reception**. The Church did not *decide* which books would be Scripture—it **received** them. Early church councils used the Latin phrase *recipimus*, meaning “we receive,” to acknowledge the books that had already demonstrated divine authority.

By using this language, the Church made it clear: it was not asserting its own authority over the Bible. Rather, it recognized the voice of God in these writings and humbly submitted to them. This distinction is crucial. We **believe the Bible is authoritative not because the Church declared it so**, but because it is the very Word of God. The Church recognized what God had already inspired.

## How God Spoke in the Past

Since the close of the biblical canon in the first century, **Scripture alone** is the authoritative means by which God speaks to His people. But in earlier times, God communicated in various ways:

- **Direct speech** (e.g., to Moses and the patriarchs)
- **Dreams and visions** (e.g., Joseph, Daniel)
- **Signs** (e.g., the fleece with Gideon)
- **Casting of lots**, or through the **Urim and Thummim** used by the priests
- **Theophanies**, visible manifestations of God (e.g., the burning bush or the pillar of cloud and fire)

These were all temporary and preparatory ways in which God revealed Himself, pointing forward to the fuller revelation we now have in Scripture.

# The Role of Prophets and Apostles

## Old Testament: The Prophets

God primarily spoke to Israel through **prophets**, His appointed messengers. Though they were human like us and used ordinary language, their words carried divine authority because they received revelation directly from God. This is why prophetic messages often began with the phrase, “**Thus says the Lord.**” What they wrote was not merely their opinion—it was God’s Word recorded for His people. The Old Testament was produced through these “agents of revelation,” chosen by God to declare His truth.

## New Testament: The Apostles

In the New Testament, the role of divine spokesman was given to the **Apostles**. The defining mark of an apostle was that he had been **personally called and commissioned by the risen Christ**. The word *apostle* means “one who is sent.” Jesus said to His apostles:

“Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.”  
— *Matthew 10:40*

Just as the prophets spoke for God in the Old Testament, the apostles spoke with the authority of Christ in the New Testament.

## One Unified Foundation

Together, the prophets and apostles form the **foundation of the Church’s faith and doctrine**. They were chosen by God to record His special revelation, which now comes to us in the Bible.

“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, **built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets**, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone...”

— *Ephesians 2:19–21 (ESV)*

Christ is the center and the cornerstone, but He entrusted His message to human agents—**His emissaries**—who spoke and wrote with His authority. Through them, God gave us the Scriptures, our sure and sufficient guide for faith and life.

## **Reflection & Discussion Questions**

- 1. Why is it important that the Bible was received and not created by the Church?**
- 2. What does it mean that the Bible is the “canon” or measuring rod for the Church?**
- 3. How does understanding the roles of prophets and apostles help you trust the Bible’s authority?**
- 4. In what ways can we show that we submit to the authority of God’s Word today?**



# The Old and New Testaments: Equally Inspired and Authoritative

The Bible is not simply a human book about God; it is God's book for humanity. From Genesis to Revelation, the Scriptures reveal one unified story of God's redemptive plan through Christ. But are all parts of the Bible equally trustworthy and authoritative? Some might wonder whether the New Testament holds the same authority as the Old, or if the teachings of the apostles carry the same weight as the words of the prophets. Scripture itself provides a resounding answer: **both the Old and New Testaments are equally inspired, divinely authoritative, and essential for the life and doctrine of the Church.**

## 1. What Does “Inspired by God” Mean?

*2 Timothy 3:16–17* affirms, “*All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.*” The Greek word for “inspired” literally means “God-breathed.” Just as God breathed life into Adam (*Genesis 2:7*), so too did He breathe out His Word. The Bible is not merely a religious book—it is the living voice of God recorded through human authors.

This inspiration extends to every part of the Bible—from the grand narrative of salvation to the smallest grammatical details. Jesus said in *Matthew 5:18*, “*Not the smallest letter or one stroke of a letter will pass away from the law until all things are accomplished.*” Even the “jot” (yod) and “tittle” (tiny marks in Hebrew) are preserved by God’s providence.

## 2. Jesus Affirmed the Old Testament as Scripture

Throughout His earthly ministry, Jesus quoted extensively from the Old Testament, affirming its truth, authority, and divine origin. He treated the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings as the unbreakable Word of God. For example, in *Luke 24:44*, He says, “*Everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled.*” His affirmation sets the foundation for Christian belief in the Old Testament’s divine authority.

### 3. The New Testament Is Also Scripture

Even while the New Testament was still being written, early Christians recognized it as inspired Scripture. In *1 Timothy 5:18*, Paul quotes both *Deuteronomy 25:4* (“*Do not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain*”) and Jesus’ words from *Luke 10:7* (“*The worker is worthy of his wages*”), introducing both with the phrase, “*For the Scripture says.*” This shows that Paul viewed the words of Jesus, already being recorded in the Gospels, as equally authoritative as the Law of Moses.

Likewise, in *2 Peter 3:15–16*, the apostle Peter affirms that Paul’s letters are part of the Scriptures: “*There are some things in [Paul’s letters] that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the rest of the Scriptures.*” This powerful statement indicates that the writings of the apostles were being recognized as the Word of God alongside the Old Testament.

### 4. One Unified Canon, One Divine Voice

The word *canon* means “measuring rod” or “standard.” To say that the Bible is the canon of Scripture means that it is the supreme authority in all matters of faith and life. The Church did not create the canon; it recognized the voice of God in the writings that bore His truth. The Old and New Testaments together make up this sacred canon—testifying to Christ, revealing God’s character, and instructing believers in godliness.

As Paul writes in *Ephesians 2:20*, the Church is “*built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the cornerstone.*” This highlights the equal significance of both prophetic and apostolic witness. The Old Testament points forward to Christ; the New Testament reveals Him fully.

### 5. Evidence Supporting Divine Inspiration

The trustworthiness of Scripture is supported by remarkable evidence:

- **Unity in Diversity:** 66 books written by over 40 authors across 1600 years—all telling one coherent story.
- **Scientific Foresight:** Isaiah describes the earth as a circle (*Isaiah 40:22*), Job says it is suspended over nothing (*Job 26:7*), and Ecclesiastes describes the water cycle (*Eccl. 1:7*).
- **Fulfilled Prophecy:** Daniel 9:25 accurately predicts the arrival of the Messiah centuries in advance. Many Old Testament prophecies are fulfilled precisely in Jesus’ birth, life, death, and resurrection.

## **6. Why This Matters Today**

The battle for the Bible continues in every generation. Many question its authority, inspiration, or relevance. But believers must stand firm, knowing that the Scriptures—both Old and New—are the unchanging, inerrant Word of God. We are not left to speculation. We have a trustworthy revelation from the mouth of God.

### **Reflection & Discussion Questions**

- 1. Why is it important to believe that *all* Scripture is inspired by God? How does this shape your confidence in the Bible?**
- 2. What does Jesus' use of the Old Testament teach us about its continuing value and authority?**
- 3. How does the New Testament affirm its own authority, even while being written?**
- 4. What does it mean that the Church “received” the canon rather than “created” it? Why is this distinction important?**
- 5. Which fulfilled prophecies or internal consistencies of Scripture help strengthen your faith in its divine origin?**
- 6. How might your approach to reading the Bible change knowing that every word—Old or New Testament—was breathed out by God?**
- 7. What practical steps can you take to deepen your love for and understanding of both Testaments?**

# The New Testament Canon: How Was the New Testament Formed?

The word *canon* comes from the Greek word *kanon*, which originally referred to a straight rod used as a measuring tool. Over time, the word evolved to refer to a “rule” or “standard,” and eventually came to mean a list or series of authoritative works. F. F. Bruce, in *The Canon of Scripture*, explains that the biblical canon is not just a list of books considered sacred but the very rule of belief and practice for the church. Thus, when we speak of the “canon of Scripture,” we mean those books that the church, throughout its history, has recognized as divinely inspired and authoritative in a unique and binding way.

The term “New Testament” itself also has historical depth. Some of the earliest references to this portion of the Bible come from early Christian thinkers like Clement of Alexandria (c. AD 150–215) and Tertullian of Carthage (c. AD 160–220). In Latin, the Greek word for “covenant” could be translated as *instrumentum* (a legal document) or *testamentum* (a will or testament). While Tertullian used both terms, *testamentum* became more common. This terminology reflects the belief that the writings from Matthew to Revelation unveil the “new covenant” that was promised in the Law and the Prophets and fulfilled in Christ.

From the beginning, the early church understood the New Testament writings as *Scripture*—on par with the Old Testament. For example, Paul refers to the teachings of Jesus as Scripture in *1 Corinthians 9:8–14*, where he quotes both Deuteronomy and Jesus’ words from the Gospel tradition. Likewise, Peter recognizes Paul’s letters as Scripture in *2 Peter 3:15–16*, where he warns that some twist Paul’s writings “as they do the rest of the Scriptures.” Paul also encouraged churches to read his letters publicly, a practice reserved for sacred writings (*Colossians 4:16; Revelation 1:3*). This high regard continued in the generations that followed, as the early Christian leaders treated these writings with reverence and doctrinal authority.

Several notable figures from the early church clearly regarded the New Testament documents as Scripture. Papias, writing in the early second century, mentions both Matthew and Mark by name and wrote a five-volume work interpreting Jesus’ teachings. Clement of Rome (AD 96) quotes from the Sermon on the Mount and assigns it divine authority. The second-century work *2 Clement* repeatedly quotes from the Gospel of Matthew as Scripture. The *Epistle of Barnabas*, dating from the early second century, introduces a quote from Matthew with the phrase, “as it is written,” a formula used throughout the Bible to denote divine Scripture.

This recognition was not limited to a small group. Polycarp, a disciple of the apostle John, quoted *Ephesians* as Scripture. Surprisingly, even Basilides—a Gnostic teacher from the same era—cited Paul’s letters with phrases like “as it is written,” indicating their widespread recognition as authoritative. Hegesippus of Palestine (AD 165–175) reported that the Gospels and other apostolic writings were being preached in churches alongside the Old Testament Scriptures. By the mid-second century, Justin Martyr affirmed the divine inspiration of the Apostles’ writings, noted that they were read publicly during church services, and introduced quotations from them with “it is written”—the same way Scripture had always been quoted.

Together, these testimonies confirm that the early church did not arbitrarily assign authority to the New Testament writings. Rather, they recognized the voice of God in the teachings of Christ and His apostles. These writings were received, not invented, as the foundation of Christian doctrine and life.

## **Reflection and Discussion Questions**

- 1. What does the word *canon* tell us about how the early church viewed the Bible? Why is this important for us today?**
- 2. Why is it significant that both Old and New Testament writings were read in early Christian worship services?**
- 3. How does the early church's treatment of the New Testament as Scripture help confirm its divine origin?**
- 4. What does the use of phrases like "as it is written" suggest about how seriously the early Christians viewed apostolic writings?**
- 5. How might learning about the canon formation process strengthen your trust in the Bible's authority?**
- 6. Do you view both the Old and New Testaments as equally relevant and authoritative? Why or why not?**
- 7. How would you explain the formation of the New Testament canon to someone who believes it was chosen arbitrarily by the church?**

# The Fourfold Gospel: The Canonization of the Four Gospels

As the apostles began to face persecution and martyrdom, the early church recognized the urgent need to preserve their eyewitness testimony to the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This recognition led to the production of the four Gospels. Mark was likely written in the late 50s, followed by Matthew and Luke in the early 60s. The Gospel of John, written much later, likely dates to the late 80s. These Gospel accounts were not casual reflections but Spirit-inspired records of divine truth. From the moment they were written, the Gospels were accepted as authoritative and were frequently quoted as Scripture in the church.

Initially, individual churches may have had access to only one of the Gospels, depending on their location and connection to a particular apostolic community. However, as time went on, these writings began to circulate more widely and were copied and distributed across the early Christian world. The church recognized the harmony and complementary nature of the four Gospels and received them collectively as a unified testimony to Christ.

The early church fathers affirmed and commented on the Gospels, further confirming their authoritative status. Papias (c. 60–130 AD) described the backgrounds of Mark and Matthew and wrote a five-volume commentary on the sayings of Jesus, which drew heavily from the Gospels. Justin Martyr (c. 100–165 AD) affirmed that Mark preserved “the memoirs of Peter” and referred to the Gospel writings as “the memoirs of the apostles,” noting that these were read publicly in worship alongside the Old Testament Scriptures. Another early Christian, Tatian (c. 110–172 AD), produced a work called the *Diatessaron*, which harmonized the four Gospels into a single narrative, indicating the already-established status of these four as foundational Christian texts.

The authority of the four Gospels is further confirmed by early manuscript evidence. Papyrus 75 (P75), dating to the early third century, contains portions of Luke and John and demonstrates that these Gospels were being copied and preserved early in church history. Papyrus 45 (P45) contains portions of all four Gospels and Acts, offering further proof of their canonical status and broad circulation among the churches.

By the late second century, the church had come to affirm the fourfold Gospel with clarity and conviction. Irenaeus, a key church father writing around AD 180, described in detail the apostolic authorship of the Gospels. He powerfully defended the necessity and integrity of all four Gospel accounts, declaring that God had given the church a “fourfold Gospel, held together by one Spirit.” Irenaeus warned against both the addition of new Gospels and the exclusion of any of the four. He stated, “They are guilty of vanity and ignorance, and of audacity also, who reject the form of the gospel and introduce either more or fewer faces of the gospels.”

This fourfold Gospel tradition became deeply embedded in Christian worship and iconography. A striking example is found in an ivory Gospel cover dating to around AD 1000–1050, now housed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The plaque symbolically depicts the four evangelists surrounding the Lamb of God: Matthew is represented by a winged man, Mark by a winged lion, Luke by a winged ox, and John by an eagle. These symbols, drawn from the apocalyptic vision in Revelation 4:6–7, reflect the church’s deep reverence for the unique yet unified testimony of each Gospel.

In summary, the formation of the Gospel canon was not the result of arbitrary human decision but a Spirit-led recognition of inspired writings. The four Gospels—each distinct yet harmonious—were preserved, affirmed, and cherished by the church from their earliest days, offering a complete and trustworthy portrait of the life and mission of Jesus Christ.

## **Discussion and Reflection Questions**

- 1. Why was it necessary for the apostles’ testimony to be written down? How does this affect the reliability of the Gospels?**
- 2. What does the distribution and early affirmation of the four Gospels reveal about the church’s recognition of their authority?**
- 3. How did early church leaders like Papias, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus contribute to our understanding of the canon of the Gospels?**
- 4. What do early manuscripts like P75 and P45 tell us about the preservation and spread of the Gospels?**
- 5. Why do you think God chose to preserve four Gospel accounts rather than just one? How do they complement each other?**
- 6. What does the symbolic imagery of the evangelists surrounding the Lamb of God teach us about the place of the Gospels in Christian worship and theology?**
- 7. How does understanding the canonization of the Gospels strengthen your trust in the truth and reliability of the New Testament?**

# Paul's Letters: Canonization of the Pauline Corpus

Like the Gospels, Paul's letters were initially circulated as individual writings. He wrote to specific churches or individuals to address particular theological, pastoral, or ethical concerns. Yet from the beginning, these letters were understood to carry divine authority. Even before Paul's death, his letters were being collected, shared among the churches, and read aloud during corporate worship gatherings. The early church valued them as Scripture, and by the end of the first century, Paul's letters had already begun to form a unified collection. This is evident in Peter's reference to Paul's writings in **2 Peter 3:15–16**, where he not only affirms the divine wisdom behind Paul's letters but also equates them with "the rest of the Scriptures."

One of the earliest surviving manuscript collections of Paul's letters is known as **Papyrus 46 (P46)**, dating to around **AD 200**. This manuscript includes all of Paul's letters addressed to churches, as well as the book of Hebrews—suggesting that some early Christians believed Hebrews also belonged in the Pauline corpus. Scholars also believe P46 may have originally included the Pastoral Epistles (1–2 Timothy and Titus) and Philemon, though portions are missing.

Around **AD 140**, a controversial figure named **Marcion** produced his own edited version of the New Testament, which he titled *The Gospel and the Apostle*. His canon included a modified version of Luke's Gospel and ten of Paul's letters. While Marcion's work is considered heretical due to its theological distortions, it actually provides historical evidence that by this time, the broader church was already circulating and affirming the Four Gospels and Paul's letters as authoritative Scripture. Marcion's edited canon was likely a reaction to the widespread acceptance of these texts by the orthodox Christian community.

Further evidence of canon formation appears in the **Muratorian Fragment**, the earliest known list of New Testament books, which likely dates to the late second century. Although the beginning of the document is missing, it affirms the inclusion of Luke and John (and probably Matthew and Mark), the Acts of the Apostles, thirteen letters of Paul, Jude, 1 and 2 John, and Revelation. It notably omits 1 and 2 Peter, James, 3 John, and Hebrews but includes some disputed books such as the *Revelation of Peter* and the *Wisdom of Solomon*. This shows that while the core of the New Testament canon was widely recognized, some discussion and discernment regarding a few texts continued.

Prominent early church fathers also contributed to the recognition of the Pauline canon. **Origen** (AD 185–254) acknowledged as undisputed the Four Gospels, Acts, the fourteen letters of Paul (including Hebrews), 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation. He listed Hebrews, 2 Peter, James, 2 and 3 John, and Jude among the disputed books. Later, **Eusebius of Caesarea** (c. 325) offered a more organized account of New Testament texts. He noted that the universally acknowledged books included the Gospels, Acts, Paul's letters, 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation. Others like James, Jude, 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John were disputed by some but generally accepted



by most. Eusebius also mentioned texts deemed spurious, such as the *Acts of Paul*, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Revelation of Peter*, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, and the *Didache*.

Through this process of careful transmission, discernment, and affirmation by the Holy Spirit and the church, the Pauline corpus and the broader New Testament canon took shape. The recognition of Paul's letters as inspired Scripture reflects the church's deep confidence in their apostolic origin and divine authority.

## Study and Reflection Questions

1. **Why do you think Paul's letters were quickly collected and shared among early churches? What does this suggest about their perceived authority?**
2. **How does 2 Peter 3:15–16 help us understand the early church's view of Paul's writings?**
3. **What is the significance of the P46 manuscript in tracing the formation of the Pauline canon?**
4. **How did Marcion's edited New Testament contribute—perhaps unintentionally—to affirming the authenticity and authority of the Four Gospels and Paul's letters?**
5. **What do the omissions and additions in the Muratorian Fragment tell us about the early church's discernment process?**
6. **How did early church leaders like Origen and Eusebius shape the conversation about which books belonged in the New Testament?**
7. **How does knowing the history of Paul's letters and their canonization strengthen your confidence in the reliability and inspiration of the New Testament?**

# **The Reliability of the New Testament Documents: Why Should I Trust the New Testament?**

## **1. Preservation of the New Testament**

The New Testament (NT) stands as the best-preserved collection of writings from all of ancient literature. No other ancient text comes close in terms of the sheer volume of manuscripts and early copies. This level of preservation is nothing short of remarkable—and many would say, miraculous. It testifies not only to the care taken by early Christians in transmitting these texts but also to God's providential preservation of His Word through the centuries.

## **2. Trustworthiness of the New Testament Authors**

Critics often claim the NT authors were deceptive or dishonest. However, no reasonable motive for such deception has ever been convincingly presented. What could the apostles possibly gain? Financial wealth? History shows they gained nothing of the sort. Fame or popularity? They were persecuted and in many cases martyred. The most plausible reason for their bold and consistent proclamation is that they were absolutely convinced the message was true. Their lives, and even their deaths, bear witness to their sincerity and conviction.

## **3. The Genre of the New Testament**

Some suggest that the NT writings aren't lies but simply ancient religious fiction. However, internal evidence clearly shows the NT writers intended to report real historical events. The Gospel of Luke opens with a direct statement of historical intent, emphasizing careful investigation and eyewitness testimony. The apostle John claims firsthand experience. Peter and Paul affirm that the gospel message rests not on myths, but on real events (e.g., 2 Pet 1:16; 1 Tim 1:4; Titus 1:14). The qualifications of the apostles and their use of eyewitnesses throughout the accounts affirm the historical genre of these writings.

## **4. Conservative Reporting in the New Testament**

Another claim is that sayings of Jesus were later inserted by the church to fit evolving theological needs. Yet, the Gospels do not reflect direct answers to many of the most pressing issues in the early church (e.g., circumcision, Gentile inclusion, food sacrificed to idols). This suggests the evangelists did not put their own words on Jesus' lips. In his letters, Paul carefully distinguishes between the teachings of Jesus and his own Spirit-led instruction, further supporting an early recognition of Jesus' distinct authority.

## 5. Corroboration for the New Testament: Did Jesus Really Exist?

Some skeptics deny Jesus' historical existence, claiming there's no credible evidence outside the Bible. This is simply false. Even apart from the NT, Jesus is mentioned in numerous ancient sources. The NT is itself a diverse collection of 27 books, many written by eyewitnesses or close associates. But even more, ancient Jewish and Roman historians also referenced Jesus of Nazareth.

## 6. Ancient Jewish References

The Jewish historian **Josephus**, writing in the late first century, refers twice to Jesus. In *Antiquities* 20.9.1, he mentions James as “the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ.” In *Antiquities* 18.3.3, though some Christian embellishment is likely, even the Arabic version refers to Jesus as a wise, virtuous man who was crucified by Pilate and whose followers claimed he rose from the dead. These external references confirm central elements of the Gospel story from a non-Christian perspective.

## 7. Babylonian Talmudic Evidence

While late and polemical, the **Babylonian Talmud** contains several allusions to Jesus. These references include details like his execution at Passover, accusations of sorcery, and the charge that he led Israel astray. Some of the sayings align with Gospel themes and fit the Johannine timeline of Jesus' death. Although hostile, these sources corroborate aspects of the Christian narrative, inadvertently affirming Jesus' existence and impact.

## 8. Jesus' Resurrection

Some Jewish texts even refer to post-crucifixion claims. One Talmudic passage claims Jesus raised himself by incantation, while others warn against using God's name to restore life. While they reject the resurrection as truth, these statements imply the disciples truly believed Jesus had risen and were performing signs in His name.

## 9. Roman Historians

Roman sources provide further support. **Tacitus**, writing in *Annals* 15.44, affirms that Jesus was executed by Pontius Pilate during Tiberius' reign and that Christians were known and hated in Rome shortly afterward. **Suetonius** records that Emperor Claudius expelled Jews from Rome due to disturbances “instigated by Chrestus”—likely a reference to Christ and early Christian proclamation (Acts 18:2). These accounts support key Gospel claims: Jesus lived, was crucified, had followers who believed He rose, and this belief spread rapidly.

## 10. The Absence of Contradictions Between the Gospels

What some view as contradictions in the Gospels are usually due to misunderstanding literary techniques. Ancient authors often grouped material thematically rather than chronologically (topical vs. timeline). The Gospels may not always give Jesus' *ipsissima verba* (exact words), but they give his *ipsissima vox* (authentic voice). Discrepancies in wording are common among truthful eyewitnesses recounting the same event.

## 11. Eyewitness Testimony in the Gospels

There is strong internal and external evidence that the Gospels preserve reliable eyewitness testimony. Luke's prologue affirms his use of firsthand sources. **Papias** (AD 110) wrote that Mark's Gospel contained Peter's memories and that Matthew authored his Gospel. John's Gospel claims to be written by an eyewitness. Features like name frequency, geographical detail, and social customs show that these writers were either eyewitnesses or had direct access to them. The early dating of these Gospels supports their authenticity and trustworthiness.

## Study and Reflection Questions

1. Why is the exceptional preservation of the New Testament important when considering its reliability?
2. What are the strongest arguments against the idea that the NT authors were intentionally deceptive?
3. How does the NT demonstrate that it was written as historical record rather than fictional narrative?
4. What are some reasons Jesus' sayings in the Gospels appear authentic rather than invented by the early church?
5. How does the existence of non-Christian references to Jesus (Josephus, Tacitus, Talmud) support the reliability of the Gospels?
6. What does the early church's care in distinguishing Jesus' words from later prophetic utterances tell us about their integrity in preserving His teachings?
7. How do the Gospel accounts handle potentially controversial or difficult material, and what does that suggest about their honesty?
8. What role does eyewitness testimony play in the credibility of the New Testament accounts?
9. Why do apparent contradictions in the Gospels not undermine their reliability? What tools help explain them?
10. After exploring this material, what strengthens your confidence in trusting the New Testament as a faithful witness to Jesus Christ?

## The Divine-Human Authorship and Transmission of the Bible

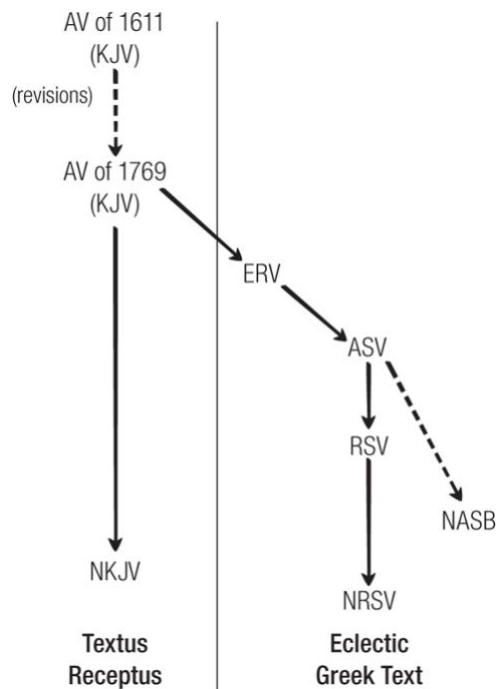
The Bible is not merely a human book—nor is it merely divine dictation. It is wholly the Word of God and fully the words of men. This beautiful mystery is what theologians call the *doctrine of inspiration*. British theologian John Stott explains it well:

“Out of whose mouth did Scripture come, then? God’s or man’s? The only biblical answer is ‘both.’ Indeed, God spoke through the human authors in such a way that His words were simultaneously their words, and their words were simultaneously His... It is the Word of God through the words of human beings.”

In this divine-human partnership, God worked through the personalities, cultural backgrounds, education, literary styles, and even emotions of the biblical authors. And yet, what they wrote—every word—was exactly what God intended to communicate. Paul affirms this when he writes, “*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness*” (2 Tim. 3:16). The Greek word for “God-breathed” (*theopneustos*) emphasizes that Scripture is *inspired*—breathed out by God Himself.

Though the original manuscripts (called *autographs*) no longer exist, God’s Word has been faithfully preserved through thousands of handwritten copies. For the New Testament alone, nearly 6,000 Greek manuscripts exist today, making it the most well-attested document from antiquity. Likewise, the Old Testament was confirmed and clarified by the discovery of the **Dead Sea Scrolls** in 1947, which predate previous Hebrew manuscripts by nearly a thousand years. These findings reinforced the accuracy and reliability of the text we have today.

Before the printing press, all copies were handwritten, an act of devotion and preservation. Today, thanks to the hard work of textual critics and translators, we hold in our hands reliable, readable translations of the original texts. Critical editions of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures—like the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* and the *Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament*—represent the scholarly consensus on the best readings of the original texts.



From divine inspiration to human transmission, from ancient languages to modern English, the journey of the Bible is one of providential preservation. When you open your Bible today, you're engaging with the living Word of God that has been faithfully transmitted across generations so that you can know Him, hear Him, and walk in His truth.

## Discussion Questions

### Understanding Divine Inspiration

1. How does the doctrine of "dual authorship" (God and man) influence the way we read and trust the Bible?
2. Read 2 Timothy 3:16–17 and 2 Peter 1:20–21. What do these verses teach us about how the Bible was written and why it matters?

### Considering the Role of Human Authors

3. How does knowing that God used the unique personalities and backgrounds of the biblical writers deepen your appreciation for Scripture?
4. Why is it important that the Bible is not only divinely inspired but also rooted in real human history and culture?

### **Transmission and Trustworthiness**

5. What do discoveries like the Dead Sea Scrolls reveal about God's providence in preserving His Word?
6. How should the abundance of manuscript evidence influence our confidence in the accuracy of Scripture?

### **Revelation and Inspiration**

7. What's the difference between *general* and *special* revelation? Why do we need both?
8. Define *inspiration* in your own words based on this study. Why is this doctrine foundational to our faith?

### **Scripture and the Modern Reader**

9. Reflect on the journey of the Bible—from inspiration to your hands. How does that process affect your view of reading Scripture today?
10. How can understanding this process help us guard against misinterpretation and careless reading?

### **Application Questions**

1. Have you ever struggled to believe that the Bible is truly God's Word? How does this lesson help answer your questions or build your faith?
2. In what ways do you see the Holy Spirit bringing *illumination* (understanding) to your reading of Scripture?
3. How might learning more about the history and reliability of the Bible motivate you to study it more diligently?
4. How can you encourage others to trust and treasure the Bible in a world that increasingly doubts its authority?

## Reflection Questions for This Study

1. **How does understanding the Bible as both fully divine and fully human affect the way you read it?**

Does it deepen your trust in its message? Why or why not?

2. **Have you ever doubted the reliability of Scripture?**

What caused those doubts, and how did you (or how might you) bring those doubts before God?

3. **What does it mean to you personally that “All Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Timothy 3:16)?**

How should that shape your attitude toward reading and applying the Bible?

4. **In what ways have you seen the Bible speak into your life—through conviction, comfort, direction, or transformation?**

Can you name a time when God’s Word directly shaped a decision or deepened your faith?

5. **How much time do you spend in Scripture each week?**

What habits or changes would help you grow in consistency and delight in God's Word?

## Application Questions

1. **What specific step can you take this week to deepen your engagement with Scripture?**

(Examples: Start a reading plan, memorize a verse, journal through a passage.)

2. **Who in your life needs encouragement to trust or understand the Bible more?**

How can you gently share with them what you’re learning?

3. **Are there areas of your life where you are relying more on feelings or culture than on God's Word?**

How can you realign those areas with biblical truth?



**4. How can you prepare your heart and mind before opening the Bible to read?**

What would it look like to pray expectantly, seeking not just information but transformation?

**5. If someone asked you why you trust the Bible, what would you say?**

How might you practice articulating that answer clearly and graciously?