**Explore God – Week 6 – Is the Bible Reliable? GOOD**

**Need Big Idea Statement**

**Introduction: Reliability**

Good morning! I thought we’d begin this morning with a little game I’ve entitled, **“Is it Reliable?”** Here’s how the game works. I’m going to show you a brief clip of someone trusting, wisely or otherwise, in the reliability of a structure and then we’ll all vote whether or not we think the structure itself will be reliable. Don’t need all these instructions…just play When we pause the video I’ll ask you if you think it’s reliable or not. If you think it is realiable – put your hand in the air and give a big thumbs up. If you think it’s not, give a big thumbs down. Simple enough, right? Let’s play!

How about these two pals?

(Play video one: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOMB22OEONI>)

Ok – who says they’re going to make the swing, no problem? And who thinks they might run into an issue or three? Well, let’s find out! (Play second half of the video)

Who guessed right? Congratulations! Ok, round two, here we go.

(Play video two: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jr5FyQOYKrc>) (5:24)

Alright, what say you? Who says this guy’s demonstration is going to go flawlessly? Who thinks things might not go according to plan? Let’s see! (Play second half of the video)

And here’s our last one:

(Play video three: [www.facebook.com/isimkins1/videos/763481246326/](http://www.facebook.com/isimkins1/videos/763481246326/))

What about this poor guy? Will this hammock prove to be reliable? What do you think? Well, let’s find out! (Play second half of the video)

Well, it looks like we were 0-3 with these examples today. Did anyone guess correctly for all three? Why don’t you give yourself a hand!

I show you these because we all long for reliability in our lives.

* A car that will start in the morning.
* A furnace that will heat our home.
* A relationship you can trust.
* A community you can count on.

None of us want to put our trust in someone or something that isn’t reliable.

**Series Recap**

Now, ladders and bridges are one thing, but what about the Bible? Is the Bible actually reliable? For the last month or so we’ve joined together with literally hundreds of other Chicago-land churches who have been wrestling through these big questions that a lot of us have wrestled with – myself included. We’ve called this series, “Explore God” because our goal is not to convince you to believe a certain way but to invite all of us to explore these big questions together. And today’s big question? **Is the Bible Reliable?**

**The Reliability of the Bible: Historical Criticism**

Well, answering this question requires that we first understand what the Bible actually *is*. It’s critical for us to understand that the Bible isn’t a book that arrived in complete form at one point in history.

* It wasn’t hand delivered from heaven by a bunch of cherubs.
* It’s not an owner’s manual.
* It’s not a legal contract.

When we open the Bible and read it, we are eavesdropping on an ancient spiritual journey. We have to understand that to understand the Bible.  
  
The Bible is a collection of…

* 66 books
* Written by 40 authors
* Over a period of a thousand years
* In 3 different languages
* On 3 different continents

It’s kind of like a mix-tape with something for every occasion. There is poetry, history, narrative, letters, and allegory. There are stories of love, heroism and cowardice. Words of instruction, heroism, and cowardice. Like mix-tapes, the Bible tells a story – and it's the story of all of us.

So that’s *what* the Bible is, but is it reliable? It’s a big question. In the time we have we can’t cover everything so let’s hone in on the New Testament and specifically the Gospels…the first four books of the New Testament that tell the story of Jesus. How can we believe that the information we have about Jesus is trustworthy?

(PPT-Ancient Biography)First of all, the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, can be understood as a kind of ancient biography. Each of the four Gospel writers set out to write an account of a real person, Jesus. So, these aren’t stories that the early church made up about Jesus; we have four portraits of Jesus painted by four different authors from eyewitness accounts.

* (PPT)**Matthew** was an eyewitness to Jesus’ life and teaching.
* (PPT)**Mark** got his information from **Peter and Mary Magdalene…eyewitnesses.**, another eyewitness.
* (PPT)**Luke**, a historian, thoroughly researched his Gospel from eyewitness accounts.
* (PPT)**John** was an eyewitness and recorded what he saw and heard.

Just to give you some perspective, **Alexander the Great** – you’ve heard of him? We have 1 account of his life written 400 years after he died, and still not many people have a hard time believing in his military conquests. For Jesus, we have 4 accounts written by eyewitnesses within a generation of his time on earth.

Do we need a different word than “reliable” here since it is the overall question? Use the word “accurate.”

(PPT-Reliable)The Gospels are also reliable because they are trustworthy. Now when I say reliable, I mean we have a lot of evidence that the Gospels are reliable representations of what was originally written about Jesus by these eyewitnesses in the first century.

The way you determine whether or not ancient literature is reliable is to first ask: (PPT)**How many years passed between the original work and the earliest copy?**

Today, English versions of classic literature are reproduced from copies called “manuscripts.” The original writings, known as “autographs,” were lost many years ago. If the gap between the autograph and earliest manuscript is wide, there is a greater likelihood that the text could have been altered, but if the gap is small the likelihood of the text changing is lessened.

To put this in perspective, let’s consider how the New Testament stacks up to other classic, ancient literature.[[1]](#endnote-1) (PPT-Chart)

For example, Homer’s *Iliad* was written in 800 BC, but the earliest copy we have is from 400 years later in 400 BC. Tacitus’ *Annals* has a 950-year gap between the original writing and the earliest copy!

In contrast… (PPT-Add John) The oldest fragment of the Gospels was discovered in Egypt in 1920. It is from John’s Gospel and is dated around AD 125. John’s Gospel was written somewhere around 70-80 AD…only 50 years difference between the original autograph and the earliest copy.

A second reliability factor is to consider how many copies of the document or manuscript exist. The more copies, the more you can check to see if these various copies have drastic differences.

(PPT-Chart)For our three works, there are over (PPT) 1800 copies of the *Iliad*, that seems good. (PPT) But just 31 copies of *Annals,* not a lot. And for the New Testament? (PPT) We have 6000 manuscripts and more continue to be discovered!

Cut this… don’t need it. ~~In addition, the scribes who made these hand-copied manuscripts were incredibly careful in their work:[[2]](#endnote-2)~~

* ~~With a small, sharp knife, scribes would gently cut the writing surface into a grid. It would look something like graphing paper. They would then copy each letter placing it carefully within the appropriate square.~~
* ~~Scribes would count all the letters in a given scroll to verify that the translation was identical to the original.~~
* ~~If an error was discovered, the scroll was burned. How’s that for a commitment to accuracy?~~

We can trust that the 4 Gospels we have in our Bible are different word? reliable eyewitness accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus.

**The Reliability of the Bible: Practically Speaking**

The reliability of the text as ancient literature is important, but often what we’re asking when we ask, “Is the Bible Reliable?” is… What is the Bible reliable for? What can I use it for? What will it help me do? For a lot of people, they want to use the Bible to prove a point. Maybe some of you know someone like this: Video: John Crist[[3]](#footnote-1)

Ok, so that’s an extreme example but we’ve all probably seen people quote the Bible to support their particular opinion, or political affiliation, or economic stance. To be honest, it’s really easy to fall into the trap of “using” the Bible as a way to make sure someone else knows how wrong they are for thinking, believing, or acting the way they do. Not surprisingly, when we use the Bible this way, we often end up pushing people away. And let me just say, if that’s happened to you, I’m deeply sorry. I wholeheartedly believe that the purpose of the Bible is not to push people away, but draw people in – not to divide, but unite.

**Jesus and the Bible**

When we are asking “Is the Bible reliable?” When we consider the Bible, we can look to no better place than Jesus. If we’re a Christ-follower or someone who’s interested in learning more, we follow Jesus’ example in everything - how to live, how to love, how to act towards our loved ones…and our enemies. So how did Jesus use the Bible? Did Jesus even use the Bible?

Well, Jesus did use the Bible. In fact he often quoted the Bible – a lot! He was well *versed* (eh?) in the Hebrew scriptures – what we call the Old Testament – and used them often. It’s hard to say exactly how many times because Jesus is often alluding to scripture even when he’s not directly quoting it. But between these direct and indirect quotes, we can safely say that Jesus quoted from the Old Testament more than 228 times!

228 times! That’s a lot! And that’s only what’s recorded of Jesus’ words! I think it shows us that Jesus loved reading the Bible and certainly considered it useful and practical as well as challenging!

Need clarity in these three paragraphs. But even more than quoting the scriptures, when we look at *how* Jesus used scripture, we see that far and away that Jesus used these scriptures to **Start Conversations**. And this was pretty revolutionary! Scripture to *start* conversations was super unusual. So unusual in fact that we see many instances of people actually stopping in confusion when Jesus didn’t condemn but invited.

You see, for generations, scriptures had been used to justify harmful practices or taken out of context to end conversations. They were used as a hammer or some other tool to prove you were wrong and I was right. But then Jesus comes along and uses them to open people’s minds and hearts to a new way of living.

We see in John 4, Jesus meets a woman from a different religious group and talks about their differences. He lets her tell him how different their scriptures had been used and then says, “No, not either these old divisive ways – try this new 3rd way, the way of love.” The Samaritan woman is so startled by this that she goes and tells the whole village about this man’s love! Talking about verses about which mountain to worship on… The fact that he used the same scriptures that had ended relationships made it all the more startling! Contrast this with how we’ve seen people use verses to shut things down.

And just a chapter later in John 5:39-40, Jesus uses the well-known prophecies around the Messiah to show that the Messiah had come! He was in fact in front of them! And not only there, but *inviting* them in!

(PPT- Jesus uses the Bible to Invite People to Relationship) This happens over and over again, Jesus **Invites People into Relationship** with him and with each other. And he uses the Bible to do that!

**Jesus Still Uses the Bible to Draw People In**

But Jesus didn’t just do this when he was alive two thousand years ago. No, Jesus is still doing this today!

Jesus wants to draw us into conversation, draw us into relationship, and remind us of who we are – our beloved, worthy status as adopted children of God! And he uses the Bible to help him do this! I love the way author and theologian, Peter Enns, talks about it:

**“The Bible, then, is a grand story. It meets us and then invites us to follow and join a world outside of our own, and lets us see ourselves and God differently in the process.” – Peter Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So***

Read that end part, the Bible wants us to “see ourselves and God differently”! That’s amazing.

How can scripture do that? How can we not fall into “The Bible Says…” Get rid of “it” language. “What I’ve read in the Scriptures reminds me…

* ***It reminds us that we are loved and worthy (John 3:16).***
* ***It shows us we’re adopted into God’s family (2 Corinthians 6:18)***
* ***It tells us we’re forgiven (Ephesians 4:32)***
* ***It invites us to love (John 15:12)***
* ***It tells us who God is (1 John 4:7-8)***
* ***It shows us God is in ultimately in charge (Jeremiah 29:11)***
* ***And it reminds us that the battle is already won and nothing can separate us from God! (Romans 8:37-39)***

Like personal part of this… When I was tired and lonely, the Bible reminded me that God’s love covers everything I have ever done and everything I’ll ever do. It reminded me that I am everything God designed and that I’m always able to lean into that design to become more fully who God designed me to be. That I have a purpose. I have freedom because Christ has freed me and offers me that freedom each and every day. I don’t have to be weighed down by the past or by my expectations of myself – I’m loved just as I am and will be loved *into* who I am called to become.

Psalm 8 is the foundation for so many of my mornings, its verses reminding me of God’s ultimate plan, love, and hope:

**3When I consider your heavens,  
    the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars,  
    which you have set in place,  
4what is mankind that you are mindful of them,  
    human beings that you care for them?[**[**c**](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=psalm+8&version=NIV#fen-NIV-14017c)**]**

**5You have made them[**[**d**](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=psalm+8&version=NIV#fen-NIV-14018d)**] a little lower than the angels[**[**e**](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=psalm+8&version=NIV#fen-NIV-14018e)**]  
    and crowned them[**[**f**](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=psalm+8&version=NIV#fen-NIV-14018f)**] with glory and honor.  
6You made them rulers over the works of your hands;  
    you put everything under their[**[**g**](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=psalm+8&version=NIV#fen-NIV-14019g)**] feet:  
7all flocks and herds,  
    and the animals of the wild,  
8the birds in the sky,  
    and the fish in the sea,  
    all that swim the paths of the seas.**

**9Lord, our Lord,  
    how majestic is your name in all the earth!**

**Challenge: Start a Conversation**

Need a better paragraph here… a better transition. Not only does Jesus offer us eternal life *later,* he offers it right now, along with guidance. But it hinges on this challenge of Jesus from John 7:17:

**“Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.” –John 7:17**

In essence he’s saying, “Do you want to find out what my teaching could do in your life? Do you really want to know whether it is reliable? Then live it out.”

Live it out. That is a true challenge. It’s a challenge to live into these promises, to seek out God’s will, to seek God first, not second or third or seventh! Are you ready to see if the Bible is reliable? Are you ready to start a new conversation?

If you’re ready to try it, I want to invite you to **Start a Conversation with Jesus** by joining the Community Bible Reading Plan. It’s simple to sign up online and every day scripture is sent to your inbox. It’s a way to start your day right. You can do this right now. We will be in a Gospel at this point.

You can also download the YouVersion Bible app onto your smart phone and find a reading plan tailored to you. So if you’re looking to learn more about Jesus – you can start with the Gospels or you start by reading the poetry of the Psalms – there are so many ways to start a conversation with Jesus!

But don’t stop there! Could this parallel “Relationships” in some way? **Start a conversation with Others**! You can do this by jumping into a small group! We have small groups that just started and small groups that will start in a week or two. We believe strongly in small groups because they are a great way to join or start conversations! In fact, our goal is for 100% of this room to be in a small group and we’re not far from that goal – leave this stat out ~~already 62% of this room is in a small group – don’t you want to join in?~~

**Conclusion**

Listen, anytime we rely on something, we’re putting our trust in it to fulfill its purpose. Just like we don’t use a hammer to change a light bulb or (other callback from the introduction?), we don’t use the Bible to **prove a point,** but to **start a conversation with Jesus**. Ultimately that’s what the Bible is pointing us to, to relationship with Jesus, relationship with each other. We’re meant to be in that relationship and live into the love of Jesus each and every day of our lives.

And the Bible can help us in that! Through Scripture, Jesus can take us to places we didn’t even know we wanted to be.

Are you ready to start a conversation? Are you ready to start a relationship? If you are, Jesus is always waiting with open arms. Jesus is always speaking to us through our conversations with each other and the Bible.

Will you join us?

**Communion Idea**

On the last night of Jesus’ life, he made time to have dinner with his friends. He knew what the next day would bring, but relationships were the most important thing in his life and he wanted to have a few more conversations.

At that dinner, he took a piece of bread and broke it, telling his friends that “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” And in the same way, when we participate in communion, we’re remembering Jesus’ gift of life and on-going conversation around hope, love, and joy.

Later in that same dinner, he took the cup and said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

When we take communion, we’re celebrating that we get to join into the on-going conversation. We celebrate that we aren’t alone, that we’re given the Holy Spirit and the Bible to guide our life and relationships.

The table is set, will you come to the table?

1. Redacted from Josh McDowell, *God-Breathed: The Undeniable Power and Reliability of Scripture* (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour Publishing, Inc, 2015), 165. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Redacted from Josh McDowell, *God-Breathed: The Undeniable Power and Reliability of Scripture*. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hzEL4h1vq7o [↑](#footnote-ref-1)