

Chapter 3

Is the Bible Literally True and/or Inerrant

There is a difference between literal truth and inerrancy. The Bible may be considered inerrant, while at the same time make use of symbolic imagery and metaphors for purposes of illustration. The question of inerrancy has more to do with theological, scientific, and historical truth. So, a better way to rephrase the title of this chapter might be this. Is the Bible the inerrant word of God? Or is it the God-inspired words of fallible men, and not true and inerrant in every respect? If the Bible is not completely inerrant, does this negate the parts that are true? If not, how does one decide which parts to believe and which parts to reject? Orthodox Christians can be sharply divided on this issue, while at the same time sharing similar “theological” beliefs and subscribing to nearly identical doctrinal statements and creeds.

Here’s my take on this issue. In the pages of the Bible you will find totally reliable information regarding the true character of God and how you may establish a relationship with Him. Please understand, however, that not even the most hard-core Christian fundamentalist believes that every Bible passage is literally true. Some passages are obviously figurative in nature. For example, in Psalm 96:12 we learn that when the Lord comes to judge the earth all the trees of the forest will sing for joy. Most of the parables of Jesus were fictional stories which illustrate spiritual truths. The apocalyptic passages in Daniel, Ezekiel, Revelation, and so on, speak of future events in symbolic terms. Up to this point, proponents of both sides of the inerrancy issue would be in agreement. Beyond this point, however, the issues become clouded.

The issue of inerrancy is complicated by the fact that many of the truths expressed in the Bible are understood, even by proponents of inerrancy, as being generally true, but not in every specific instance. For example, in Ephesians 6:2 children are admonished to honor their fathers and mothers so that everything will go well with them and that they may enjoy long life on the earth. In Proverbs 22:6, we are admonished to *“train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.”* Obviously, not all obedient children live long lives and not all children who are raised in devoutly Christian homes make the right choices later in life.

Another related issue is the difficulty of separating the words of God from the words of man in the Scriptures. The writers of the Bible, although inspired by God, still expressed their own points of view, which were often contrary to God’s truth. The entire books of Job and Ecclesiastes are illustrative of this. Job was under the mistaken notion that God always rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked in this life, and he was unable to understand why he was being punished. His friends were no help. They insisted that Job had committed some grievous sin and was justly suffering God’s wrath. Despite all the give and take between Job and his friends, the issue was never clearly resolved. In the end, Job resigned himself to the fact that he should honor God despite, in his opinion, being unfairly treated. Eventually his health and

possessions were restored, but one gets the feeling that this ending was added to satisfy those who could not accept the fact that life is not always fair. Was Job an actual historical character, or was the book intended to be understood as a parable illustrating man's inability to understand the ways of God?

In the case of Ecclesiastes, the writer begins with these words, "*Meaningless! Meaningless!*" says the teacher. "*Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.*" He goes on to explain how futile life is because, in the end (see Eccl. Chap. 9) all share a common destiny—"*the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not . . . For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten.*"

Although Jesus had great respect for the Scriptures, he also took liberties when interpreting them and rendered many of their teachings obsolete by supplanting them with newer doctrines. In Matthew 5, the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus emphasized the importance of the Law and the Prophets, and told us that "*until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished,*" and warned us not to break even the least of these commandments. However, He then went on to amplify and change six of these commandments. In the cases of murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, revenge, and hatred of enemies, he made the rules much stricter. Even strict Biblical literalists understand that individual Scriptures must be interpreted in light of the historical context in which they were given. In Old Testament times, due to the "hardness of peoples' hearts," God's laws were more lenient than the standards which he now holds us to.

I personally have come to believe that God's revelations to us through the inspired writers of the Bible are progressive in nature. Over time God has progressively revealed more of his truth. The fact that Solomon and Job were ignorant of an afterlife does not mean that their written works were not inspired by God. They were truthfully expressing what God had revealed to them. If we insist that all Scriptures are inerrant we fail to take into account the progressive nature of God's revelation. The writers of the Bible wrote in different historical contexts and with different purposes in mind. They were inspired by God, but they were not perfect, and their knowledge of spiritual and historical truths was not perfect.

For the most part, our view of God today is quite different from that of the ancient Hebrews. The religious and cultural identity of the Hebrews and, by extension, many modern day Christians, is deeply rooted in ancient stories and legends, many of which were borrowed from neighboring cultures, which were verbally passed down from one generation to the next. Many of those stories found their way into the Hebrew Scriptures. In my view, those stories do not have to be literally true in order to convey spiritual truth. In many of those stories, however, we sometimes see a very primitive view of God. For example, in the Garden of Eden God is pictured as physically walking around looking for Adam, and Satan is pictured as a talking serpent. I personally believe that it would be a serious mistake to base Christian doctrine on a literal interpretation of those stories. What I try to do when assigning meaning to those stories and traditions is to identify the progression of thought. In the Hebrew Bible we don't find literal Christian truth, but instead the origins of that truth. Valuable lessons are often learned through a process of trial and error, and this is evident in the lessons learned by the Nation of Israel and the

Christian Church throughout history, as recorded in the Scriptures. In the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, we see a culmination of this process. I do believe that God continues to reveal new truths to us today.

It is unsettling for most of us to realize that the particular religious doctrines that form the basis of our purpose in life, including our final destiny after death, are based on an imperfect document. It is helpful for me to understand that our view of perfection may not be the same as God's. A pitcher does not have to be perfectly shaped, and free from surface cracks, to be perfectly suited for holding water. It apparently suits God to accomplish His goals for mankind through imperfect human intermediaries. He does almost nothing directly. We have been given the privilege of being used by God to accomplish His purposes, despite our weakness and imperfections.

Please understand that whether you believe in Scriptural inerrancy or not the fact remains that the Bible must be interpreted by examining a particular verse or passage in light of the historical context in which it was written, and other Scriptures dealing directly or indirectly with the same topic must also be examined. Any given Scripture, no matter how clear the interpretation may seem at first glance, is subject to a variety of interpretations. It may be regarded as figurative or symbolic in nature; it may be regarded as applying only to a particular period in Biblical history, only to be supplanted with other commands given at a later date; it may be regarded as the opinion of the writer, but not necessarily the words of God Himself, and so on. Individual verses and passages of Scripture must be viewed and interpreted in light of the totality of the Scriptures. The teachings of the New Testament shed light on the meaning and intended purpose of various passages in the Old Testament. In some cases the teachings of Christ supplant Old Testament teachings. In other cases New Testament teachings reveal hidden meanings in various Old Testament passages. In most cases, when faced with multiple possible interpretations of a given Bible passage, the intended meaning becomes clear only when other passages are examined which deal with the same topic.

For example, in Matthew 17, Jesus took his disciples aside and admonished them for their lack of faith. He told them that if they had faith even as small as a mustard seed they could move a mountain from here to there and nothing would be impossible to them. Other passages imply that we can have whatever we ask in Jesus' name, and so on (See Matt. 21:22; Jn. 16:24; Mk. 11:24). One could take a "literal" view of these passages and assume that if we just have enough faith we can get from God whatever we want. When other Bible passages are examined, however, we realize that "getting what we want" is not what prayer is all about. James tells us (4:3) that we don't get what we ask for because we ask with the wrong motives and pray selfishly. James also tells us (5:16) that the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Righteousness results from abiding in Christ and conforming our wills to His. When we are able to share the mind of Christ in this way, then what we want will be the same as what God wants and our prayers will indeed become very powerful. A guaranteed "yes" answer to prayer is not simply a matter of asking for whatever you may want at any given moment. When Jesus prayed in Gethsemane, He did not get what He wanted. He did get what He prayed for, however, because His prayer ended with these words, "*not my will, but thine be done.*"

A very difficult issue for me personally to resolve was how far I could safely depart from the popular view of Scriptural inerrancy and still maintain my confidence in the Bible as a reliable source of spiritual truth. Today I am able to accept most of the findings of “historical criticism” of the Bible, including source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, tradition criticism, canonical criticism, and so on, and still maintain my faith in the Gospel of Christ. Because my study of the Bible is not restricted or confined to a rigid view of inerrancy I am able to more honestly and accurately assess the development of thought throughout Bible history, as God has progressively revealed His truths to us. There is not space in this book to provide an exhaustive treatment of this subject. My main purpose in writing this chapter is to give you a basic understanding of my views regarding Bible inspiration and inerrancy. In subsequent chapters I will be providing Scriptural support for my views on a variety of topics. The ways in which I use Scripture to support those views will amply illustrate how I deal with the questions of inerrancy and progressive revelation when interpreting the Bible and uncovering underlying foundational truths about God and the Gospel of Christ.

I believe the best way to understand and interpret the Bible is to approach it with attitude of submission to Jesus Christ as the Lord of one’s life. He is God’s living Word to us. As you read the words of the Bible, which have come to you through the imperfect filter of human understanding and experience, trust Jesus Christ, who is Himself perfect, to guide you by His Holy Spirit.

I would like to mention at this point that the main theological positions I have taken in this book are totally supported by the Scriptures, no matter which view of inspiration one might hold. Many inerrantists, who disagree with my views regarding the inerrancy of the Scriptures, nevertheless strongly agree with my belief in the doctrine of universal reconciliation.