

## **175 and Counting: The Bible Tells Me So**

**2 Timothy 3:16-17**

**By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III](#)**

If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to 1 Timothy, sorry, 2 Timothy chapter 3 verses 16 and 17. For the last few weeks we've been in a series called "175 and Counting" and we've tackled a few topics of crucial interest and importance to us as a congregation and to the Christian Church in general. We've addressed the issue of discipleship that being a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ is more than about praying a prayer or making a decision or claiming to be a follower of Christ. It's actually hearing and doing what the Lord calls us to be and do in the Christian life. That's what a Christian disciple is — one who hears and does the words of his or her master. We also, last time we were together, gave some thoughts to the whole issue of creation because there are some in our day and time who say because the Christian account of the origins of the universe is different from the materialistic, naturalistic, scientific account, that the Christian account has come into conflict with reality and you can no longer be a believer and accept what is obviously reality. The same thing can be said about human origins. The argument is made that what the Bible teaches about the origins of the human race is out of accord with what science has taught us about the origins and the development of the human race and therefore you can no longer credibly be a Christian and accept reality because what Christians believe the Bible teaches is out of accord with the reality as we've learned it through naturalistic, materialistic, scientific study.

Well, we're looking at a number of issues like this. And by the way, I made an offer last week to talk to folks who had questions about this and I've already had a number of folks who have taken me up on my offer. That offer continues to stand and it stands with regard to the study that we're going to do today because there is nothing that has been more relentless for the last two hundred plus years than the assault on the authority of the Bible. The last two centuries in the western world since, at least since the late 1700's, there has been a relentless attack upon the integrity, the historicity, the inspiration, the authority of the Bible. And no doubt it has had its effects. You can see many denominations where the Bible's authority has been degraded. Now interestingly, just like we said last week, where the Bible's authority is no longer held, that kind of Christianity is shrinking. And no wonder, because Christianity is tied to the authority of the Bible. Where the Bible is honored and held in high authority, there, Christianity is

vibrant and growing and there are no exceptions to that, anywhere in the world. Where the Bible's not viewed as the inspired, authoritative, Word of God, Christianity is dying, and where it's held in authority Christianity is growing. There are reasons for that and it's important for us to be ready to give a defense for the hope that is in us so I want to address this whole issue of the Scripture today and I want to do it from what Paul says in 2 Timothy chapter 3.

Let me tell you ahead of time what we're going to see in this passage. Paul, in this brief passage, in verses 16 and 17, tells us what the Bible is, what the Bible is for, and what the Bible does — what it accomplishes, what its end is. What the Bible is, what the Bible is for, and what the Bible does. If you don't understand or accept what the Bible says the Bible is, it will undermine the purpose for which God gave us the Word and that's why it's so important for us to have a clear, Christian understanding of the Bible's claims about itself and be ready to give a defense for the hope that is in us. That's what we're going to work on together today. Let's pray before we read God's Word.

*Heavenly Father, this is Your Word. We ask that You would help us to understand it and we pray that by Your Spirit You would bring it home to our hearts so that we believe it and that we embrace its authority over our lives. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.*

This is God's Word; hear it. 2 Timothy 3 beginning in verse 16:

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.”

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant Word. May He write its eternal truth upon all our hearts.

Just over a year ago, the vice moderator of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, the PCUSA, the mainline Presbyterian denomination in our country, created quite a stir when he said, “Scripture is only a reference point to the Word of God; it is not the Word of God. You know, the Word of God with a capital ‘W.’” He went on to say, “Sola Scriptura,” the teaching that the Bible is our final rule for faith and practice, “Sola Scriptura is dead.” And there was quite a discussion when he said those words but I want you to understand that his views are widely held in many places, especially in mainline protestant denominations here in the United States of America and in other places in the English speaking world. But I also want you to understand that when someone says that, they are in direct contradiction to Scripture itself. The Bible makes claims about itself and those claims have to be taken seriously and those who say, “I am Christian but I disagree with the claims that the Bible makes about itself,” need to come clean. They need to come clean and they need to admit, in the first place, that what they are saying is not in accordance with what early Christians believed and what

the Bible itself teaches. And secondly, they need to come clean and realize that if what they say is true the Christianity cannot be true. Then what they need to do is they need to be honest and say, "I'm rejecting Christianity completely. I'm not going to pretend to be a Christian while altering fundamental beliefs." And I want to explain why today.

For instance, when this man says, "The Bible is not the Word of God; it is a reference point," he is expressing a view that has been around for a long time in critical, liberal Christianity. You can find this in Germany and France and England back in the 1790's and you can find it coming forward for the last two hundred years or more, so this is not anything new. But when it is said, notice two things that are happening. The direct, explicit claims of the Word of God are being rejected. When you say, "The Bible is not the Word of God; it is a reference point," you are directly contradicting numerous passages of Scripture that speak to just that issue. Let me ask you to take your Bible in hand. I'd like you to turn with me to just a few passages. I could illustrate this point literally for hours and I would love doing that but you would not, so I'm just going to take you to a few passages, the first being 1 Thessalonians chapter 2 verse 13.

What did Paul think he was doing when he was preaching to the Thessalonians? Did he think that he was giving a reference point to them that they could then add their own ideas to or disagree with or come up with their own idea about what the Word of God was because all he was doing was sharing what his opinion about God is. You know there are many people who say the Bible is just a group of people's opinion about what God is like and what the world is like and what our faith should be like and our opinion counts just as much as theirs. So the Bible's a reference point and my opinion's a reference point. Is that what Paul is doing? Well look at 1 Thessalonians chapter 2 verse 13. Here's what Paul says to the Thessalonians. Now this is two thousand years before the vice moderator's talk and listen to what he says. "For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the Word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but for what it really is, the Word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe." You see what Paul is doing? He is congratulating the Thessalonians that they did not listen to him preach and say, "You know, we really appreciated you sharing your opinion, Paul. Those are very enlightened, learned, studied opinions, and now we'll go back and use what you've said as a point of reference because after all, what you're just said are just human words and all of us can have our opinions about God." No, that was not the Thessalonians' response. Their response was, "That's the Word of God." What Paul said was not his own opinion; they were not the words of man. That was God talking to us. What Paul said came from God. This is emphasized throughout the Scriptures.

Turn with me to 2 Peter chapter 1 verses 19 and 20. One of the things that you'll hear today is, and in fact, Landon Whitsitt, the vice moderator of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, makes this very argument. He argues,

“Whenever somebody says they believe that the Bible is authoritative and then you ask them, ‘Well, what does your authoritative Bible say?’ then they start telling you something.” And he says, “Now immediately they’re equating their interpretation with what the Bible says.” You see, his argument is, “They’re really doing the same thing I’m doing. I’m arguing that the Bible, it gives you one opinion and I can give you another opinion too, and we work on that together and we decide whatever it is that the Word of God is saying to us. But when somebody says, ‘I believe in the authority of the Bible’ and you ask them, ‘Well what does it say?’ and they tell you something, well they’re just telling you their opinion.” In other words, it’s just a matter of interpretation. Well, two thousand years before the vice moderator said that, what does Peter say? 2 Peter chapter 1 verse 19:

We have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts, but know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

Now again, we don’t have time to do justice to the profundity of what Peter just said, but Peter, in one sentence, is summarizing for you hundreds of years of the prophetic tradition in Israel. In Israel, one of the fundamental differences between a false prophet and a true prophet was what? A false prophet speaks his own ideas. He comes up with his own message. And a true prophet speaks the Word of God and not his own ideas. And this is Peter’s very point. This is not subjective. It’s not just up to your own interpretation. This is the Word of God. The Bible itself makes this clear. It is God’s words written by human authors under the direction of the Holy Spirit and it is not a dead letter but a living word, an active force in our life.

You know very often people will say, “Well, Jesus is the authority in my religion. I’m not going to worship a Bible. It’s a dead letter. And saying that the Bible is going to control everything that you believe is idolatry. You’re worshiping a book; we worship Jesus.” Well of course that’s a false dichotomy. Jesus Himself said that “heaven and earth will pass away; His word will not pass away.” Jesus says that it would be easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one jot or tittle of the Law of God to pass away. That’s what Jesus said. That’s Jesus’ opinion of the Bible.

At a very important time in the history of the Southern Baptist Convention there was a debate going on the floor. *The Baptist Faith and Message* was about to be changed. For many years it had said that Jesus was our final authority and the authors of the new *Baptist Faith and Message*, all whom were conservative, Bible-believing men, were changing *The Baptist Faith and Message* to affirm the inerrancy, the inspiration, and the final authority of the Bible and so they changed

a clause in *The Baptist Faith and Message* to make that very clear that Baptists accepted the authority of Scripture. And a commissioner stood up on the floor and he said, "I don't like this. You're making us show our allegiance to a Book but our allegiance isn't to a Book; we don't worship a Book. We worship a person, Jesus, so our ultimate allegiance shouldn't be to this Book." Now everyone in the room held their breath as fifteen thousand commissioners wondered who was going to answer this man and from the platform, Al Mohler stood up and walked to the speaker, and he said, "That, my friends, is exactly the issue that is before us. Can we pit Jesus against the Word of God or does Jesus teach us to accept the authority of the Word of God?" And he did a little Bible study through the gospels and he showed how Jesus teaches us to receive the authority of God's Word. You can't pit Jesus versus God's Word because Jesus is the Word made flesh and He Himself by the Holy Spirit gives us the Word of God and so those two things are not in competition.

Now why is it that people reject the authority of God's Word? There are many reasons for that and let me say since I was a teenager I've been reading about this. I ran into skeptical friends when I was a teenager and I've been reading books about this under the guidance of my pastors and elders. When I was in college I was around many liberal friends and I've been reading about it since then. In seminary, my seminary professors helped me with these things. I've been reading about these things for thirty years or more and I've really never found a compelling argument against the inerrancy, inspiration, and authority of Scripture. But the kinds of things that people say are this. They will say that there are contradictions in the Bible. There are contradictions of facts, there're contradictions of theology, and therefore we cannot accept the final authority of God's Word. Let me give you one example.

Turn with me in your Bibles to the book of 2 Samuel. Turn to 2 Samuel chapter 24. In 2 Samuel 24, remember this story? David decides to take a census of the people of God. Now that doesn't sound too bad except that if you remember what Moses said in the Law in Deuteronomy the king was expressly forbidden from taking a census. Why? Because God wanted the king to trust Him, God, to protect Israel, not to trust in how many horsemen, how many soldiers, how many chariots, how many spears, how many swords, how many instruments of war he had to protect the children of Israel against their enemies. But in 2 Samuel 24 we read this. Verse 1:

Again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and He incited David against them, saying, "Go, number Israel and Judah." So the king said to Joab, the commander of the army, who was with him, "Go through all the tribes of Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, and number the people, that I may know the number of the people."

And it's interesting in that passage that Joab argues with David a little bit. "David, you shouldn't do this. You know we're not supposed to do this." It's an interesting

passage, but do you know in this passage the author says, "God incited David" to do this. It was the Lord, who when His anger was kindled against Israel, incited David against Him. Now, critical scholars will ask you to turn, and I'm going to ask you to turn, to 1 Chronicles chapter 21 and they will say, "Now look at this same story told by the Chronicler." 1 Chronicles chapter 21 verse 1:

"Then Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel. So David said to Joab and the commanders of the army, 'Go, number Israel from Beersheba to Dan, and make me a report, that I may know their number.'"

And then in this passage Joab argues with David just like before. And they say, "See, there's a factual contradiction and a theological contradiction. The passages contradict. One says that the Lord incited, the other says that Satan incited, and he one, gives the explanation for what happened to the Lord causing it to happen; the other gives a theological explanation to the event that Satan caused it to happen, trying to get David off the hook, no doubt. And therefore we have a factual and a theological contradiction of the Word." Or do we? Very frankly, my friends, the factual and theological contradiction here is superficial. There is a profound coherence to what is being said here and if you paid attention to what God repeatedly says in the Bible you'd understand that.

For instance, who was responsible for Joseph being sold into slavery in Egypt? Was it God or his brothers? The answer is, "Yes." In Genesis 50:20, Joseph looks his brothers in the eye and he says, "You meant it for evil but the Lord meant it for good, to save many lives." The New Testament parallel of that is Romans 8:28 — "God works all things together for good for them that love God and who are called according to His purpose." Right? God is at work even in evil things.

In fact, the most evil event that ever occurred in the history of the world is the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. And what does the New Testament say about it? Think about it. Who does Jesus say delivered Him into the hands of His enemies, repeatedly in the gospels? Go check Matthew. He says that it will be His own people who will deliver Him into the hands of His enemies. He says it will be the chief priests and scribes who will deliver Him into the hands of His enemies. And finally He says to the disciples, "One of you will deliver me into the hands of My enemies." But check Romans 8:32. Who does the apostle Paul say delivered Jesus over into the hands of His enemies? "He who spared not His own Son but delivered Him over for us all, how shall He not with Him freely give us all things?" Do you hear what Paul is saying? He's saying that God the Father delivered Jesus over into the hands of His enemies for us that we might be saved! And isn't that exactly what Peter preaches on the Day of Pentecost?

Turn in your Bibles to Acts chapter 2 and look at what Peter preaches before the assembled multitudes in Jerusalem. Acts 2:22:

Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves know — this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.

Now wait a second. What did Peter just say? “He was delivered over into the hands of His enemies by the predetermined and fore-appointed plan of God and you nailed Him to the cross by the hands of wicked men.” So who was it? Who was at work there? Was it the wicked men or was it God? The answer is, “Yes.” What’s happening in Samuel and what’s happening in Chronicles is a profound theme that runs throughout the Scriptures that God will even use the stratagems of Satan to glorify Himself and to do everlasting good to His people. It’s not a factual contradiction.

You know, I was reflecting on this. If you only had the end verses of the gospel of Luke that we just spent three years studying. If you only had the last verses of the gospel of Luke and the way they describe the ascension and you didn’t know that Luke also wrote the verses after Acts 1:6 and following that describe the ascension, you would come up with a theory that two different writers wrote that account of the ascension because Luke draws his attention to different facts. And that’s exactly how scholars do. They assume that the Bible was written by many disparate voices that contradict and differ from one another, but if you assume that you will read into the Bible contradictions that do not exist there. And this is just one example of a contradiction that may look like a contradiction on the surface but actually conveys with it a profound theological point that is made from Genesis to Revelation.

I mean after all, the book of Job speaks to this, doesn’t it? Who tempted Job? Well, Job 1 and 2 says it was Satan. Who brought Job to Satan’s attention? God! So who was at work in the temptation of Job, Satan or God? The answer, “Yes!” Over and over the Bible emphasizes God is sovereign over all but we make real choices that really matter and humans sin and God is still active and sovereign. And so a passage that looks like a contradiction evaporates as a contradiction when you understand the themes and the theology of the Word. But if you assume that this Book is made up of a collection of contradictions you’ll find contradictions everywhere. Interestingly, that kind of thinking leads you in a trap that you can’t get out of because if you can relativize what the Bible claims you can relativize anything, including your own speech.

There’s a famous story of Don Carson, a professor of New Testament who was lecturing on the apostle Paul and a liberal scholar was challenging him on his interpretation of Paul. And that liberal scholar held the view that it is not the text that determines its meaning; we determine what the text means. And she challenged him with a question. And he repeated her question back to her exactly as she had spoken it except in the negative. And she said, “No, you didn’t

understand me. Let me ask my question again.” And she asked her question again and he repeated it back to her exactly as she had said it except in the negative. And with great frustration, she said, “No, that is not what I am asking!” And he said, “Ma’am, you seem to be very concerned that I take your words like you are saying them. All I’m asking is that we do the same for the apostle Paul because we don’t get to change his meaning because we don’t like it or because we think we can make it up as we go along. We need to listen to what he is saying and then reckon with that.” And if you don’t recognize the authority of God’s Word and what it says about itself you are left in that kind of relativism. You just make it up as you go along. But what you ought to do is be honest and say, “I’m not a Christian.” See, you can say the gospels are not true and people will listen to you but when you say, “The gospels are not true but I believe them,” people go, “What’s up with that? That’s crazy! Why would you say, ‘I’m a Christian but I don’t think the Bible is the Word of God?’”

## **THE SCRIPTURE IS GOD BREATHED**

Now what is the apostle Paul doing? Very quickly, look at 2 Timothy chapter 3 verses 16 and 17. Paul is telling you here what the Bible is, what the Bible is for, and what the Bible does. First of all, look at what Paul says the Bible is. “All Scripture is God breathed.” All Scripture is inspired. Notice what Paul says. All Scripture is inspired; not some Scripture but all Scripture. Secondly, note what is inspired. It’s not just the ideas of Scripture; it’s the words of Scripture. All Scripture, all the writings, all that has been written down in the Word of God is inspired. And notice the word that he uses. It is “God breathed.” Your ESV translation does that beautifully. “All Scripture is breathed out by God.” Paul is telling you this is what the Bible is. He’s articulating for you in just a few words the doctrine of plenary verbal inspiration, that all the words of Scripture are inspired. They’re God’s words.

## **THE SCRIPTURE IS PROFITABLE**

Now what does he say the Bible is for? Well he tells you in the second half of verse 16. It is for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, and notice what he says: “It’s profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness.” In other words, Paul is saying that the Bible is useful. It’s beneficial; it’s practical; it’s profitable. Profitable for what? For discipleship! For being taught, for being corrected, for being steered in the right direction, for being trained in righteousness. It’s profitable for godliness. So what is the Bible? It’s the inspired Word of God. What is it for? It’s profitable for discipleship. What does it do? It equips us, Paul says, look at verse 17, it equips us to live the Christian life, “that the man of God may be competent, equipped for very good work.” What has happened as people have lost confidence in the authority of the Bible is they have lost confidence in the Bible to equip them for



life.

## THE SCRIPTURE EQUIPS US

You know I think evangelicals, by and large, have done a pretty good job of defending the authority of Scripture over the last hundred or so years. But what we've had a harder time is making sure that the church lives like we accept the authority of the Word over the authority of the world in our lives. There's a lot of world in the church. There's a lot of the world in our thinking and in our living. And the apostle Paul says the reason God gives us His inspired Word is so that we would be disciplined and equipped for godliness. So embracing the authority of the Word of God is vital for discipleship. Why? Well, one reason because he tells you in the previous verses. Look at 2 Timothy 3 verses 14 and 15. He tells you the Word of God is where you find out the way of salvation. You see what he says there? That we learn from the sacred writings the way of salvation which is by faith in Jesus Christ. So if you don't accept the authority of the Word you don't know the way of salvation. Furthermore, the Word of God is how you know how to live the Christian life. The Word is given to us for all things necessary in faith and life and if you've lost confidence in the Word you won't know how to live.

And of course that's where the rubber meets the road with our witness to the world. Do we look different from the world or do we look just like them in the way we live? So understanding the authority of the Word of God is not some academic issue for ivory tower theologians to haggle about. It's something that is very important for us as Christians. That's why we need to understand, despite all the claims and critiques and contradictions to the contrary, that Scripture is the Word of God. It is God's Word breathed out and it's the authority for our discipleship, for our living of the Christian life.

Let's pray.

*Heavenly Father, thank You for Your Word. Thank You for the privilege of studying it together.*

*Grant that we would believe it. Bless us as we worship You by it, in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Now let's sing about the Word using number 144, "Father of Mercies, in Your Word."

Receive God's blessing. Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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