



THUS SAITH THE LORD

A STUDY OF GOD'S WORD



Inspiration – How did God preserve what He told people?

Can a man marry a man? Is it ever okay for a couple to move in together before getting married, just to make sure things are going to work out first? Does a wife need to submit to her husband? The culture has very strong opinions on these questions, opinions which directly contradict the Bible. But do we have to take every part of the Bible seriously? Maybe we can take the parts that resonate with us – like God being love or the importance of being kind – and skip over those parts we have a hard time defending to our neighbors – like hell, or a man being swallowed by a fish, or lust being adultery of the heart. The answer to those questions depends on how we answer another question: did God Himself write the Bible? Or is it a record of people with great spiritual insight wrestling to understand God, learning a lot along the way, but getting some of the details wrong? The difference between those two options might seem small, but the answer we give will result in two very different ways of looking at life.

If we argue that the authors of Scripture might have gotten some things wrong, how do we decide which parts are right and which are wrong?

This brings us to the issue of inspiration: what does it mean that God's Word is inspired? There is much confusion on what exactly is meant by inspiration, but a careful study of Scripture shows us that inspiration is a doctrine clearly taught and defined in God's Word. This lesson is important because what one believes about inspiration will either allow us to blend in with an ever-shifting culture or will require us to stand out as counter-cultural oddballs who let a 2,000+ year old book dictate our lives.

Can you think of some passages that teach that God is the one who is ultimately responsible for the Bible?

Views on Inspiration

It used to be that Christians simply said that they believed the Bible was inspired, and that was enough. Over time, however, the definition of "inspiration" was hijacked and the word came to mean different things to different people. We will begin this lesson by going over different views of what people mean by inspiration.

Natural Inspiration

This view states that the Bible is inspired, but just like any other great work of history. Some people will read the works of famous Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle and argue that their writings are inspired. When we use the word inspiration like this, we mean that something was produced which we find to be exceptional. Such a view does not think that the Bible is worthless, after all Plato and Aristotle and Shakespeare are not worthless. However, it fails to see the Bible as ultimately authoritative. I'm not going to believe or think something *just* because Plato or Aristotle or Shakespeare or Paul or Moses said it. I have much to learn from them, but I reserve the right to disagree.

Why would someone want to use the word "inspiration" in this way if they mean nothing more than "insightful?"

Partial Inspiration

There are several different variations of this view. Some think that God gave certain people more insight than a typical Christian, but not necessarily a different type of insight. Therefore, Scripture is the result of very perceptive and even God assisted thinkers. Others think that certain parts of the Bible relating to faith and living before God are inspired, but stuff about history, science, and similar material isn't necessarily inspired. Still others think that God gave the concepts themselves, but the actual words were chosen by the biblical author. All these views seek to strike a balance between natural inspiration and a full view of inspiration. They argue that God helps in some ways but the final product isn't fully God's Word.

What is the practical difference between partial inspiration and natural inspiration? How differently would someone approach Scripture who believes in natural inspiration versus partial inspiration?

Dictation Theory¹

On the opposite end of the spectrum are those who understand inspiration to mean that God directly dictated each word to the biblical writers. Paul is hunched over his scroll and God says, "I Paul, an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ" and Paul begins scribbling furiously: "I Paul, an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ..." Now, some portions of the Bible do claim to be word for word from God, but is this the way all Scripture was written, including passages that sound like John or Jeremiah is the one speaking? While this view does teach that the Bible is God's Word, there are several problems with it.

- **The biblical writers did careful research.**

Luke begins his gospel by telling Theophilus what he was sharing was the result of carefully following the events of early Christianity (Luke 1:1-4). Sometimes Old Testament history writers give us the source for their stories (2 Kings 15:6, 11, 15, 21, 26, 31). Proverbs was a collection that was edited at

¹ Dictation theory would also use the words "verbal" and "plenary" as this lesson does below, but they would go further and argue that inspiration must also mean that God gave every word to the biblical writers.

several different points (Proverbs 25:1). This all strongly suggests there was no magic moment when one person sat down and had God dictate an entire book to them.

- **The biblical writers often wrote in the first person.**

It's hard to imagine God telling Paul to write, "For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming? For ye are our glory and joy" (1 Thessalonians 2:19) or telling John to write, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth" (3 John 4). It also would be strange for God to dictate that Paul say "I thank God that I baptized none of you, but Crispus and Gaius; Lest any should say that I had baptized in mine own name. And I baptized also the household of Stephanas: besides, I know not whether I baptized any other" (1 Corinthians 1:14-16). These statements assume that the author is really writing down their own thoughts, reflections, and emotions.

- **The biblical writers used different styles of writing.**

Paul sounds like Paul, John sounds like John, and Luke sounds like Luke. Different authors have different ways of writing, and God did not overpower the personalities of the different authors so that they all sound the same. John uses simple vocabulary but likes to repeat themes like love, truth, life, and light. Paul thinks in very tightly structured arguments. All these authors agreed, yet they all wrote from their own distinctive perspective.

What would be the problems of holding to a divine dictation view of Scripture?

Verbal, Plenary Inspiration

The words that careful students of the Bible have chosen to describe their view of inspiration are the words "verbal" and "plenary." **Verbal** inspiration means that when Moses, Paul, John, or other authors of Scripture were writing, God inspired the very words that they put down, not merely the ideas.

Why would it matter that the words themselves were inspired rather than just the ideas or concepts?

What would be the result of believing that God gave important concepts but not necessarily the words themselves used to teach those concepts?

The second word that is used to describe inspiration is **plenary**. Merriam-Webster defines plenary as "complete in every aspect: ABSOLUTE, UNQUALIFIED."² This simply means that every part of God's Word is inspired. Romans 8 is inspired, but so is Leviticus and Numbers. We don't have certain parts that are more inspired or less inspired, every part is inspired.

What are some portions of Scripture that some might view as "less inspired" or "less important"?

What about portions of the Old Testament that no longer apply, like food laws or warnings to dead kings?³

² <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/plenary> Accessed February 18, 2022.

³ This question shades over into interpretation, a topic we will be covering later.

The Scriptural Case for Inspiration

We have argued that verbal, plenary inspiration is the best way to describe what is going on when the Bible was written. So where does Scripture teach this? Several important passages teach us this doctrine.

Jesus: David Spoke by the Holy Spirit (Mark 12:35-37)

Jesus' statement in Mark 12 (and the parallel in Matthew 22:41-45) gives a quick but important statement that shows us how Jesus understood Scripture. Jesus says that when David wrote a Psalm he was speaking "in the Spirit." Jesus goes on to ask how it could be that David would call the future Messiah "Lord" if the Messiah was his descendant. The obvious conclusion is that the Messiah must in some way go beyond mere humanity (while not necessarily being less human). The important thing to note here, however, is how easily Jesus makes a reference to David speaking through the Spirit. There is nothing unusual about this Psalm, it appears that Jesus assumed all of Scripture was given through the Spirit and therefore this Psalm was given by the Spirit as well.

What else did Jesus teach concerning the Old Testament (i.e. the Scripture of His day) that relates to inspiration?

Paul: Scripture Is God-Breathed (2 Timothy 3:16)

One of the most famous passages dealing with inspiration, in fact the passage from which we get the word "inspiration," is found in 2 Timothy. Paul has been emphasizing the importance of God's Word in responding to false teachers, knowing that things are going to get bad for Timothy and those coming after him (2 Timothy 3:1-13). He then emphasizes the importance of knowing Scripture (2 Timothy 3:14-15) because of its great importance (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

What Scripture does Paul have in mind when he says this? What was the "Bible" that Timothy had known from a child (cf 2 Timothy 3:15)?

Would these statements also apply to the NT then? Why or why not?

Paul uses an interesting word for "inspiration" in this passage. The Greek word is *theopneustos*. It's a compound word consisting of two parts. *Theos* is the Greek word for God, and *pneuma* is the Greek word for spirit, wind, or breath. The idea is not that God breathed *into* Scripture, but rather that Scripture is breathed *out* by God. When you talk, you must breathe out.⁴ Scripture is the speech of God, it is that which He breathed out.

Why do you think there is so much diversity in Scripture if the same God breathed all of it out?

⁴ For a fun experiment, put your hand in front of your mouth and start talking. You will feel breath on your hand as you do so, because in order to talk you have to breathe out.

Peter: Scriptural Writers Were Spirit-Carried (2 Peter 1:20-21)

So how can it be true both that God breathed out Scripture and that He didn't speak from heaven and give the biblical authors what they were supposed to say? Peter helps us understand a little better how that worked. In his second letter, Peter is emphasizing the importance of God's Word over any experience, even the experience of hearing directly from God Himself on the Mount of Transfiguration (2 Peter 1:16-19a).

Which would you think would be more confirming, hearing God's voice directly or having Scripture?

Why do you think Peter said Scripture was "more sure [i.e. certain]"?

Like Paul, Peter points to the origin of Scripture as the reason for such confidence. Scripture did not come by the will of man, but instead came as the Holy Spirit "moved" holy men of God. The same word for "moved" in the Greek is also used in Acts 27:15 and 17 to describe a ship being "driven" or "borne along" by the wind. In a similar way, God guided and directed the thoughts, experiences, and writing of those who recorded Scripture so that what they wrote came from their own mind and heart, but it was also word for word what God had intended them to write. Scripture is both a divine and a human book. It is human in that it comes from humans experiencing human emotions and situations and addressing them as humans. But it is also divine, perfectly revealing to us what God thinks and what He wanted to say in those situations, and through those situations to the rest of His people throughout time.

How should the fact that Scripture is a divine and human book affect the way we study it?

When Scripture speaks, God speaks. This simple statement makes a powerful claim that will make all the difference in your life. If Scripture is truly and fully God's Word, then it must be studied, obeyed, and wholly followed. If it is anything less, it should be studied, evaluated, and partially followed. The claim of Jesus, Paul, Peter is that Scripture comes to us from God as a divine document by which we ought to live our lives. God's Word is inspired, and that inspiration gives it ultimate authority over God's children.

Definition: Inspiration is the belief that what the authors of Scripture wrote was and is the very words of God.

But how can we know for sure *which* books are inspired? We have a list of 66, but where did that list come from, and what if we have the wrong list? This question leads to the subject of canonization, a topic we will study next week.