



THUS SAITH THE LORD

A STUDY OF GOD'S WORD



Inerrancy – Can We Trust What God Wrote?

Ever realized halfway through an argument that you are, in fact, the one who is wrong? Ever been embarrassed to find that you posted something online and later discovered what you posted was not true? We all make mistakes and we all get things wrong; it's simply part of being human. No matter how hard we try, no matter how much work we put in to learning something or knowing about an issue, we will at some point (likely many points) be wrong. Being wrong seems to be an inescapable consequence of being limited, finite beings in fallen world and with fallen minds.

So when we come to a book written by over thirty different men, it's hard to swallow that in the 1,189 chapters of the Bible not one error crept in. Living in the age of information, it's not hard to get online and find long lists of supposed "errors" in the Bible. Some trumpet these as definitive proof that the Bible is a fraud and not worth paying attention to. Others claim we can still cherish the Bible as a powerful religious document while forgiving some of its mess-ups. This lesson will argue that God's Word is inerrant, and that believing so is important to our faith.

Why Inerrancy Matters

Does it even matter? Can't we just say the Bible is an incredible book, the best book that's ever been written, and we have far more to learn from this book than any other? So what if Luke missed a few things as he wrote the beginning of the church, so long as it's generally right? Does it matter if the Old Testament fudged a few historical details or

Why do you think the doctrine of inerrancy is important? What would be the harm in allowing for a few minor errors?

Inerrancy means we can trust God (Genesis 3:1-2)

As we mentioned in our previous lesson, Satan loves to sow doubt. He began his temptation of Eve by asking "Did God really say?" and he's continued asking that question ever since. Satan wants Christians to question how trustworthy God's Word is. He also would love nothing more than to leave a small opening for doubt that can begin to grow and spread.

What could happen if a believer accepted that there were mistakes in the Bible? How could this be used to sow doubt?

Inerrancy means we must obey God

How would accepting that there are errors in the Bible allow us to avoid obeying God?

If some of the Bible is wrong, that leaves the door open just a crack for us to decide where Scripture is wrong and where it isn't. Once we admit historical or scientific errors, it's just a small step to say that some of the things that Scripture taught were culturally conditioned and no longer apply. Once we are no longer bound to take God's Word as God's Word, we become free to twist things a little bit here and there.

This is not merely a hypothetical issue. Two authors, Jack Rogers and Donald McKim, coauthored a book in 1979 entitled *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach*. They argued that "inerrancy" was a new doctrine and that most church leaders and thinkers throughout history of the church recognized some mistakes in the Bible but weren't bothered by them.¹ One of the authors, Jack Rogers, later went on to write a book entitled *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church*, arguing for the full inclusion of homosexuals in the church and in church leadership. Once inerrancy is gone, other uncomfortable parts of the Bible can begin to slide away too.

The Case for Inerrancy

So where did the idea of inerrancy come from? Opponents sometimes try to argue that the teaching of inerrancy is simply a human doctrine that is imposed on the Bible. They argue that inerrancy is a recent development, the result of our overly detailed information age going too far. So does the Bible argue for inerrancy?

If someone asked you why the Bible is without error, what would you tell them?

Inspiration teaches that God wrote the Bible.

Inerrancy builds on the doctrine of inspiration. In a previous lesson we looked carefully at the doctrine of inspiration and saw that God inspired all of Scripture verbally (the very words themselves) and plenary (all parts equally). Scripture is breathed out by God (2 Timothy 3:16) and is the result of men being brought along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21) so that what they wrote is exactly what God wanted them to write. This means that when we pick up a Bible, we are picking up God's communication to man, and that is crucial for a proper understanding of inerrancy.

How would a different view of inspiration change one's view on inerrancy?

¹ For an excellent rebuttal to Rogers and McKim's book see John Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: Infallibility and Inerrancy in the Christian Tradition*.

God does not lie or get things wrong.

The Bible teaches that God is all-knowing (Isaiah 40:28) and that He never lies (Hebrews 6:18). If both of these statements are true, and if God wrote the Bible, then we can have confidence that when God speaks He will speak truth. Some will argue that inerrancy should be limited to areas of life and practice, because the Bible didn't set out to be a history textbook or a science textbook.

Is it true that the Bible is not a science textbook or history textbook? What does this mean for inerrancy?

Jesus taught inerrancy.

Finally, the teaching of Jesus and the apostles assumes that the Old Testament was unbreakable and without error. Jesus said that not a single letter would pass from the law until everything written there had been fulfilled (Matthew 5:18). On another occasion, Jesus quotes from the Old Testament and casually throws in that God's Word cannot be broken (John 10:35). These comments show the high regard that Christ had for the Old Testament and shows us the regard we ought to have for both the Old and the New Testament.

Clarifying Inerrancy

One of the reasons some struggle with the teaching inerrancy is that they have misunderstanding what inerrancy includes and what it doesn't include. God's Word is without error, but we need to be clear what we mean by that.

Inerrancy allows for normal language.

Can you think of any examples where we use technically "inaccurate" language that no one finds "wrong"?

Ever been upset at someone for asking "Did you see the sunrise?" After all, it could be argued that the sun doesn't rise! That's just an illusion created by the rotation of the earth! Right, but sunrise is a common idiom that describes our perspective, so it's not wrong to talk about a sunrise. It's just normal language. Similarly, if someone asked what time it was, and I said "9:30" when really it was 9:32, no one would accuse me of being deceitful or wrong; I was using an approximation.

When Jesus says that the mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds (Mark 4:31), He wasn't making an absolute botanical claim. He was talking to farmers and was discussing the seeds that they were familiar with. They got his point and would have been confused if He told them that the smallest seed was Jewel Orchid, a plant they had never seen. When the molten sea is described in 2 Chronicles 4:2 as having a diameter of 10 cubits and a circumference of 30 cubits, the biblical writers aren't redefining Pi, they are giving an approximation.²

² Interestingly, the width of the molten sea is described as a handbreadth (2 Chronicles 4:5). If the measurement of the diameter was from the inside to the inside and the measurement of the circumference was around the exterior of the bowl, then adding in a handbreadth on each side to the diameter gets very close to Pi.

The Bible can also use metaphors.

What are some metaphors used in Scripture?

The Bible calls God a rock (Psalm 42:9), but none of the Scriptural authors thought of God as literally being a rock. David said he flooded his bed with tears (Psalm 6:6), but no one thinks his bed was floating in his bedroom. The Bible uses lots of figures of speech, metaphors, hyperbole, and all the other things we normally use in our speech without being dishonest. Sometimes there is debate about whether something is literal or figurative, especially regarding prophecy, but when God's Word is understood properly there are no mistakes in it.

Inerrancy Allows for Right Reports of Wrong Information

At the end of 1 Samuel we read that Saul died by falling on his sword. In 2 Samuel 1 we read about a man from Saul's camp who comes to David and takes credit for Saul's death. Is this a contradiction? Only if Scripture claimed the man who came to David was telling the truth, which it doesn't. In fact, given that the author has just explained how Saul actually died, it's clear that he wants us to see this man as thinking that he's bringing good news to David and will receive David's blessing for killing Saul at last (he was disappointed to say the least).

Inerrancy applies to the perspective of the author of the biblical book, it does not apply to everything that every character says, even the good characters. The Old Testament in particular likes to set up examples and leave it to us to evaluate the characters speech and actions. Just because someone says it doesn't mean the Bible is claiming it.

Why do you think the biblical writers, especially in the Old Testament, leave us to evaluate things on our own rather than telling us what to think?

Inerrancy allows for different perspectives.

When studying the gospels, as well as Kings and Chronicles, we often find parallels that don't match up exactly. This can be concerning for some, but the question that must be asked is not "Are the accounts different?" Rather, we should be asking, "Do the accounts disagree?"

What is the difference between those two questions?

People can remember different details of the same event, or talk about the same event from different perspectives, and still be both sharing accurate statements about what happened. Chronicles may include details Kings leaves out. Mark may not have all the details that Matthew does for a certain miracle or saying of Jesus. Almost no two accounts are exactly the same, which is good because if they were exactly the same there would be no reason for having two of them!

Inerrancy must ultimately be accepted by faith.

In the end, inerrancy must ultimately be accepted by faith, rather than by our ability to figure out everything that looks like an error.

What do you think of the above statement? If we find errors in God's Word, should we doubt inerrancy?

The problem with waiting until we have solved all the supposed errors before believing inerrancy is that we must wait until we 1) perfectly understand everything the Bible is saying and 2) know everything there is to know about history, science, geology, and everything else in the world. So long as there is the chance we are wrong or are misunderstanding Scripture, there is a chance that we might mistakenly accuse Scripture of having an "error."

For years the Bible was mocked mercilessly for suggesting that there was once a major civilization called, "the Hittites." No records had been discovered of this supposed civilization, and this ghost of a civilization was used to discredit the history of the Old Testament. Then in the nineteenth century we started discovering treaties that were signed by some country called "Hatti." Eventually we realized that there had indeed been a Hittite civilization, and it had been huge and very important.

We are limited creatures dealing with a book that has been written in different cultures, in different languages, over a period of 1,500 years. To think we won't ever be confused is pretty arrogant. Instead, we start from a place of faith, looking at the problem as on our end, rather than with Scripture. Augustine faced the same problem we do in the fourth and fifth centuries: what if I think I found a mistake? At one point he discussed with a friend his response to coming across something in Scripture that looked wrong:

I have learned to yield this respect and honour only to the canonical books of Scripture: of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error. And if in these writings I am perplexed by anything which appears to me opposed to truth, I do not hesitate to suppose that either the [manuscript] is faulty, or the translator has not caught the meaning of what was said, or I myself have failed to understand it.³

How would you help a believer who was really struggling with whether or not God's Word contained any errors in it?

Definition: The belief that God's Word is completely true and therefore without error.

³ *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, volume 1, page 350.