

I WISH THE PREACHER WOULD TALK ABOUT? *Can I Trust the Bible?*

Philippians 3:14-4:5

August 16, 2026

I was not quite four years old in the summer of 1986 when our parents called my older sister and me into their room one late summer afternoon. I do not remember any of the specific words they said to us that day, but I do remember knowing that this was a serious kind of conversation. Their tone suggested importance. When they had gathered us, they handed each of us a Bible. The inscription in mine reads simply: *Presented to Chris Henry by Mommy and Daddy, July 1986.*

At nearly four years old, I could read almost none of the words in this book, but this Bible has vivid pictures. I especially loved the ones of Samson's great strength and Jesus walking on the stormy seas. Now as you might imagine, over the years since, I have been given many other Bibles, but forty years later this one still stays close to me. It reminds me that these words were written on my heart long before my brain knew how to spell them.

Just a moment ago we did the same thing here. We baptized Beau, who turned one on Friday, and the children of this church put a Bible into his parents' hands. Beau cannot read the words, but we pray, we trust, that they will get down into his heart long before his head will make sense of them.

When contemplating topics for our August sermon series, *I Wish the Preacher Would Talk About*, a constellation of questions emerged about this book. Can I trust the Bible? Can I trust a book this old, this strange, this conflicted? A text that argues with itself, that has been used for centuries to exclude or condemn?

And deeper than that, questions we ask when the doors are closed. Can I trust this book when I am losing hope? When the doctor gives the report? When I am so angry I cannot see straight? Can I trust this book when everything else is falling apart?

The moment we're living in makes these questions even more potent. We have spent decades pulling down institutions that once held us up. Now, some of it

needed pulling down, but we are now standing in the rubble of the wreckage. We are lonely and suspicious, and we have started to doubt that anyone, or anything, can be trusted. Truly trusted. Can I trust the Bible?

Settle in. I've got some things to say.

Tradition tells us that Paul is writing this letter from a prison cell, crafting words for Timothy, whom he calls *my beloved child in the faith*. Paul knows as he writes this letter that he will probably never see Tim again, so he chooses his words very carefully. In my children's Bible, the letter is titled *Paul Encourages Timothy*. And so he does. My translation reads, "But you should continue following the teachings that you learned. You know that these teachings are true. And you know that you can trust the ones who taught you."

Timothy was given a book like this when he was a child. His grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice, whom Paul names in the letter, raised him inside the stories of scripture. That is how it has always worked. Nobody comes to this book alone. Somebody handed a Bible to you. Somebody opened the Bible with you. Someone told you these stories until this story became your story. Today would be a good day to thank that person. It is why we baptize babies. It is why we put a Bible in the hands of kids who cannot read the words. We are not distributing information. We are telling a story to which we belong, one that can be trusted.

Paul writes that all scripture is inspired by God. The word is actually even more interesting than that. The word is *God-breathed*. Scripture is *God-breathed*. Notice that Paul does not tell Timothy that the words of scripture fell out of the sky from heaven. Paul knows, as we know, that these words came through people, written and collected and told in communities for centuries, by particular voices in particular times, with all the limitations of history and culture that also confront us. God took ordinary, fragile human speech and breathed into it. Breathed through it. To hold these convictions together—that these are human words inspired by a divine breath—is not a compromise or

a diminishment of scripture. In fact, it describes how God works in the Bible itself. God has always worked through people. Through human hands inspired by a divine calling.

Paul also does not promise that Timothy will find every answer to every question in his life in these words. Paul does not promise certainty or freedom from struggle and doubt. He promises that these words are useful. That they will equip him for every good work.

I grew up hearing my father tell the old stories of scripture, woven into the story of my life. In the gentle voice of his weekly preaching, I learned about a God of love. I learned about Jesus who welcomed children and fed hungry crowds and called disciples. When I was in college I learned to approach the Bible as a scholar, to study the Word and the world surrounding the words, to get a sense of their revolutionary message in their original context, how strange and different the words of scripture were in the time they were written. Then seminary, where I learned to read the Bible with mind and heart, where I read scripture in community across difference and in light of the Word become flesh. In my years as a pastor I have watched this God-breathed book shape lives of meaning. I've witness the words of scripture rebuild broken relationships and call people to a whole new way of living.

I have seen these words come to life. I have stood at a graveside reading Paul's promise that nothing in all of creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. And when I looked up from the text, my eyes met the eyes of a widow who had just buried her husband, and I knew in my heart the words I had spoken were true. God permits nothing to separate us from God's own love.

I have prayed with a man in memory care who had lost all language. When I began the words of the Lord's Prayer, his mouth started to move. He whispered the prayer with me, all the way to the end. The words were gone, but the heart remembers.

So, I trust this book. I trust this book because it has held me, and I have watched it hold you. I trust this book because the people who gave it to me lived it. They were trustworthy. Paul says, "Listen to the word because those who gave you the word loved you. They lived the scriptures they taught." I trust this book because I trust the God I meet in its pages.

Perhaps you have heard that there are powerful voices who want to turn this book into a warrant for hatred.

They read scripture and come away convinced God shares their contempt, that God despises all the people they despise. Or, they demand that texts be posted on walls and etched in monuments. But listen to this. The test of scripture is not whether we plaster its words in prominent places. It is whether anyone can see those words in us. You can quote chapter and verse and parade your piety without ever letting these words shape your heart.

For those of us who grieve the misuse of scripture to demonize difference or bless violence or claim superiority or defend hatred, the faithful response must not be to abandon scripture, to hand it over as a surrender, to retreat into secularism or rudderless spirituality. The answer is to read the Bible. Together. I firmly believe the alternative to a weaponized faith is not disconnection but deeper understanding.

You might say that Paul knew this day would come. He wrote to Timothy from his prison cell that a time was coming when people would twist and torment these words. When they would gather teachers to tell them only what they wanted to hear. His answer was not a better argument, but a deeper calling. Proclaim the message, he wrote. Be persistent. Whether the time is favorable or unfavorable, cling to this word.

So, as one called to preach the Gospel, I will not stand by while our book is turned into a weapon. It was placed in my hands as a child. I took a vow in ordination. And every one of us has been handed these words, and with them, a deep call. What we were called to preach is not what they are preaching.

Yes, Jesus warned of false prophets in sheep's clothing who, underneath, are ravenous wolves. The costume may be holy, but the appetite is vile. Then, in that same passage, Jesus gave us a simple test, a test so simple you could almost miss how radical it is. The test is this. *You will know them by their fruits.* That test does not exempt any of us. Scripture simply will not allow us to hate one for whom Christ gave his life in love.

When what grows out of your reading is fear, or contempt, or cruelty, or a sermon that teaches a congregation to despise its neighbor, I do not care how much scripture you can recite. Your fruit is rotten.

And so I want you to see what else grew this week. The waters rose across our state, and while some voices were using holy words to condemn, the people of God did something entirely different. Yesterday, a member of our staff asked me if he could take a day off this week,

not to rest, but to drive to Connersville and help his neighbors haul ruined furniture out of flooded homes. Across this state, people of faith did not retreat or write a treatise. We grabbed a shovel and launched boats and turned fellowship halls into shelters. And no one standing in knee-deep water asked what anyone in need believed. The Word compels a response. Good fruit. Paul says the Word of scripture equips us for every good work. The Word made flesh.

A word to the young people hearing my voice, and everyone who loves one. Some of you have drifted away, and too often we have responded by wondering what is wrong with you. So we've judged the culture or tried to imitate it. Both have been mistakes.

Many of you are suspicious because what you were taught and told was Christian faith was merely moralistic condemnation or political tribalism. If you heard this preached as gospel, you were right to walk away. But too many of you walked alone. In a time of isolation, you need Lois and Eunice and a church. You need people to tell you the stories of a God who hears groaning under the weight of suffering and comes down to rescue. You need to hear the story of a young woman who sang the powerful down from their thrones. You need to hear the story of the Son of God eating with all the wrong people, forgiving from a cross, rising on the third day and sending disciples out.

Yes, I am dismayed by the abuse of scripture that surrounds us. But I am not afraid. As Paul instructs the Church, do not lose heart. Why? You read the Bible. You know that these sacred stories have a way of resisting anyone who tries to take them captive. You can bend this book to your will for a while. But you cannot keep it caged. It always gets loose.

The Word of God is not ours to control. The purpose of these ancient texts is not to be of use to us, but to make us useful to God.

So can you trust this book? Yes. Absolutely. But be careful what it is you are trusting. It will not let you keep distant from suffering. It will not settle every argument or answer every doubt. And it will never, never hand you a weapon to use against your neighbor. This book will not yield to our politics or our prejudice or our ego. It asks us to yield to God.

Give it your attention and it will meet you where you are. Give it your life and it will never let you go. Friends at Second, do not let loud voices steal this story from you. Do not hand over a God of love to people who preach

hatred. And whatever you do, do not walk away. Open the book. Open your heart. Let it lead you out these doors, not alone, and unafraid. Amen.