

JOHN
PIPER

How the Christian Scriptures

Reveal Their Complete Truthfulness

A
PECULIAR
GLORY

“*A Peculiar Glory* is not just another book defending the reliability of the Scriptures, although it does do that. It is a reminder that without the internal witness of the Spirit, no amount of evidences will ever lead to faith. And that witness works most directly as we read and understand Scripture itself—as it attests itself to us—particularly as we focus on Jesus and the gospel message. Part apologetics, part church history, part almost lyrical poetry, Piper’s book should inspire every reader back to the Bible, to its core and to the Jesus whom it reveals, who loves us beyond measure despite all that we are and do—more than enough reason for being his disciples.”

Craig L. Blomberg, Distinguished Professor of New Testament,
Denver Seminary

“Never has the church been in greater need of recognizing that Scripture is self-attesting. In this important and timely book, Piper shows what it means not only to conform our thinking but also to submit our worship and our lives as a whole to the self-establishing, self-validating truth and authority of the Bible and, in doing that, to the Christ of the Bible.”

Richard B. Gaffin Jr., Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology
Emeritus, Westminster Theological Seminary

“*A Peculiar Glory* is a solid theological and exegetical treatment of biblical authority, but much more. Besides the standard arguments, Piper has developed (with the help of Jonathan Edwards) a profoundly original yet biblical approach to the question. It raises the traditional arguments to an exponential level of cogency. Piper says that our most definitive persuasion comes from actually seeing the *glory* of God in his Word. Theologians have traditionally called this the ‘internal testimony of the Holy Spirit,’ but that theological label does little justice to the experience, the awareness of the glory of God as we meet Jesus in Scripture. That really happens. It is astonishing and powerful. And it explains the difference between an observer’s merely theoretical faith and a true disciple’s delighted embrace of Christ. This doctrine of Scripture is worthy of the overall emphasis of Piper’s writings, the ‘desire’ for God, ‘Christian hedonism,’ and the ‘dangerous duty of delight.’ Perhaps only Piper could have written this book, and I’m delighted that he has done so.”

John Frame, J. D. Trimble Chair of Systematic Theology and Philosophy,
Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

“Piper points us to Scripture—its authority, its historical accuracy, its total truthfulness, and especially its beauty and power. The Scriptures are beautiful and powerful because they disclose to us, as the Spirit opens our hearts, the loveliness and glory of Jesus Christ. Here we find compelling arguments for the truthfulness of the Scriptures and profound meditations on the stunning glory of God. The book captures and expresses the truth of Peter’s words in John 6:68, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.’”

Thomas R. Schreiner, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“The classic doctrine of Scripture’s self-attestation suffers when it is used as a short-cut method of scoring evidential points or winning an argument without doing any work. But it unfolds its wings and soars to the heavens when handled by somebody who shows that when we read the Bible, we are dealing with God himself in his own holy words. In this book, John Piper throws everything he’s got at the message of how God illuminates the mind and gives firm conviction to the heart through the Bible.”

Fred Sanders, Professor of Theology, Torrey Honors Institute,
Biola University

“It’s easy to take the Bible for granted. We know that it’s the Word of God, but do we really? We know which books belong to it and what distinguishes these texts from ordinary religious literature, right? Of course, we know why we trust Scripture and how to communicate that confidence to others, or do we? Rather than take for granted a high view of Scripture, *A Peculiar Glory* exposes another generation to the source, authority, reliability, and truthfulness of God’s written word. Dr. Piper has written another important, accessible, and wise account of the things that matter most.”

Michael Horton, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology
and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California; author, *Calvin on the
Christian Life*

“There are few questions more important than ‘How do I know the Bible is God’s Word?’ And there are few people who could address it as well as John Piper. Drawing from the deep theological well of Jonathan Edwards and with a practical eye for the average believer in the pew, Piper helps us recover the foundational importance of a self-authenticating Bible. This book will revolutionize the way you think about God’s Word.”

Michael J. Kruger, President and Professor of New Testament, Reformed
Theological Seminary, Charlotte; author, *Canon Revisited*

“In this spirited and tightly argued book, pastor-theologian John Piper seeks to ground our confidence in the Bible’s status as the Word of God by directing our attention to the ‘peculiar glory’ that is manifest through its message and across its pages: the glory of the ‘Lion-like majesty’ and the ‘Lamb-like meekness’ that radiates in the face of Jesus Christ. Here is a book on the authority and trustworthiness of Scripture that promises to strengthen our faith in the word of God and to expand our capacity for wonder before the glory of God.”

Scott R. Swain, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology and Academic
Dean, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

“With passion, clarity, a believing respect for Scripture, and a burning desire for God’s glory, John Piper has written a robust defense of the complete trustworthiness of Scripture, with debts to Jonathan Edwards and the Westminster Larger Catechism. The language of the book is simple and accessible, but the ideas are deep and its coverage extensive. Scholarship is worn lightly, and the pastoral concern informing the work is pervasively evident. Whether the reader is educationally sophisticated or unsophisticated, the argument is that the peculiar glory of God is on view for all to see, if God gives the grace to do so. I hope this work finds a wide readership.”

Graham A. Cole, Dean and Vice President of Education and Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“John Piper has written a robust and pastoral defense of an orthodox doctrine of Scripture. Resisting any who would render well-grounded assurance of Scripture’s truthfulness the preserve of experts and academics, his emphasis upon the self-authenticating and life-transforming glory of God they bear is salutary and faith-affirming. We cannot properly regard Scripture without beholding its author. The greatest strength of Piper’s treatment lies precisely in the fact that his account of Scripture is so absorbed in the beauty of the one who inspired it.”

Alastair Roberts, blogger; participant, Mere Fidelity podcast

“*A Peculiar Glory* should be quickly established as a modern classic on the Bible. Clearly and methodically laying out the case for why we can have absolute confidence in the Bible as God’s own word, it gives to faith both muscle and joy. The day John Owen persuaded me that the Christian Scriptures are self-authenticating was a glorious moment of liberation. I hope and expect that John Piper will bring that same liberation to many with this book.”

Michael Reeves, President, Union School of Theology; author, *Delighting in the Trinity*; *The Unquenchable Flame*; and *Rejoicing in Christ*

A Peculiar Glory

*How the Christian Scriptures
Reveal Their Complete Truthfulness*

John Piper

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A Peculiar Glory: How the Christian Scriptures Reveal Their Complete Truthfulness

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To Bethlehem College and Seminary
Sacred Book. Sovereign God. Serious Joy.

In God, whose word I praise,
in the LORD, whose word I praise,
in God I trust; I shall not be afraid.
What can man do to me?

PSALM 56:10-11

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Introduction

Is the Bible true? I am not asking if there is truth in it, say, the way there is truth in *Moby Dick*, or Plato's *Republic*, or *The Lord of the Rings*. Aspects of truth can be found virtually everywhere. What I am asking is this: Is the Bible completely true? All of it. Is it so trustworthy in all that it teaches that it can function as the test of all other claims to truth? This book is about how the Bible gives good grounds for the answer yes. The Bible is completely true.

There is a story behind every book. That is certainly true here. This introduction is not that story; my story comes in chapter 1. But I think it will be helpful to signal immediately why glory figures so largely in this book. My seven decades of experience with the Bible have not been mainly a battle to hold on. They have been a blessing of being held on to, namely, by beauty—that is, by glory.

I have stood in front of this window all these years, not to protect it from being broken, or because the owner of the chalet told me to, but because of the glory of the Alps on the other side. I am a captive of the glory of God revealed in Scripture. There are reasons deeper than my experience for focusing on the glory of God. But I cannot deny what I have seen and the power it has had.

Vastly more important than one man's experience is the reality itself. The glory of God is the ground of faith. It is a solid ground. It is objective, outside ourselves. It is the ground of faith in Christ and in the Christian Scriptures. Faith is not a heroic step through the door of the unknown; it is a humble, happy sight of God's self-authenticating glory. Consider the following biblical examples of how the glory of God becomes the ground of knowledge. The fourth example is the focus of this book.

The Heavens

First, how are all human beings supposed to know that God exists and that he is powerful and beneficent and should be glorified and thanked? David, the king of Israel, answered in Psalm 19, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork” (v. 1).

But there are many people who do not see the glory of God when they look at the heavens. Nevertheless, the apostle Paul says that we should see it and that we are without excuse if we don’t, because

what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him. (Rom. 1:19–21)

God has shown everyone the glory of his power and deity and beneficence. If we do not see God’s glory, we are still responsible to see it, treasure it as glorious, and give God thanks. If we don’t, we are “without excuse.”

The Son

Second, how did Jesus’s first followers know that he was the Messiah, the Son of the living God? One of those followers answered, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

But there were others who looked at Jesus, saw his miracles, and heard his words but did not see divine glory. To such people Jesus said, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me?” (John 14:9). He had shown them enough. They were responsible to see the glory—and to know him.

The Gospel

Third, how are people who hear the good news of the Christian gospel supposed to know that it is from God? The apostle Paul answered: by “seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image

of God,” that is, by seeing “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:4, 6).

But many people hear “the gospel of the glory of Christ” and do not see divine glory. Not seeing the divine glory of Christ in the gospel is blameworthy. It is not an innocent blindness, but a culpable love of darkness. “They are darkened in their understanding . . . due to their hardness of heart” (Eph. 4:18). They are “perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved” (2 Thess. 2:10). The gospel of the glory of Christ is enough. To hear it faithfully and fully presented is to be responsible to see divine glory.

The Scriptures

Fourth, how are we to know that the Christian Scriptures are the word of God? The argument of this book is that the answer to this question is the same as the answer to the three preceding questions. In and through the Scriptures we see the glory of God. What the apostles of Jesus saw face-to-face they impart to us through their words. “That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3).

The glory that they saw in Christ, we can see through their words. The human words of Scripture are seen to be divine the way the human man Jesus was seen to be divine. Not all saw it. But the glory was there. And it is here, in the Scriptures.

Three Sentences behind This Book

This is not a new approach to the question of the truth of Scripture. In fact, one could understand this book as an extended meditation on three sentences.

One of those sentences is from the Westminster Larger Catechism. Question 4 asks, “How doth it appear that the scriptures are the word of God?” One of the answers is: “The scriptures manifest themselves to be the word of God, by . . . *the scope of the whole, which is to give all glory to God.*” This book is an effort to press into that answer as deeply as I can.

A second sentence that gave rise to this book is from Jonathan

Edwards. Edwards cared deeply about the Native Americans of New England in the 1740s. He wrestled with how they could have a well-grounded faith in the truth of Christianity if they were unable to follow complex historical arguments.

Miserable is the condition of the Houssatunnuck Indians and others, who have lately manifested a desire to be instructed in Christianity, if they can come at no evidence of the truth of Christianity, sufficient to induce them to sell all for Christ, in any other way but this [path of historical reasoning].¹

His answer was found in 2 Corinthians 4:4–6, which we cited above. He put it like this:

The mind ascends to the truth of the gospel but by one step, and that is its divine glory. . . . Unless men may come to a reasonable solid persuasion and conviction of the truth of the gospel, by the internal evidences of it, in the way that has been spoken, viz. by a sight of its glory; 'tis impossible that those who are illiterate, and unacquainted with history, should have any thorough and effectual conviction of it at all.²

This book is an effort to apply Edwards's concern and his reasoning to the whole of the Scriptures. Can we say, "The mind ascends to the truth of the [Scriptures] but by one step, and that is its divine glory"?

The third sentence at the root of this book is Paul's word from Romans 4: Abraham "grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised" (Rom. 4:20–21). Trusting God's word glorifies God. Why is that true? It is true because trusting a person calls attention to the person's trustworthiness. But that is true *only* if the trust is warranted. Groundless trust does not honor the person trusted. If you trust me with your money when you don't know me or have any good reason, based on my character, to believe I won't steal it, you are not showing me to be trustworthy; you are showing yourself to be a fool. Only warranted trust glorifies the one trusted.

¹Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, vol. 2, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. John Smith (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957), 304.

²*Ibid.*, 299, 303.

Which means that the task I have set myself in this book is to answer the question: What warrant—what good foundation—in the Christian Scriptures provides a well-grounded trust? What basis of belief in the Scriptures as the word of God will, in fact, honor God?

The Glory of the God Who Speaks

Another way to describe what I am aiming at is to distinguish the argument for our confidence in Scripture from the argument that simply says, “We believe the Scriptures because God says they are his word, and God should be believed.” My problem with this sentence is not that it is false but that it is ambiguous.

There are false prophets who say, “Thus says the Lord.” Yet, “I have not sent them, declares the LORD, but they are prophesying falsely in my name” (Jer. 27:15). What this implies is that when God says, “Thus says the Lord,” we are obliged to believe it not *merely* because that’s what the word says, but because the glory of the speaker and what he says is manifestly divine. My argument is that the glory of God in and through the Scriptures is a real, objective, self-authenticating reality. Christian faith is not a leap in the dark. It is not a guess or a wager. God is not honored if he is chosen by the flip of a coin. A leap into the unknown is no honor to one who has made himself known.

In the End We Know by Sight, Not Inference

The argument of this book is that the final step of certainty concerning the Scriptures is the step of sight, not inference. The pathway that leads to sight may involve much empirical observation, and historical awareness, and rational thought (see chapter 17). But the end we are seeking is not a probable inference from historical reasoning but a full assurance that we have seen the glory of God. Thus, at the end of all human means, the simplest preliterate person and the most educated scholar come to a saving knowledge of the truth of Scripture in the same way: by a sight of its glory.

Liberating and Devastating

Of course, this is both liberating and devastating. It is liberating because it means the sweetness of well-grounded, God-honoring confidence in

Scripture is not reserved for scholars but is available for all who have eyes to see.

And it is devastating because no human being can see this glory without God's help. This is not because we are helpless victims of blindness but because we are lovers of blindness. "This is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil" (John 3:19). We are not chained in a dark cell, longing to see the sunshine of God's glory. We love the cell, because sin and Satan have deceived us into seeing the drawings on the wall as the true glory and the source of greatest pleasure. Our prison cell of darkness is not the bondage of external constraint but of internal preference. We have exchanged the glory of God for images (Rom. 1:23). We love them. That is our blindness.

What must happen is described by the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:6. The God who created light in the beginning must shine into our dark cell to reveal himself. "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." The answer to our darkness is the shining of divine glory into our hearts by means of the light of knowledge—the knowledge mediated by God's inspired Scripture. That is what this book is about.

This does not mean that there is nothing we can do in our quest to see the self-authenticating glory of God in Scripture. Jesus gave the apostle Paul an impossible mission. He sent Paul "to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God" (Acts 26:18). If it is hopeful for the apostle to move toward the blind, then it is hopeful for the blind to move toward the apostle. Blind or seeing, that is what I hope you will do with me in this book.

The Peculiar Glory

Thus the main burden of this book is parts 4 and 5 (chapters 8–17). In part 4, I probe into what really happens in our experience when we see the glory of God in Scripture; and I try to show how this authenticates the Scripture as God's life-giving, infallible word. In part 5, I argue that the way the Scriptures convince us is by the revelation of a peculiar glory. In other words, the power of Scripture to warrant

well-grounded trust is not by generic glory. Not, as it were, by mere dazzling. Not by simply boggling the mind with supernatural otherness. Rather, what we see as inescapably divine is a peculiar glory. And at the center of this peculiar glory is the utterly unique glory of Jesus Christ. This is the heart of the book.

The peculiar glory of God, as he reveals it in the Scriptures, is the way his majesty is expressed through his meekness. I call this a paradoxical juxtaposition of seemingly opposite traits. Jonathan Edwards called it “an admirable conjunction of diverse excellencies.” This pattern of God’s self-revelation is his lion-like majesty together with his lamb-like meekness. God magnifies his greatness by making himself the supreme treasure of our hearts, even at great cost to himself (Rom. 8:32), and so serving us in the very act of exalting his glory. This peculiar brightness shines through the whole Bible and comes to its most beautiful radiance in the person and work of Jesus Christ, dying and rising for sinners.

I will argue that there is in every human being a “knowledge” of this God—this glory. There is a built-in template that is shaped for this peculiar communication of God’s glory. When God opens our eyes (2 Cor. 4:6) and grants us the knowledge of the truth (2 Tim. 2:25), through the Scriptures (1 Sam. 3:21), we know that we have met ultimate reality.

By the instrument of the Scriptures, in the hands of the Holy Spirit, God cuts away the corrosion from the template of his glory. Miraculously we are thus conformed to the peculiar shape of God’s glory. Where we saw only foolishness before, now we see the glory of majesty in meekness, and strength in suffering, and the wealth of God’s glory in the depth of his giving—that is, in the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.

Preliminary Questions

Before we direct our full attention to the question of how we know that the Christian Scriptures are the word of God, we must ask: What specific Scriptures are we talking about? Are we talking about the Apocrypha that is contained in the Roman Catholic Bible? Which books actually are parts of the Christian Bible? And what about the handwritten transmission of the Bible during three thousand years until the printing

press was invented in 1450? Do we actually have the original words that the authors wrote? Those are the questions we deal with in part 1.

Closer to the heart of the matter, but still preliminary, is the question, What do the Scriptures claim for themselves? This question is preliminary because my argument is not that we believe the Scriptures because they *claim* to be God's word. But it is closer to the heart of the matter, because these claims are, in fact, essential threads in the fabric of the glory-revealing meaning of Scripture. Therefore, they are part of the panorama of glory that gives a well-grounded foundation to our confidence that the Scriptures are the totally true and infallible word of God. This is the focus of part 3.

Not a Masterpiece, but a Window

Part 1 is the story of my life with the Bible, from my childhood to the present. It has at least two purposes. One is to put all my cards on the table so that you know exactly where I stand as I try to deal honestly with the Bible. The other purpose is to draw attention to the way the Bible does its work in a person's life. I point out that I did not simply hold a view of the Bible for seven decades. I was held by a view through the Bible.

As I said at the beginning, the Bible has not been for me like a masterpiece hanging on the wall of an Alpine chalet but rather like a window in the wall of the chalet, with the Alps on the other side. In other words, I have been a Christian all these years not because I had the courage to hold on to an embattled view of Scripture, but because I have been held happily captive by the beauty of God and his ways that I see through the Scriptures.

If your heart says, How can this be? my answer is, Come and see.

PART 1

A Place to Stand

*“ . . . the LORD revealed himself by
the word of the LORD ”*

Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

JUDE 24–25

My Story: Held by the Bible

Everyone stands somewhere, even if we sometimes don't know where we stand. This is true geographically and theologically. You might be blindfolded, and driven around town in a car for an hour, and then let out. You would be standing somewhere but may not know where.

I did this with my wife on her fortieth birthday so she would not know where I was taking her. In her case, she is simply too savvy in the city and could tell by sounds and turns where we were. It didn't work. But for the sake of the illustration, you can see what I mean: you can be standing somewhere and not know where you are standing.

That is true theologically also. Everyone is standing somewhere. I don't mean everyone is dug in somewhere. You might be ready to leave your geographic spot as soon as the blindfold comes off. And the same is true of your theological position. The blindfold I have in mind may be as simple as never having seriously thought about where you're standing. In other words, we may not know where we stand because we've never given it any attention.

But there we are, nonetheless, standing somewhere.

Standing in the Sway of What We Don't Know?

This is true about the Bible. We all stand somewhere in relation to the Bible. A few of us grew up in a Bible-believing home, and we came to believe and love the Bible for ourselves. We stand on it. We believe what

it says is true, and we try to bring our lives into harmony with it. But that is not the rule.

My university professors in Germany stood somewhere in relation to the Bible—and it was not where I stood. You may once have stood where I stand and walked away. You may have been badly hurt by people who say they believe the Bible. Or you may have asked too many questions and become disillusioned with the anti-intellectual responses of “Bible-believing” Christians. Or you may be standing just around the corner from where I stand, and all you can see are shadows, but they are very attractive. Or you have just walked through a crisis that made everything feel unstable, and you are grasping for something firm and durable.

Some of you grew up in a home where the Bible was totally absent. You saw it only in the news when people were sworn into office with their hand on it. To this day it may be as absent to your mind as a mathematical equation you have never heard of. But that equation might be true. It might describe the forces of gravity that keep us on the ground. Or it might represent the interaction of oxygen and carbon dioxide that keeps you alive. Or it might signify the thrust needed from a jet engine to keep your plane in the air. In other words, you may be standing in the sway of a life-giving equation and not even know it exists.

It may be that way with the Bible too. It may describe a reality that totally encompasses you without your knowing it. It may describe a power that holds you in being. It may present a path of truth and wholeness and joy, some of which you have intuited and some of which you haven't. Without knowing it, you may enjoy some of that path, and other parts you may hate. But one thing is sure: all of us stand somewhere in relation to the Bible.

The Bible Is More Like a Letter Than an Equation

Likening the Bible to a mathematical equation is not strikingly profound. You can live your whole life with relative happiness, and then die, without regretting that you never knew a single one of those equations. Even though they describe how you walk and breathe and fly, knowing the particular formula doesn't matter.

The Bible isn't like that. And the main reason is that the Bible is more like a letter from the Creator of the universe than it is a record of

the laws of nature. The record of natural laws is impersonal. But a letter from the Creator is personal. The main difference between a personal letter and a textbook on physics is that the letter is designed to connect you to the heart and mind of the writer, and the textbook is not. This is the great divide on how we approach the Bible. Does it express the heart and mind of a divine person, or is it merely a record of human religious experience?

This is one of the biggest questions about where we stand: Do we stand consciously in a personal universe or an impersonal one? Do I stand in the awareness that the main thing about the universe is that I am a person created by a Person? Do I live in a universe created by a Person who has purposes and plans for me and for the universe? Or do I stand in an impersonal universe? Does the world have no personal creator or governor? Do I stand as the product only of impersonal material forces?

Cover to cover, the Bible describes the world as personal. A personal God created the world. He created human beings in his own image to manage the world as his stewards.

God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion.” (Gen. 1:27–28)

The least this means is that we are personal the way God is. We are personal in a way that the animals are not. In our personhood, the Bible says, we are meant to image forth the kind of person God is. That is what images are for. Only these images are *living* persons, not statues. Fill the earth with God-imaging persons—according to the Bible, that is human destiny. “Blessed be his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory! Amen and Amen!” (Ps. 72:19).

How Will the Creator Communicate?

This raises the question of whether and how the Creator aims to communicate with the persons he created in his image. Everyone stands

somewhere in relation to that question. Not to think about it is a standing place. To say, “No, he doesn’t,” is a standing place. To say, “He does, through all religions,” is a standing place. And to say, “Yes, uniquely and infallibly through the Christian Scriptures, the Bible,” that too is a standing place.

And there are reasons why all of us are standing where we are. Some of those reasons are conscious, and some are not. You may have thought about it and concluded: *I just can’t know for sure*. Or you may have thought and concluded: *I simply don’t approve of the God of the Bible and the way he tells people to live*. Or you may have read it and seen so much moral and spiritual beauty in Jesus that you concluded: *I can’t deny what I have seen—this is real*.

I’m in that last category.

So let me clarify where I stand, so we can all be clear from the outset, and you can know what you are dealing with in this book. Then we can raise this question: *Why should we believe this?*

My Standing Place: Home

I grew up in a home where the Bible was assumed to be the infallible word of God. Whether they succeeded or failed, my parents tried to submit to the authority of the Bible. I think they succeeded pretty well. That’s probably one reason I never rebelled against them. They tried to form their ideas about God and man and sin and salvation from the Bible. They tried to bring their attitudes and emotions in line with the Bible. And they tried to form their behaviors by the Bible.

That’s what you do, if you believe it is a reliable communication from your Creator. In spite of blind spots, and in spite of what the Bible calls “indwelling sin” (Rom. 7:17, 20), I think my parents fundamentally succeeded. The God they worshiped, the Savior they trusted, the joy they experienced, and the love they showed were, I believe, truly the God, the Savior, the joy, and the love of the Bible. It was all real.

There was no claim to perfection, either in knowledge of God or responses to that knowledge. They knew what the Bible itself taught about our knowledge: “Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been

fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12). We can know truly, but we cannot know comprehensively or flawlessly while we remain sinners. The day will come when Jesus will return to earth, and the followers of Jesus will be changed. We will sin no more. And even though we will not become omniscient, we will cease to believe wrong things (1 Cor. 13:12).

But for now, we are fallible people, trying to submit as fully as we can to an infallible Book inspired by God. That is what my parents believed and what I grew up believing. As I moved through twenty-two years of formal education, the challenges to this view of the Bible were many and constant. They are many and constant today. And I assume there will be many of them until Jesus comes, because one of the most prominent writers of the Bible predicted it:

The time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. (2 Tim. 4:3–4)

Those times were already happening when the Bible was written. And there is good reason to believe that as the end of the world approaches (a time of which no one can predict), the Bible will be more embattled than ever.

So, as I moved through college in Illinois, and seminary in California, and graduate school in Germany, I was not surprised that the objections to this view of the Bible intensified at every stage. Can you really continue to hold onto the view of your youth even though you are in graduate school in Germany, where virtually no one shares your view—neither students nor professors?

Not So Much Holding a View as Being Held

It may sound strange, but “holding onto my view” was never the way I experienced it—at least not as I can remember. It felt more like my view of the Bible was holding onto me. Or, as I believe today, God was holding onto me by clarifying and brightening and deepening my view of him in the Bible. I believe that’s why the view I received from my parents remained more compelling than any competing view all along the way.

I looked at many competing views of the Bible. I had to. That’s

what liberal arts education does. It exposes you to great alternative worldviews—as we like to call them. And in seminary, the challenges became more focused on the historicity and formation and preservation of the Bible itself. Then in graduate school, I didn't just read about those views; I had seminars and hallway discussions with the people who held those views and taught them and wrote books about them. In other words, the challenges to my view of the Bible moved from worldview challenges, to historical-critical challenges, to personal challenges.

But simultaneously my view itself was being clarified, brightened, and deepened. It never felt as if the bad guys ganged up to pommel my poor, adolescent, Sunday-school view of the Bible. At every point, it felt like the view grew to be a match for all comers.

The View: Clarified, Brightened, Deepened

Now I need to be careful here, or I am going to create the wrong impression. What I just wrote could sound very intellectual and could give the impression that what was really happening is that I was becoming smarter. I suppose I was learning more and more about presuppositions, and about the logical flaws of certain arguments, and about the misuse of historical data. But that was not decisive. I'm not talking about becoming smarter when I say that my view was being clarified, and brightened, and deepened.

What I mean can be best understood if you take the word *view* not just in an intellectual sense (as in *viewpoint*), but in the aesthetic sense—as in *vista*, or *sight*, or *landscape*. I never recall merely having a view of the Bible, as if it was a book on the table, and I viewed it this way and not that way, nor did I see it as a set of ideas that I could view this way or that way.

Not a Painting on the Wall, but a Window

The Bible was never like a masterpiece hanging in a museum that I viewed this way and that. Rather, it was like a window. Or like binoculars. My view *of* the Bible was always a view *through* the Bible. So when I say that, all along the way, my view was getting clearer and brighter and deeper, I mean the reality seen through it was getting clearer and brighter and deeper. *Clearer* as the edges of things became less fuzzy,

and I could see how things fit together rather than just smudging into each other. *Brighter* as the beauty and impact of the whole message was more and more attractive. And *deeper* in the sense of depth perspective—I suppose photographers would say “depth of field.” Things stretched off into eternity with breathtaking implications—in both directions past and future. You could sum this up with the phrase *the glory of God*. That’s what I was seeing.

That is what was changing to meet the challenges. This was not an intellectual effort. Seeing is not an effort the way thinking is. It happens. You may need to exert yourself to walk up to the edge of the Grand Canyon, but when you get there, seeing is not work. You may need to travel to the Alps or the Himalayas, but when you get there, seeing is not an effort. It is given to you.

I did my walking and my traveling. That’s what education is. But I did not make myself see. And that is why I say it is not as though I was holding onto my view of the Bible, but rather that the view was holding onto me. Or God was holding onto me by making the view supremely compelling. If you are standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon, or rafting down the Colorado River *inside* the canyon (as I did in the summer of 2012), it is proper to say you are held by the view, the sight, the vista. That is what the Bible was doing for me. It was holding me; I was not holding it.

When the Clouds Part

Here’s an analogy—a living parable—for how it worked.

One of those seven days rafting 190 miles down the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon, it began to rain. That didn’t matter much, since we were already wet from the rapids. We were dressed for it. The frustrating part was that it was lunchtime, and there are only so many small beaches where you can tie up and eat.

So we tied up and set up the tables and put up a large umbrella to keep the rain off our peanut butter sandwiches. But the rain was so hard and the wind so strong that the umbrella was useless, and we had to eat soggy sandwiches. We laughed about it, but it was unpleasant and frustrating. For a moment, my “view” was not so clear, and bright, and deep. Maybe being in the Grand Canyon is not so compelling after

all. Maybe a dry seat in the hotel back in Las Vegas would be more compelling.

Little did we know what was about to happen. We boarded our two large, blue, motor-driven rafts and set out down river. The rain stopped and the sky started to clear, when suddenly, almost simultaneously, dozens of waterfalls burst out into the river in front of and behind us from the walls of the canyon. Some of these were gigantic, falling a thousand feet. The water coming out of the gorges was red. The guide explained what had happened.

He said that during a hard rain the water in the gorges comes down from the steep sides and builds and builds until it is a rushing river—a rain-made temporary river in a place where it almost never rains—dozens of temporary rivers looking for an outlet. When the water reaches a certain force, it breaks out over the precipice into the canyon as a waterfall. And the red color is owing to the soil it picked up on the way. It was stunning.

Then he said, we might not see the likes of this in the canyon for another hundred years.

That is a parable of how God held onto me by my view of the Bible—that is, my view through the Bible. Just when the view started to seem foggy and rainy and frustrating, and other views of life started to seem more attractive, God would clear the skies and cause even the rain to serve the irresistibly beautiful vista of his glory. He never let any other view of reality outshine the view of the Bible.

So, yes, I still hold the basic view that my parents did and that the Christian church has held through its whole history until the streetlights of the Enlightenment began blinding people to the stars and luring people away from the brightness of God's glory. That is where I still stand—on the edge of the Grand Canyon, and at the foot of the Himalayas, and sometimes rafting right down through the depths of the glory.

More specifically, then, what kind of binoculars is the Bible? What kind of window onto the glory of God is this? Let me move toward a precise description of the kind of book the Bible is by taking you from my days of formal education to where I am today in relation to the church and school and web ministry that I have served.

Teaching College Students as the Vista Expands

When I was twenty-eight, I found my first real job. With my wife and son, I came home from Germany in 1974 and moved straight to St. Paul, Minnesota, where I began to teach biblical studies at Bethel College (now Bethel University). I couldn't believe they were paying me to study and teach the Bible. I would have done it for free, except that I had a wife and a child to support. So the \$10,500 annual salary was a needed bonus to the privilege.

I taught New Testament introduction, Greek, and individual New Testament book studies. I loved it. To this day, few things are more gratifying to me than looking at the Bible—and *through* the Bible—long enough to see what is really there and then helping others see it for themselves. I had done it for Sunday school classes all through seminary and graduate school. Now I was doing it for college students. It was deeply satisfying.

Some of my energy was devoted to defining how the view of my parents—my view—related to tough questions such as why there are different accounts of the same event in the four Gospels, especially Matthew, Mark, and Luke (called the Synoptic Gospels). So I wrote a short paper early in my time at Bethel called “How are the Synoptics without Error?”¹ It became a position paper for the Bible faculty for the years I was there.

But, mostly, my energies were devoted to looking through the inerrant window, not at the Bible's “inerrancy” itself. I loved pushing students' noses against the window pane of the first epistle of John, and the first epistle of Peter, and 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and the Gospel of Luke, and doing all I could, with prayer and modeling and asking good questions, to help them see the glory of this Christ-dominated landscape.

The effect of this Bible-saturated life was that a vision of God's greatness and glory and centrality was becoming more clear and bright and deep. I found that one aspect of this glory, namely, God's sovereignty over all things, was relentlessly controversial in all my classes. No matter the text or the subject of the class, that issue would come

¹ Available at <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/how-are-the-synoptics-without-error>.

up. Students would see it shining in the distance (some might have said lurking or prowling). And not a few of them did not like what they saw.

This did not surprise me, but it did trouble me. I had been in their shoes all through my own college days. And I had gone to seminary as a person who was happy to put limits on God's sovereignty by my *self-determining* will (which I liked to call "free will"). This is the air we breathe in America, and it is the default assumption of the human heart. By nature and culture, we resonate with William Earnest Henley's "Invictus":

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.

One of the reasons this feels so obvious is that moral accountability seems impossible without ultimate human self-determination. And if anything is clear in the Bible, it is that human beings are morally accountable to God. I had never really considered whether this assumption—that moral responsibility requires human autonomy—was in the Bible. I just assumed it was. But I did have to admit that defending my own volitional supremacy did not produce a robust experience of worship.

Only in seminary was I able to see that one of the highest, reddest, most magnificent of all the waterfalls in the canyon of God's glory was the absolute sovereignty of God. I wrote on my final exam in a course on systematic theology, "Romans 9 is like a tiger going around devouring free-willers like me." The battle had been painful, and there were tears along the way. But now the fight was over. What had seemed like an assault on my freedom became the ground of my hope.²

Romans 9 and the Call to the Pastorate

So I knew what these students were feeling. What was troubling is that when I tried to show them what I had found in Romans 9, for example,

²If any reader would like to see how I worked all this out, one place to look would be John Piper, *The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God's Delight in Being God* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2012), chaps. 2, 4, 5.

many of them were not persuaded. They argued that it simply does not mean what Piper says it means. And they had books and teachers to back them up.

Eventually, when my time for a sabbatical came, I took it from the spring of 1979 till January 1980 to write the most thorough treatment of Romans 9:1–23 that I was capable of. I put my eye to those twenty-three verses and looked as hard as I could, day and night, for those months. The book was published as *The Justification of God* in 1983.³ I was writing it first for my own conscience’s sake and then for my students. Was I really seeing what is there? I inherited from my parents not only a high view of the Bible but also a sober view of my sinfulness and fallibility. I was not without error. The Bible was. So I was writing the book to test what I saw in Romans 9.

But something utterly unexpected happened. As I worked on Romans 9 day after day for months, the vision of God’s magisterial sovereignty not only became more and more clear, but it took hold of me in a way I had never planned.

When I was a child and a teenager, folks would ask me, “Are you going to be a preacher like your dad?” My father was a traveling evangelist—a great preacher in my estimation, and I respected and loved him deeply. I still do. But I would always answer no. The simple reason was that I couldn’t speak in front of a group without freezing up. It was a horrible condition for an adolescent. And to this day, I do not make light of it. God lifted that burden in part when I was in college and seminary. I was able to teach. But teaching seemed very different from preaching.

But during that sabbatical, the God of Romans 9 seemed to be saying through the window of his word: “I will be proclaimed, not just analyzed. I will be heralded, not just studied and explained.” And little by little there grew in me a desire—totally unexpected—to leave academia and preach this great and glorious God of Romans 9.

I wanted to see what would happen. I wanted to put to the test whether preaching the whole counsel of God—with a vision of God that many students found offensive—could grow and sustain and nurture and delight and guide and empower a church with people from all age

³John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1–23* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983).

ranges and different educational and ethnic backgrounds. On the one hand, this felt like a challenge to exalt the greatness of God, but on the other hand, it felt like a challenge to the authority and truthfulness of the Bible.

Could I preach the God of the Bible as he really was in the text? Could all the things the Bible says about God and about man and salvation and holiness and suffering really be heralded with unvarnished clarity so that a people would be built up, and souls would be saved, and missions would be advanced, and justice would roll down like rivers, and joy would abound even in sorrow?

Looking through the Book from behind the Pulpit

I could not resist this call. It became overwhelming on the night of October 14, 1979. That next morning my wife said she had seen it coming and would happily support the move. I resigned my teaching post and accepted the call to be the preaching pastor at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where I served for thirty-three years until the spring of 2013.

My answer to the question *Can the God of Romans 9, with his absolute sovereignty over all things, including salvation and suffering, be preached without compromise for the growth and strength and mission of the church?* is yes. For thirty-three years, week in and week out, I gazed at the words of Scripture until I saw through them to the Reality and then preached what I saw. I do not recall a single weekend when I was not excited to preach what God had shown me. Sometimes this was controversial. But I tried to be so faithful to the text of the Bible, and so transparent about how I saw what I saw, that the people would trust me. I did not want them to depend on my authority but on God's authority in the Bible. I resonated with the apostle Paul when he said,

My speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.
(1 Cor. 2:4–5)

In one sense, I viewed my whole ministry as a demonstration of the truth and authority of God's word, preached with as much clarity and

brightness and depth as I was able, with God's help. Would my "view" of the Bible that I inherited from my parents prove as compelling to others as it was to me? The question was not mainly, *Would they come to "hold" my view?* The question was, *Would the view of God's glory in the Scriptures hold them as it has held me?* That was the test. History, and finally eternity, will answer.

An Eldership of One Mind on the Whole Counsel of God

When I came to Bethlehem Baptist Church in 1980, there was a very broad affirmation of faith, doctrinally speaking. I am very much in favor of a broad affirmation of faith as a qualification for *membership* in the local church. I think that's right. The door into the local body of believers, it seems to me, should be roughly the same size as the door into the universal body of believers.

But the door into the eldership—that is, the door into the council that will give an account to God for the souls of the flock as teachers and leaders (Heb. 13:17; 1 Tim. 3:2; 5:17)—should be much narrower. When Paul addresses the elders of the church, his stress is that they not shrink back from teaching anything in God's counsel, but give the flock the "whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:20, 27–28). That implies that elders must make an effort to find and clarify and preserve this whole counsel of God.

Little by little through the years at Bethlehem, I was preaching and teaching and leading in such a way that I hoped would lead the elders to have one mind about what this whole counsel looked like. After about fifteen years, I thought we were ready to work toward putting our unified grasp of God's word into a document we could all agree on. This affirmation of faith then would become the criteria, under Scripture, of what the elders would be expected to believe and teach.

The aim, of course, was that the people would joyfully see this as truth from the Bible and gladly embrace it. But since people were joining the church all the time at different levels of biblical understanding, and since people did not always agree with everything in the document, we did not make this affirmation of faith a criterion for membership. It represented where the elders would try to lead the people, not where people had to be in order to join the church.

In other words, the aim was that the elders would define a place to stand—including a place to stand regarding the nature of the Bible. That is section 1 in the document. This process of refining what has become the Bethlehem Baptist Church Elder Affirmation of Faith (now embraced also by Bethlehem College and Seminary, and the Treasuring Christ Together network of churches, and the ministry of desiringGod.org) took several years.

I did the first draft and then sent the document to a dozen respected leaders outside Bethlehem for feedback, to be sure it avoided eccentricities. I wanted it to be a fresh statement of biblical truth, exalting the glory of God, and interwoven with the truth that God is most glorified in us when we are satisfied in him. But I did not want it to be idiosyncratic or quirky or novel. We do not think God has shown us truth that no one else has seen. We believe it is wise and humble to aim at reclaiming the glory of long-held biblical truth rather than claiming new discoveries.

The elders worked on it for a long time, and we were in no rush. We were working for the generations to come, not just for ourselves. We hoped to put in place an affirmation of faith that God might be pleased to use for decades to protect and ignite the truth in the institutions and personal lives that had grown up at the church. So twenty years after my arrival, the elders unanimously settled on the wording of the affirmation, and the church voted that from that time on all the elders would embrace this truth as the core of what we would preach and teach.

Section 1 concerns the Scriptures—the subject matter of this book. This is where we stand. This is the standing place that defines this book. This is the view we “hold.” But more importantly, it is the nature of the window onto the vista of God’s glory that has *held* us—held me for over sixty years.

1. Scripture, the Word of God Written

1.1 We believe that the Bible, consisting of the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments, is the infallible Word of God, verbally inspired by God, and without error in the original manuscripts.

1.2 We believe that God’s intentions, revealed in the Bible, are the supreme and final authority in testing all claims about what is true and

what is right. In matters not addressed by the Bible, what is true and right is assessed by criteria consistent with the teachings of Scripture.

1.3 We believe God's intentions are revealed through the intentions of inspired human authors, even when the authors' intention was to express divine meaning of which they were not fully aware, as, for example, in the case of some Old Testament prophecies. Thus the meaning of Biblical texts is a fixed historical reality, rooted in the historical, unchangeable intentions of its divine and human authors. However, while meaning does not change, the application of that meaning may change in various situations. Nevertheless it is not legitimate to infer a meaning from a Biblical text that is not demonstrably carried by the words which God inspired.

1.4 Therefore, the process of discovering the intention of God in the Bible (which is its fullest meaning) is a humble and careful effort to find in the language of Scripture what the human authors intended to communicate. Limited abilities, traditional biases, personal sin, and cultural assumptions often obscure Biblical texts. Therefore the work of the Holy Spirit is essential for right understanding of the Bible, and prayer for His assistance belongs to a proper effort to understand and apply God's word.

Here I Stand

This is where I stand with hope and joy and love. This is the window of the Word through which the vision of God has exerted its compelling power. I do not merely hold a view of Scripture. I am held. The glory of God shining through his Word has been an irresistible treasure. Nothing in this world comes close to the beauty and the value of God and his ways and his grace.

After almost seven decades of seeing and savoring the glory of God in Scripture, the doxology of Jude 24–25 is very personal:

Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his *glory* with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be *glory*, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

In my case—and I think it is what Jude intends—the “glory, majesty, dominion, and authority” of God are ascribed to him here because this is what, in fact, did the keeping. He has kept me—held me—by his glory by revealing his glory to my heart year after year so that other glories would not lure me away. This he has done through his word. For me, the glory of God and the word of God are inseparable. I have no sure sight of God’s glory except through his word. The word mediates the glory, and the glory confirms the word.

We turn now to a more important story than my own—the story of how the Bible came to be and how it has confirmed its truth and authority for two thousand years. How do we know what the Bible is—which books are in it? How do we know it’s true? How has the Bible provided a well-grounded faith that the Bible itself is the word of God?

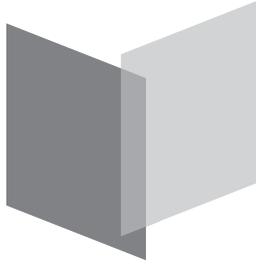
This wonderful story of God’s work in the world—to create his written word and to build his church by his word—is woven together with my story. It is also woven together with yours. Everyone will be drawn into this story one way or the other. It could not be otherwise, since we are not dealing with a tribal deity and a provincial book. We are dealing with the Creator of the universe and a book that he inspired as a gift for all the peoples of the world. I invite you to come with me. I know of no greater quest than this: Is the Bible God’s word? Are the Christian Scriptures true? How do we know?



Everyone wants to be happy. Our website was born and built for happiness. We want people everywhere to understand and embrace the truth that *God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him*. We've collected more than thirty years of John Piper's speaking and writing, including translations into more than forty languages. We also provide a daily stream of new written, audio, and video resources to help you find truth, purpose, and satisfaction that never end. And it's all available free of charge, thanks to the generosity of people who've been blessed by the ministry.

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CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

