

Doesn't It Just Depend on How You Interpret the Bible?

Be Ready to Share Summer Sermon Series 2016

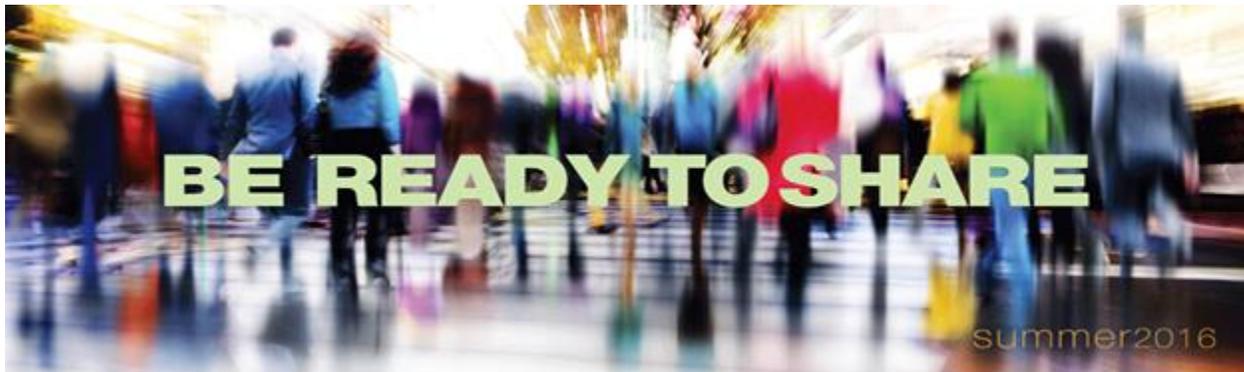
2 Peter 1:16-21

Kenwood Baptist Church

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TEXT: 2 Peter 1:16-21



Doesn't it just depend on how you interpret the Bible? That's the question before us and the question that our text responds to this morning. Many of you will remember Walter Cronkite as the man who was considered to be the most trusted man in America, who was the news anchor for CBS Evening News for almost 20 years. As a young journalist, Walter Cronkite was providing radio commentary in his local town before he made it to CBS News. He received a phone call from his boss' wife telling him that three firefighters had been killed in a local blaze and that he needed to report this on the air immediately. Walter Cronkite, known for checking his facts, said: "I cannot broadcast this yet. I need to check the facts." It was made infinitely more awkward by the fact that it was his boss' wife who was calling. She called back: "Three men died in this fire in a local house. Report it on the air." He repeated: "I must check my facts before I report this on the air." His boss was frustrated, took the microphone from Walter Cronkite, and reported the story. As it turned out, three men had not died in a local fire, and though Walter Cronkite was terminated for insubordination to his boss, he then went on to anchor CBS Evening News for 20 years. But, he had a reputation for checking the facts, and he used to end his evening news broadcast with the statement: "And that's the way it is," and then give the date. He omitted this phrase, however, whenever the news ended with a piece of opinion or personal commentary, but when he checked the facts and was sure of what he reported, he would say: "And that's the way it is."

Many people today come to the Scripture or imagine the Scripture as something that's open,

that the interpretation of the Bible is arbitrary, that truth is subjective, that the authority of the text is impossible. Many young readers today in school are taught a theory of literature called *Reader Response Theory* where you come as a reader and attribute meaning, that there is no meaning from the author behind the text. For those of us who come to the Scriptures, this is a matter of weighty significance, because Christianity stands or falls on its trustworthiness. Can these events be relied upon as having truly occurred? So we turn to 2 Peter 1:16-21, another passage where the Bible speaks about itself. Peter begins in 2 Peter 1:16a by stating:

“For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, . . .”

Peter says that Christianity is not about following a gripping novel; it is not about sci-fi; it is not about fantasy; it is not about a story that someone made up, a legend; and it is not an alternative reality. The word *myth* this is something that is associated with a story, something that is made up, something that clearly has its origin in the mind and imagination of people. But Peter states emphatically: “We didn't follow a man-made story when we told you about the coming and the power of Jesus Christ.” Instead, he states in 2 Peter 1:16b:

“. . .we were eyewitnesses of His majesty.”

This is a crucial term that he uses. An eyewitness is someone who was actually there, someone who saw His majesty. I found myself wondering this week what he was thinking of when he said: *We were eyewitnesses of His majesty*. I began reviewing in my mind the Gospels and wondering what was he remembering. Maybe it was that moment at the wedding in Cana of Galilee when Jesus took stone jars filled with water for purification and turned the water into wine in the midst of this wedding. We hear the line: “Everyone serves good wine first, but you have kept the good wine until now.” John tells us that this was the first of Jesus’ signs where He manifested His glory. Can you imagine being there at that wedding? We think it's awkward when the dessert tray starts to run low because we underestimated the number of people coming to the reception. But here's a moment at the wedding went Jesus first reveals His glory, and John tells us this. Maybe Peter was remembering Jesus’ miracles of healing. We read that when Jesus came into Galilee, a certain royal official whose son was sick at Capernaum came before Jesus and said: “Come, my child was dying.” Jesus spoke to him and said: “Go your way, your son lives.” As this father returned to his home, the servants met him and said: “Your son lives,” and he believed upon Jesus. John tells us that this was the second time that Jesus manifested His glory. Jesus is no ordinary man, no human prophet. Maybe it was the moment when Peter remembered the time that his mother-in-law was sick. We read in Matthew 8 that Peter's mother-in-law was lying sick with a fever. We are not told that she was close to dying, but she had a serious, probably life-threatening fever. Jesus came into Peter's home in Capernaum, touched her, and the fever left her, and she got up and began to serve those around her. Peter was there that evening when many people came and brought those who are

oppressed by demons and saw Jesus cast out the spirits with the word and healed all who were sick. Maybe he was remembering that moment of seeing Jesus' glory and power. Maybe it was the moment when Peter and the other disciples were on a boat with Jesus on the Sea of Galilee and one of the rushing storms came onto the sea. Jesus was sleeping, but the disciples were afraid. They woke Him and said: "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" and Jesus spoke to the disciples, including Peter, and said: "Why are you afraid?" He rose up from the boat, rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. If you saw someone do that, that would make an impression on you. It would make an impression on me. It would make an impression on the most skeptical person. The disciples responded by asking the question: "What sort of man is this that even the winds and the sea obey Him?" The last time they had seen someone speak to the winds and they obeyed was when God the Father split the sea and 600,000 came out on dry land. This is extraordinary. Maybe it was the time when Peter went with Jesus and the inner circle of the disciples and Jesus took them up to the northern part of the country, to Caesarea Philippi. It is clear, when we follow the text, that this is the moment that Peter remembers the most. We read in Matthew 8:23-29:

"Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter replied, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.'"

Peter remembers what happened right after that moment. Jesus took His disciples, this inner group, Peter, James, and John, and He led them up to a high mountain by themselves. They were alone with Jesus. The traditional place for this event is Mount Tabor, which is about 1800 meters high. It's a mountain, generously so-called, in the midst of Galilee, and this is the traditional location for the Mount of Transfiguration. If you look very closely at Mount Tabor, you will see a church on the top remembering this moment. When you do the pilgrimage tour of Israel, this is where you go. Most scholars think, however, that Jesus was up north in Caesarea Philippi, just a couple of days after Peter's confession. The Gospels tell us that Jesus took them up to a very high mountain, and even on the most generous of terms, Mount Tabor does not register as a very high mountain. Caesarea Philippi is at the base of Mount Hermon, and this is a very high mountain. Jesus probably took His closest disciples up to the top of Mount Hermon, which is



snow-covered for most of the year. Jesus took these disciples up to the top of the mountain.



When they were there by themselves, Jesus was transfigured before them. They saw Him as He really was, as He really is. They saw Him with the glory that He had before the world began. The Gospel writers tell us that Jesus was transfigured and that His face shone with a divine, resplendent glory like the sun, and that His clothes became white as light. They saw standing with Jesus Moses and Elijah, and they were speaking with Him, and Peter said to Jesus:

“Lord, it is good that we are here. We will make a tabernacle for You.” While he was still speaking these words, a cloud of divine glory overshadowed them, and the Voice of our heavenly Father spoke audibly and said: This is My beloved Son with whom I am well pleased. Listen to Him.” Now, if you saw that and you heard that, you would not forget that. I don't care how many passwords you're trying to remember in your postmodern life, you would not forget seeing the resplendent glory of Jesus, would you? If you forgot seeing Him, would you forget the Voice from heaven speaking: “This is My Son, My Beloved Son; I am well pleased with Him. Listen to Him”? Peter never forgot it, and when he's writing these words in 2 Peter, he is towards the end of his life, yet he has never forgotten it. He reminds his hearers then, and us today, in 2 Peter 1:17-18:

“For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to Him by the Majestic Glory, ‘This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,’ we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with Him on the holy mountain.”

Christianity stands or falls on eyewitness testimony of these events. Christianity is not about a well-written, clever story. The Bible is not written to create you an adrenaline rush. The Bible is not written to cultivate feelings of excitement and pleasure in you from our lower, baser desires. The Bible was written from eyewitnesses of the glory of God to tell us that these things are true and that they really happened. Peter says they were eyewitnesses of His Majesty, and this is the testimony of several writers in the New Testament. Luke tells us in Luke 1:1-2:

“Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us.”

John 1:14 says:

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory. . .”

In 1 John 1:1-2 we read:

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life-”

It is not a dream. It is not something made up. We saw it; we heard it; we touched the Word of Glory. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8:

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then He appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared also to me.”

I remember the time I was invited to speak as a hostile witness to the Harvard Atheists' Club, and we reach this moment in the text. A man across the room who was hostile, didn't believe a word of the Bible, said: “All of it is untrue, made up,” I said: “It's not it. It claims to be the report of eyewitnesses, and when you read it, reads like eyewitnesses.” Eyewitnesses include details like there happened to be 153 fish in the nets that Jesus called the disciples to bring up after His resurrection. Eyewitnesses include the details of places, names, geography. Eyewitnesses include place names, personal names. Eyewitnesses include the languages that are spoken. Have you ever noticed how Jesus occasionally speaks in Aramaic in the Gospels? To me, that is the evidence of eyewitnesses. They heard Him. They heard His voice. They remember His saying: “*Talitha cumi*, little girl, arise.” They remember hearing Him cry out on the cross: “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?* My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?” They preserved His words. They remember seeing that the title that was on the cross was written in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, and they record it.

Sometimes you hear people say the Gospels are full of contradictions, and I've come to see this as a paper tiger. People say this who have been told that, and the best response to that question is just to say: “Really, can you tell me something specific that you're thinking of?” Most people stop right there. Occasionally, someone will make a desperate grasp and will say: “Well, one of the Gospels says were two angels at the tomb, and the other says there was one.” What about that! I just gently reply that if there were two of them, then there was one. The gospel accounts don't need to be forced into and out of shape and harmonized. They reflect eyewitness testimony. They reflect the details of someone who was there. They don't reveal a conspiracy theory. Conspiracy theories end up sounding all alike. When you seek a case in a court of law and you interview a set of people and you have five testimonies and they are all exactly alike in every respect, most people would conclude that they talked about that beforehand. The Gospels read as eyewitness testimony; not only the Gospels, but the whole of

the Bible. The Bible can be verified at so many places. Archaeology is a fantastic discipline that allows us to dig in the dirt and get paid for it and write papers and books about it. Can you imagine that? How awesome is that! But there is only about 5% that has been excavated, a very small percentage. But when excavations have happened, they confirm the events of the Bible: in large items, like digging up a stone inscription that mentions the house of David; like finding an inscription that mentions Pontus Pilate in connection with the edifice in Caesarea; or in small details, like finding Assyrian architecture and discovering on those walls little chips of blue and red paint. The ruins of buildings that you see at archaeological sites, most those buildings were painted. As we have excavated Assyrian sites, we see that the Assyrians painted their buildings and dressed their warriors in blue and red. Isn't it remarkable that Ezekiel describes the Assyrian forces as dressed in blue and red? It's because he was there and saw it. I am moved by the accuracy of the Scripture in large items and in small. I love to go to Athens and stand on Mars Hill and see the base of the Acropolis area of the Parthenon structure. When you read Paul's sermon that he spoke there, that is the only place on the planet where that sermon makes sense. I love to see the accuracy in the details of geography, place names, languages. Wherever the Bible can be verified, it has come through clean and true and reliable.

Christian faith, the Scripture, rests on eyewitness testimony. Some of you are not persuaded by that. To some of you, it wouldn't matter how many eyewitness testimonies came. Maybe you are a person immersed in Photoshop, and you think that anything can be manipulated. People can be manipulated; documents can be manipulated; photographs can be manipulated; and you are living in a moment in time which we are in whether we want to embrace it or not. We are in a moment of time where we have almost unlimited access to information, and yet we have a rising skepticism about the reliability of that information. Have you ever noticed that some of the things on the Internet are not true? Occasionally you even pull up a Wikipedia article, and said it says right at the top: "This article has problems." Most of us say: "Well, I'll just keep reading because I'm in a rush." The Word of God is not based only on eyewitness testimony, it is based on something infinitely more reliable. The second half of our text states that the Word of God is based not just on eyewitness testimony, but it is produced by the very movement of the Holy Spirit in people's lives. What we have in God's Word is the words of a God who cannot lie. Isn't that awesome? God cannot lie. He says in His Word: "I'm not a man that I should lie." He can't do it. The Scripture is breathed out by people being carried by the Holy Spirit, as we will see in the end. Peter says: "Eyewitness testimony is great, but we have something infinitely greater than my testimony." In 2 Peter 1:19a, he says:

"And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention, . . ."

Pay close attention to the Scripture. It is not arbitrary. It is not subjective. It is not up for grabs.

Yes, it is capable of an almost infinite number of meaningful applications, and that is only evidence of its inspiration. Pay close attention. This is the Word of God. Peter says in 2 Peter 1:19b that the Word of God is:

“ . . . as to a lamp shining in a dark place.”

Psalms 119:105 says:

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path,”

In Psalm 119:130, we read:

“The unfolding of Your words gives light.”

Proverbs 6:23 says:

“For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light.”

God's Word is reliable, trustworthy.

On our vacation, we had a beach walk at night, and we had flashlights as we were walking. There are all kinds of activity on the beach at night, and it is fun to watch the crabs come out, fun to watch huge ocean fish end up flopping on the seashore. Sometimes it was a little unsettling to see big jellyfish floating at night. But, as we walked along with our flashlight, I remember Jonathan's asking me: “Dad, if I shine my flashlight, will the light go up to the moon?” Have you ever wondered that? I did what any self-respecting dad would do in that moment. I said: “I'm not sure about that. Good question.” Then I went to Wikipedia that night, and I tried to get a little crash course on physics and how this works. I came back the next morning over breakfast, and I told him: “The good news is actually your light does reach the moon. It's just that it's so diffused at that point that you can't see it, but the photons keep going.” This seemed to satisfy him. I thought it was neat. God's Word is not diffusing. It is a lamp, a light, shining bright and clear to give us both the path right in front of us and a million miles away. We pay close attention to Scripture until, Peter says in 2 Peter 1:19c:

“ . . . until the day dawns and the Morning Star rises in your hearts.”

This imagery that Peter uses is to pay attention to Scripture until the day dawns, and the day that he refers to is probably not tomorrow. The Word of God is not relevant for just one day, but it's an image for the dawning of that great and final day when evil will be banished: the Day of the Lord. The language of the Morning Star rising is that image in the Scripture that Jesus uses of himself in Revelation 22:16 when He says:

“I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright Morning Star.”

So, when you read the Bible, pay close attention to it until you see Christ clearly. That is a great general piece of guidance on how we read the Scriptures. You read the Scriptures; you pay

close attention. What are we looking for? We are looking to see Jesus Christ in the Scriptures. Keep reading until you see Christ. During the time of the Scottish revival in the last century, there was a great awakening in Scotland. In response to that awakening, there was a renewal and revival in faithful preaching of the Word. As a reminder to them, the preachers during the Scottish revival took as a practice putting an inscription on the front of their pulpits: "Sir, we would see Jesus." It is a quote from John 12:21. It is a reminder that what's happening right here is proclaiming Christ. We want to see Christ. We read the Scripture until we see Him.

Peter says in 2 Peter 1:20:

“. . .knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation.”

It doesn't originate from us. The meaning of it does not depend on us. It is not selective, subjective, or arbitrary. He goes on to say in 2 Peter 1:21:

“For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”

The Bible does not come about from human origin, but here's how it comes about. It is so beautiful! It comes about when men, people, speak from God, as they are carried along by the Holy Spirit. The Word comes to us not just by eyewitness testimony. It comes from something infinitely greater, and that is the personal, empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. We see the divine and human aspects of the Bible beautifully displayed in Scripture. The Holy Spirit does not override the human personalities. The Holy Spirit does not cause all the Scripture authors to speak in the same language or use the same idioms. One of the fascinating things about 1 and 2 Peter in particular is that the Greek of 1 and 2 Peter is some of the most difficult in the New Testament, and scholars have wondered for decades how it was possible for a Galilean fisherman to write like this. It is so difficult that no one reads 1 and 2 Peter in their first year of seminary. It is just hard. There is a big vocabulary, complicated sentences. He uses a rhetorical style called the Asianic style which is really flowery. Some scholars have said this must be a forgery, but there is something great about it. At the end of 1 Peter, Peter says: "I wrote this letter, and Silas helped me." Isn't that awesome? "Silas helped me." I would conclude from that that Silas' Greek is pretty good. Silas has a sense for style and elaborate phrasing. The French would have loved Silas. The Germans would have said: "Can't you be a little more concise?" But, that means that the Holy Spirit carried Silas too. That means that we have the Word not just rooted in eyewitness testimony, but we have a Word that is carried forward to us by the Holy Spirit. As we talked about last week, that Word that is breathed out by God, by people carried by the Holy Spirit, has been reliably transmitted to us.

So, what do we need to do? Last week, I challenged you to read it. Take up the challenge and

read it. This week, I want to stress to all of us, what are we reading for? This is what I tell my children; this is what I tell people who ask me; this is what I want to tell you now because I'm preaching. There are two questions to ask when you're reading the Bible.

Number one: Ask yourself always in any passage of the Bible that you are reading, **who is God revealing Himself to be in this text?** The Bible is not something that comes from human origin. It is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is the Word of the living God. It is your heavenly Father speaking to you, and so we listen first to who He is revealing Himself to be. There is no God like Him, and every passage of Scripture is like a mosaic tile filling out the picture of the infinite glory and greatness of God, the beauty of His holiness, the righteousness of His ways. Discipline yourself to ask first who is the Lord revealing Himself to be.

Number two: This is answerable only after you answer the first one, after you seek who is the Lord revealing Himself to be. Then, with great humility and open-heart and hands ready, ask: **What does He require of me?** That is how I read the Scriptures devotionally; that is how I read it scholarly, that is how I want us as a community to discipline ourselves. Who is the Lord revealing Himself to be in this text, and what does He require of me? It is really like the hermeneutical counterpart to Jesus' statement that the Word can be summarized as: love God and love your neighbor. It is really like looking for who is God, and He is showing us who He is in passage after passage. Then, what does He require of me? How do I put my love for Him into action? What do we find in 2 Peter 1:16-21 with these questions? We find that our heavenly Father is a speaking God. We wouldn't have the Bible if He hadn't sent the Holy Spirit to pick up the Scripture authors and carry them. We wouldn't have it. We find out that He is a God that does not obliterate our personality. We find out that He is a God who is concerned for truth in all things, and that He considered the Word of His beloved Son so important, so powerful, that He moved eyewitnesses to record it. We discovered that our heavenly Father takes great pleasure in authenticating His one and only Son: *This is My beloved Son with whom I am well pleased*, and that He directs us to listen to Him. What does our heavenly Father require of us? We could say many things.

He does not ask us to live our lives on a lie, because He is a God of truth. He wants you and me to live our lives, not on myths, legends, sci-fi fantasy, but on verifiable eyewitness testimony of true events on which we can base this life and the life to come. What else does He require of you and me this morning? He requires us to pay close attention to His Word, to listen to His voice. As it reveals Christ, we see His power and glory, and we anticipate His return as King. We give our best attention to the voice of our Father. We often need reminders that the first word we must hear daily is the Word of God. Is that the first word you are hearing? Most of us don't hear God first in the day. We check last night's scores; we check this morning's news; we check the weather; we listen to someone else. Yet, it is so powerful, so important to begin the day,

hearing the voice of our heavenly Father first. That's the Word we must hear first, and it is so fitting at the end of the day to come back and hear Him again. That's the rhythm that will take you far in the life of faithfulness. Jesus says: "My sheep know My voice." We need to be people who give our best attention to His voice, and when we do so over time, we place ourselves in a posture of discipleship, of learning, of growing, of anticipating what will He do today. What will He show me about His infinite greatness? When He shows you something of His infinite greatness; when He reminds you of what He asks of you; and then you get the day to go out and experience that. Then you are actually fully equipped and ready to share something. People don't need you and me to tell them the weather. People don't need you and me to tell them about the latest disaster. People need you and me to tell them what God has done for us in Jesus Christ and who He is and that He speaking to us as His children, day by day, week by week. This God, who spoke to us in the pages of Scripture, spoke to us climactically in His coming into this world.

When He came into this world, He taught the Kingdom of God has arrived. He taught His disciples the blessings of the Kingdom. He demonstrated the reality of the Kingdom with signs and miracles and took His disciples up to the Upper Room the night in which He was betrayed. He told them: "I eagerly desire to eat this Passover with you before I suffer." In the context of this Passover meal, Jesus took bread. He broke it in the presence of His disciples and said: "This is My body, broken for you. Do this in remembrance of Me." Later in the meal, He took the cup and said: "This cup is the cup of the New Covenant in My blood, which is poured out for you. Do this in remembrance of Me." The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Eyewitnesses said: "We saw it. We touched Him. We heard the Voice from heaven speak: 'This is My beloved Son with whom I am well pleased. Listen to Him.'" To hear the Word of Christ right now is to take Him at His Word. This is His body broken for you. This is His blood shed for you. All who receive find forgiveness and full participation in the New Covenant community. If you put your trust in Christ, you are welcome at His table today. Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, we praise You and we honor You. We thank You that we have Your Word spoken, reliably transmitted, trustworthy, and that that Word reveals You, reveals Christ, and that You call us to Yourself even now. We ask Your blessing. Prepare our hearts to receive this memorial feast.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.