

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

Q&A – Is the Bible reliable?

Sunday 10 January 2007 (10am)

Rev Stu Cameron

Just before Christmas one of our politicians was in the media a lot - and our politicians, of course, love the media. This man seemed to be getting more press than most - Tony Abbott, the Leader of the Opposition.

And Tony Abbott, of course, is well known for many things – a very articulate man but also a very strong Catholic faith. In fact, he had trained for a number of years for the priesthood before deciding it wasn't for him but he still retains that very strong Christian and Catholic faith. And he is a very controversial figure as politicians tend to be – they polarise people.

He made a particular comment in the weeks leading up to Christmas when he was asked a question about the Bible and its place in our education system. I'll paraphrase what he said – I have the direct quote here – but he essentially said that for an understanding of our origins and an understanding of our culture, that a basic understanding of the Bible is absolutely and fundamentally necessary - to understand our legal code, to understand where our literature has come from. And even though, he said people don't need to be believers, they should have some understanding of the Scriptures and of Christianity.

Well, anyone would think that he had said people should go and read the works of Hitler because the uproar that was in the media was unbelievable. Now this isn't just about politics, let me underline that, I'm not saying who I vote for or who I endorse or anything like that, but I couldn't believe the uproar there was in the media.

Did you see any of it? Did you hear any of it? It was unbelievable. All about our young people in school – through comparative religion classes or whatever it might be – understanding the bedrock of Christian faith, which is at the heart of our culture here in modern western democracies, understanding some aspect of, some basic understanding of the Bible.

In many ways it's not surprising. You see the Bible has been attacked, has been burned, has been banned for centuries. Many people have this very antagonistic attitude towards the Bible. They don't like it. They don't like the portrait of God that it paints. They don't think it's reliable. They don't think it's historical. They think it's an ancient text for ancient days with no relevance for the new day that we live in - this modern enlightened world that we live in. There are many atheist proponents of this; I call them fundamentalist atheists because they so fundamentally believe in what they're saying. It's almost like an alternative dogma or religion they're offering. And Richard Dorkins seems to be the high priest of this new movement. He wrote the book "The God Delusion". He was quoted about his attitude towards the Bible ... let me read it to you:

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.
(Richard Dorkins)

He doesn't hold back, does he?! This is the attitude towards the God or the portrait of God that the Bible paints. And this is not new. The Bible has been attacked for the last two thousand years, or even beyond when you look at the Hebrew Scriptures. It's been pulled apart, it's been banned, it's been burnt, it's been pushed to the side but still it survives and still it speaks to hundreds of million of people today who themselves hear the word of God spoken through it. You see, the Christian faith is a faith of the book - we are the people of a particular book.

Here in this church we have eight stated values which are drawn from our own heritage and history. One that we state very clearly and succinctly is this:

Centering our lives on God's written Word we will allow Scripture and the Holy Spirit to guide and direct us as we encounter God's living Word (Christ).

We are people of the book. Our Christian faith is anchored in our understanding, our reading, our interpretation, our wrestling with the Bible.

Tim Keller puts it even more directly:

The Christian faith requires belief in the Bible.
(Tim Keller)

Now just a week or so ago, Sue and I celebrated our 21st wedding anniversary. We love being married to each other but it would be really strange if Sue came to me and said, "Look, I love being married. I love everything about being married; I love the ring, I love being called Mrs whoever – I love all of that. I love being married but I don't really want to have a husband". That would be a very strange thing for her to say. She might be tempted to say that from time to time but it would be a very strange thing to say.

It's nonsensical to say you can be married but not have a husband or a wife. Well in the same way, it would be nonsensical to say, "Well I'm a Christian but I don't really need the Bible. I mean the Bible is interesting but it's not really important or it's not really authoritative". You see, the Christian faith requires belief in the Bible. Our faith is anchored to the portrait of God and God's work in our world that's articulated in the Bible.

So the question we have before us today: If the Christian faith stands or falls on the reliability of the Bible, is the Bible we have today ... is it reliable? Is it reliable? And that's what I want to address today.

God's voice is heard

The first thing I'd say about the Bible is that in the Bible, God's voice is heard.

Saint Augustine, one of the great church fathers, who lived around about 300 years after Jesus, said that we have been created for God and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God, that we've been created to live in a relationship with God, to be communicated to by God, to communicate with God. Behind that statement is this understanding that we have been created to hear from God, for God to speak to us.

Saint Ignatius, another one of the church fathers, said, "He who has heard the Word of God can bear God's silences."

Many of us have experienced God's silences – God doesn't appear to be speaking to us – but when we have heard God speak to us - in a variety of ways - we can lay hold of that and recognise that God is there, that God is in a relationship with us, that God loves us, that God has our best interests at heart.

God speaks. God's voice is heard through the pages of Scripture. When we go to the Scriptures themselves ... we see at the beginning of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, in Genesis, right back in chapter one, the first activity of God is to ... what? Speak. The first activity of God is to speak:

And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light
(Genesis 1:3)

And we see this repetition all the way through Genesis chapter one: "And God said. 'Let there be ...'" and it was done. So God's voice is heard and God's voice is active and God's voice is effective. God speaks. God's voice is heard.

We go to the beginning of the New Testament, to the Gospel of John ... in the first chapter in the first verse, again we see the story of Jesus commencing in a similar vein:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God
(John 1:1)

The Greek word is 'logos'. It can be translated, "In the beginning was the spoken word and the spoken word was with God and the spoken word was God".

God and God's voice are inseparable. God's voice is heard.

And this stands in stark contrast to the gods of the Hebrew people's day and the gods of Jesus' day. You see, all the gods of Jesus' day and before, they were gods who could be seen but were not heard. They were idols – Baal and Aphrodite and Ashera and a litany of others. They all had images made of them – some in bronze, some in gold, some in clay, some in stone. You could go and worship at them, you could bow down before them. They were there, they could be seen but they were not heard from at all. They could not speak.

The prophet Jeremiah likened these idols to a 'scarecrows in a watermelon patch' – all show and no voice. The gods of the idols could be seen but not heard, but the God of the Old Testament and the New - YHWH, Adonai, the LORD, the Father that Jesus knew - could not be seen but was heard. He could speak. His voice could be heard.

God's voice is heard through the pages of the Old and New Testaments, audibly by some – by people like Moses and Samuel and Joshua and some of the prophets. God's voice is heard by the people prophetically as God's people get up and speak God's word on his behalf. They speak his word of grace or of judgement or of love or of mercy or of correction, whatever God's message might be. God's voice is heard audibly, prophetically and God's voice is heard circumstantially as the people of Israel look around them, as they experience the judgement and yes the grace and mercy of God, they hear God speaking to them through their circumstances and they recognise God's action and activity in their lives.

The Bible is underpinned by this assertion that God's voice is heard.

God's voice is recorded

You know many conservative Muslim scholars believe the Koran was dictated to the prophet Mohammed by Allah, by God himself, and that in essence Mohammed's hand was divinely directed by God.

Some people have had that attitude about the Bible, that once in some magical way, as the authors of the Scriptures sat down, that their hand was taken over. That's not really an accurate picture. God speaks through the forty or more authors of the Bible but God himself is inspiring them. We do read in the Scriptures that God writes himself, for example, in Exodus chapter 32:

The tablets [the Ten Commandments] were the work of God, the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets.
(Exodus 32:16)

Jesus in that wonderful story, that very challenging, inspiring provocative story, the one of the women caught in adultery:

Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger
(John 8:6b)

... and all the women's accusers begin to scatter. There have been pages and pages and books and books about what Jesus might have written, but it's all pure speculation. We don't know.

But the Bible we have is not written directly by the hand of God but is written by God through the inspiration of the human authors that bring it to us. It's inspired by God. It's God's Word to us, mediated to us through his people.

It's written to us in three ancient languages: Ancient Greek, which most of the New Testament is written in; Ancient Hebrew in, which most of the Old Testament is written and, throughout the Old and New Testament, some Aramaic which is the very language that Jesus would have spoken as he ministered amongst us on the earth. As I said before, it's written by 40 different authors with a whole range of different experiences. Some are Kings, some are prophets, some are fishermen – a whole range of different people, all with their own experiences and contexts.

It's written on a variety of different forms; it's mainly written on papyrus which was made by reeds that were taken from the banks of the Nile river, matted together, layered across at right angles and then beaten into a pulp like paper and then used as it was dried. Or it was written on parchment, on animal skin. Much of those papyri and those animal skins survive to this day and I'll speak about them in just a moment.

It was written, much of it, during the time of the events that were occurring. Some of it was written after the time of the events that are recorded. For example, the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – most Bible scholars would say Mark was written somewhere around 20 years after the events it records and the others 20 or so years after that again.

There is so much evidence that points to the reliability of these ancient records. The manuscript evidence is in 24,000 separate different portions of papyrus or parchment. The oldest one, which was found in a cave in Egypt is called P42. It's not a very

attractive name – it's a piece of papyrus on which is a verse from John's Gospel. It's dated around 125 AD, somewhere around 20 or 30 years after the original is thought to have been written. It is a remarkable piece of evidence.

The manuscript evidence strongly supports that the New Testament was all written in the first century, in the 30 or 40 or 50 years after Jesus ministered amongst us. There is no comparison in all antiquity in comparison with other ancient writings in terms of how much evidence there is for the reliability of the words of the Bible we have today.

For example, Julius Cesar, the first Emperor of Rome, who lived between 100 and 44 BC, who wrote copious notes about his reign and his rule: The earliest copy of his writing is dated back to AD 900 – one thousand years after he had lived amongst us and after he had written these words. The number of surviving manuscripts is 10 and yet historians rely on these ancient manuscripts, even though there's one thousand years' gap between when they were written and the first available manuscript. Or most there is no doubt whatsoever about the genuineness of the words, they are attributed to Cesar.

When we go to the New Testament we see that all the 27 Gospels and letters we have were written between AD 40 and 100. The earliest copy, which I showed you before, was in AD 125. The time span between when they were written and the earliest manuscripts we have is 25 to 50 years. And we have 24,000. It has no comparison with any other ancient document, whether it be documents attributed towards Homer or Plato or Tacitus or Josephus or any of the other ancient well-known, famous historians or philosophers or leaders of that same era. The New Testament is unsurpassed - unsurpassed in the weight of documentary evidence that points to its reliability. And all these manuscripts have been dated, they've been cross-checked and so the Bibles we have today, that I have here in front of me, that you have at home or you've brought with you today, these are the result of people poring over these 24,000 documents – this is just the New Testament – and checking the reliability of the words and making sure that what we have accurately reflects what was written, accurately reflects what was inspired 2000 years ago.

We also have the extra-Biblical evidence, the evidence outside the Bible itself. In the first few hundred years of the Christian church there were many church fathers like Augustine, like Polycarp, like Irenaeus, who wrote a lot of material outside the Bible records we have but they were quote heavily from the Bible. In the first three to four hundred years we have all of these writings from these church fathers and they quote extensively from the Bible. In fact, there are 86,000 separate quotes from the first three centuries of the church, from the Bible. If you put all those quotes together you could reconstruct the New Testament all apart from 20 verses. This is evidence outside the Bible itself about the accuracy and the reliability of the events that are recorded there. It's a remarkable confirmation of the accuracy and the reliability of the text.

Some of you are thinking, but the Bible was written at best 20 to 50 years after the events it records. How can we be sure that the words attributed to Jesus are accurate? How do we know that the people have got those right? How do we know the stories have not been elaborated, not been expounded. You know how when you tell a story it gets bigger and bigger with the telling?

And we look back with our modern eyes. We live in a very literate culture where we don't believe anything unless it's written down. All of us can read and all of us can write in some way, shape or form. But back in Jesus' day – and this would have been the same in the centuries before and the centuries after – only three percent of the population could read or write ... and that's at best. Three percent could read or write.

It was very much an oral culture and so writings or stories were passed down orally and there was a skill that had been developed, as it happens in various cultures, where things could be passed down accurately.

I've shared here before that in Jesus' days, all good Jewish boys ... the first part of their education would be to memorise, not to read, but to memorise the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch. Can you imagine what that would be like? Memorising, Genesis and Exodus- *Leviticus* for goodness sake! Memorising all of that! A boy of 12, a Jewish boy of 12 would be able to quote you – not chapter and verse, they didn't have those – but quote you from those first five books. This was the skill set that they had in those days. To be honest, now if I was (as an experiment here today) to whisper into your ear – don't look so worried, I'm not going to do it – if I was to whisper some message and ask you to pass it along and pass it along the line, how accurate do you think it would be once it got over here? Not accurate at all. We don't live in an oral culture, we're not used to memorising what's said to us. We're used to reading things and having a record there. Not in Jesus' day.

A Harvard historian, at the turn of the 20th century, was wrestling with this issue in terms of the works of Homer, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. These are epic poems which, combined, have 27,000 lines. And modern historians were looking at these works and were saying there's no way these things could have been passed on orally and written down accurately. Nobody can remember 27,000 lines, for goodness sake. It's just ridiculous. But this historian went back and saw that there was this structure, this poetic structure to these verses and he tested out a hypothesis. He went to places like the Balkans, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, where there were ancient peasant cultures still carrying on the traditions of the day and he found out that these cultures were able to memorise these incredibly complex, long poems and story forms accurately – people who could not read nor write. Such was the strength of this oral culture – a similar culture to that of Jesus' day.

Based on the modern finding it is not at all presumptuous to believe that the teaching and ministry of Jesus could be written down accurately 20 , 30 40 years after the event. Jesus' teaching would have been passed around from one Christian to the next. There were still eye witnesses around to verify the accuracy of those words and so even though they were not written down initially, these had been burned indelibly into the minds and the hearts of the people so that when they were poured out onto the page, they were accurate.

And modern historians love to play games by ripping it apart. Rubbish! We look back with our modern mindset and we think, 'They couldn't do that, they were an illiterate people'. They had a different skill set to us. They were able to do far more with the oral word than we can ever do.

There was the eyewitness testimony. Most of the New Testament was written when there were still eyewitnesses to the events which it testifies to - in the Acts of the Apostles, in the Gospels - and so if there was any elaboration, any expansion beyond what actually happened there would have been eyewitnesses. There would have been a conspiracy on a major scale to believe that no-one would have contradicted or corrected the words recorded in our New Testament.

Some people say, 'Well, I mean the New Testament has the recordings and the writings of the Gospels and the letters of Paul but it's left out a whole heap of other sacred writings that have been left out for political reasons', that the Canon of Scripture, which we call it, which was finalised around 400 AD at the Synod of Hippo –

there's been a gigantic conspiracy to leave out the controversial stuff. This is the Dan Brown, DaVinci Code conspiracy.

But there's strong historical evidence to show that around about 150 AD, certainly by 200 AD, the Canon of Scripture had been fixed. There was a lot of debate within the early church about what was Scripture, what was inspired and what was not. For example, there was a lot of debate about Hebrews, about some of the letters of Peter, about Revelation, about the letter of James. But at the end of the day, they are deemed inspired by the Holy Spirit and consistent with the teaching of the rest of the New Testament.

When the Synod of Hippo in AD 393 listed the 27 books of the New Testament, it did not confer upon them any authority which they did not already possess, but simply recorded their previously established canonicity.
(F F Bruce)

In other words, they New Testament scriptures already had authority long before they were confirmed officially. The Bible is reliable. God's voice is heard. God's voice is recorded.

God's voice is translated

The translation of the Scriptures started even before New Testament times. In around 300 BC Alexandria was a major city in the Greek Roman world and it had a legendary library of around 500,000 volumes. It was a seat of learning. The King of Egypt invited the elders of Jerusalem to send 70 of their best scholars to come and translate the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. You see, there were more Jews living outside of Jerusalem in the diaspora – the dispersion – than there were living in Jerusalem itself. Some would estimate that in Alexandria itself, there was anything up to 500,000 Jews. But they didn't speak Hebrew any more. They didn't speak Aramaic. They spoke Greek. And so the Bible needed to be translated into their own tongue. Legend has it that those 70 scholars got into 70 separate rooms, provided by the King of Egypt, and sat down with the Hebrew Scriptures and translated them into Greek and every one of those translations was word-for-word perfect and the same.

Then, in AD 405 – so this is after the New Testament - Jerome translated the Greek New Testament and the Hebrew Old Testament into Latin, which had become the language of the day. He went back to the original texts and translated them and that was the Bible for at least a millennium. Until in around 1500, people like Wycliffe and people like William Tyndale started to translate the Latin text into English, believing that every believer should have access to the Bible in their own language. For that they got killed.

In 1611 the first King James version of the Bible was published, as 52 scholars went back again to the original text, translated it into the English language of the day and that has been the pattern right down through the ages: The Revised Standard Version; the New Revised Standard Version; the New International Version, which I preach from. Scholars go back to those original manuscripts and translate them into the idiom and the language of their day. They go back to those thousands of manuscripts, they pore over them. They argue over them. They debate about them. And eventually we have the Bible that we read today, accurately reflecting the original text.

Today the Bible – or at least portions of it - is translated into at least 2,400 languages of an estimated 6,900 living languages in the world. Ninety-eight percent of the world has access to the Bible or at least some portion of it. We support, in a small way, Reverend Aron Bayer who is a minister of the United Church Solomon Islands who is still working on a translation of the Old Testament into one of the native languages of the Solomon Islands. I love the fact that we are supporting him in that work. God's Word is translated.

God's voice is truth

Now we live in a world that is suspicious of any 'truth' claim. Truth is dismissed in post-modern cynicism - that words don't have meaning, that truth is subjective, that everything is relative. That may be true for you but it's not true for me. "Look I honour your ability to work out the truth for you but don't try to impose your truth claims on me. There is no such thing as absolute truth." This permeates our culture ... in our universities, in our schools, in all sorts of facets of life. That's one pole.

At the other pole, many of us want to reduce the truth to a few bumper sticker slogans. Christians are very good at doing this. Have you ever heard the phrase, "The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it?" I've probably used it myself when I've been a bit frustrated. Well it begs the question, the Bible says ... what? You believe... what? And where have you drawn your understanding from?

You see, truth cannot be dismissed, nor can it be reduced. Truth has to be wrestled with. Truth has to be pursued. Truth has to be sought after. And to discover truth we have to go back to the origin of truth. We have to look back to the claims of Jesus who claimed to be the Christ, the Messiah. This is what he had to say:

I am the way, the truth and the life
(John 14:6)

Jesus was making an astounding claim to say, 'You cannot know the truth apart from me'. He goes on to say:

If you hold to my teaching, you really are my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.
(John 8:31-32)

So if Jesus was making this claim about truth being himself, about being the personification of truth, it then flows on to suggest that our attitude towards the Bible should be the same attitude that Jesus himself had towards the Scriptures in his day. And when you look at the life and teachings of Jesus, you come to understand that Jesus did not dismiss the Scriptures, he interpreted them. He did not ignore the Scriptures, he explained them. He did not abolish the Scriptures, he fulfilled them. He fulfilled them in his life, his death and his resurrection. Jesus' teaching was rooted in expounding and elaborating the Old Testament scriptures.

Some of us say, and perhaps may even be thinking, 'But there are passages in the Bible that I just find purely offensive. The portrait that they paint of God, what they ask of me, I find it deeply offensive. It's offensive towards women, it's offensive towards gay people. It's got stuff I can't understand – that stuff in Revelation and Daniel ... who can understand that?'. But again we want to reduce the Bible down to some simple slogans that we can put up on a poster on the wall.

T S Elliot said that the measure of a book is not whether you can read it but whether that book reads you.

Tim Keller, who is a Christian minister, an apologist, who wrote a fantastic book called 'The Reason for God', writes this:

Only if your God can say things that outrage you and make you struggle will you know that you have got hold of a real God and not some figment of your imagination.
(Tim Keller)

So if you pick up your Bible and you open its pages and sometimes you're offended – **great!** If sometimes you pick up your Bible and you're outraged – fantastic because it seems to me that God speaks to us in our condition and our condition is often rebellion towards him.

God challenges us. God inspires us through his Word. He changes our hearts and our lives through his Word.

And so **we should approach the Bible with an open mind and a searching heart.**

Martin Luther, the great German reformer, said this:

The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold of me.
(Martin Luther)

Can we approach the Bible by opening it up and just expecting that, whatever faith we have - or if we have no faith at all, that perhaps God might speak to us? That he might illuminate these words on the page, that they become words that enter our lives, our souls, our hearts?

When I reflect on my interaction with the Bible over the last 40 years I can see how God has done that again and again. When I had a Bible given to me when I was a young boy, it was one of those picture Bibles with those Cecil B Demille depictions of the Old Testament. I loved it! David and Daniel and Joshua - these wonderful 'Boy's Own' adventure stories. I was just captured by it. I was given a Gideon's New Testament when I was in my first year of High School. My friends used its pages to make rollie cigarettes. I was given a Bible on my 18th birthday and then again when I was ordained - the Bible I preach from. There's nothing magical about the Bibles I own or the many Bibles I have at home or here at church but when I look back to what the Bible has done for me I can say 'Amen' to the words of Martin Luther.

It was when I was a 15 year old boy, struggling with the understanding that God could love me, someone who stuffed up, who let God down so often, who had an image of God as some black-caped figure in the sky, I read the words in the first letter of John, "There is no fear in love but perfect love cuts out all fear". My life was changed.

When I moved to the city and I was struggling with where to go in my life and a friend on a camp gave me what he believed was a word from Scripture for me, 1 Timothy 1:12: "I thank Christ Jesus my Lord who has strengthened me because he considered me faithful and has placed me in his service" and I believe it was the first time I thought God might use even me. God's Word laid hold of me.

It was later on when I was leading a youth group with Sue and preaching on this stinking hot, Adelaide summer's night, barefoot in front of these bored teenagers and was reading again from Romans chapter eight: "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, that nothing in all creation, not the principalities, nor powers of angels, demons, nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God" ... and that just swept over me like a tsunami and I just wept and wept and wept and God's Word laid hold me.

Last year I shared with you, as I reflected back on the year, there was a verse which I'd read again and again and again. I'd read through the Scriptures but for some reason this hadn't taken root but, inspired by the Spirit, Psalm 67 verse 4: "Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings".

The Bible lays hold of us and this leads us to the final test. You see I think there's so much evidence that points to the objective truth that the Bible is reliable but, at the end of the day, this is truth that has to be experienced by you. This is truth that has to be experienced – not just known but experienced. That's truth. Truth is not just a cognitive thought but it's a reality that's experienced.

I go to the story of Samuel in the Bible, in the first book that bears his name. Samuel was a boy and he was in the temple under his master Eli and the Scriptures say that in those days of rebellion in the house of Israel the voice of the Lord was not heard very much, there were not many visions. And as Samuel's lying down in the temple, he hears a voice calling out to him. He wonders what it is. Is it something he's eaten? Is it a figment of his imagination? Is he going mad? And he goes to Eli ... once, twice, three times ... and eventually Eli recognises that God might be speaking to him and he encourages him to go back and this is what happens next:

The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening"
(1 Samuel 3:10)

For those of you who have doubts about the Bible, for those of you who doubt even that God exists, I'm going to put one last challenge in front of you. I want to suggest to you that the final test of whether the Bible is reliable is actually to open it up and, with whatever faith you have, to say those words, 'Speak, for I am listening'. I know God won't let you down, that God will speak to you through reading the words on the page and speaking to other people.

Even if you have no faith, even if you don't believe God is there, even if you believe God is a figment of our imagination or a projection of our desire - what have you got to lose? You're just going to offer some words into thin air. 'Speak, for I am listening'. Test it yourself. Don't dismiss it. Test it yourself and see if what I say is not true. Test it yourself.

Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, said:

The Bible is a letter from God with our personal address on it.
(Soren Kierkegaard)

The question for us today is whether we will open the envelope and read it.

Ravi Zacharias is a great Christian apologist and leader. In the early 1970s he was ministering amongst the US troops in Vietnam and he was assisted by a Vietnamese translator, Hien Pham, and he would help him translate his messages for the South

Vietnamese troops. Towards the end of that war, Ravi Zacharias was separated from his translator. He'd become a good friend and was a Christian believer, and when South Vietnam fell he lost all contact, until 18 years later when Hien was in the US now as a refugee and he shared with him what had happened. Hien said after the fall of South Vietnam, because he'd been assisting the South Vietnamese forces and the US troops, he was put into a labour camp where he was reindoctrinated. He was told that Christianity was a lie, that it was a cultural western imperial plot to rob him of life. That the only hope that he had was in communist ideals. He heard every day, again and again, Marx and Engels and other communist writers and thinkers. And he got to the point after being two years in that labour camp of giving up. He thought perhaps they're right, perhaps this is true, perhaps everything I've been told, everything I've read, everything I've heard ... perhaps it's all a lie?

Let me read what happened next:

The next morning, he was assigned the dreaded chore of cleaning the prison latrines [the toilets]. As he cleaned out a tin can overflowing with toilet paper, his eye caught what seemed to be English printed on one piece of paper. He hurriedly grabbed it, washed it, and after his roommates had retired that night, he retrieved the paper and read the words, "Romans, Chapter 8." Trembling, he began to read, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ... For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:28,38,39).

Hien wept. He knew his Bible, and he knew that there was not a more relevant passage for one on the verge of surrender. He cried out to God, asking forgiveness. This was to have been the first day that he would not pray; evidently God had other plans.

As it were, there was an official in the camp who was using a Bible as toilet paper. So Hien asked the commander if he could clean the latrines regularly. Each day he picked up a portion of Scripture, cleaned it off, and added it to his collection of nightly reading.

(Recounted by Ravi Zacharias)

What his tormenters were using as toilet paper could not be more treasured for him.

Down through the ages, the question of whether the Bible is reliable has been answered by men and women, young and old, from hundreds of different cultures, hundreds of different language groups, hundreds of different people groups. That question has been answered by people like Hien Pham.

Is the Bible reliable? I have heard the voice of God through these pages. Open your Bibles. Say the words, 'Speak for I am listening' and find out what God does.