

## **Jason Upchurch - Systematic Theology - Bibliology - Canon - Deuteronomy 31:9-13**

This morning we're coming back to our occasional series on systematic theology; the study of doctrine. The Bible calls pastors to teach doctrine, and it calls all believers to know doctrine.

We are still in the big umbrella of bibliology - the study of the Bible and this morning we're specifically looking at the canon of Scripture.

And I want to look at the canon of Scripture a little bit differently than most systematic theologies present it. I don't want to give a historical development lecture or a technical analysis of how the people of God recognized the canon. I just want to let the Scripture speak for itself about the issue. So this truly is a biblical look at what the Bible says about its own contents.

What do we mean by the canon of Scripture? Let me define some things and then we'll talk about why this is important.

First of all, the word canon means a measuring stick. We're not talking about huge guns being pulled by horses on a battlefield. A canon was sort of the ancient equivalent of a yard stick, a measuring stick. And the idea behind a canon - just like a yard stick - is to measure things in order to ensure they are the proper size.

So when we built a garage, the inspector came out with his measuring tape and measured the post holes, the building size, the distance from the property line, so on to ensure everything measured up just right.

In the same way, when we say the canon of Scripture what we're saying is that believers over the millennia have taken these writings, and measured them so to speak to ensure that they measure up to God's Word.

All 66 books of the Bible have been poured over to ensure these are actually God's words - the church has measured them. The church has also measured other writings and determined they don't measure up to the standard of God's Word.

The Apocrypha, 1 & 2 Clement, the Didache, Aquinas, Augustine, Calvin - those writings are not Scripture. Many of them are right and good, but they don't measure up to the standard of Scripture. I'd encourage you to actually read the Apocrypha. Or the Didache or Calvin or the early church Fathers. But they're not on the same level as Scripture.

And, just to be clear, the Church did not make these 66 books turn into the Bible. The Church did not decree that Galatians and 1 Kings and Song of Solomon magically turned into Scripture. No; the church looked at Galatians, evaluated it and measured it with the rest of God's Word and recognized that it measured up to the standard of God's Word.

A jeweler doesn't make diamonds, a jeweler simply recognizes whether or not a shiny rock is a diamond. In the same way the Church did not make books Scripture, they simply recognized books of the Bible as having been given by God.

The Catholic Church would take issue with that statement, by the way. The Catholic Church believes the church had to exist before the canon. The problem is that throughout history God delivered his word to his people - he declared what his word was, not the church.

Now, a couple more observations before we start looking at passages: we don't have any of the original copies of the Word of God. We don't have the original Exodus document, or the Jeremiah document; we have no original documents. All we have are copies.

But God has still preserved his Word down through the millennia with surprising accuracy. When we see copies of the OT from the 700s AD then compare them to some of the Dead Sea scrolls from a couple hundred BC we realize that God's people have taken extremely great care to copy God's Word accurately.

Second, is that by the time of Jesus the OT was established as the Word of God. Very few people argue that the OT is settled - usually if people take issue with the canon of Scripture it's the NT books.

We'll look at some places in the OT to get a better understanding. But when Jesus and the Pharisees are arguing about stuff, Jesus's never says "You can't quote that - that's not in the Bible." He never says that. He says they don't understand what they are reading. But throughout their exchanges there's never a time where they are arguing about which books are quoted.

So what that tells us is that at the very least the OT Canon was established by Jesus's time. None of the apocryphal books are quoted as authoritative although there are outside books that are quoted in the NT.

Now, what I want to is show you the development of the canon from the beginning and see how it slowly expanded.

Okay, here in **Deut 31:9-13** we have the account of Moses writing down the book of Deuteronomy. **Read 9-13**

Why does this matter? It matters for a couple reasons. First, because God is commanding that his whole Law - the 5 Books of Moses - be read every 7 years when the people gather for the year of Sabbath. But what are they going to read? That has to be defined. They are going to read all the words that God gave to Moses. Nothing more, nothing less. Because that's what God will require of Israel.

**Look at Deut 32:47** for a minute. This chapter is often called the song of Moses. And it's really a song about the history of Israel and God's work in making them his people. And at the end, Moses says this about the song and all he has written down. **Read 44-47**

Now, again, Moses is talking about the whole body of his work. I think probably the last chapter of Deuteronomy was written by Joshua because it records Moses's death.

But I want to make a really devotional point related to this passage. We are called to take these words to heart, we are called - men especially - are called to teach them to our children. Why? So our kids will walk in the way of God. **Read 46**

You guys, the first 5 books are not obsolete. They are fully God's word. Do not despise these words because they are God's Words, part of his canon.

But look again at **Vs. 47. Read**

Listen, these are not empty words, they are your life. We're not going in to possess the Promised Land, we're going to possess the real Jerusalem. How much more should we be careful to do them.

That's what's at stake in the canon discussion. Is what we are reading life from God? Or is it something else?

Imagine you're going scuba diving and you've got 2 tanks. And you'll be a couple hundred feet under. You better be sure that what you're breathing is oxygen, that what you're breathing is life. Because if not, you're dead.

The Book of Mormon is not life, the Quran is not life. Watchtower is not life, Ellen G White's writings are not life, CS Lewis, Wayne Grudem, Jason Upchurch - those writings are not life. Some might be okay, others poison, but they are not life. Only God's Word is life.

That's why this is a big deal. What's life? Which books? What's not?

**Turn to Deut 17:18-20** for a moment. This is interesting. Remember Israel started out as a theocracy - God was in charge and there was no king. King Saul didn't come to power for more than 400 years after Moses wrote down these words. Joshua led Israel, then there was the time of the Judges. But here in the Law there's

a sneak peak that God knew there would be a time when there would be kings. Notice what they are supposed to do. This is where it gets good. **Read**

Every king who came to power in Israel was to write down their own copy of the Law. And the priests had to approve it. This would do a few things. It would mean that he would have had to read every single law he was responsible for upholding. No excuses that he didn't know. Second, he couldn't add or take away from the law because the priests had to approve it. Third, this copy was something he was to meditate on constantly as he ruled to guide him.

What God is doing is anticipating the canon - the 5 books - being closed at least for a time. No more and no less than these 5 books ruled the people of God for some amount of time.

**Deut. 4:2** You shall not add to the word I command you nor take from it.

**Deut. 12:32:** Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it.

This is canon - for that moment in time, that was the entirety of God's Word to God's people in written form.

**Turn to Josh 24:26-28.** So there are huge warnings about adding to the Word of God. Well, Joshua is the 6th book of the Bible and look here. **Read**

Why wasn't Joshua killed for adding to the Word of God? He must have had a very compelling reason to add to the Word. And the people who knew Joshua must have had a very compelling reason to allow him to add to the Word.

It seems like the people of God recognized that Joshua was used by God to add to the canon of Scripture.

What's interesting is that the rest of the chapter records the death of Joshua - which I'm guessing Joshua didn't write. So someone else came along and added these last paragraphs to the Word.

Now, part of what this tells us is that we believe in what we call progressive revelation. Progressive revelation is the idea that God did not just drop a completed Bible out of heaven for us to pick up and read. He slowly revealed his will to us over time.

**Heb. 1:1** Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.

The author of Hebrews makes it clear that God slowly, over time, gave us more and more information. And the culmination of his revelation was in Jesus. Everything looked forward to Jesus. But it was a slow process.

Side: We just got done reading through the book of Joshua as a family and several times throughout the book it talks about how something exists "to this day." Rahab lives in Israel "to this day (**Josh 7:25**). Joshua burned the city of Ai and made it a heap of stones, and he killed the king of Ai and piled a heap of stones that stands to this day (**8:28**). And how the people of Israel piled up a heap of stones for an altar of remembrance when they crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land. And inevitably one of my kids asks, "Dad, did you see that when you went to Israel? It says 'it's there to this very day.'" And of course the question is good because on a fresh reading it would seem like the Bible is actually talking directly to us - removing the proverbial 4th wall. But it's not. It's speaking to the generation that lived when the book was written.

So when Joshua was talking to his kids and grandkids, that pile of stones stood to that very day. The stones are gone for us some 3,400 years later.

**Turn to 1 Kings 11:41-43.** One of the questions about how we got our Bible is what source material did the writers use? Where did they get the information to write it down? Did God just whisper it in their ears and they write down exactly what God said? This is called the dictation theory. And the answer is probably not for a lot of the Bible.

Remember Hebrews said “in various ways?” Sometimes God directly recorded to them. But other times he used other methods. Many times the Holy Spirit worked in people to utilize royal records for His word. **Look at this. Read 41-43**

There were royal archives that were kept with the kings. Now, this royal archive may or may not have been used for this book. But it seems like this is an ancient bibliography that the writer of Kings is using to alert us to the fact that he put this book together, in part, by using a source called the book of the Acts of Solomon.

**Look at 14:29-31** here we see the same thing. Quick note before we read. There are a lot of people who actually try to undermine the reliability of the OT by questioning who wrote it. You’ll hear people refer to the JEPD theory - that’s an effort to say we have all these different sources to prove Moses didn’t write the Pentateuch - the first 5 books. JEPD theory is nonsense. But what is true is that many of the biblical authors did use source material and that’s okay. **Read 29-31**

This phrasing happens a few times throughout the OT indicating that there were other books that recorded in greater detail the history of Israel that the authors of the Bible referenced to compile Scripture. Now, are those books inspired by the Holy Spirit? The answer is no.

This is where it gets a little technical. Not every source is inspired as canon. The actual inspiration happens to the individual at the time they are writing down the Scripture. The human is not inerrant all the time. Moses erred. Paul erred. Peter erred. But when they were writing down the Word, **2 Pet. 1:21** says they were carried along by the Holy Spirit to write down God’s Word without error. And so the end result was that what they wrote down at the time was God himself speaking.

As BB Warfield once said, “What Scripture says, God says. And what God says Scripture says.”

It’s only what the biblical authors wrote that is actually Scripture. This is especially important because in the New Testament, you’ll see quotes from Greek philosophers, Greek plays, even in Jude you’ll find a quote from the Book of Enoch - a pseudepigrapha book that’s frankly quite crazy. Those sources are not God’s Word. But when they are used by God in his Word to make a point then the quoting of them becomes God’s Word. That’s technical but important.

Let me show you one other place where we see this compilation method. **Turn to Luke 1.** This is called the prologue to Luke’s gospel. It’s the introduction, as it were. Notice what Luke says. **Read 1-4**

Remember Luke was a doctor. He was very educated and also accompanied Paul on his missionary journeys for some amount of time. Well it appears they met a guy named Theophilus. And Theophilus - whose name means “Lover of God” - was probably a very wealthy Roman governor. His name is a Roman name, his is addressed as “Most excellent Theophilus” which would be a title of Roman nobility. And it’s likely he paid Luke to write an account of Jesus’s life. There were a lot of stories about Jesus circulating, some probably true, some not true. Some embellished. And what Theophilus wanted was an orderly, chronological presentation of Jesus’s life.

So what we have here is a gospel that God created as part of the canon using the financial means of a very wealthy early Christian to fund the journalistic efforts of doctor. I think we’ll meet Theophilus in heaven. And thank him for funding Luke’s writing of the gospel and Acts. But Luke went around and put together the stories of Jesus in an accurate and chronological way.

Now, as I said before, the OT canon was basically solidified by the time of Jesus. Josephus recorded a list of the books of what we call the OT and he makes note that these books had been verified for centuries.

Now, whereas the OT canon came very slowly, over the course of a thousand years. The NT happened relatively quickly. The first book written was probably James or Galatians in the late 40s or early 50s and the whole thing was finished by 70AD. Some people think Revelation and the Gospel of John were written in the

90s - I think they were probably written sooner. But either way, the 27 books of the NT were written relatively quickly compared to the OT: in a span of 20 years at the least or 50 at the most.

Some books were accepted right away as canonical. Matthew, Mark, many of the epistles. Others took time to accept because the church wanted to be sure they knew that they knew that these books were from God.

So lists began to emerge early on about what books were in. And there were also lists that talked about books that were for sure not canonical.

While apostles were alive, they could easily attest to the canonicity of the letters. Paul says in **1 Corinthians 14:37** that what he is writing is from the Lord. Peter says Paul's writing are Scripture in **2 Pet. 3:14-16**. That kind of settles it, doesn't it?

Other books it took the church longer to verify because Christians wanted to be sure not to call Scripture something that wasn't from the Lord. So some books took a while to gain acceptance by the Church. Hebrews took a while because no one knew who wrote it. We still don't know who wrote it. But it appears to be either an apostle or someone who knew the apostles.

Revelation took a while to be recognized. It's a pretty apocalyptic book which is hard to understand.

But by the 200s and 300s the Christian church had universally solidified which books are part of the Bible.

There are no other books that should be in here. Nothing was left out. You'll see ads for TV shows about "missing books of the Bible." They're all nonsense. The church hasn't missed anything. Our brothers and sisters in the faith have diligently preserved and examined every writing imaginable and there's nothing to add and nothing to take away.

Now, why do we even need a book about God? Because without the Bible there's only so much we can actually know about God. **Look at Rom 1** for a minute.

God has revealed himself in 2 ways throughout history. We call these ways general revelation and special revelation. General revelation is given to all people but very vague. General revelation refers to things like the sun, moon and stars. The creation around us. The fact that we know right and wrong intuitively. Those things give us an idea that God exists, but we don't know a whole lot about him.

Special revelation is given to a limited amount of people and very specific. Special revelation is the Bible. Or when God came to Abram out of nowhere and spoke to him. Or when God came to Moses in the burning bush. It was a supernatural revealing himself to specific people.

Here in Romans, Paul talks about both general revelation and special revelation. **Read 1:16-17**

This is special revelation. The gospel message - the whole of Jesus's life, substitutionary death, miraculous resurrection, salvation by grace through faith - people have to know that information and believe that information to be saved. That information has to be revealed to us for God to impute Christ's righteousness to us. **Read 17**

So there is a revealing of this information that has to happen for salvation to happen. How can they believe unless they what? Hear. Gotta hear the message of the gospel to be saved.

But there is also a general revelation of God. Paul talks about. It doesn't save anyone. It makes them accountable to him. **Read 18-20**

So this is general revelation. General revelation is how God has revealed himself to all people all over the world. We call it general because it's not very specific information about God. But there is information. All people know that:

- 1) there is a God.
- 2) there is right and wrong
- 3) God is powerful and creator
- 4) there's no excuse denying God

Every single person on the planet can know that much about God because God has revealed it. Now, it's not enough to save them. **Vs. 18** says his wrath is revealed to all people. There's just enough information about God for all people to condemn them. And they know that. **Read 21-23**

This is what all people with only general revelation do. They don't worship God in the ability that they have. There's no tribe out there somewhere that's just worshipping the one true and living God in the genuineness of their heart seeking him in love and peace.

No. Universally what sinful people do with the general revelation of God they have is reject it. They don't honor God, they don't thank God. They darken their own hearts from what they know and go worship other stuff.

This is why people need the gospel revealed in the Bible. We all need the special revelation of God in order to be saved and grow.

That's why when people tell you "Oh I can go worship God on a mountain." The real answer is that they don't. Their foolish hearts are darkened on the mountain and what they really end up worshipping is nature and birds and fish and nonsense.

The canon of Scripture - that contains the true gospel - is what is needed for salvation.

Now, I want to make 2 devotional points about the canon. I don't think many of you are really struggling over whether Hebrews should be in the Bible. I don't think many of you are concerned about way in which the early church recognized which books were or were not part of the canon.

My concern is more pastoral. What happens a lot of times with believers is that we make our own canon of Scripture. And we do this 2 ways.

1) The first way is that we read non-biblical books far and away more than we read the Bible. We like Tozer or Piper or MacArthur or fiction books or Google News more than the Bible. Now, you guys know I love reading books. We've got books aplenty.

But what I think often happens is that we look to our own canon of non-biblical literature as being more helpful or interesting than the actual Bible.

Maybe we're bored with the Bible, maybe we're confused by the Bible. Maybe we're just not all that motivated. But whatever it is, we need to be reminded to return to the Scripture.

We need to be reminded of **2 Pet. 2:2** to long for the pure spiritual milk like newborn infants that we might grow up into salvation.

You know how little bitty babies just want to nurse? All day every day? That's what we need to do. Father, give me a desire to drink from your word. Sneak in a chapter of Proverbs, sneak in a chapter of James. Read all the short books ASAP.

Or, teach the Bible to someone. Read the Bible with someone. Newborn babies don't sit down to a 5 course meal and pound out 5,000 calories. They eat a couple ounces here and there all day long.

2) Here's a second way I think we need to be challenged. I think we create our own canon within the Scripture. Think about books of the Bible you gravitate to and other books you avoid. Or have never read.

What we're doing is saying that we have a hierarchy within the Bible. We go to the books that are easy or familiar. I want to encourage you to read the ones you haven't read in a while - or ever. Read them several times. Read them with a study Bible. Read the introduction and background.

It's all life. It's all food for your soul. And many times it's been when I turn to a book I haven't read in a while that I find myself particularly encouraged in ways I hadn't expected. May the Lord bless the reading of his Word.

**Pray**