FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

BIBLIOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Word of God

UNIT 1: INTRODUCTION, WHY BIBLIOLOGY MATTERS

Lesson 1

THE DOCTRINE BEFORE ALL DOCTRINES

Why the Study of Scripture Must Come First

The Two Books of Revelation

Key Text: Psalm 19:1–14

> *"All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work."*
>
> **2 Timothy 3:16–17, NASB 1995**

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Introduction

Before we can rightly speak of the triune God who has made Himself known, before we can expound the doctrines of creation and providence, before we dare to unfold the mysteries of sin and salvation, of the church and the last things, we must first settle a prior and more foundational question: How do we know any of this at all? By what means has God disclosed Himself to creatures made from dust? On what authority do we stand when we confess the great truths of the Christian faith? The answer to these questions does not merely lead us to the doctrine of Scripture; it demands that we begin there.

This is the study of Bibliology, the doctrine of the Bible, the theology of the Word of God. It is, in a very real sense, the doctrine before all doctrines, the foundation upon which every other theological structure must be built. To neglect this doctrine, or to treat it as merely introductory and therefore expendable, is to build a house upon sand. To get this wrong is to get everything else wrong eventually, not immediately, perhaps, but inevitably. For once the authority, sufficiency, and truthfulness of Scripture are compromised, every doctrine that rests upon it begins to shift and crack.

In this first lesson, we lay the groundwork for the entire series by asking and answering the most fundamental question in all of theology: Why must the study of Scripture come first?

I. THE LOGICAL PRIORITY OF BIBLIOLOGY IN THE THEOLOGICAL ENCYCLOPEDIA

In the history of systematic theology, theologians have long recognized that the arrangement of doctrines is not arbitrary. The order in which we study the great loci of Christian theology reflects a logical and pedagogical priority. The term theological encyclopedia, as used in classical theological education, refers not to a reference book, but to the ordered arrangement and interrelation of the various branches of theological study.

Bibliology occupies the first position in the theological encyclopedia for a profoundly simple reason: it is the doctrine that tells us where all other doctrines come from. Every other locus of systematic theology depends upon and derives its content from the Scriptures: Theology Proper (the doctrine of God), Christology (the doctrine of Christ), Pneumatology (the doctrine of the Holy Spirit), Anthropology (the doctrine of man), Hamartiology (the doctrine of sin), Soteriology (the doctrine of salvation), Ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church), and Eschatology (the doctrine of last things). If we do not first establish what the Bible is, where it comes from, and why it can be trusted, then every subsequent doctrinal affirmation is left without a foundation.

Consider it this way: Bibliology does not merely stand alongside the other doctrines as one topic among many. It stands beneath them as the epistemological ground upon which they all rest. The great Reformed theologian B. B. Warfield rightly observed that the doctrine of Scripture is the principium cognoscendi, the principle of knowing, in Christian theology. God Himself is the principium essendi, the ground of all being; but it is through His Word that He has made Himself knowable to finite creatures. Without the Word, we are left groping in darkness, constructing gods of our own imagination rather than bowing before the God who has actually spoken.

This is why, throughout the history of the church, the great theological systems have almost universally begun with the doctrine of Scripture. From the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) to the Second London Baptist Confession (1689), from the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978) to the systematic theologies of Charles Hodge, Louis Berkhof, Wayne Grudem, and John Frame, the pattern is consistent: first, the Word; then, everything else. The reason is not mere tradition. The reason is theological necessity.

II. THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL QUESTION: HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT GOD?

At its heart, the study of Bibliology is an exercise in theological epistemology, the study of how we know what we know about God. Epistemology is the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature, sources, and limits of human knowledge. When applied to theology, it asks the most searching question of all: How can finite, fallen creatures know the infinite, holy God?

The answer of the Christian faith is breathtaking in its simplicity and staggering in its implications: we know God because God has chosen to make Himself known. Knowledge of God does not originate in human investigation, philosophical speculation, or mystical experience. It originates in divine revelation, the sovereign, gracious, and

free act of God whereby He discloses Himself, His will, and His ways to creatures who could never have discovered Him on their own.

This is a point that cannot be overstated. The difference between Christianity and every form of human religion and philosophy is precisely this: in Christianity, God speaks first. We do not ascend to God by the ladder of human reason or religious effort. God descends to us in the condescension of His self-revelation. As the prophet Isaiah declares:

> *"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways," declares the LORD. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts."*
>
> **Isaiah 55:8–9, NASB 1995**

The infinite qualitative distance between the Creator and the creature means that unless God bridges the gap by His own initiative, we remain in ignorance. Theology, rightly understood, is not the human quest for God; it is the human response to God's self-disclosure. And that self-disclosure has come to us in two forms: general revelation and special revelation.

III. GENERAL REVELATION VS. SPECIAL REVELATION: NATURE, CONSCIENCE, AND THEIR LIMITS

The Christian theological tradition has long distinguished between two modes of divine revelation: general revelation and special revelation. Both are genuine disclosures of the living God, but they differ in scope, content, and purpose.

A. General Revelation

General revelation refers to God's self-disclosure through the created order, through the human conscience, and through the providential governance of history. It is called "general" because it is available to all people, at all times, in all places. No one is exempt from it; no one can escape it. The psalmist gives us one of the most majestic descriptions of general revelation in all of Scripture:

> *"The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard. Their line has gone out through all the earth, and their utterances to the end of the world."*
>
> **Psalm 19:1–4, NASB 1995**

Notice what the psalmist is saying: creation itself is a kind of sermon. The heavens are not silent; they are telling. The expanse of the sky is not mute; it is declaring. Every sunrise, every star-filled night, every thunderclap and gentle breeze is a word from God, a testimony to His eternal power, His wisdom, His beauty, and His glory. And

this testimony is universal. It crosses every linguistic and cultural barrier: "There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard," and yet their message reaches the ends of the earth.

The apostle Paul elaborates on this in his letter to the Romans, grounding the universal accountability of humanity in the universality of general revelation:

> *"For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse."*
>
> **Romans 1:20, NASB 1995**

General revelation, then, is sufficient to render all people without excuse before God. It testifies that God exists, that He is powerful, that He is wise, and that He is to be worshipped. But here is the critical point: general revelation, while rendering humanity inexcusable, is not sufficient to save. It tells us that God is, but it does not tell us who God is in the fullness of His triune being. It tells us that we are accountable, but it does not tell us how our guilt can be removed. It reveals the glory of the Creator, but it does not reveal the gospel of the Redeemer.

B. The Limitations of General Revelation

This brings us to a sobering reality: because of the fall, humanity does not receive general revelation rightly. Paul's argument in Romans 1:18–32 is not that people see God's glory in creation and respond with worship. Rather, the opposite is true: they see His glory and suppress it. They exchange the truth of God for a lie. They worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator. General revelation, apart from the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit and the content of special revelation, leads only to condemnation, never to salvation.

The conscience, likewise, is a witness to God's moral law written on the heart (Romans 2:14–15), but it is a witness that has been corrupted by sin. It can accuse, but it cannot redeem. It can produce guilt, but it cannot produce grace. It points to the existence of a moral Lawgiver, but it cannot introduce us to the Savior.

C. Special Revelation

Because general revelation is insufficient for salvation, God has given a second and higher form of self-disclosure: special revelation. Special revelation refers to God's direct, verbal, and redemptive communication to specific people at specific times for the purpose of making known His saving purposes in Jesus Christ. It includes God's words spoken through the prophets and the apostles, His mighty acts in redemptive history, and supremely, His self-revelation in the incarnate Word, the Lord Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1:1–2). Special revelation has been permanently inscripturated, committed to writing, in the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments, which together constitute the Holy Bible, the written Word of God.

Psalm 19 itself models this two-fold revelation beautifully. In verses 1–6, David celebrates the voice of God in creation (general revelation). Then, in verses 7–14, he turns to the voice of God in Scripture (special revelation), and the change is remarkable. Suddenly the language becomes more intimate, more personal, more saving:

> *"The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes."*
>
> **Psalm 19:7–8, NASB 1995**

What creation cannot do, the Word of God does. Creation declares God's glory, but the Word restores the soul. Creation reveals power, but the Word makes wise the simple. Creation inspires awe, but the Word rejoices the heart and enlightens the eyes. This is why Bibliology matters. This is why the doctrine of Scripture must come first. Because without the written Word, we have glory without gospel, power without promise, and law without grace.

IV. THE NECESSITY OF A WORD FROM GOD: WHY CREATION ALONE IS INSUFFICIENT

The insufficiency of general revelation for salvation underscores a profound theological truth: God must speak if we are to be saved. Creation can show us that God is great; only the Word can show us that God is gracious. Creation can declare that we owe God worship; only the Word can declare that God has provided a Substitute for our failure to worship Him.

The necessity of special revelation is rooted in at least three realities:

1. The finitude of the creature. Even apart from sin, human beings as finite creatures would require God's self-disclosure to know Him truly. The infinite God cannot be exhaustively known by finite minds apart from His own gracious accommodation.

2. The fallenness of humanity. Sin has not merely limited human knowledge of God; it has corrupted it. The mind of fallen man is hostile to God (Romans 8:7). The natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him (1 Corinthians 2:14). Without a supernatural Word, accompanied by the supernatural work of the Spirit, fallen humanity remains in spiritual blindness.

3. The specificity of redemption. The gospel is not a general truth that can be deduced from the observation of nature. It is a particular announcement about a particular person, Jesus of Nazareth, who accomplished a particular work, substitutionary atonement, at a particular moment in history. This announcement must be told; it cannot be discovered. As the apostle Paul reasons:

> *"How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? … So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ."*
>
> **Romans 10:14, 17, NASB 1995**

The implication is unmistakable: no Word, no faith. No Scripture, no gospel. No Bible, no salvation. The written Word of God is not a luxury for the intellectually curious; it is an absolute necessity for any creature who would know God savingly.

V. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BIBLIOLOGY AND EVERY OTHER LOCUS OF THEOLOGY

Because the Bible is the source from which all Christian doctrine is drawn, the doctrine of Scripture stands in a unique relationship to every other branch of theology. It is not simply one doctrine among many; it is the doctrine about the source of all doctrines. Consider the following:

- **Theology Proper** (the doctrine of God) depends on Bibliology because everything we know about God's attributes, His triune nature, and His decrees is revealed in Scripture.
- **Christology** (the doctrine of Christ) depends on Bibliology because the person and work of Christ are known to us only through the apostolic testimony preserved in the New Testament.
- **Soteriology** (the doctrine of salvation) depends on Bibliology because the gospel itself, the announcement of Christ's life, death, burial, and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins, is a verbal message communicated through the Word.
- **Ecclesiology** (the doctrine of the church) depends on Bibliology because the church's identity, mission, governance, and worship are all normed by the teaching of Scripture.
- **Eschatology** (the doctrine of last things) depends on Bibliology because our hope of Christ's return, the resurrection of the dead, and the new heavens and new earth rests entirely on the promises of God's Word.

In short, to weaken the doctrine of Scripture is to weaken every doctrine. To abandon inerrancy is eventually to abandon orthodoxy. To compromise sufficiency is to open the door to every form of theological and practical error. The history of the church confirms this without exception: every major departure from Christian orthodoxy has begun with a departure from the full authority, truthfulness, and sufficiency of Holy Scripture.

VI. THE PASTORAL URGENCY: A CHURCH THAT LOSES ITS BIBLE LOSES EVERYTHING

This lesson is not merely academic. It is pastoral and urgent. We study Bibliology not merely because it is logically first in the theological encyclopedia, but because the church in every generation faces the temptation to loosen its grip on the Word of God, and the consequences of doing so are devastating.

Consider the pattern of church history. The mainline Protestant denominations of the twentieth century did not abandon the gospel overnight. They did not wake up one morning and decide to deny the resurrection of Christ or to affirm what Scripture forbids. The erosion was gradual, and it began at precisely the point we are studying: the doctrine of Scripture. First, inerrancy was questioned. Then, inspiration was redefined. Then, authority was relocated from the text to the community, from the Word to human experience. And once the Bible was dethroned, there was no longer any fixed standard by which error could be identified or truth defended. The results were catastrophic: the evacuation of the gospel from pulpits, the embrace of moral relativism, the hemorrhaging of membership, and the loss of any coherent Christian witness.

This is not ancient history. This pattern is repeating itself in our own day, often under softer and more sophisticated labels. The language may have changed (we hear of "recontextualization," "progressive revelation," "generous orthodoxy," and "faith deconstruction"), but the trajectory is the same: a slow and steady retreat from the full authority and sufficiency of the Word of God.

This is why the study of Bibliology is not optional for the health of the church. Every pastor, every elder, every Sunday school teacher, every parent, and every believer must understand what the Bible is, where it came from, and why it can be trusted, not merely as an intellectual exercise but as a matter of spiritual survival. A church that loses its Bible will inevitably lose its gospel. And a church that loses its gospel has nothing left to offer a dying world.

Let us, therefore, begin where we must begin, with the Word. And let us commit ourselves, by the grace of God and the illumination of His Spirit, to being a people who are, in the fullest and most joyful sense, faithful to the Word.

Key Text: Psalm 19:1–14 (NASB 1995)

The heavens are telling of the glory of God;

And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.

Day to day pours forth speech,

And night to night reveals knowledge.

There is no speech, nor are there words;

Their voice is not heard.

Their line has gone out through all the earth,

And their utterances to the end of the world.

In them He has placed a tent for the sun,

Which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber;

It rejoices as a strong man to run his course.

Its rising is from one end of the heavens,

And its circuit to the other end of them;

And there is nothing hidden from its heat.

The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul;

The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.

The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;

The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes.

The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever;

The judgments of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether.

They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold;

Sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb.

Moreover, by them Your servant is warned;

In keeping them there is great reward.

Who can discern his errors? Acquit me of hidden faults.

Also keep back Your servant from presumptuous sins;

Let them not rule over me;

Then I will be blameless,

And I shall be acquitted of great transgression.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart

Be acceptable in Your sight,

O LORD, my rock and my Redeemer.

Theological Terms and Definitions

Bibliology	From the Greek biblos ("book") and logos ("study, word"). The branch of systematic theology that deals with the doctrine of the Bible, its origin, nature, authority, sufficiency, and interpretation.
Theological Encyclopedia	The ordered arrangement and classification of the various branches and topics of theological study. Not a reference book, but the logical structure by which doctrines are organized in their proper relationships.
Epistemology	From the Greek epistēmē ("knowledge"). The branch of philosophy concerned with the nature, sources, and limits of human knowledge. In theology, it addresses the question: How do we know what we know about God?
General Revelation	God's self-disclosure through the created order, the human conscience, and providential history. It is universal in scope, available to all people at all times, and sufficient to render humanity without excuse (Romans 1:20) but insufficient for salvation.
Special Revelation	God's direct, verbal, and redemptive self-disclosure given to specific people at specific times, culminating in Christ (Hebrews 1:1–2) and permanently inscripturated in the sixty-six books of the Bible. Special revelation communicates the content necessary for saving knowledge of God.
Principium Cognoscendi	Latin for "principle of knowing." In Reformed theology, Scripture is the principium cognoscendi, the foundational source or principle by which God is known. God Himself is the principium essendi (principle of being).
Inscripturation	The act of God whereby He caused His special revelation to be committed to writing in the Scriptures, ensuring its permanent preservation, transmission, and authority for all subsequent generations of the church.
Locus (pl. Loci)	Latin for "place" or "topic." In systematic theology, a locus refers to a major doctrinal category or subject area (e.g., Theology Proper, Christology, Soteriology). Each locus constitutes a "place" in the theological system where a particular doctrine is examined.
Sola Scriptura	Latin for "Scripture alone." The Reformation principle that Scripture is the only infallible and final authority for the church in all matters of faith and practice. It does not deny the usefulness of creeds, confessions, or tradition, but affirms that all such authorities are subordinate to the Word of God.
Perspicuity	The clarity of Scripture. The doctrine that the Bible is sufficiently clear in its essential teachings so that ordinary believers, aided by the Holy Spirit and the teaching ministry of the church, can understand what is necessary for salvation and godliness.

Practical Application

A. *For the Mind: What Must We Believe?*

We must believe that the Bible is not merely a human book about God, but is the very Word of God, divinely given, divinely preserved, and divinely authoritative. Our confidence in every other doctrine of the Christian faith rests upon our confidence in Scripture. If you have never consciously affirmed that the Bible is the Word of God and the supreme authority over your life, let this lesson be the occasion of that confession. Every Christian must be able to say, with full conviction: "I believe the Bible to be the inspired, inerrant, infallible, sufficient, and authoritative Word of the living God."

B. *For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?*

The study of Bibliology should not leave us cold and clinical. If we have rightly understood what the Bible is, that the infinite God has stooped to speak to us and has given us His very words, then the only fitting response is one of awe, gratitude, and love. David models this for us in Psalm 19:10: the Word of God is "more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb." Do you treasure the Bible? Do you feel its sweetness? Do you long for it the way a hungry man longs for bread? Let us ask the Lord to kindle in us an ever-deepening love for His Word, not merely as a duty, but as a delight.

C. *For the Hands: What Must We Do?*

1. Read it daily. Establish, if you have not already, a consistent discipline of personal Bible reading. The Word of God cannot shape your soul if it sits closed on a shelf.

2. Study it carefully. Reading is essential, but study goes deeper. Use the tools God has provided, such as commentaries, cross-references, and concordances, to mine the riches of Scripture.

3. Memorize it faithfully. The psalmist declared, "Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against You" (Psalm 119:11, NASB 1995). Scripture hidden in the heart is a weapon against temptation and a fountain of comfort in trial.

4. Submit to it wholly. The Word of God is not merely to be read and admired; it is to be obeyed. Where Scripture speaks, let us bow. Where it commands, let us act. Where it warns, let us tremble. Where it promises, let us trust.

5. Defend it courageously. In a world that increasingly dismisses, distorts, or denies the authority of Scripture, every believer must be prepared to give a reason for the hope that is within us (1 Peter 3:15). This series is designed to equip you for that very task.

D. *For Every Season of Life*

For the new believer: This study will give you a firm foundation for your faith. You will learn not only what the Bible teaches, but why you can trust it without reservation.

For the parent: As you teach your children the Scriptures (Deuteronomy 6:4–9), let this study deepen your own conviction so that you can answer their questions with clarity and confidence.

For the one who is doubting: If you have wrestled with questions about the reliability of the Bible, this series is for you. Honest questions deserve honest answers, and the Word of God is not afraid of scrutiny. We will face the hard questions head-on and find that the Bible can bear the weight of our deepest inquiries.

For the one who is suffering: When the storms of life rage, the Word of God is the anchor that holds. It is precisely because Scripture is true, trustworthy, and sufficient that the promises it contains are reliable. The God who has spoken is the God who keeps His word.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

1. Think about the role the Bible has played in your life up to this point. When did you first encounter the Scriptures, and how has your relationship with the Bible changed over the years? Share briefly with the group.

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

2. Read Psalm 19:1–6. What does creation do according to these verses? What specific language does David use to describe the testimony of the created order?
3. Read Psalm 19:7–11. List the six descriptions David gives of the Word of God (e.g., "the law of the LORD is perfect"). What effect does each one produce?
4. According to Romans 1:18–20, what can be known about God through general revelation? What is humanity's response to this knowledge?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

5. Why does Psalm 19 move from general revelation (vv. 1–6) to special revelation (vv. 7–14)? What is David communicating by this progression?
6. What does it mean to say that Bibliology is the "doctrine before all doctrines"? Why must the study of Scripture logically precede every other area of theology?
7. Explain the difference between general revelation and special revelation. Why is general revelation, though genuine and sufficient for accountability, insufficient for salvation?
8. What does the phrase principium cognoscendi mean, and why is this concept important for understanding the role of Scripture in theology?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

9. On a practical level, how does your current Bible reading and study reflect your belief that the Bible is the authoritative Word of God? Are there changes you need to make?
10. The lesson argued that "a church that loses its Bible loses everything." Can you think of examples, either from church history or from your own experience, where a departure from the authority of Scripture led to broader theological or moral decline?
11. Romans 10:14, 17 teaches that faith comes from hearing the Word of Christ. What responsibility does this place on us as individuals and as a church to ensure that the Scriptures are proclaimed, taught, and treasured?
12. Psalm 19:14 ends with a prayer: "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my rock and my Redeemer." How does a right understanding of Scripture shape not only what we believe but how we live, speak, and think?

Prayer Focus

Spend time in prayer as a group, thanking God for the gift of His written Word. Ask the Lord to open your eyes to behold wonderful things from His law (Psalm 119:18). Pray for a deeper love for the Scriptures, for a teachable spirit throughout this series, and for the Holy Spirit's illumination as you study together.

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

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