

5 Living with uncertainty

God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5 ESV).

Ever been misunderstood? An old yarn tells of troops radioing, “Send reinforcements; we’re going to advance,” but the message headquarters heard was, “Send three and fourpence; we’re going to a dance.”

We misunderstand for so many reasons. We make assumptions about what someone is talking about. Is the context what just happened, or what happened earlier? Noise and distractions interrupt. So do silences and unspoken issues. People use the same word to mean different things. Language itself is ambiguous. Sometimes the way we encode our messages can be cryptic, like the phrase in this puzzle:²³

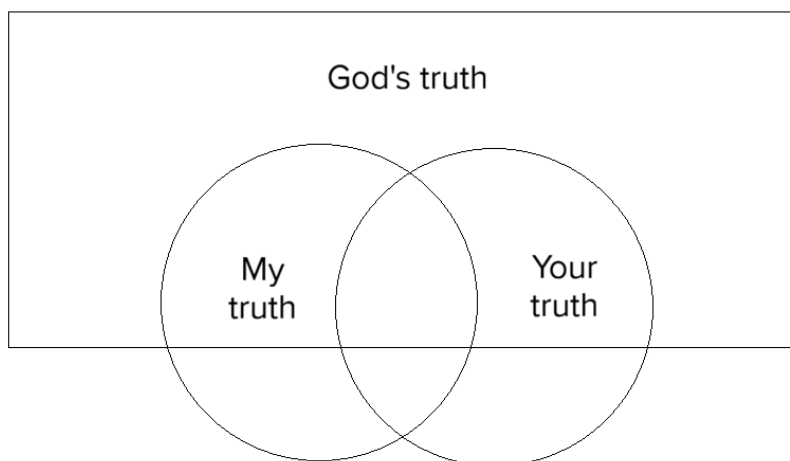


To live with humility is to live with uncertainty. A humble person asks, “Did I hear you right?” while a proud person is sure they’re right.

And there’s no shortage of proud Bible teachers. They’re so sure they’re right, arguing with anyone who doesn’t hold their view, as if they think they’re God.

God’s word is true. We approach it humbly, so it changes us.

There is objective truth: it’s what God knows. But I’m not God; my truth is partial. My truth has some of God’s truth, mixed with things I’m wrong about. What I don’t know far outweighs what I know. So, my truth is a blend of truth, falsehood, and ignorance. I don’t know what I don’t know.



²³ Solution at the end of tonight’s notes.

We learn from each other with each other, pursuing God's truth together:

Philippians 3:15 (NIV)

All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you.

While Paul was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write Scripture, he trusted the God who was at work in those who didn't see things his way. That's faith.

Maturity (in verse 15) is not knowing everything; it's knowing someone. Five verses earlier Paul told them his goal: *I want to know Christ* (verse 10). The reason we study the Bible is not informational; it's relational.

Faith is not convincing myself of my certainty (self-belief). Faith is trusting the one who is certain. God is trustworthy, abounding in love and faithfulness (Exodus 34:6). Our faith is constantly growing and being refined, adapting to what we know of God. Knowing God is the reason we study the Bible, the revelation of God.

We're okay to live with our uncertainty because we're living with God.

5.1 Difficulties with Scripture

Are there errors in the Bible? That was a topic of debate between "liberal" scholars²⁴ and Evangelicals last century. Evangelicals claim the Bible is *inerrant* (without error), but it has proved deceptively difficult to pin down in precisely what sense that's true.

The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy was produced in 1978, signed by 300 scholars. It consisted of nineteen propositions, expressed positively and negatively like this:

WE AFFIRM that a confession of the full authority, infallibility, and inerrancy of Scripture is vital to a sound understanding of the whole of the Christian faith.

WE DENY that such confession is necessary for salvation. However, we further deny that inerrancy can be rejected without grave consequences, both to the individual and to the Church.²⁵

Of course, their statements needed exposition too, and the exposition was longer than the propositions were. They met again in 1982 to produce a further interpretation of how to interpret the Scriptures (*the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics*), and again in 1986 to explain how to apply the Scriptures.

The problem is that to deny errors in the Scripture, you must define what constitutes an error. Is the Bible wrong to speak about *the four corners of the earth* (Revelation 7:1) since we now know the earth is round? Most readers understand this was just an archaic way of speaking about spreading out in all directions (north, south, east, west).

Other difficulties are harder to explain.

²⁴ Roger Olson, *Against Liberal Theology: Putting the Brakes on Progressive Christianity* (Zondervan, 2022).

²⁵ G. K. Beale, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 273-74.

Jesus' grandfather

Who was Jesus' grandfather?

- **Jacob** was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, the mother of Jesus (Matthew 1:16).
- Jesus the son, so it was thought, of Joseph, the son of **Heli** (Luke 3:23).

Jacob and Heli are not merely two names for the same person; the disparity continues back for several generations.

Some suggest that Matthew and Luke could have traced different sides of Jesus' family: Mary's ancestry versus Joseph's. That's possible, since kingship was received through the father, while Jewish heritage even today comes through the mother.

The truth is we **don't know** how to account for the difference. That's why I'm not keen on arguing about inerrancy: there's too much we don't know.

The LORD or Satan?

What do you make of this?

2 Samuel 24:1 (NIV)

The anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, "Go and take a census of Israel and Judah."

1 Chronicles 21:1 (NIV)

Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel.

These texts describe the same event. David conducted a census of Israel to determine his military strength. God was displeased because David's faith was misplaced: relying on the power of his army rather than the power of the LORD.

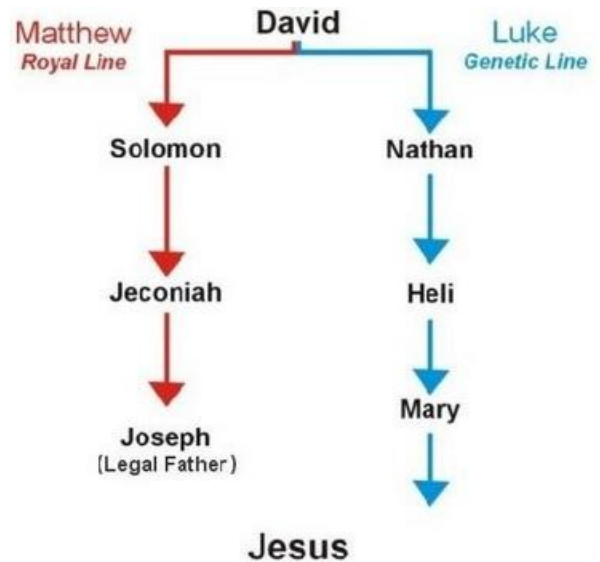
But what was the source of David's misplaced faith? Was the LORD setting a trap for David? Or was Satan tripping him up? Which one is right? Which one is wrong?

For me, this was one of the "I don't know" texts for a long time. Now I understand it's not a contradiction, but an example of **progressive revelation**. More had been revealed by the time Chronicles was written.

Progressive revelation (definition):

More is revealed as the story unfolds. The more complete revelation of God comes to us in Christ.

The Hebrew word *śā-ṭān* means enemy or adversary. In the time of the kingdom, the Philistines or Moabites were Israel's *śā-ṭān* [enemy]. In a time of peace when there was no enemy, Solomon could say, "There is no *śā-ṭān*" (1 Kings 5:4). Later, Hadad the Edomite became a *śā-ṭān* to Solomon, and the Syrian king *Rezon* was Israel's *śā-ṭān* as long as Solomon lived (11:14, 23, 25).



A commonly suggested solution for the disparity in Jesus' genealogy in Matthew and Luke.

It wasn't until after the exile that the Jewish people realized there was a *Śā-tān* in the heavenly realm opposing them. Assyria had wiped out Israel. Babylon captured what was left. Persia captured Babylon, so now they were under Persia—not restored as a kingdom of God. Alexander the Great conquered Persia, so now they're part of the Greek empire. They realize, "These aren't just human *śā-tāns* opposing us. There's a Satan—the Enemy behind the enemies. This Satan is oppressing us to prevent God's saving work being fulfilled through us." They speak of this Enemy opposing them in the heavenly court (as in Job 1–2). The *Śā-tān* accuses them of being so corrupt that God cannot use them (Zechariah 3:1-2).

Chronicles was written after returning from exile. (See the list of returning exiles in 1 Chronicles 1–9). Now they realize a spiritual enemy has been opposing them all along, so Chronicles can speak of the Satan trying to undermine them in David's time.

There's no contradiction. This is a diachronic difference—a time-based difference in perspective and the language available to them. As God revealed more (progressive revelation), they became aware of things they did not know in earlier times.

When the text is uncertain

Open your Bible to Mark 16:9-20. Are these verses in your Bible? Is there a note saying these verses were not in the earliest copies of the Bible? These verses were in the text when the King James Version was translated in 1611, so why do modern translations leave out chunks of the Bible? People who crave certainty sometimes accuse translators of tampering with God's word.

The reality is that there are differences in the ancient copies of the text available to us today. Manuscripts were copied by hand, and copyists made mistakes. They may have written "your" instead of "our." They may have missed a line. They may have seen a note written in the margin and added it to the text on the assumption that the previous copyist had missed it and then realized their mistake. For many reasons, there are differences in the ancient copies since they were not churned out by a printing press.

We have so many copies of the New Testament that most of the time it's easy to reconstruct what the text would have been. For example, older copies are more likely to be right than later copies that are copies of copies. That makes us cautious about Mark 16. As the NIV says, "*The earliest manuscripts and some other ancient witnesses do not have verses 9-10.*"

Did Mark's Gospel originally end at verse 8?
 Would Mark end the story with confusion, silence and fear?
 Was there a final page that's been lost in transmission?
 Did a later copyist add an ending to resolve the tension?
 Honestly, **we don't know**. We can't be certain.

Mark 16:8 (NIV)

Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

The other passage we can't be sure of is John 7:53–8:11. For the first five centuries, the story of the woman caught in adultery was not in John's

Gospel. It's such a great story, and so consistent with the heart of Jesus. I wish it was there. Others did too, apparently. Some copyists included it here. Others inserted it into John 21 or Luke 24. It's very unlikely this was originally part of the Gospel of John, so you won't hear me teaching from this passage, even though I like the story.

In any recent translation, you'll see footnotes on the manuscript evidence. Some are very obvious: the additional text in 1 John 5:8 has no support in any manuscript before the fourteenth century. Others are less clear. Should Mark 1:1 include the words *the Son of God*? The evidence is inconclusive. Of course, many other verses describe Jesus as the Son of God, whether this one does or not.

The truth is that we have thousands of manuscripts and fragments of New Testament books, far more than any other books from ancient times. Some fragments are dated to the second century—from 100-200 years of when the text was written.²⁶

Are you okay to live with uncertainty?

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²⁶ <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/new-testament/dating-the-oldest-new-testament-christian-manuscripts/>

5.2 Relational faith

Isaiah 55:8-9 (NIV)

⁸ “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD.

⁹ “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

God is beyond knowing, but not unknowable. The Bible is God revealed to us, the revelation that ultimately comes to us in Christ. We know God relationally.

Some things we know through mathematical deduction or scientific experiment. Historical and relational knowledge are not like that: you can't repeat events in a lab. I've known Robyn's love for many years, but I can't prove it scientifically. God is present in history and relationship, but neither astrophysics nor apologetics can prove God. The Bible doesn't try. God is someone we know, and trust:

*I know **whom** I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day (2 Timothy 1:12).*

The Bible begins with relationship between God and humanity:

- It's the story of a creature honoured with authority to image God, and the conflict we introduce when we see ourselves as gods instead of God's.
- It's the story of God's faithful love: leading his people in this conflict zone, entering the warzone to defeat death without using our weapons, and rising to restore heaven's reign to the earth.
- It's the story of the Lamb leading his people in the way of the cross towards the day when earth is once again what God intended it to be: a kingdom of heaven.

That's the story we live in, the macro framework for my little life. I'll be dead long before God completes this goal, but it's the one thing worth spending my life on. The restoration of heaven's reign to the earth in Christ is *the treasure hidden in the earth, the pearl of immeasurable value* (Matthew 13:44-46).

What is faith?

Hebrews 11:1 (NIV)

Now **faith** is **confidence** in **what we hope for** and **assurance** about what we **do not see**.

Does this verse promise that if I'm confident enough, I'll get what I ask for? That interpretation puts *me* at the centre: *my* faith in *my* confidence assuring *me* of getting what *I* hope for. That reduces faith to a means of manipulating God.



Put your faith in God. That makes a world of difference:

- Faith is *confidence* in God’s character, where God is leading us.
- *What we hope for* is our world reborn as a kingdom of heaven.
- What we’re *sure about* is that God is taking us there, even though we *do not see* it fully realized yet.

That interpretation fits the context: *we hold unswervingly to the hope we profess because the one who promised is faithful* (Hebrews 10:23). The faith examples that follow are of people trusting where God would take the world. By faith they invested their lives in what they did not yet see.

Why did Abraham’s faith lead him to leave the Babel-builders region? *He was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God, ... longing for a better country*—one that recognized heaven’s reign (Hebrews 11:10, 16).

All the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 died without seeing their hope fulfilled. The nation founded by the Torah was a miniature kingdom of God, a piece of the earth as the Promised Land, with God reigning through his anointed (David). But it all fell apart. They lost everything to the kingdoms of the world. *They were all commended for their faith, but none of them received what had been promised* (11:39).

The unresolved hope of earth as a kingdom of heaven then finds fulfilment in Christ. Jesus is the architect/builder Abraham longed for, the one who brings to earth what we’re all longing to see. So we keep running towards that goal, *fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy set before him*—the hope of earth reborn as a kingdom of heaven—*he endured the cross, scorning the shame* of being treated as a powerless pretender to the throne. And he has been raised up, *given a seat at the right hand of the throne of God* (Hebrews 12:2).

This is the faith the gospel calls us to. The gospel is the good news of God’s Christ, raised up as Lord to lead the world. This gospel calls for faith in Jesus—trust in God’s anointed leader as the Saviour of the world. Faith in God’s Messiah sets us right with God (justifies), so we do right out of faith[fulness] to God, in response to God’s faithfulness to us.

Our faith is in God, not in ourselves. God is trustworthy, and I have much to learn. Are you okay living with faith in God and uncertainty in our own understanding?

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When you face a crisis of faith

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul talks about going through a crisis of faith. When everything he knew went down the drain, Paul lost everything that gave him value:

Philippians 3:4-7 (NIV)

⁴ If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. ⁷ But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss ...

Paul's Jewishness was his identity. At 8 days old, he was already obeying the Torah (compare Leviticus 12:3). His DNA was Jewish all the way back to the man who was Israel (Jacob), through his youngest son (Benjamin). Paul was a model of pure Jewishness: a Hebrew of the Hebrews. As a Pharisee, Paul called his people to live as the Sinai covenant demanded. He was so zealous for the faith of his fathers that he tried to stop those who gathered in the name of King Jesus (the church).²⁷ He was so meticulous in fulfilling the Torah that he believed he was right with God, faultless by the standards of the Sinai Law.

All his certainly came tumbling down when Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus. If Jesus was raised from the dead, those who crucified him were wrong. The God of Israel overruled Jesus' execution, enthroned him as Lord of all people, and called Paul to carry this good news to the gentiles as well as Israel (Acts 9:15). Belonging to the people of God was no longer a matter of Jewish ancestry and Torah obedience. All who give their loyalty to the Messiah (place their faith in Christ) are counted as the people of God now. Paul's Jewishness was no advantage anymore.

This was such a crisis of faith for Paul that it took him years to work through it (Galatians 1:17-18). His identity and value no longer came from belonging to the Jewish nation but from belonging to the Jewish Messiah who is Lord of all.

The value of the Messiah replaced what Paul had considered valuable:

Philippians 3:7-14 (my translation)

⁷ But whatever were my assets, I've recalculated as a liability on account of the anointed ruler. ⁸ All of it moved to the liability column in light of the surpassing value of knowing Messiah Jesus as my Lord, the reason I forfeited it all. I consider it worthless so I could gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him: not having my own right standing from Torah obedience, but through reliance on the anointed leader, the right standing from God on the basis of allegiance. ¹⁰ To know him—both the power of his being raised up, and the participation in his anguish—is to be shaped with him by his death, ¹¹ so I could come to rise up out of death.

²⁷ On why we use the word *church*, see at <https://allenbrowne.blog/2019/09/06/why-church/>

¹² It’s not like I’ve already moved in, or already arrived. I’m in pursuit, acquiring how I was acquired by our anointed leader. ¹³ Family, it’s not like I think I’ve acquired it. Just one thing: forgetting what was before, stretching forward to what’s ahead, ¹⁴ I pursue the goal—the prize of the higher call of God [to participation] in Messiah Jesus.

See what Paul did? When everything he thought he knew crumbled around him, he reframed everything around the Messiah. Just as you might deconstruct an old house to make way for a new one, deconstructing your faith is not a bad thing if you hold on to the one thing that matters: the Messiah God has given us. Everything can be reconstructed around him.

We’re doing that all the time. I grew up with faith, but in 2012 I realized that my understanding of Jesus was lacking. He saw himself as *the son of man*, but that’s not how I understood Jesus’ identity. What he did and taught was all about *the kingdom of God*, but that’s not how I understood Jesus’ mission. I met with Haydn Nelson and said, “I need to pursue a better understanding of Jesus. I don’t understand how he understood himself and his mission.”

In the years since then, I’ve let go of many things I thought were important, so I could know him—who he is, and what he’s doing. Seeing Jesus as the king at the centre, with us as his kingdom has reframed everything for me. I’m still learning, but seeking King Jesus and his kingdom is reconstructing everything I value.

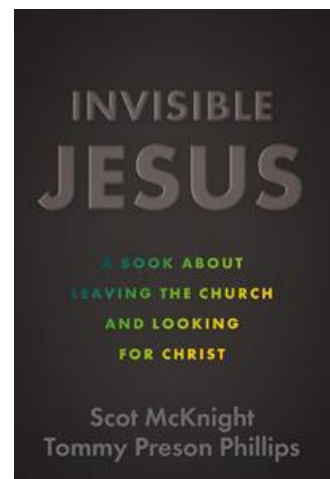
What about you? Is your faith under reconstruction as you see Jesus as our leader who reconstructs humanity in his leadership?

For more on the topic of deconstructing faith, see Scot McKnight’s book:

Invisible Jesus: A Book about Leaving the Church and Looking for Christ (Zondervan, 2024).

Your thoughts?

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5.3 Conclusion

Rather than deconstructing our faith, we could say our faith reconstructs us. We lose our own certainty as we trust God to redeem the world through the leadership of the Christ. That's faith.

Scripture is the vision of the God reconstructing us in Christ. Seeing God changes us, as we follow him. That's the goal of Bible study:

James 1:22–25 (NIV)

²² Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. ²³ Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror ²⁴ and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.

²⁵ But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.

More on that next week.

Did you solve the puzzle on page 49? Answer below.²⁸

²⁸ A little misunderstanding between friends (a little *mis*, under stand-in-G, between friend and friend).