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Series: Summer Q&A
Message: Do We Have the Right Books?

Transcribed Message
July 5, 2026
Luke 24:14-49

Well, we have been over the course of these last few weeks doing a summer series called Summer Q&A, and it's largely focused, if you've been with us, on the Word of God. The fact that the Word of God is true, the fact that the Word of God is trustworthy, the fact that the Word of God constantly points us to Jesus. If you want to see what the Bible is about, look for Jesus on every page, right? Well, when you think in terms of the uniqueness of God's Word and the extraordinary nature of God's Word, that's what we've been putting forth for these weeks, the fact that the Bible is a library of books.

Yes, it's one book before us, but there are literally 66 different books that make up God's Word. Revealed to us, God making known what was before unknown. Inspired, God breathed out His Word, right? Gave it to us in an inerrant and completely trustworthy form. The Bible's written by 40 different human authors over a period of some 1,500 plus years, in three different languages, on three different continents. I mean, everything about this book is so unique, it's so amazing, so special, so extraordinary.

And then the fact that we saw last week, the Bible has this one consistent story. So, you just think about the length of time involved, and then you think about all of the different writers and the different places that they came from, their different backgrounds, and yet under the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit, they all form this one beautiful, consistent story telling us about God's great rescue plan for humanity and how it centers in His Son Jesus and the forgiveness of sins. So again, you want to understand your Bible, look for Jesus, because He's all through its pages.

When you think about the uniqueness of this book and what we claim about this book, it raises some interesting questions, not the least of which is, okay, we have 66 books. How do we know we have the right 66 books? How do we know we have the right number? How do we know with any sense of certainty that it is only 66? How can we be

sure of the fact that we claim this to be the Word of God, and it is in its fullness all that God and what we have said it is. So, when we look at it in that way, we want to look this morning at this matter of how it is that we got the canon of Scripture that we have. Our big idea, the God who gave us His Word, so revealed and inspired, is the God who providentially guided its collection and preservation, and those all just kind of flow out from one another. The fact that God has revealed His Word, that He's inspired His Word, that in His providence He has seen the collection of His Word and the preservation of it.

So, let's look at this together. It's all about the canon or how the Bible came to be. Let's begin by defining and talking about what we're talking about. What exactly are we talking about? And I just want to begin with what hopefully is bringing some clarity to this matter. So, let's start there. When we talk about the canon of Scripture, it's easy to begin by using wrong words. So, we want to have clarity first. Wrong words all the time confuse things, don't they? So, it's not a matter of choosing, it's a matter of recognizing, and I think that is a defining point.

When we ask, who chose these books? We're really asking the wrong question. The wrong question isn't who, it's not a matter of who chose these books. It brings to mind almost the sense of backroom meetings, secret meetings, councils that nobody really knows for sure what was going on, people sitting in a room and raising their hands and voting, I want this one in, I don't want that one in. And of course, I think that, as we will see, is totally missing the point. It's like asking the question, why did you choose your parents? Well, you didn't choose your parents, did you? You recognize who they are, you recognize your parents, but you didn't choose your parents. So, that's the point that we want to begin with.

All of this can lead, then, to some wrong ideas. So, when you begin with wrong words, soon you have some wrong ideas. We want to clarify: it wasn't the church who gave us the canon, it was the canon who gave us the church. Now, that is going to be very important, and it's at this point that we have a major difference between the Roman Catholic Church, for instance, and the Protestant Church. This is one of the defining issues

regarding the Reformation. The fundamental question of authority is behind this whole matter, isn't it? Who has ultimate authority? Who has infallible authority?

Well, our Catholic friends would say that the church has given us the canon, so that they would put the church at the top, and the canon would come underneath. And therefore, within the Catholic tradition, you, of course, have the infallibility of the church. You have the infallibility of the Pope. The Pope can speak *ex cathedra*. He can speak from the chair. He can speak, as they believe, from the chair of Peter. And since their sense of authority is vested in the church, and in the Pope, who speaks, as they believe, for Peter, and for all of us, then the church is understood as giving us the canon of Scripture.

Well, when we come to this issue as Protestants, we see it literally just the opposite of that. We see that the canon of Scripture is on top, and the church is underneath. It is the Word of God that is infallible, and only the Word of God is infallible. Infallibility is not to be found in the church. Infallibility is not to be found in a man. It is not to be found in anything other than the Word of God. The canon, then, in that sense, gave us the church.

J. I. Packer said it this way: The church no more gave us the New Testament canon than Sir Isaac Newton gave us the force of gravity. God gave us gravity by His work of creation, and similarly, He gave us the New Testament canon by inspiring the individual books that make it up. So, clarity first. The canon gives us the church. The church did not choose the books that are a part of our Scripture. They recognize the books that are part of our Scripture.

When we said at the beginning that the Word of God is given to us by revelation and inspiration, that simply flows to the truth that when any particular book of the Bible was written, at that moment in time, it was immediately the Word of God. It was breathed out, it was revealed by God, and the stamp of the Holy Spirit of God and the inerrancy of that Word was immediately in place. It was then incumbent upon the church, as we're going to see, to recognize which books that, in fact, was true of.

So, let's look, then, at the matter of the canon itself. The matter of the canon. Let's begin just by what we're talking about. What we're talking about is the idea of canon, the meaning of canon. How appropriate it is for the Fourth of July weekend for us to be talking

about a canon, because if your neighborhood was like mine, there was a lot of cannons going off. Well, that's not what we're talking about, right? We're not talking about a cannon that goes boom. We're talking about a canon that, in fact, is used in a very different way. The Hebrew word for canon is the word "reed". The Greek word for canon, are you ready, is *kanon*. The Greek word for canon means rule or rod or measure. So, you put those together, right? The Hebrew word for reed, the reed was a form of measurement. The Greek word for canon is the idea of measuring, of finding out what is true, what is the standard. When we hear this idea of the New Testament canon, that's what we're talking about. We're talking about the Scripture and the divine standard that God has given to us by which we are to measure all things. It is to be our guide, isn't it?

So, the need for the canon then is both practical and theological. The early church, the Old Testament saints, they needed to know what is it that God has said to us and how do we know what is to be the guide and rule and measure for all of life. So, they needed to know what was it that God had given to them by way of His Word, to have the revelation written, to have it recorded, and then ultimately to have it collected, to be able to circulate it, and to know with some degree of certainty, this is the Word of God that is being circulated, that's being read, that's being studied. I mean, if you stepped into the first century world and when persecution broke out, you as a believer, you wanted to know what it is that you're willing to die for, because that's really what you were facing as a New Testament believer living under persecution. And so, the church wanted to know with absolute certainty what God's Word was to them. So, canonicity, as I said, flows out of revelation and it flows out of inspiration.

So, you're right back to where we started. We started with the idea that man does not determine what is and what isn't the Word of God. Man acknowledges and recognizes what it is that God has written. Here's the key point to the whole thing in my mind. God gave His Word to who? God gave His Word to His people. God gave His Word to His people. God did not say to either the Old Testament Jew nor did He say to the New Testament Christian, hey, you guys, I've written you a word. I've written books for you to know and study what it is that I want you to know and study. Now, go find them. They're out there

somewhere. They're in the world. I've written them, and all you have to do is you have to go find. Of course not. When God's Word was written, when it was revealed and inspired, it was given to His people. His people received His Word. So, that's critical to understand.

When Paul writes, and we've already mentioned this before in 1 Thessalonians chapter 2:13, when he's writing to them, he thanks them, remember, that when he came to them, they received the Word, not simply, he says, as the Word of men, but as the Word of God. Now, that's a startling thing for Paul to say if he is not under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and giving them God's revelation. He's literally saying to them, when I came to you, I wasn't just speaking the words of men. I was speaking to you the Word of God, and you understood that, and you recognized it for what it is.

So, let's walk through the formulation of the canon. Let's just kind of talk our way through how it is that God's Word came together. How is it that it was collected? How is it that we can have confidence this morning, sitting here as we do, that the Bible that we hold in our hand is, in fact, the very Word of God that He wants us to have? So, we began, of course, with the Old Testament canon.

Now, the first thing we acknowledge with the Old Testament is we do not have a lot of information. We do not have a lot of, in the historic record, of exactly how all of this came about, and largely because it's over such a long period of time, right? For almost 1,400 years, the Old Testament is being collected. Well, that's a long period of time. So, historically, we don't have a lot regarding all of the ways that this came about, but what we do know is this. There were books of the Old Testament that were readily recognized, right?

If you went to the table of contents, if you had in your hand this morning a Hebrew Old Testament Scripture, and you went to the table of contents. Now, you'd have to go to the back of it because they read the other way, right? So, you go to the back of the Old Testament Scriptures, and there'd be two things that would strike you immediately as over against your Bible. The first one is, as you counted the books, you would come to the interesting conclusion that, well, there's only 22 books listed here, or in some cases, there's 24, which I'll explain in a moment.

So, in the Hebrew Old Testament Scripture, there's 22 books or 24, and the reason for that is not that they have a different Old Testament than we do. Those 22 books constitute the 39 that we have. It's just they numbered them differently. All the first and seconds – 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles – instead of that being six books, it's three. Ezra and Nehemiah are one. Sometimes Ruth is added onto the book of Judges since it took place during the time of the Judges. Sometimes Lamentation was just added onto Jeremiah as one. All the minor prophets are listed as one. So, we have 12 in our Bible. They just had one. So, all of that to say, the Hebrew Old Testament Bible, there's either 22 or 24, depending on which of those combinations happened, but they're the same 39 books that we have. And so, when you think about that, all the books that we have in our Old Testament are the same books that you find in the Hebrew Old Testament.

Just listen for a moment to how it is that God's people understood that they were getting his word and how it was that the writers of the Old Testament knew that. Exodus chapter 24 and verse 4, this is what Moses says: And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord. He rose early in the morning, and he built an altar at the foot of the mountain and 12 pillars according to the 12 tribes of Israel. As he's writing, Moses has an awareness that as he writes these words later that this is the word of God to his people. He's writing down, he says, all the words that the Lord had spoken to him.

Go to Deuteronomy chapter 31. Listen to Deuteronomy 31 and verse 24: When Moses had finished writing the words of this law in a book to the very end, Moses commanded the Levites who carried the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord, take this book, take this book of the law and put it by the side of the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord your God, that it may be there for a witness against you. He understood that this was the word of God. What was he doing with it? He was keeping it within the Ark of the Covenant. It was that important, right? It was that special. It was that significant.

You go on to Jeremiah. In Jeremiah chapter 1 and verse 4, Jeremiah says, now the word of the Lord came to me. This is the testimony of the Old Testament Scriptures, right? The word of God was being received, it was being written, it was being treasured, it was being kept because they understood what was happening. We've already mentioned in

Daniel's writing in the ninth chapter, Daniel himself says that he's sitting there and he's got the scroll of Jeremiah, and he's reading the scroll of Jeremiah, a contemporary prophet of his, and he understands that Jeremiah in his prophecy about God's people had said that it would be 70 years and then they would return to Jerusalem, and he's reading that, remember? And he starts to do the math, and he says, wait a minute. We're almost at the end of the 70 years. It's getting close. So, he's literally reading the prophet Jeremiah in his quiet time, and he's understanding that this is the word of God and the promise of God. So, there's a whole bunch of books of the Old Testament that were readily accepted and received.

Now, the second thing to note is there were books that were questioned. What do you think those books would be? Out of the Old Testament, there were five books that were questioned as to what we do with these books. It really became more of a question of interpretation than whether they should be in the canon. The book of Esther, of course, was one of those, and maybe was at the top because Esther makes no mention of the name of God. But God is all over that book, isn't he? His providence is on every page, and yet that was troublesome because God is never mentioned. Proverbs was held in question because there are some proverbs that seem contradictory, right? There's a proverb that says, don't correct a fool in his folly, and then there's a proverb that says, correct a fool in his folly. Well, okay, which is it? Well, it depends on the circumstance. There are some times when a fool needs to be corrected, the writer of Proverbs says. There are other times when a fool doesn't need to be corrected. It's not a contradiction, it's just the context, and then Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes was just viewed as being somewhat too skeptical. There were questions about the worldview, right? Song of Solomon, okay, need I say more? Ezekiel, just all the strange visions, so hard to understand. So, again, it wasn't so much that these books were viewed as to whether they were Scripture. The Jewish community was trying to decide how do we interpret these, how do we understand these, and so they were received into the canon a little bit later.

But here's the big question, right? The third question has to do with what about the Apocrypha? Everybody wants to know, what about the Apocrypha? The word Apocrypha

simply means hidden, it means secret. What about these 15 books that don't appear in our Bible? If you look at the chart that we had last week on the back of your bulletin. And by the way, there was a little error there, it should have said 1 Kings 12, that's the one circle, and not 2 Kings 12. But the whole point of the Apocrypha is it's written during the period of the silent years. So, in our Bible, Malachi to Matthew, there is no further word from God, 400 years of silence. Well, the Apocrypha are written during that time frame, from about 300 to the first century, and so within that context, there's a question about, okay, are these books supposed to be a part of Scripture?

And, as you probably are aware, the two different groups, really three different groups, have answered this question differently. The Roman Catholic Church says yes. They pick 11 of the 15, and they have in their Douay version then 46 books that they have as a part of their Old Testament. The Eastern Orthodox Church has even more within the Protestant tradition. We don't have any of them, and so the question becomes, well, why not?

But what could we say about the books of the Apocrypha? And the very first thing we can say, that's not even a part of your notes, the very first thing we can say is they're valuable in terms of history. They fill in a lot of the gaps between Malachi and Matthew regarding what was happening in the life of the Jewish people in the culture of that time. So, historically, they have value, but here's the point.

Here are the reasons why we do not believe they're a part of the recognized canon of Scripture. The first one is they were never part of the Hebrew Scripture. So, when you think in terms of, well, how did the Jewish people view the Apocrypha? They didn't ever include them in the Old Testament. Now, the caveat to that is when the Old Testament Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek in what's called the Septuagint, they were included at the back of that, but a distinction was made between the books that we recognize as being a part of the Old Testament Scripture and the Apocrypha. The same thing happened with the Latin Vulgate. When it was translated from the Greek into the Latin, the same thing happened. They included the books of the Apocrypha, but even Jerome, who did that translation, was troubled by adding those to the 39 books of the Old Testament, but he was

under intense pressure, and he put them in there, but he noted that they were not necessarily canonical. So, all of that to say the Jewish people never accepted any of the books of Apocrypha. They were never part of their Old Testament Scripture. That's significant. That's important.

Secondly, they make no claim to be inspired. They make no claim to be inspired. In fact, there are errors within the books of the Apocrypha. There's no line in the 15 books of the Apocrypha in which it says, and thus says the Lord, or the Lord said. There are no claims to being revelation or inspiration. And in fact, as I said, there are both historic and there are doctrinal errors.

The third reason would be the Apocrypha is never quoted in the New Testament. When you consider that there are hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of quotations in the New Testament of the Old Testament Scriptures, never once did any of the writers of the New Testament pull out of the Apocrypha and quote it. So, 35 books of the Old Testament are quoted in the New Testament. Never one of the books of the Apocrypha are ever quoted.

And then the fourth one, even the Roman Church made a distinction between the Apocrypha and the Old Testament prior to the Great Reformation. And the Great Reformation is really the defining point there, right? The Roman Catholic Church didn't include the Apocrypha in their Scriptures until the Council of Trent in 15 and 46, when Luther and the Roman Church went their separate ways. And then they only took 11 of them, so they didn't even take all 15.

Finally, this point, I think Jesus implies the close of the Old Testament Scriptures. Listen to what Jesus says in Matthew chapter 23 and verse 34. We'll explain why this is significant as we go. Therefore, Jesus says, I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some of you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth. Now listen, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. And you say, what does this have to do with anything? It has to do with everything.

Jesus is telling us when the Old Testament canon ended. When you, again, pick up a Hebrew Old Testament Scripture, the last book of their Bible, their Old Testament, is 2 Chronicles. There's a chronology obviously. 2 Chronicles ends the Old Testament. So, what Jesus is saying is this. Genesis, we have the murder of Abel. 2 Chronicles, we have the murder of Zechariah. It's like He's saying from Genesis to what we would say Revelation. But what He's saying is Genesis to Malachi. And He puts those two bookends, and He says this is, in fact, the Scriptures that were given 400 silent years followed, and then you come to Matthew.

Which brings us then to the New Testament canon. So, let's look at the New Testament canon. Here we have a much more clear historic process, because the New Testament is written in a matter of some 50 years. When you think in terms of the New Testament, the books that were readily recognized, unlike the Old Testament, the New Testament was written from about 47 A.D. to 95. So, if Galatians or James is the first book of the New Testament written, 47, Revelation is written in 95. So, a very short period of time, right? All the books of our New Testament are written either by an apostle or someone who was closely connected to apostles. There's this sense of authenticity.

Matthew obviously is an apostle. Mark is a close friend of Peter. When we read Mark's gospel, we're reading Peter's gospel. That's why Peter comes off in Mark's gospel the poorest of all the gospel accounts because Peter's just being honest. He's giving us his gospel through Mark as Mark records that. And then you go all through the rest of the scriptures. All of them are written then by the end of the first century, written and received by the church.

Debates continued over certain books, but by 367 a man by the name of Athanasius writes and talks about the 27 books that are part of God's word to his church. The same thing is true in the New Testament as in the Old Testament. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians chapter 14 and verse 37 and he says the things that I am writing to you are a command of the Lord. He's writing and he's giving not his own ideas, but he's giving the commands of the Lord, right? The same thing as I said in 1 Thessalonians 2:13 Paul writes and he says

hey I'm so glad that you didn't just think it was the words of men that was coming to you. It was the very words of God.

I think one of the neatest ones is in 2 Peter 3. This is what Peter says: Well, first of all in verse two – that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through his apostles. There's this awareness that the apostles are giving the church the word of God but listen to what Paul says in those two verses (15 and 16) when he says: And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him as he does in all of his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction than this as they do the other scriptures. Peter literally says the writings of Paul are scripture just like the Old Testament is scripture. There's an awareness. That is the point. The church is receiving God's word. The church is receiving the Scriptures that God has given.

If you look at the map and I know we can't describe everything on this map but that's the circulation that was happening. The word of God was being written, recorded by the apostles and those connected with the apostles. And then those books were being distributed. Paul will say when he writes to the church at Colosse: Read this letter and then make sure that you pass it on to Laodicea so that they can read it, too. There was an awareness that they were receiving God's word and it was being acknowledged and collected and recognized.

What about the New Testament? What about the question of which books that were questioned in the New Testament? Yes, there were some that were questioned in the New Testament. The book of Hebrews. The book of Hebrews was questioned because the authorship is not clearly stated. We still today debate over who wrote the book of Hebrews. Some people think Paul wrote it. Some people think Luke wrote it. Some people think Barnabas wrote it. We just simply aren't told so that called somewhat into question the book of Hebrews. For a while 2 Peter was questioned. The style of 2 Peter is so different from the style of 1 Peter that some people thought somebody else wrote it. Somebody else

probably did write it from the standpoint of Peter probably had a different secretary. He probably had a different amanuensis that recorded that second letter and its style is different. James, of course, was called into question because of James' statement that faith without works is dead and is he in conflict with Paul and justification by faith. 2 and 3 John. It took a long time for 2 and 3 John to be recognized because they're so small and there wasn't a lot of circulation. A lot of people had not been able to receive and hear about those. And then Revelation. It was kind of like Ezekiel. Revelation is kind of hard to understand. All these visions and all these things that are going on. So those were the books that took a little longer to be recognized, but ultimately all 27 were.

What about the books that were rejected or lost? Well again, you come back to the criteria for the books that were recognized as being revealed and inspired of God. They had to have the seal of the prophetic word, the apostolic authorship. There was the sense of how they were received by the church. Did the church welcome them and receive them and acknowledge them or the qualities that reflect the divine authorship? Just the beauty, the excellence, the power, the unity that is a part of God's word. The Holy Spirit's stamp on these books, these letters.

There are many other books There are many other gospels. There's the gospel of Thomas. That's quite popular. The gospel of Peter. The gospel of Judas. Those are not lost. So, if someone says to you well, what about the lost book? They're not lost. They've known about these books. These books have been studied for centuries and they're just simply not of the same quality and nature as the word of God. Most of them are simply rejected because if you were to take the gospel of Thomas and read it. or the gospel of Judas and read it, I can assure you, you would know within the first five minutes this doesn't even sound like the other scriptures that I'm reading regarding the authenticity of the Holy Spirit's stamp on them.

Finally, listen to this from Proverbs chapter 30 verse 5. Every word of God proves true. He is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words lest he rebuke you and you'll be found a liar. God has revealed and inspired his word, and that same God

has providentially preserved it and seen to its collection so that his people for all these centuries have had his word that speaks to them.

What do we take away? Well, it's about *sola scriptura*, isn't it? *Sola scriptura*. The scriptures alone are all we need for faith and practice. God's word is sufficient. That's what that means. *Sola scriptura* simply means that God's word contains everything we need to know. How to have a relationship with God. It explains to us obviously the gospel – that we are all sinners and have fallen short of the glory of God. And the way back to God is not by what we do for him. It's what he's done for us. So, it's sufficient regarding how I have a relationship with God But it's also sufficient for how I walk with God? Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord.

What does that look like? It looks like a people individually and corporately understanding *sola scriptura*, that God has given us everything we need for how to live life well. How to get along with each other well. How to relate to the people that God brings into our life well. How it is that we walk in holiness and purity before him. How it is that we acknowledge and have his Lordship over every area of our life. It's all there. It's all there. God's word is sufficient.

Let's pray. Gracious Father, we thank you so much for this living, breathing, alive word. Thank you that your word is living and it's powerful. It's sharper than any two-edged sword, Father. It comes into our hearts and into our minds, and it divides and it shows us what is right and what is good, and what is wrong and what is harmful. Father, it brings us life – the life of the gospel when we put our trust in Christ, in Christ alone. Father, it gives to us direction for every day that we live our life. We thank you this morning as your people that you have revealed yourself to us. You have made known what was before unknown. You have breathed out your very word and it gives us life and hope and purpose every day. We thank you for the blessing of having your word in our own language. We pray that we'll live it faithfully before you and each other. In Christ's name, amen.