

A pair of ornate brass scales of justice is centered in the image. The scales are made of polished brass with intricate scrollwork and a decorative top. Two pans are suspended by chains from the central column. The scales are placed on a dark wooden surface. The background is a blurred, warm-toned interior, possibly a library or study, with bookshelves visible.

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**WHAT THE BIBLE
SAYS ABOUT
TRUTH**

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT TRUTH

By: Bobby Jamieson

What is truth? Few questions are more important, and few are more disputed.

Many people today are skeptical of anyone's claims to know the capital-*T* Truth. Because of this atmosphere of distrust, some people want to give up on the hunt for truth altogether, declaring a universal cease-fire on truth claims. But can we really get by without truth?

Philosopher Roger Scruton has argued, "All discourse and dialogue depend upon the concept of truth. To agree with another is to accept the truth of what he says; to disagree is to reject it."¹ In other words, we can't even talk to each other without the notion of truth. To say that I'm lying is to presuppose there is truth to be told. To say that I'm wrong or even mistaken assumes the existence of a truth from which my statement departs.

But what if truth is nothing more than a conversational convention? Do we ever really mean anything when we say that something is true or false?

In this essay, I'm going to explore what the Bible says about the question "What is truth?" The Bible teaches that there is such a thing as truth—"true truth," as Christian apologist Francis Schaeffer put it.² This truth is grounded in the very **character and being of God**. And knowing the truth brings wholeness, healing, freedom, life, and joy.

But before exploring the Bible's answer to the question of truth, let's evaluate some common contemporary answers to the question.

Four Takes on Truth Today

Truth is disputed territory today, as it always has been. To claim to know the truth is to claim to know what everyone everywhere should think. To call an answer to a question "true" is to imply that at least some other answers are false. And this always gets personal sooner or later. If you're right, then someone, somewhere is wrong.

**THIS TRUTH IS GROUNDED IN
THE VERY CHARACTER AND
BEING OF GOD.**

No wonder tempers can flare over competing takes on truth. Still worse, entire wars have been motivated—at least in part—by contradicting truth claims.

The twenty-first century West suffers from what you might call "truth fatigue." We've been through a seemingly interminable history of battles over the truth. We're tired of fighting about it. Yet still, people can't seem to get away from the question. Everyone's got an opinion on truth—even if the opinion is that there is no such thing.

¹ Roger Scruton, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Philosophy* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 28.

² Francis A. Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason*, in *The*

Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy: Three Essential Books in One Volume (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 218.

Truth Is What Works

For some people, this basically means that in the end, **truth doesn't really matter**. What does it matter whether we can or can't know what's really "out there"? As long as you do what makes you happy and leave others to do the same, what does the truth matter?

In this view, if a belief that something is true seems a useful aid to living a contented life, then there's no harm in believing it—provided you don't try to make anyone else believe it, too.

TO CLAIM TO KNOW THE TRUTH IS TO CLAIM TO KNOW WHAT EVERYONE EVERYWHERE SHOULD THINK.

The view that "truth is what works" is basically an indifference to the question of truth. There are far more sophisticated variations on this position.³ Yet for most people today, a pragmatic attitude toward truth isn't a philosophical conviction so much as a practical convenience. With so many competing truth claims out there, isn't it simpler just to go with the flow? If no one can agree about what truth is, how important could it be in the first place?

Truth Is What You Make It

This is similar to the first view but more radical. From this perspective, we all construct our own truths, and the word "truth" itself is only a placeholder. In other words, truth isn't really anything "out there."

Sometimes people hold this view because they think of language as a glass cage: it looks transparent, but really we're trapped within it. If all our thoughts about the world are mediated through language, we can never get past language to what is *really* out there. "Truth" is just a word we use to describe the language game we're playing when we talk about the world.

FOR MOST PEOPLE TODAY, A PRAGMATIC ATTITUDE TOWARD TRUTH ISN'T A PHILOSOPHICAL CONVICTION SO MUCH AS A PRACTICAL CONVENIENCE.

Others point out that what we think about the world is, to a large degree, determined by the society we inhabit. Our view of the world functions to enable coherent social interactions. "Truth" or "reality" is simply a social construct, a shared imaginative enterprise that enables us to live together peacefully. Thus, truth isn't necessarily what an *individual* makes it, but what a *society* makes it.

At a more popular level, people tend to treat truth like private property. I have my own truth like I have my own car. But most importantly, others' truths are inviolable. The only universal truth is that it's always wrong to say someone else's truth isn't true. Within this view, truth is a good thing, even though it's just a social construct.

³ For example, there are those associated with thinkers like John Dewey and Henry James—leading figures in a philosophical movement known as "pragmatism." See Cornelis de Waal, *On Pragmatism*, Wadsworth Philosophical Topics (Belmont, NJ: Wadsworth, 2005).

Truth Is What Science Tells Us

A third common stance today is that [truth is what science tells us](#). Look at how far humans have come in understanding the world, this argument says. We can scale mountains, fly around the world, and map distant corners of the cosmos. We can clone animals, cure diseases, build microscopic robots, send information anywhere at anytime. Science clearly works. Why wouldn't we trust it to give us the truth?

It's not just that science works; it also promises a firm place to take our intellectual stand. Science works by testing hypotheses, ruthlessly subjecting them to repeatable, observable tests, and eliminating explanations that can't bear the weight of cold, hard data. And the scientific method has proven so useful on so many fronts that some people view it as the key to all knowledge.

Ultimately, some thinkers have formalized this general posture into the belief that scientific statements are the only true statements because they're verifiable by observation.⁴ Scientific claims (e.g., "ice melts at 32 degrees Fahrenheit") are meaningful because they can be tested empirically. Religious claims (e.g., "[Jesus is God](#)") are meaningless because no experiment can tell us whether they are true or false.

Truth Is Tyranny and Should Be Resisted

Finally, many people think that truth is tyranny that should be resisted. They see all truth claims as power grabs. Where you have someone who says they know the truth, there you have someone trying to dominate, exploit, or oppress other people under the pretext of bringing them in line with "the truth."

**PEOPLE TEND TO TREAT TRUTH
LIKE PRIVATE PROPERTY.**

As Friedrich Nietzsche famously put it: "There are no facts, only interpretations."⁵ And if that's the case, then the only way one interpretation will ultimately defeat another is by holding a gun to its head. As such, truth is an instrument of violent coercion, even torture.

Therefore it is our duty to resist all claims to truth by subverting them, exposing their hidden motives, and subjecting them to radical critique. If there are no criteria by which agreement about the truth can be peacefully negotiated, then communication is war—and truth is the heavy artillery.⁶

⁴ One technical form of this view is known as logical positivism, which holds that the key to knowledge is the "verification principle," in which the meaning of a sentence is determined by its method of verification—that is, by how you can determine whether it is true or false. For brief discussion, see Scruton, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Philosophy* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 17–22.

⁵ See discussion in Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche on*

Truth and Philosophy (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 2.

⁶ For an in-depth engagement with these philosophical currents, broadly known as deconstructionism, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009).

Questioning Today's Takes on Truth

It's worth asking some questions about the claims of these four perspectives on truth.

My point in questioning these views is not to disparage those sympathetic with them. Much less is it to say these views have nothing to offer. As we'll see, from a biblical perspective, each of these points of view has at least a kernel of truth and therefore has something important to offer us. Yet they each make a claim about what truth is, and so they invite critical questions.

Of the claim that "Truth is what works," I ask:
How do you decide what "works" in the first place, whether for an individual or society?
And what do you do when what works for one person actually harms another? On what ground do you say the former is wrong?

MANY PEOPLE THINK THAT TRUTH IS TYRANNY THAT SHOULD BE RESISTED.

As to the notion that "Truth is what you make it," we might ask: If language is a glass cage, how can it even describe itself? Or if truth is merely a social construct, then what can you say to a society that physically mutilates women or tolerates the sexual abuse of children? If their truth allows them those actions, on what ground can you declare such practices to be wrong?

As to the view that "Truth is what science tells us," remember that from this perspective only scientific statements are meaningful. But is the assertion "Scientific statements are the only meaningful statements" itself a scientific statement? Clearly not. It is a philosophical claim. Therefore, logically speaking, this statement condemns itself as meaningless.⁷

THE QUESTION "WHAT IS TRUTH?" IS ITSELF FOUND IN THE PAGES OF SCRIPTURE.

Finally, what of the claim that "Truth is tyranny and should be resisted"? If truth claims are to be debunked, deconstructed, and overthrown, why not this one? It, too, claims a power as dominant as any religion. It prescribes a specific action as "right"—what *should be done*—encouraging all people to comply with its dictates, keeping them under its sovereign sway.

Truth According to the Bible

So what, then, does the Bible say about truth? It might surprise you that the question "What is truth?" is itself found in the pages of Scripture. When standing trial before the Roman governor Pilate, Jesus said to Pilate, "For this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."⁸ Pilate responded by asking, "What is truth?"⁹

If only Pilate had known that the truth was standing before him, looking him in the eye.

⁷ Scruton, 18.

⁸ *The Holy Bible*, New International Version © 1984, John 18:37.

Truth Is a Person

You see, the Bible teaches that truth isn't just an abstract idea or philosophical puzzle. Instead, truth is a *person*—the person of Jesus Christ, to be exact. Jesus said to his disciples, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”¹⁰ The Apostle John, reflecting on the whole of Jesus' life, wrote, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”¹¹ In Jesus, the truth took on human nature.

If we're being honest, we must all admit that our lives are marred, one way or another, by deceit and falsehood. We've all departed from truth in our thoughts and actions. As the Apostle Paul put it, we “suppress the truth” by our own sinful desires and deeds.¹² Yet Jesus lived a perfectly truthful life. Looking ahead to Jesus' coming to earth, the prophet Isaiah said that Jesus would be put to death “though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.”¹³

But, for Christians, Jesus is far more than just a truthful person; he is the truth incarnate. The Apostle Paul tells us that in Jesus, “all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.”¹⁴ So Jesus is the truth in human form because he is God in human form. In Jesus, the truth came to earth to confront our lies, transform our minds, heal our hearts, fill us with joy, and liberate us from slavery to deceit.

FOR CHRISTIANS, JESUS IS FAR MORE THAN JUST A TRUTHFUL PERSON; HE IS THE TRUTH INCARNATE.

God Is True

But we need to pull back the lens a little. In order to understand more fully what the Bible means when it says that Jesus is the truth, we need to understand that truth is an attribute of God's own nature. God is true.

The Bible tells us this over and over again: “This God—his way is perfect; the word of the Lord proves true; he is a shield for all those who take refuge in him.”¹⁵ This passage from the book of Psalms tells us that all God does is faithful and trustworthy. Every word he speaks is true, because it comes from his own nature. We can run to him, cast ourselves on him, and depend wholly on him, because he is true. His words are true and his ways are true. There is nothing false in God.

Speaking in regard to his own written testimony about Jesus, the Apostle John writes, “Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true.”¹⁶ To believe in Jesus is to acknowledge that God is who he says he is: the true, faithful, trustworthy God.

The Bible uses a wealth of terms and images to describe God's truth. Consider this bit of a poem written by Moses: “He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.”¹⁷

⁹ Ibid., John 18:38.

¹⁰ Ibid., John 14:6.

¹¹ Ibid., John 1:14.

¹² Ibid., Romans 1:18.

¹³ Ibid., Isaiah 53:9b.

¹⁴ Ibid., Colossians 2:9.

¹⁵ *The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version © 2001, Psalm 18:30.

¹⁶ Ibid., John 3:33.

¹⁷ *The Holy Bible*, New International Version © 1984, Deuteronomy 32:4.

**TO BELIEVE IN JESUS IS TO
ACKNOWLEDGE THAT GOD IS
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FAITHFUL, TRUSTWORTHY GOD.**

Later the prophet Jeremiah considered the so-called gods of silver and gold that Israel's neighbors made for themselves, and he contrasted them with the true and living God: "But the Lord is the true God," wrote Jeremiah. "He is the living God, the eternal King. When he is angry, the earth trembles; the nations cannot endure his wrath."¹⁸

According to the Bible, the Lord is the true God, the one who really lives and reigns. Because he is the true God, he has sovereign power over all. When the Bible says that God is true, it implies that he truly exists, that he is perfectly truthful in all he says and does, and that he alone knows all reality perfectly and immediately. Pulling together many biblical passages and themes such as these, the nineteenth-century Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck wrote: "He, therefore, is the primary, the original truth, the source of all truth, the truth in all truth. He is the ground of the truth—of the true being—of all things. . . . God is the source and origin of the knowledge of truth in all areas of life; the light in which alone we can see light, the sun of all spirits."¹⁹

Because God is true, all truth derives from and corresponds to him. If our thoughts are true, it's because they correspond to the world as God made and knows it. If our actions are true, it's because they conform to the way God himself acts.

Because God is true, all truth belongs to him, and all truth finds its ultimate meaning in him.

All God Says Is True

We saw above that because God is true, all he says is true. In a letter to one of his coworkers, the Apostle Paul says that God "does not lie."²⁰ As one of the Psalms puts it, "All your words are true; all your righteous laws are eternal."²¹

But where do we have access to God's speech? [In the Bible itself](#). Paul tells us, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."²² God himself *spoke* the Scriptures. God worked through the human authors of Scripture in such a way that they freely wrote precisely what God intended them to. What Scripture says, God says. But how is this possible?

**WHEN THE BIBLE SAYS THAT
GOD IS TRUE, IT IMPLIES THAT
HE TRULY EXISTS, THAT HE IS
PERFECTLY TRUTHFUL IN ALL
HE SAYS AND DOES, AND THAT
HE ALONE KNOWS ALL REALITY
PERFECTLY AND IMMEDIATELY.**

Jesus tells us that the Father accomplished this by the [power of the Holy Spirit](#): "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come."²³

¹⁸ Ibid., Jeremiah 10:10.

¹⁹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Volume Two: God and Creation*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 209–210.

²⁰ *The Holy Bible*, New International Version © 1984, Titus 1:2.

²¹ Ibid., Psalm 119:160.

²² Ibid., 2 Timothy 3:16.

²³ Ibid., John 16:13.

From Jesus' words, we can understand that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth. So what the Spirit revealed to the Apostles is *true*. Have you ever wondered why we should trust that the [biblical accounts of Jesus' life are true](#)? Jesus himself told his disciples that "the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."²⁴ The apostles' memories of Jesus were safeguarded by the Holy Spirit—and they themselves were taught by the Spirit.

THE APOSTLES' MEMORIES OF JESUS WERE SAFEGUARDED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT—AND THEY THEMSELVES WERE TAUGHT BY THE SPIRIT.

This gives Christians confidence that what the Bible says about Jesus is true. And it ultimately gives us confidence that all the Bible teaches is true. As the Apostle Peter says, referring to the whole Old Testament as a prophetic writing, "For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."²⁵

In sum, the Bible is true because every word of it is the word of God. God inspired the Scriptures in such a way that he actually breathed out the very words of Scripture, by the Holy Spirit, through the free agency of the human authors.

Because the Bible is the Word of the God who is true, the Bible itself is true. As theologian Scott Swain puts it, "*God's word is wholly true*. In his Word, God does not hide anything from us that would cause us to be misled. Moreover, *God's word is only true*. In his Word, God does not include anything that would lead us astray."²⁶ Therefore we can trust the Bible completely. We can—and must—allow the Bible to shape and reshape our thoughts about God, ourselves, and our world.

Truth Is Thinking God's Thoughts After Him

The Bible tells a sprawling, epic narrative. It begins with the creation of all things and concludes with the recreation of all things. It tells the story of how God created people to rule the world under his dominion, and so enjoy fellowship with him and cause creation to flourish.²⁷ Yet, the Bible tells us, people rebelled against God, choosing to disobey him. With this decision, [sin entered the world](#). Consequently, we are all subject to sin and stand under God's judgment.²⁸

But from the beginning, God had a plan to rescue people—and ultimately creation itself—from the predicament of sin by [sending his Son Jesus into the world](#) as a man.²⁹ Jesus—the embodiment of truth—lived a perfectly truthful life in our place. He obeyed God perfectly, satisfying God's righteous requirements.³⁰

Yet Jesus was crucified by people who, like all of us, loved lies rather than the truth.³¹ But Jesus' crucifixion wasn't a tragic accident—it was God pouring out the punishment we deserved onto Jesus. Why? So that if we would turn from sin and trust in Jesus, we could be reconciled to God, forgiven, and adopted into his family.³²

²⁴ Ibid., John 14:26.

²⁵ Ibid., 2 Peter 1:21.

²⁶ Scott R. Swain, *Trinity, Revelation and Reading: A Theological Introduction to the Bible and Its Interpretation* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 78.

²⁷ *The Holy Bible*, New International Version © 1984, Genesis 1:26–28.

²⁸ Ibid., Genesis 3:1–24.

²⁹ Ibid., Genesis 3:15; Isaiah 53; Galatians 4:4–5; Ephesians 1:3–5; Philippians 2:5–11.

³⁰ Ibid., Matthew 3:15; Romans 5:19; Hebrews 4:15.

³¹ Ibid., Acts 2:23; 1 Corinthians 2:8.

³² Ibid., Romans 3:21–31; 2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 John 3:1.

On the third day after his death, Jesus rose from the grave. Now he rules at God's right hand, and one day he will rule over a renewed creation. All people everywhere are called to submit to, trust in, and [follow Jesus](#).³³

This is the main point of the Bible. It tells us how to be saved from sin and how to live out salvation. But it doesn't tell us all things. The Bible is true, but not exhaustive. So how do we know what's true in addition to the Bible?

JESUS—THE EMBODIMENT OF TRUTH—LIVED A PERFECTLY TRUTHFUL LIFE IN OUR PLACE.

In brief, truth is thinking God's thoughts after him, though this might sound confusing. This means, first, that nothing that contradicts the Bible is true. But remember also that God knows all things perfectly. Anything we can know, he knows already. If we discover the structure of a cell, we're discerning what God has designed. If we solve a math problem, we're uncovering a piece of the fabric of logic that God has woven into creation.

Thus the Bible ultimately provides a firm footing for seeking truth in all realms of inquiry: math, language, science, history, even the arts.

Because God really is "out there," truth truly exists and we truly can know it.

Because God created us to inhabit the world, we can trust that our senses mediate actual knowledge of the world rather than a mere illusion.

Because God made the world, it reflects his own wisdom and truth. Therefore the order that scientific investigation of nature uncovers is not random or a mirage—it's a reflection of its maker.

Because God is a speaking God, we can use language to communicate with him and with each other. Language isn't a glass cage but a genuine means of personal fellowship.

Believing in an absolutely truthful God who has revealed himself in an absolutely true Bible doesn't squash intellectual inquiry—just the opposite, in fact. The Bible itself celebrates an early kind of science when it says that King Solomon "described plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also taught about animals and birds, reptiles and fish."³⁴ It offers examples from nature to give us insight into the way life works.³⁵ Believing in a rational God is a tremendous motivation to investigate rationally the world that he made.

BELIEVING IN A RATIONAL GOD IS A TREMENDOUS MOTIVATION TO INVESTIGATE RATIONALLY THE WORLD THAT HE MADE.

Though we can never know perfectly or exhaustively, we can know truly. [We can know God](#). We can know each other. We can know the world God has made. By attending to what God has said in Scripture and done in creation, we can think God's own thoughts after him, and so know truth.

³³ Ibid., Acts 3:14–21, 17:30–31; Hebrews 10:12–13.

³⁴ Ibid., 1 Kings 4:33.

³⁵ Ibid., Proverbs 6:6–8.

Truth Sets You Free

Finally, the Bible teaches that truth isn't just for thinking, but for doing. The Apostle Paul says that truth is meant to be obeyed.³⁶ Truth isn't for toying with. It's for transforming our lives so that they conform to the life of Jesus.

King David prayed, "Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place."³⁷ God wants us to be true all the way down. He doesn't want true statements from false hearts, or "true" deeds from deceitful motives. He wants the very core of our being to be true—just like him.

When we know and live God's truth, we know and live as God has always meant us to. This doesn't bring dutiful drudgery, but joyful freedom. Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."³⁸

True disciples of Jesus are those who do what he says. They take his words as true, his commands as true, his promises as true. They hold to his teaching like a drowning man holds to a life raft, like a child holds to their parent. And when they do this, they come to know the truth. Why? Because they come to know him who is truth in person.

**THE BIBLE TEACHES THAT TRUTH
ISN'T JUST FOR THINKING, BUT
FOR DOING.**

Jesus is the truth. To know him is to know truth. To live as he lives is to live truth. And to know and live the truth is to be free—truly free.

The Bible and Today's Takes on Truth

So what is truth? From a biblical perspective, all the views we surveyed earlier in this essay contain at least a grain of truth.

- "Truth is what works" rightly grasps that if truth means anything, it must impact our lives.
- "Truth is what you make it" discerns that none of us have perfect knowledge. None of us can claim a view from nowhere.
- "Truth is what science tells us" has a grain of truth in that science can tell us many true things about the world we live in.
- "Truth is tyranny and should be resisted" correctly recognizes that we all have a vested interest in the truth, which is a powerful concept that can be wielded for ill as well as for good.

³⁶ Ibid., Romans 2:8.

³⁷ Ibid., Psalm 51:6.

³⁸ Ibid., John 8:31-32.

Therefore, in addition to critiquing these four takes on truth, the Bible also fulfills and transforms them.

- God’s truth “works” because it teaches us how to be true from the heart.
- We don’t make the truth, but God’s truth makes us. His perfect knowledge provides a firm footing from which we can discover truth.
- Science can tell us *some* truth because science discerns God’s own handiwork, whether or not it recognizes creation as God’s.
- The Bible subverts the tyranny of the lies we tell in the name of truth. The Bible resists every false truth claim, every oppressive narrative, every story used to subjugate. The Bible claims truth for itself, but it is a truth that brings light and life, freedom and flourishing.

Staying for an Answer

Reflecting on the encounter between Jesus and Pilate mentioned above, the sixteenth-century British philosopher Francis Bacon quipped, “‘What is truth?’ said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer.”³⁹

**TO KNOW AND LIVE THE TRUTH IS
TO BE FREE—TRULY FREE.**

How about you? Unlike Pilate, you’ve stayed for an answer. You’ve thought about a number of takes on truth, especially the Bible’s. Have you ever thought that truth could be a person? Or that God’s truth is the basis of all true human knowledge, including science? Or that truth could set you free—from sin, from condemnation, from any and all lies?

I pray that you would look Jesus in the face and see him for the truth he is.

³⁹ Francis Bacon, “Of Truth,” cited in Scruton, *An Intelligent Person’s Guide to Philosophy*, 30.

⁴⁰ Photo Credit: [corgarashu | Shutterstock](#)