Reliable authority

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[0:00] Now let's turn to the last verses of John's Gospel, John chapter 21. And we'll read from verse 20, although really it's just the last three verses we want to look at this morning.

John 21 from verse 20. Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, Lord, who is going to betray you?
When Peter saw him, he asked, Lord, what about him? Jesus answered, if I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?
You must follow me. Because of this, the rumor spread among the brothers that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die.
He only said, if I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down.
[1:07] We know that his testimony is true. Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the book that would be written.

Really, what I want to think about this morning is a contrast between the words at the beginning of verse 23, the rumor spread among the brothers, and then the words in verse 24, we know that his testimony is true.
How do you know what you can really rely on in life? The question of reliability is a tremendously important one.
It's important at the level of things. A washing machine, is it reliable? Or is it going to flood my kitchen? Is it going to break down? A car has it been reliably serviced?
And a brake is going to fail. It could be very dangerous. Even more dangerous. What about an oil ring? Is it reliable? Are all the procedures reliable?
[2:26] Are there likely to be a disaster like Piper Alpha? Nuclear power station, is it designed reliably? Are the procedures reliable?

The question of reliability, tremendously important one. It's true not only of things, it's true of people. Your friends, can you rely on them? Can you trust them? Can you tell them something? Can you ask them for help? Your husband, your wife, can you rely on them?
Your parents, your children, can you rely on them? Can you trust them? These are questions that we face up to all the time in life. And so often, we find that both things and people are unreliable. They let us down, they disappoint us. Now this question of reliability, is even more important when we come to consider God, and everything that concerns God.
[3:33] Is there some reliable way of finding out about God? Of what He says to us? Of what He wants of us? Is there something we can rely on?

This is the greatest question of all. If God exists, what is He like? And what relevance does it have to me? Tremendously important question, greater than any of the other ones we've mentioned. Because everything else hangs on the question of whether God exists and what He's like. Is there some reliable way of finding out these things? In the middle of the 20th century, people thought that man had outgrown religion.
But as we near the end of the 20th century, and the end of the second millennium, people are beginning to see that people have not outgrown religion at all.
In fact, the question now is not so much a choice between will I be religious or non-religious, but it's more and more a choice of which religion will I follow? There's been a tremendous upsurge of Islam.

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[4:44] There's also been a tremendous victory of Christianity over Marxism in Eastern Europe. And there's also the emergence from the influence of Eastern religion and the occult, the emergence of a movement known as the New Age movement in the Western world.

All religious means are tremendously influential and will be coming more and more influential. So the question more and more is what is God like?
And how do I know what He's like? Which of these groups, these competing groups, competing for my attention, which am I going to follow? That's more and more the question that confronts us at the end of this century.
Human beings are incorrigibly religious. We have an indelible sense of the existence of God. And no matter how that may try to be stamped out in various places such as in Russia or Eastern Europe, it cannot be stamped out.
But the great question is, what is God like? What does He want? And how can I know these things? Is there some reliable source I can go to to find out?
[6:11] Now all of this comes into very sharp focus if we think about Jesus. To people of all different religious persuasions, Jesus is a very important figure.

That's maybe not something you've thought about very much, but you go to Islam and to the Koran, their holy book, and you'll discover that Jesus is a very important place there.
Jesus is recognized as one of the great prophets. But there are things that are said there that differ from the Christian view of Jesus.
For instance, He's only held to be one of the prophets, and in a way subordinate to Muhammad. In other ways, He's unique, different even from Muhammad. But for instance, they would say He was only a man, an ordinary man.
He wasn't the Son of God. And they would even say that He wasn't really crucified on the cross. He didn't really die. So, there are some ideas about Jesus that seem to conflict very much with what we have been led to believe about Jesus.
[7:30] So, all these different religions and movements, they may have ideas about Jesus, but what is He really like? And how are we to know? Now, that's the question that I think is before us here at the very end of John's Gospel.

Sometimes, it appears to us that these last verses of John's Gospel, it's a bit of an anticlimax. After all the tremendous things that we've been discovering in John's Gospel over the past while, we've been looking at it.
We've read some of the famous passages this morning in John's Gospel. And then it ends about this, and you're not really very sure what it's all about, this last few verses.
Well, I believe it's about this great question of what you can rely on with regard to information about God and especially information about Jesus Christ.
We could, for instance, we could rely on rumours or human tradition. That's the first thing that's brought before us. Because of this, in verse 23, because of this, the rumours spread among the brothers that this disciple would not die.
[8:50] In other words, if we look at this, first of all, in the specific situation about John, John the disciple who's actually recording this Gospel, will see what's involved.

Jesus had said something about John to Peter. He had said, if I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?
You must follow me. Now, we thought about that last week. But, you see, this was misunderstood by people who heard this saying.
And they interpreted that as meaning, well, John's not going to die. He's going to live right up until the time when Jesus returns to this world and brings the world to an end.
Jesus didn't say that. That's the way they interpreted it in their minds. So, this rumour or this saying went out in that form.
[9:53] which he, John had to correct it. It was mistaken. But that was the rumour or the saying or the tradition that went around among some people, maybe many people.

And John had to correct it. He had to show that it was wrong. Now, if we consider this about the great questions we've been looking at, the question about God, the question about Jesus Christ, especially about Jesus, how does this tie in?
Well, this is one way in which people seek to look at these questions. What's God like? What's Jesus like? They accept human traditions.

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They accept saying. They accept ultimately rumour. Let's take some of these things that I've mentioned already. For instance, I began to talk about Islam.
In Islam, Jesus is accepted as a prophet, but not the Son of God. Just a man. And he didn't actually die on the cross. But, were these things written down at the time it happened?
[11:09] No. The Koran was written over 500 years after Jesus lived and died. So, it was a saying. it was a tradition.

It was a rumour. Not reliable. Similarly, we can take things, for instance, in Roman Catholic doctrine that have developed over the century since the coming of Christ.
Christ. Yes. The Roman Catholic Church recognises Jesus is the Son of God and recognises that he is the Saviour of the world.
But there are traditions in the Roman Catholic Church added onto that. Traditions that say really that Jesus needs some help. He's not really, doesn't appear anyway, able enough to save people on his own.
He needs to have a high priest on earth, the Pope. He needs to have his mother, Mary, to be a mediator as well to help him.
[12:19] And he needs the mass as a special way in which people can receive his help together.
Now, when you come to look at these things, none of these things has got authority in the Bible.

But they were traditions. They were human ideas that were spread about. And actually, some of them were only very recently formulated into doctrines, last century and this century.
People infallibility. And so on. And some of the doctrines about Mary. Long years, centuries, after the things actually happened.
people could go wrong very quickly in their sayings about John and that he wasn't going to die, surely people have gone very far wrong over those centuries with their sayings and their human tradition.
But take another example. Liberal Protestant theology. It again is an example of the same kind of thing. it will teach.
[13:28] Again, Jesus is not the Son of God. He's a good man. He's a great teacher. Look at the Sermon on the Mount. Look at the teaching he gave about that we should love one of them. that's what Jesus is.

Well, it's true that Jesus is a great teacher and a good man, but the Bible says much more about him than that. But this idea about Jesus, where does it originate?
It originated last century. The 19th century. 18th centuries after the things really happened. Saying. Tradition. Bloomers. Are they reliable? Then take for instance another movement I mentioned, the New Age movement.
A new thing. We'll be hearing a great amount about, I'm sure, in the years to come. They also have things to say about Jesus Christ. They say that Christ is the basic evolutionary force within creation.
[14:35] Sounds very scientific that. very appealing to modern man. They also say the Christ is universal love. Again, very attractive isn't it?

Very plausible too because Jesus spoke about love. They say Jesus was one incarnation of the cosmic Christ.
Well, again, it sounds all very modern and very attractive, but what does it mean? mean? What does it mean? Does it mean the same as what the Bible teaches about Jesus?
I think we'll discover it doesn't. But the point is, where has this originated? It originated 19th century after things really happened, after Jesus really lived and died and rose again.
Is it reliable? trust me saying, these rumors, these traditions? Well, no. We're being taught here by John.
[15:37] But that's not the reliable way to go about things. He says, because of this, the rumors spread among the disciples, among the brothers, that this disciple would not die.

It was a wrong understanding that was passed around. You know how these things happen. You know how gossip goes. Something happens, someone tells somebody else about it, and an arm is added onto it.
Somebody tells someone else, and a leg is added onto it. And so it goes on, until the story has got arms and legs all over the place. Well, that's how human tradition goes.
And it's unreliable. All these ideas, all these human traditions, unreliable. Sometimes they're loosely based upon things Jesus said or did.

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For instance, the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, that the wine and the bread at communion is actually transformed into the real body and blood and divinity of Jesus Christ.
[16:49] It's loosely based on what Jesus said. He said, this is my body. But Jesus also said, I am the door. And no theologian I've ever heard of has interpreted that as meaning that Jesus is made of wood.

In other words, it's a misinterpretation of Jesus' obvious use of figurative language. And then take again, the New Age movement, take the quotation from Jesus, the kingdom of God is within you. And they say, that means that all this about religion is a very subjective thing, it's just to do with yourself, it's just private. That's not what Jesus meant at all. It's taking these things out of context and interpreting them in a completely wrong way.
So then, is there any alternative to these traditions, these sayings, these rumours? You look at all of these different ideas and you're confused.
you don't know what to believe because they don't all agree with one another. Who are you to believe? Are you to believe Islam? Are you to believe liberal Protestant theology, Roman Catholic theology?
[18:02] Are you to believe the New Age movement or any other district? Some people today are genuinely confused because it's only one human tradition against another.

How do you solve it? Well, John knew the way to solve it. And that's how he finishes his gospel here on this tremendously important point. What we have brought before us here is the fact that we can rely on the written account of eyewitnesses.
You see, John had to correct that thing about himself. They thought he would never die. He said, Jesus did not say that he would not die. He only said, if we want him to remain alive and live return, what is that to you?
In other words, it's none of your business. And then this is added, this is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true.
Now here, other people are joining in with John, other people in the church, and they're adding their voice in and saying, this is what the truth is. And here they're saying it not just with regard to that one saying about John himself, but about what John has written.
[19:16] John is testifying and he's written these things down and they're true. And so we can rely on these written accounts of eyewitnesses.

this written account, in this particular instance, was correcting tradition. It was correcting that wrong saying that had got out.
So that's the way to look at it. You go to the source. You go to what is the right account of these things. And that's what we have in the scripture. First of all notice that it is an eyewitness account. This is the disciple who testifies to these things. he's a witness. He can give testimony. John himself say in his first letter, the very first verse, that he saw the word of life.
He saw Jesus, even touched him. He's an eyewitness. So he knows what he's talking about. The same kind of thing is said at the end of chapter 20 here in his gospel.
[20:24] in verse 30. Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples. These things were seen. They were witnessed by the disciples.

But more than that, we're told here that John wrote them down. This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. Now you can give testimony, you can give verbal testimony in a court of law.
You just speak your testimony. But there's another way of giving testimony, that is a written account, a written statement of what has taken place. And you sign it and you say, that is the account of what took place.
Now this is what we've got in the Bible. A man giving his eyewitness account written down. So it is recorded in this very definite way.
I was mentioning earlier to the children about how by writing something down you make it very clear. And you recording it soon after what happened, you record exactly what happened, exactly as you saw it, and there it is.
[21:39] And you can refer back to it. Now this is exactly what was happening with John. He was writing down the things that he knew about, the things that he had seen. And we know the church, maybe this was the elders and the church in Ephesus where John was, we don't exactly know, but they say we know that his testimony is true.

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In other words, they're saying this is reliable. They're saying this is something that we have verified. Now we don't know all the details of the way in which they verified it, but one way, one obvious way would be if they'd consulted the other witnesses.
People like Peter, some of the other disciples, they had seen these things too. It could be verified, it could be corroborated. Now I must say that's all very well for people living in that first century. They could actually speak to some of these people like John and Peter and the rest of them, and they could make sure that that's what really happened. What about us today? Well, first of all, we've got this tremendous thing to go on, reliable accounts of eyewitnesses written down within the lifetime of these people who had seen those things, so that if any of it was wrong, it could be corrected by people who had seen it.
This goes right back to the source. It's not human traditions or sayings that have been passed around and maybe only after a long while thought up about Jesus.
[23:13] It's things written down at the time. But also, we have other corroboration today. For instance, these people who had passed doubt upon the Bible and saying it's not reliable and therefore they invented their ideas about Jesus being just a man and a good teacher and all the rest of it, they pointed to things, for instance, in John's Gospel as examples of inaccuracy.

They were saying, John was, or whoever wrote this Gospel was writing, oh, in the second century, well over a hundred years after these things happened, and he was inventing things about Jerusalem that didn't exist.
I mean, he mentions a pool of Bethesda with five porches in it. It's all invention. Or he mentions this pavement, Gabbatha, where the soldiers were when Jesus was being trying.
Again, never heard of before. Just an invention. in this century, the 20th century, archaeology, Israeli archaeology, dug up in Jerusalem, the pool of Bethesda, and the pavement, Gabbatha. Striking confirmation that the word of God, the Bible, is not invented. It is speaking about real things, things that really happen.
[24:40] Now, this New Testament, of which John's Gospel is a part, was all written down within the lifetime of those who had witnessed these events.

And therefore, it is something, as I say, goes right back to the source and is reliable. But then, we notice here, the last verse of the Gospel adds something to this, and it adds a kind of disclaimer. it says, Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world wouldn't have room for the books that would be written. In other words, John says, I'm not pretending that this is exhaustive truth.
I'm not pretending that this is everything that could ever be said about Jesus. But, it says, even if I attempted to write down all I knew about Jesus, it would take far too much.
It would take far too much for me to write and far too much for you to read. And if everybody who had been involved with Jesus wrote down everything that could be written about Jesus, then the whole world wouldn't contain the book.
[25:49] There'd be no end to it. Now, you know how, say, for instance, we've had recently the Piper Offer inquiring into that terrible disaster.

And the volumes and volumes and volumes of evidence given over one incident. Yes, a traumatic incident, but one incident. Now, if you think of every incident in the life of Jesus, full of meaning and significance, and you'd have to have volumes and volumes and volumes written about that.
John is saying, that's not the kind of book I'm writing. That is not the kind of book the Bible is. It's not a book that gives all the details that could be given.
Some people, they want the Bible to be a book that would answer every question they could ever have about anything. That's not what the Bible is. The Bible tells us certain things that we need to know.
And that's the point I want to finish on, which is really the sort of first conclusion of John's Gospel at the end of chapter 20, which we looked at some months ago.
[27:02] But it really ties in with this verse. Because verses 30 and 31 of chapter 20, John says, Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book.

But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

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In other words, John had a purpose in writing down the things he did write down. He couldn't write everything, but he wrote down important things, because these showed what Jesus was all about. And that's the great thing that we have to discover as we come to the Bible. It's a book that's reliable, it's a book that reliably tells us about Jesus, and it's a book that has a purpose.
And that purpose is that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, and so on. The purpose John had in writing, and the purpose indeed of the whole Bible, is not primarily morality, that you'd be good or able to distinguish between right and wrong.
[28:16] Not as a primarily knowledge, that you'd know these things, know about God, know about Jesus. Its ultimate purpose is a persuasive one. Its purpose is persuasive, persuasion, to the truth.

It is that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ. Now this is written for that purpose, so that the Bible, the gospel, is evidence that's been brought before you to persuade you to come to the conclusion that Jesus is indeed the Christ, the Son of God.
So, John is saying here there is sufficient evidence for you to come to that conclusion. And here is the evidence. He writes this, and he says, I have come to that conclusion, and that's my purpose in writing, that you too would come to see that Jesus is the Son of God.
This Jesus who lived, who did those things, who died on the cross, and who rose again, this Jesus is the Son of God. You can come to believe that on the basis of the evidence.
But that's not all he says. My purpose in writing is that you would come to believe that, but then there's more. He says that by believing, you may have life in his name.
[29:43] In other words, the fact that you come to believe in Jesus Christ, it does something, it changes something, it gives you something that you had not before. It's not just a matter of whether you can believe it or leave it.

No, when you believe this, there's a transformation takes place that is unparalleled, that you may have life. Are you living, or are you just existing?
That's the question that such words in John's Gospel really confronts us with. Jesus said, I am the way, the truth, and the life.
Jesus said, I've come that they may have life, and have it to the full. Do we know that life to the full that Jesus spoke of, or are we just existing?
Are you going to enjoy life, real life, forever, or is death going to be the end of all enjoyment? The life that John is talking about here is eternal life, life that begins here and now, the life of knowing God, of knowing God's love, and that going on forever, because death can't break that.
[31:00] Death can't break the relationship between you and Jesus Christ, because Jesus has conquered death. Jesus said, I am the way, the truth, and the life.

No one comes to the Father except by me. So there's no other way, Jesus says, you have to come to me, and then you'll find true life. He also said, remember, we read it, I am the good shepherd, and the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.
He tells us there the way by which we get this life. It's a gift to us, it's free to us, but it was costly to him. He laid down his life, he died, he suffered, he took the punishment and the separation from God that we deserve to give us life.
That's the message that John brings before us here in his gospel. And he says, I've written it so that you may believe. And preachers like me, we preach this not just to interest you, not just to stimulate you, we preach it so that you too may believe, so that you too may come to know what life is all about.
So from these words at the end of John's gospel we learn that the Bible is reliable and it has a message for you. Believe in Jesus and you will have real life.
[32:31] Let us pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Our gracious and loving heavenly Father, we thank you for your own word because if we didn't have it we would be left at the mercy of all kinds of conflicting opinions and ideas.

But here we have your word that was written down right after these events took place and it is a word that is backed up by thousands of early manuscripts of these things so that we can be more certain of the events that took place concerning the life of Jesus than of any other event in the history of the ancient world.
We thank you for that and we pray gracious Lord that today we would realize what a precious gift we have in having the Bible and having it here translated in our own language and having such

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freedom to read it and to hear it being proclaimed enable us today to fulfill the purpose for which it was written that we would come to believe in Jesus Christ for ourselves and know the life that he has come to give.
We ask this in Jesus name and for his sake Amen. Amen.

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