

The following sermon was preached at Redemption Baptist Church on Sunday, 28 May 2023. We encourage you to look up the Scriptures that are referenced and see the context for yourself. May the Lord speak to your heart as you study His Word.

Not One Jot Nor Tittle (Part 3)

Matthew 5:18

I would like to begin this morning's message by posing a question to you. The question is this: **"Is there anything other than God that is eternal?"** Now, just so you know, this is not a "trick question"! The answer to this question is found right in the pages of Scripture; and the answer is, "Yes: there *is* something other than God Himself that is eternal."

Now, lest you fear that I am straying into heresy, allow me to make my case from Scripture. This "thing" that has existed forever is something that *proceeds forth* from God Himself. (Jesus said so in **Matthew 4:4**.) It is something that has *eternally* existed in the mind of God. This thing is so precious to God, that David said, in **Psalms 138:2**, that God exalts this thing above His own name! God associates this thing with His own divine self—so much so, that He *calls Himself* by this thing (for example, in **Galatians 3:8**). The longest chapter in the Bible (**Psalms 119**) is dedicated to glorifying this thing. In fact, God names His own Son after this "thing," in **John 1:1**, **John 1:14**, **1 John 5:7**, and **Revelation 19:13**. This "thing" is inseparable from God Himself—so much so, that God commands us to place our *trust* in it. Furthermore, God will *judge us* by this thing one day. What is this thing that is eternal, like God Himself? It is **God's Word!** God's Word will never pass away, because it emanates from His very Being! Christ *is* the living Word of God; and just as *He* abideth forever, so His *Word* abideth forever!

This morning, we are continuing our focus on **Matthew 5:18**. We are talking about Christ's promise that He will not allow one jot or tittle to pass from the Law (the Scriptures). As Jesus preached this sermon, He knew that His disciples needed confirmation of this truth. If they *didn't* have the assurance that *every* word of Scripture is indestructible, how could they be absolutely sure of its message that Jesus is our Righteousness—or that those who believe on Him will inherit the Kingdom that He had promised to give them? **Matthew 5:18** is not just a passing thought: *it is foundational to everything that Jesus is saying!* Jesus' disciples *needed* this promise on that day when He preached this sermon to them by the Sea of Galilee; and *we* still need it today. The title of this message is ***Not One Jot Nor Tittle (Part 3)***.

Matthew 5:18

I. The preservation of the Received Text

In a moment, we will delve into the history of the preservation of God's Word. However, before we do, let's examine another one of God's promises concerning preservation.

Isaiah 40:6-8

1 Peter 1:23-25

In the **Isaiah** passage that we just read, Isaiah declares that the Word of God will **"endure forever."** In the **1 Peter** passage, Peter quotes Isaiah; and he compares God's Word to a **"seed"** which produces spiritual life in those who are born again. Like Isaiah, Peter declares that God's Word will "endure forever"; and lest anyone doubt what this means, he says that God's Word is **"incorruptible."** The word **"corruptible"** is translated from the word

phthartes, which means “perishing,” or “disintegrating”—like a human body that breaks down, dies, and then rots away. Everything in this world disintegrates, and perishes; but not the Word of God! It is *aphthartou*—incorruptible! The *paper* on which God’s words are written will perish; but His *words* will never perish, because He protects them, and keeps them accessible to us, from generation to generation! What else can we expect from the God who magnifies His Word above His name?

Now, as we have seen, there are two families of Greek text—the **Received Text** (upon which our KJV is based), and the **Critical Text** (upon which almost all modern Bibles are based). There are about 5,750 known manuscripts that follow the Received Text; and in contrast, there are only about 40 known manuscripts that follow the Critical Text readings. (And these 40 manuscripts disagree between themselves significantly, in thousands of places!) Yet, despite their small number, most modern scholars consider the Critical Texts to be more “accurate,” because they are, for the most part, *older* than the Received Text manuscripts. They call these texts the “older and better” manuscripts. However, what they don’t tell you is that there *are* some known copies of Scripture, from as early as the first century, that follow the Received Text. Clearly, Received Text readings *did* exist before the Critical Text readings! Another thing that most modern scholars won’t talk about is that there *were* people, from very early in church history, who were known to corrupt the Scriptures *purposely*. For example, a Christian named **Gaius**, who wrote treatises between 175 and 200 A.D., named four heretics of his day who were guilty of altering the text, and distributing it. Obviously, just because a text is *older* doesn’t mean that it’s *better*. Even in the days of the Apostles, there were already wicked men who not only were *altering* Scripture, but *forging fake epistles*!

2 Thessalonians 2:1-2

Despite Satan’s best attempts to corrupt Scripture, God has preserved His Word. The accuracy of the 5,750 Received Text manuscripts (dating from about A.D. 600 to A.D. 1400) is astounding. Yes, there are occasional differences between them, due to a tired copyist who made a slip of the pen. However, the differences are almost entirely spelling differences; and they amount to less than 1% difference between all the manuscripts. (And by comparing the manuscripts, it is easy to identify the occasional spelling errors, and fix them.) In contrast, the Critical Text manuscripts leave out (or alter) nearly *10,000 words* (7% of the New Testament)!

Now, is there any evidence (aside from a few older manuscripts) that the Received Text really existed before the Critical Texts began to be manufactured? Yes! You see, we have thousands of *quotations of Scripture* embedded in the writings of Christian authors who lived in the first three centuries; and, with the exception of the quotes from heretics like Origen, these quotations overwhelmingly *follow the Received Text*. **Justin Martyr** (who wrote around A.D. 140) quoted 767 passages, from every book of the New Testament except John and Jude; **Clement** quoted 389 passages, from every book except James, 1 and 2 John, and Jude; and **Tertullian** quoted 1,802 passages, from every book except James, 3 John, 2 Peter, and Jude.¹ (And these are just a few examples.) If all the quotes from the Christian authors in the first three centuries were compiled, the entire New Testament could be reconstructed several times over; *and it would read like the Received Text*. Obviously, these writers (though not all of them were true Christians) did know the difference between the *pure* and *corrupted* Scriptures.

Is there any other evidence that the Received Text existed before the Critical Text? Yes, there is much more! You see, there are some very ancient translations of the Bible that we still have copies of today; and guess to which Text family they belong? The *Received Text*! The **Peshitta** Translation is one of the earliest of them. The *Peshitta* was an ancient Syrian translation; and it was translated somewhere around **A.D. 150**. Now, some of the later copies

of the *Peshitta* were tainted by Alexandrian Text readings; but most of them follow the Received Text. The same is true of the **Old Itala** version. This is the first known Latin translation of the Bible; and we still have about 50 ancient copies of it. (Tertullian mentioned this translation in his writings, and specifically stated that it was translated in **A.D. 157**.) This Old Itala translation was used by believers who lived in the Italian Alps, for many centuries. In fact, the **Waldenses** (a group of believers with beliefs like modern Baptists) were the direct biological and spiritual descendants of these Italian believers. Throughout the Middle Ages (starting from about 1100 and onward), the Waldenses not only used the Old Itala, but made copies of the *Greek* New Testament! They also made translations from the Greek (and sometimes from the Old Itala), into the Germanic, French, and Italian dialects of their day; and they smuggled them all over Europe. The **Albigenses** (a huge group of baptistic believers who lived in southern France) also used the Old Itala, and made modern translations. These faithful believers had a Crusade declared against them by **Pope Innocent III** in 1208; and from 1209 to 1229, the Catholic Church murdered about a quarter million of them!

Tragically, the Albigenses were completely wiped off the face of the earth. However, the Waldenses survived! Starting in earnest in the year **1488**, the Catholic Church began to slaughter the Waldenses systematically, until finally, in **1655**, they nearly exterminated them. In 1655, the last of the Waldenses were forced to flee the Alps, and to go to the city of **Geneva**, France, for refuge; and when they got there, the leaders of Geneva were astonished at the ancient Greek manuscripts that the Waldenses brought with them. In fact, there is good reason to believe that in the late 1500's, **Theodore Beza** (the leader of Geneva at that time) used some of the Waldenses' Greek testaments to compile his Greek text for print; and this text was later used by the translators of the King James! One of the elders of the Waldenses, named Leger, who fled the Alps in 1655, claimed that his people had "*always* had the entire joy and fruition of the celestial treasure of the true, *preserved* holy Scriptures."ⁱⁱ

There were other ancient versions of the Bible that followed the Received Text, as well. The **Gothic** Bible, for example, was translated into the Germanic language of central Europe by a missionary named **Ulfilas**, around the year **A.D. 350**; and it followed the Received Text. The **Celtic Christians** of Britain and Ireland also used the Old Itala, which is based on the Received Text. All over Europe, there were faithful believers who rejected the spurious readings of the Alexandrian manuscripts, and embraced the Received Text.

Now, perhaps you are wondering, "Pastor, if there were only 40 ancient copies of Scripture that were in the Critical Text family, and if Origen's readings were rejected by most Christians, then how did they become available all over Europe?" It's simple: *through the Latin Vulgate*. You see, in A.D. 383, **Bishop Damasus** of Rome commissioned a man named **Jerome** (who lived near Bethlehem, in Israel), to produce a standard Bible in Latin. What he produced is called the "Latin Vulgate" (meaning "common"); and it became the standard Bible of the Roman Catholic Church for centuries. Now, Jerome didn't like the Old Itala translation, and its Received Text readings. He liked the readings of *Origen* (particularly, the readings from the fifth column of his Hexapla, in the Old Testament, as well as many of his edited readings in the New Testament). Jerome also made *his own* bogus translations of some verses, to give support to Catholic doctrine. A good example is **Luke 1:28**.

Luke 1:28

In this verse, the Greek word for "*thou that art highly favoured*" is *kecharitoméne*, which means "one who is favoured, or shown grace." However, Jerome translated this word into Latin as "*gratia plena*," which means "one *full of* grace." Clearly, this is *not* how it reads in

Greek; so why did Jerome word it this way? Because he wanted to make it appear that Mary is a reservoir of grace—someone who *bestows* grace, instead of one who *received* grace from God. Jerome had a fanatical devotion to Mary, and a *really* nasty temper; and he vehemently maligned the true Christians of his day who dared to say that we shouldn't worship Mary. Now, that having been said, Jerome didn't follow Origen's readings *all* the time. In fact, there is one extremely important Received Text reading that was *not* omitted from Jerome's Vulgate: and that verse was **1 John 5:7**. (We will talk much more about that verse in a later sermon!) Nonetheless, Jerome's Vulgate *was* corrupted in many places (especially the Old Testament, and the Gospels); and these corruptions made their way into the West, as the Catholic Church eventually forced people to read *only* the Latin Vulgate. (Even then, only priests and bishops were allowed to read it.) It was Bible-believing groups such as the Novatians, Donatists, Albigenses, Paulicians, Waldenses, the Celtic Christians of Britain and Ireland, and many others, who resisted the Latin Vulgate, and stuck to the Old Itala. As I said earlier, the Waldenses also copied the *original Greek copies* of Scripture. These simple farmers and peddlers went to extraordinary lengths to preserve God's Word, and to take it to countries all over Europe; and they often paid for it by being butchered, drowned, or burned at the stake.

Now, one of the nations to which the Waldenses fled was England; and despite the fierce persecution that they received from the Roman Catholic authorities, they had a profound impact there. (The Waldenses were sometimes called "Anabaptists" by the Catholic authorities, because they "re-baptised" people who had been "baptised" as infants by the Catholic Church.) The *Martyrs' Mirror* records that in the year **1391, 443 English Waldenses** were examined by the Catholic inquisitors; and one of these men boldly told the inquisitors that he had been a Waldense for 30 years!ⁱⁱⁱ If there were *that many* Waldenses who were rounded up at once, there must have been a much greater number of them throughout the land! It was in this environment, and at this time, that a priest named **John Wycliffe** began to make waves. It is strongly believed that Wycliffe was affected by the preaching of the Waldenses; and as he studied the Bible, he came to reject the authority of the pope, and said that a church should be local, and have only pastors and deacons. He rejected works salvation, sacramentalism, transubstantiation, and baptismal regeneration; and he taught the biblical teaching of the priesthood of all believers. According to the Catholic authorities, he and his followers also rejected *infant baptism!* There is no question that at some point, Wycliffe became a true believer; and it appears that he embraced *Baptist* beliefs at some point.

Wycliffe's writings went all over England and Europe (especially in Bohemia.) However, his greatest legacy was that he *translated the Bible into English*; and he sent groups of his disciples (who were called "Lollards") throughout England to disseminate the Scriptures, and to preach the Gospel. Huge numbers of people were freed from the shackles of Catholicism, and were born again! Now, amazingly, Wycliffe was never put to death by the Roman Catholic Church. He did appear on trial before the Catholic bishops in **1377**, to give account for his doctrine; but he was protected at that time by a "friend in high places," **John of Gaunt**, who was the Duke of Lancaster. Shortly after this mistrial, **Pope Gregory XI** issued 5 papal bulls against him; but nothing came of it, because at that time, there was a "great schism" that was raging over the papacy. There were now *two* men who were claiming to be the pope—**Pope Gregory XI**, who was in Rome, and **Pope Clement VII**, who was in Avignon, France. This contention over which line of popes was legitimate continued until 1417. (At one point, there were even *three* men who claimed to be "pope"!) Needless to say, during this fray, the authorities in Rome were too distracted to deal with an upstart priest in England. Through this, and other means, God continued to protect Wycliffe, until he finally passed away in 1384.

Now, the text that Wycliffe used to translate the Bible into English was the Latin Vulgate. Unfortunately, that was the only text that was available to him. Of course, there was more than enough Scripture in the Vulgate for people to hear the Gospel, and to be saved: yet, it wasn't entirely pure. However, the situation was not out of God's control. God was silently at work all along. Though all His words *were not all together in the same place*, He was orchestrating events so that *all* the pieces of His Word to be brought together, and then distributed throughout the world!

You see, while Wycliffe was working with an imperfect Latin text in England, people like the Waldenses, deep in the heart of the Alps, were still preserving the pure Greek text. Also, over in Eastern Europe, in the Byzantine Empire, the Greek Orthodox priests were continuing to make thousands and thousands of copies of the Greek New Testament; and they all followed the *Received Text* reading. Now, make no mistake about it: the Greek Orthodox Church (as well as all the other Eastern Orthodox churches) do *not* preach the true Gospel. The Greek Orthodox Church teaches most of the same false doctrines that the Roman Catholic Church does; and, just like the Roman Church, they persecuted true Bible-believers, such as the Paulicians. Nevertheless, they *did* reject the corrupted Greek text of Origen, and faithfully copied the Received Text. The overwhelming majority of the Received Text manuscripts that we still have today were copied by Greek Orthodox priests from about 600 A.D. to the late 1400's. That is why the Received Text is sometimes called the "Byzantine Text": it was preserved in the *Byzantine Empire*, by Byzantine priests.

Brethren, God can use whatever vessels He wishes to use to accomplish His will. Of course, the vessels that He most *desires* to use are His own people. God has given to His churches the responsibility to protect and propagate His Word. In **1 Timothy 3:15**, the Apostle Paul called the local church "*the pillar and ground of the truth.*" God *has used*, and will *continue* to use, *His* people, in *His* churches, to preserve His Word. The Waldenses, the Albigenses, and many other Christian groups who paid for God's Word with their lives, are perfect examples! Yet, God can use lost men, as well. He used the Byzantine priests; and, as we shall soon see, He used kings, printers, Protestant priests, and Roman Catholic priests, to bring His Word together, and crystalize it. Before we move on, let's examine this truth in light of Scripture.

Jeremiah 36:1-4, 16-32

When King Jehoiakim cut up Jeremiah's scroll with a penknife, and threw it into the fire, the situation looked bleak. Years' worth of revelations from God were obliterated in an instant. Yet, we still have the book of **Jeremiah** with us today, in its entirety. Why? Because God gave Jeremiah all the words that Jehoiakim had just destroyed, *for a second time*. (And He gave Jeremiah *additional* Scripture, to boot!)

Brethren, if God willed to give us His Word for a *second* time, by divine inspiration, it would be no problem for Him at all! (Wouldn't it be nice if, when civil authorities burn God's Word, or when evil men *corrupt* God's Word, and there seem to be no more pure copies available, God would step in and give us His words all over again, by divine inspiration?) Yet, that is not how God has chosen to work. When God's Word seems to be on the verge of annihilation, God helps His people "*with a little help*"! (It's called "Providence.")

Daniel 11:21, 31-35

In the above passage, God was prophesying of an event that would happen about 250 years after Daniel wrote this prophecy. The event was that a Greek-Syrian king named **Antiochus Epiphanes** went into the Temple, sacrificed a pig on the altar, erected a statue of Zeus, and

demanded that all Jews renounce their faith in Jehovah, and worship himself, or else be put to death. It was a dire time! Many Jews renounced their God, and turned against their own people; and the godly remnant was soon on the verge of being wiped out. Yet, God enabled a small band of men, under the leadership of a man named Judas Maccabees, to drive the forces of Antiochus Epiphanes from the land in **167 B.C.** God gave them just enough help to win!

My friends, God often works this way. For example, in 535 B.C., God used a Persian King named **Cyrus** to make a decree that the Jews could return to their homeland, and rebuild their Temple. God prophesied about Cyrus more than 150 years before he was born! He called him by name, and said that he would be His “*shepherd,*” to “*perform all my pleasure*”!

Isaiah 44:26-45:4

Just as Daniel prophesied, the Euphrates River was temporarily diverted and dried up, so that Cyrus’s army could go under the walls of Babylon; and when they went under the walls, they found that the brass grid gate had been mysteriously broken (just as Isaiah had prophesied). This enabled Cyrus to go into Babylon with ease, and conquer it. God foretold all this long in advance; and when Cyrus was *shown* this Scripture by a group of Jewish priests, he was so amazed and pleased, that he happily granted the Jewish people the permission to return to their land, and rebuild their Temple. Cyrus did not know the true God; yet, God used Him to build His Temple, and His city. Likewise, God sometimes used wicked men to preserve His Word—right when His people were most in need of help! He can do this, because He is God!

II. The crystallization of the Received Text

Psalm 19:7-11

In this psalm, David refers to God’s Word by several different names. He calls it “*the law of the LORD,*” “*the testimony of the LORD,*” “*the statutes of the LORD,*” “*the commandment of the LORD,*” “*the fear of the LORD,*” and “*the judgments of the LORD.*” (He calls it “*the fear of the LORD,*” because it is God’s Word that *teaches* us to fear the LORD!) With this in mind, what does David say about God’s Word? For one thing, he says that God’s Word is “*perfect.*” The word for “*perfect*” is *tamiym*, which means “whole, perfect, or complete.” Obviously, David believed that God had preserved *all* His Word. David also said that God’s Word is “*pure.*” Clearly, he did not believe that God’s Law had been corrupted to any degree. He said that God’s Word is “*righteous altogether.*” How could he regard it as “*righteous altogether*” if part of it had been corrupted? Most importantly, he said that God’s Word endures “*forever.*” That word “*enduring*” is based upon the word *amad*, which means “to stand.” David’s message is clear: God’s Word will stand forever!

Now, let’s get back to the history books, and see how God preserved His Word. We are now going to fast-forward about 100 years from the time of Wycliffe. We are now in the 1450’s; and several profound things are happening, which God is going to use to bring His Word together in its entirety. For one thing, the printing press was invented by a German named **Johann Gutenberg in 1454.** This was a *very* good thing. Before the printing press, it took the better part of a year to copy the entire Bible accurately; and for this reason, Bibles were extremely expensive. However, what had once taken months to do could now be done swiftly. The very first book that was printed on the printing press was the Bible (in the Latin Vulgate). Little did anyone know that within another 60 years, the Bible would be available in the *original Greek*, in large numbers, and that it would quickly spread all over Europe!

However, there was something else that happened at about this time; and it didn't *seem* like a good thing at all. In fact, it was a very ominous and serious thing. It seemed that Christianity itself was hanging in the balance! You see, on **29 May 1453**, the **Ottoman Turks** conquered the city of Byzantium (the capital of the Byzantine Empire); and the Byzantine Empire officially fell, and came to an end. For centuries, the Byzantine Empire (which had once been the eastern part of the Roman Empire) had been like a "buffer zone," keeping the Muslims from invading Europe. Now, however, the Muslims had crossed the Dardanelle Strait, and were on the European Continent; and in the coming years, they would continue to move into the heart of Europe, until they finally came just outside the gates of Vienna. (They tried to take Vienna in 1529, 1566, and 1683; but God would not allow them to go any farther. Over time, the Eastern European nations managed to push them back into Turkey.)

Now, what does this have to do with the Bible, and the received Text? Plenty! You see, in the final years before the fall of Byzantium, many Greek Orthodox priests fled for refuge to Western Europe. And guess what they took with them? Copies of the Received Greek Text of the New Testament! This also happened to be the time when the Renaissance was taking off in Western Europe. Universities were being established, and were growing, all over Europe; and people thirsted to learn not only about arts and sciences, but about the ancient Greek and Latin classics. And guess what Greek literature was now available for them to study? The Greek New Testament, which the Greek Orthodox priests had recently brought from the East! Suddenly, scholars everywhere were reading copies of the Greek New Testament; and by this time, the power of the Roman Catholic Church was weakened *just enough*, that they were unable to do much about it. The 70-year struggle over the papacy in the past century, combined with the increasing civil power of Western kings, and the invasion of the Ottomans in the East, and the power of this new invention called "the printing press," had taken its toll.

It was shortly after the fall of Byzantium, in the year 1466, that a Dutchman named **Desidorius Erasmus** was born. He was ordained as a priest in 1492; and he went on to become a powerful Catholic theologian. However, he was *not* the kind of theologian that Rome wanted! You see, Erasmus was disgusted by the gross corruption of the Roman Catholic Church; and in his writings, he demanded reform. As the years went on, he cast off more and more of the Catholic Church's teachings—to the point that he was accused of being a Protestant—and even an Anabaptist (although he never actually left the Catholic Church)! However, whether he was a true believer or not, one thing is for sure—he had a deep love and reverence of the Scriptures. He went all around Europe, and collected every ancient Greek manuscript that he could find. As he compared these manuscripts, he found them to agree with each other; and he compiled them into a complete edition for print, in the year **1516**. He called it *Novum Instrumentum Omne*. And guess who was profoundly impacted by this Greek New Testament? A German priest named **Martin Luther**, who nailed a document called "95 Theses" to the door of a cathedral in Wittenburg, Germany, in 1517. In the years to come, that old *Textus Receptus* became the basis for the German Luther Bible; the English Tyndale Bible, Coverdale Bible, Matthew's Bible, Bishop's Bible, Geneva Bible, and King James Bible; the Spanish Reina Valera; the Czech Bible of Kralice; the Portuguese Almeida Recebida, and many, many others; and God often used unsaved men (even wicked rulers, like King Henry VIII) to ensure that these Bibles were distributed far and wide! Just as the ashes of John Wycliffe were maliciously dumped into the Avon river by the Catholic Church, and made their way to the oceans, so God's *pure, uncorrupted* Word has made its way all around the world.

Conclusion: Brethren, God's Word *endures forever*—not just in Heaven, but down here on earth! We can be absolutely sure of its purity! The same God who *gave* His Word to men by *inspiration* has *kept* it for men, by way of *preservation*. Christian, don't let *anyone* mine away that confidence! **Perhaps you're**

not sure that you are saved. If so, I'm here to tell you that you *must* be "born again." We have an "incorruptible seed" in our hands; and that "seed" is God's Word. It is by this "incorruptible seed" that you must be born again. *Believe* the promise of salvation in this Book! *Trust* Jesus' words. Jesus promised, "***Come unto me, all ye that labour, and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.***" It's not by good words, or religious deeds, that you enter the Kingdom: it is by Jesus' finished work on the cross. Believe that promise; come to Jesus; and *rest in Him!*

ⁱ Dr. David Cloud, *Rome and the Bible* (Port Huron, MI: Way of Life Literature, 1996), p. 17.

ⁱⁱ David Sorenson, *Touch Not the Unclean Thing* (Duluth, MN: Northstar Baptist Ministries, 2001), p. 258.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Cloud, *Rome and the Bible*, p. 83.