The Amazing Story of the Bible

God’s Word Through the Ages
A Roman emperor named Constantine and a German student of ancient Bible texts named Tischendorf—two actors in the incredible drama of the Bible’s survival—lived 1,500 years apart, yet these men were connected by events neither could have imagined. It all began in ancient Rome with an emperor named Diocletian.

In 303 A.D., Diocletian initiated the last great persecution of the Christian Church in the Empire. More than the Christian’s buildings or beliefs, Diocletian feared the influence of their sacred book. He knew the survival of the Church depended on their Scriptures, so he destroyed every copy he could find. Despite the emperor’s attempts, God would not allow His Word to be extinguished. He preserved the Bible so that it could sustain His people, the Church.

Years later an illness forced Diocletian to abdicate the throne. His successor, Constantine, proclaimed Christianity to be the official religion of Rome. When Constantine realized the churches of Constantinople had no Bibles, he commissioned a scholar named Eusebius to produce fifty vellum Bibles for the churches: “Volumes, that is to say, of the Holy Scriptures, the provision and use of which is, as you are aware, most necessary for the instruction of the Church.”

Diocletian attempted to silence God’s Word, but through Constantine, God enabled it to flourish. Centuries later a young German scholar named Tischendorf helped to preserve it for the modern era.

**Constantine and Konstantin**

Not a single copy of those fifty vellum Bibles produced by Eusebius exists today. But after Constantine’s proclamation, the number of Bible copies increased significantly. One of the ironies of biblical history is that Emperor Constantine’s efforts were revived by a young Bible student who bore the emperor’s name: Lobegott Friedrich Konstantin von Tischendorf. The tale of his search for ancient copies of the Bible reads like a real-life Indiana Jones adventure.

In his quest to unearth long-forgotten copies of the sacred text, Tischendorf spent years blowing the dust off ancient manuscripts throughout Europe and the Middle East. In 1844, he visited Saint Catherine’s Monastery near Mount Sinai in Egypt. In the monastery’s library, he spotted a trash bin next to the fireplace that was filled with pages of an old manuscript about to be used as kindling. When Tischendorf
examined the pages, he realized he had found 129 leaves of the oldest biblical manuscript he had ever seen. When he explained his discovery to the monks, they quickly confiscated all but 43 of the pages which they permitted Tischendorf to take with him.

Haunted by the memory of the pages he had left behind, Tischendorf visited Saint Catherine’s again in 1853, but he left empty-handed. On another visit in 1859, he was more subtle, not mentioning ancient manuscripts until the last night of his visit. A monk invited Tischendorf to his private quarters and pulled down from a shelf a bundle wrapped in a red cloth. Watching breathlessly, Tischendorf recognized the remaining pages of the manuscript he had salvaged from the trash in 1844. The bundle contained much of the Old Testament, apocryphal writings, the entire New Testament, and two additional letters written by early Church leaders.

Through Tischendorf’s diplomatic efforts, this manuscript eventually made its way to Cairo, then to the Imperial Public Library of St. Petersburg in Russia. Today, Codex Sinaiticus is one of the three largest, earliest, and best-preserved copies of the Bible in existence. (Incidentally, another three thousand manuscripts were discovered at Saint Catherine’s Monastery in 1975, including more pages of Codex Sinaiticus.)

It would be hard to imagine a more unlikely scenario: One of the three most significant biblical manuscripts in the world laid in obscurity for hundreds of years, was discarded as kindling in a remote monastery in the Sinai wilderness, and was rediscovered by a visiting student. Who could doubt that God’s own hand prompted Tischendorf to discover the Codex Sinaiticus at just the right moment to save it from destruction?

God’s miraculous preservation of the Bible provides an essential link between the history of His people, His plan of redemption, and His people today. We do not have to wonder whether the Bible we read is an accurate representation of God’s revelation to mankind. Thousands of early manuscripts have been preserved, providing more textual evidence for the Bible’s accuracy than any other ancient writing.² To be sure, preservation is the right word. The preservation and propagation of the Bible can be attributed to nothing except the providence of God throughout history.
Providence and the Bible

Without a doubt, God’s providence has preserved the Bible through the ages. What is providence? The Westminster Shorter Catechism defines it this way: “God’s works of providence are his most holy, wise and powerful [acts of] preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions.” Or, in the words of Scripture itself, providence is the outworking of “Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will” (Ephesians 1:11).

Even in Christian circles, it is not uncommon to hear someone say, “I caught a lucky break,” or “He was so fortunate,” or “What a coincidence,” or “Good luck to you!” When we use such language, we reflect a secular worldview that suggests life is the product of chance—sometimes for the good, sometimes for the bad. But such ideas are not supported by Scripture. The apostle Paul writes, “We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28).

But the doctrine of providence says the opposite: life is not a pinball machine; events don’t bounce off one another in random fashion. Instead, the Bible teaches that God orders the events of this world to accomplish His divine plan and purposes (Proverbs 16:1-9). That includes the preservation of the Bible from the time of its writing until the end of the age. God orchestrates events like Tischendorf’s timely arrival at Saint Catherine’s Monastery to preserve His written Word for future generations.

Studying the preparation and preservation of the Bible reminds us of God’s sovereignty over history. On the surface, events can seem unrelated or even random. But when we reflect on past events, we can see purpose and divine providence at work. The Bible is a collection of 66 books transcribed by more than 40 authors, but it is also one book with one author (God) and one storyline with a beginning and an end (2 Peter 1:21), preserved by the hand of God through a series of unlikely events.

Between 1500 B.C. and A.D. 500, God inspired a diverse group of people to transcribe and assemble His revelation for all to read. The Bibles we read today are remarkably accurate representations of the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek manuscripts. In fact, almost all Bible scholars agree that, regarding matters of faith and salvation, there is no doctrine central to the Christian faith that can be questioned due to an issue of the accuracy of the copies we possess of the original biblical writings.
WITHOUT A DOUBT, God’s providence HAS PRESERVED THE BIBLE THROUGH THE AGES.
When we reflect on the amazing story of the Bible, we find new reasons to be thankful for God’s providence on behalf of generations past, present, and future.

**Preservation and the Bible**

Consider some of these additional circumstances God orchestrated to preserve His Word:

- **Moses and picture drawings.** Through his status as the adopted son of Pharaoh’s daughter, Moses received a first-rate education in Egypt. He grew up using the shapes and symbols we see on the walls of Egyptian burial tombs known as hieroglyphics. Sometime later, probably when he lived in Midian, he learned to write with the letters which became the Hebrew alphabet (consonants only, no vowels). This training uniquely prepared Moses to author the first five books of the Bible through the inspiration of God’s Spirit.

- **Solomon, songs, and sayings.** Proverbs were widely used for teaching and passing along wisdom in the ancient world, and Solomon was a master at creating them. He spoke 3,000 proverbs and wrote 1,005 songs (1 Kings 4:32). When Solomon spoke his words of wisdom, a scribe would record them. Several generations later, the Bible informs us that portions of Solomon’s proverbs were preserved and copied by scribes in King Hezekiah’s court (Proverbs 25:1).

- **Josiah and the lost law.** Josiah became King of Judah when he was eight years old. Because his father and other predecessors had led the kingdom into sin, the Book of the Law was misplaced until workers who were rebuilding the temple found the scrolls. When a scribe read the law to Josiah, he tore his robes in grief over how his people had ignored God’s Word. This discovery led to a period of great revival and helped to ensure the preservation of the law.

- **Ezra and everything else.** Many scholars believe Ezra is the man who not only wrote the books of Ezra and Nehemiah but also is the one who began collecting the Old Testament writings after Judah’s Babylonian captivity. We know from Nehemiah 8 that he loved God’s Word and led a period of spiritual revival (verses 1-9). Whether it was him or someone else,
God raised up an individual with the dedication and skills to collect and preserve the Old Testament writings.

- **Seventy scribes in Alexandria.** As a result of Alexander the Great’s conquests, Greek became the predominant language of the Mediterranean world. This prompted one of Egypt’s kings to commission a Greek translation of the Old Testament books for the library in Alexandria, Egypt. According to tradition, 72 Jewish scholars traveled to Egypt from Israel and prepared a Greek version of the Old Testament. This translation of Scripture made God’s Word widely accessible throughout the Mediterranean world.

- **Sandy scrolls on the seashore.** Just prior to the birth of Jesus, a group of Jews known as the Essenes lived on the shore of the Dead Sea in a community called Qumran. This devout sect specialized in making copies of Jewish scrolls and maintained an extensive library of manuscripts. But when Rome occupied the region in A.D. 70, the Essenes abandoned their settlement along with the manuscripts. It wasn’t until 1947 that a shepherd boy found a cache of clay jars in a cave near Qumran. His discovery led to the unearthing of around eight hundred ancient manuscripts, including all the Old Testament books except Esther. An intact scroll of Isaiah was found to be almost identical to the Hebrew texts used to prepare our modern Bibles. God providentially appointed the Essenes to curate the texts and hide them in caves so that they could be discovered at a time when archaeology and textual studies could fully appreciate their immense value.

- **Paul’s lost letter.** Did you know that Paul wrote a letter to the Corinthian church besides the two we have in the New Testament? He refers to this letter in 1 Corinthians 5:9, but we have never seen it. Is it tragic that this letter was “lost” in the first century? On the contrary, it’s an indication that the letters God wanted to preserve for the Church age were kept safe. Evidently, the “lost letter” was written exclusively for the benefit of the Corinthians and not for us.

The Bible’s amazing history provides hope and encouragement for our own life. If God choreographed each event in the Bible’s “life” purposefully, He can do the same thing for each of us. When we find ourselves in unfamiliar territory, we can trust Him to be our guide. When we imagine that we have lost our way, He dusts us off
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at just the right time and puts us to work in His kingdom. If our efforts seem to be forgotten, we can trust that they accomplished His purposes. Like the Bible, God’s children are providentially prepared, preserved, and protected.

The dramatic series of events that preserved God’s Word through the ages should ignite in us a passion for its sacred text. In the digital age, we have access to books of all kinds in a variety of formats. Yet only one book has survived the rise and fall of world powers. Only one book contains the authoritative record of God’s revelation to mankind. Only one book has been prepared and preserved like the Holy Scriptures, and only one book in the world deserves our sacred honor and devotion.

1. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Vita Constantini* (translated), IV, 36
THE PROVIDENCE OF SCRIPTURE

The Bible is the Word of God

2 PETER 1:21
Prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.

2 TIMOTHY 3:16
All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.

PSALM 19:7-11 (NLT)
The instructions of the Lord are perfect, reviving the soul.
The decrees of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple.
The commandments of the Lord are right, bringing joy to the heart.
The commands of the Lord are clear, giving insight for living.
Reverence for the Lord is pure, lasting forever.
The laws of the Lord are true; each one is fair.
They are more desirable than gold, even the finest gold.
They are sweeter than honey, even honey dripping from the comb.
They are a warning to your servant, a great reward for those who obey them.
PRESERVATION OF SCRIPTURE

God’s Word stands forever

ISAIAH 40:8
The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever.

MATTHEW 24:35
Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.

PSALM 119:89
Forever, O Lord, Your word is settled in heaven.

REVELATION 22:18-19
For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.
About the Author

David Jeremiah is the founder of Turning Point, an international ministry committed to providing Christians with sound Bible teaching through radio and television, the Internet, live events, and resource materials and books. He is the author of more than fifty books, including *Overcomer, A Life Beyond Amazing, Is This the End?, The Spiritual Warfare Answer Book, David Jeremiah Morning and Evening Devotions, Airship Genesis Kids Study Bible,* and *The Jeremiah Study Bible.*

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