

## "The Bible For Today"

In my last message I used a Scripture verse from the Book of Judges in the Old Testament, "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25). I said that in many ways this describes life in the U.S. today, where we're moving away from a traditional Judeo-Christian ethic towards a more secularized culture. I tried to argue that we need a more reliable moral compass than just doing what seems right to us – following our own opinions or the latest cultural trend, and that *God's laws and commands found in the Bible* offer a trustworthy guide for both personal conduct and the ordering of society.

But I also said that fewer people today believe that the Bible is God's inspired Word, and that it has any authority over our life. A Gallup poll taken earlier this year indicated that 20% of people in the U.S. say the Bible is the literal Word of God – a *new low*. 29% said they believe the Bible to be "fables, history, moral precepts recorded by man" – a *new high!* i.e. 3 out of 10 American adults see the Bible as just a collection of man-made stories and writings. (And, that number is 16% even *for those who identify as Christians!*) The Gallup people commented, "The shift in attitudes about the Bible is not an isolated phenomenon. It comes even as a number of indicators show a decline in overall religiosity in the U.S. adult population...thus, it is not surprising to find that views on the nature of the Bible have shifted in a less religious direction as well."

A Barna group study last year, done in connection with the American Bible Society, was somewhat more positive. It did find, however, that 33% (1 in 3) said our country would be about the same without the Bible, and 14% said our country would be better off without the Bible!

So, with it seeming like the Bible is having less of an impact on people today, let's take a look at this Book! Historically, Christians have claimed that ***the Bible is inspired by God***. The Bible makes this claim about itself: 1 Timothy 3:16 says, "All Scripture is inspired by God...". The Greek word translated "inspired" literally means "God-breathed".

How is it inspired? Some people believe every sentence, every word, even every punctuation mark was dictated by God. But, there are problems with this view! First, the original writings were written in Hebrew (the Old Testament) or Greek (the New Testament), with a little bit of Aramaic. If you've ever taken a foreign language, you know that when going from one language to another you sometimes can't translate the text word for word. Frankly, it's a bit far-fetched to believe every punctuation mark was divinely inspired, especially since there were no punctuation marks in the original manuscripts. Copyists put them in later!

I believe it's the *ideas* and the *truths* that are inspired. The writers had their own views and perspectives and reasons for writing. They wrote in real life situations. But God's Spirit prompted them to write what they did so God could speak to us His message and Truth.

By the way, one does not have to take everything literally in the Bible in order to believe it is inspired by God. The Bible contains many different *kinds of writings*. Yes, much of it is factual history, but there's also allegory and poetry and parables. For instance, when Jesus said if our eye causes us to stumble, gouge it out, or if our hand leads us astray, chop it off, this is *hyperbole*

(deliberate exaggeration). Jesus didn't want us to take that literally. When the Psalmist wrote "Let the rivers clap their hands; let the mountains sing together for joy" (Psalm 98:8), this is not literalism, since rivers don't have hands to clap and mountains don't sing songs! You don't have to be a literalist to believe that Scripture is divinely inspired!

We may ask: Hasn't God inspired other writings also? What makes the Bible different from other inspirational literature? *It is this: the Bible, in a unique way, is the written record of how God has acted in human history for the salvation of the world.* In the Old Testament God acts uniquely through a people called Israel. For whatever reason God had, God chose Israel for a special mission: to reveal Himself, His nature and purposes, to the rest of the world. But Israel failed time and again in that mission – breaking God's commandments, priding themselves on being God's chosen people, and forgetting that they were to share the message of God's love with everyone.

Finally, God did the most daring thing imaginable: He sent His Son to save us, and to reveal most perfectly what God is like. Colossians 1:15 says, "The Son is the image of the invisible God." Jesus shows us what God is like, and the New Testament gives us the best picture of Jesus we have! It was written by those *closest to the Christ Event* – in fact, by some who walked with Jesus. The Apostle John, one of the 12 disciples, can write: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life" 1 John 1:1.

*Jesus is the center of our faith – what God has done in the Person of Jesus the Christ – for our salvation. The Bible is the inspired writing that points to Jesus!*

*But what about the Old Testament, you say? Why do we need that? Because the Old Testament points ahead to the coming of Jesus – why we needed a Savior/Messiah! And prophetic glimpses of what this Savior will be like. Woven throughout the Old and New Testaments together is the saga of how God entered human history to save humankind.*

A lot of people have more of a problem with the Old Testament. Some of the stuff in there is kind of shocking! For example, certain Old Testament laws demand that adulterers and children who curse their parents should be put to death! Imagine if those were laws on the book today! God tells the Israelites, when they conquer certain Canaanite cities or towns, to kill everyone left. Back then it was called "the ban". Today we call that genocide.

These are valid points. How can we answer them? Here are some thoughts. *First, some of the Old Testament laws were for that time, and that time alone.* For instance, certain *dietary laws*. What you could eat and not eat. And *cultic laws* that had to do with religious rituals and worship at that time, when there were animal sacrifices. These were laws under the old covenant. But with Jesus' coming, God established a new covenant that replaced the old covenant He had made with Israel. Jesus, not animals, is the sacrifice to atone for our sins.

*Another thing: the command to completely destroy an enemy nation was not a general principle*

*for all time.* Wars in the Old Testament were not just about gaining territory, but about establishing the Hebrew God as the true God. If Israel had been defeated and annihilated, and the pagan gods of these other nations had ruled the day, God's redemption of the whole world would have been short-circuited. Israel's survival as a nation and as a witness to God's plan of salvation depended on their victory over evil, pagan nations.

*But perhaps most important to keep in mind is that all of Scripture must be judged by the revelation of God we have in Jesus Christ.* Jesus is the Living Word of God, the Word made flesh! All of Scripture must be read and understood in light of the understanding of God we've been given in the Person of Christ! The *written* Word must be judged by the revelation of God we have in Jesus, who is the *Living Word of God!*

I think it's important to note that Jesus Himself acknowledged the validity of the Old Testament witness. Jesus said, "Examine the Scriptures...they also testify about me" (John 5:39). The "Scriptures" here would have been the Hebrew Bible, basically our Old Testament. The New Testament wasn't written yet. When the Risen Christ appeared to some disciples on the road to Emmaus, it says, "Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them *the things about himself* in all the scriptures" (Luke 24:27). *He is there in the Old Testament too!*

*One of the ways of understanding the Bible more thoroughly is to accept what is called "progressive revelation".* In this way of interpreting Scripture we recognize that the Bible was written over a span of hundreds of years. Our human understanding of God – His nature and purposes – have changed as time progressed. God revealed Himself in ways *consistent with each particular culture and time in history* – in ways people of that time could understand. So, how Abraham and Sarah grasped the nature of God in the time they lived – on the edge of recorded history – was not the same as the understanding of God we have today because of Jesus.

This doesn't mean the people back then who wrote the Scriptures were stupid. They weren't. Lest any of us today start to brag about how far more we are advanced than the ancients were, just look at the mess the world is in today. Much of it is pretty stupid and evil! Even in those more primitive stories from the Old Testament, however, we see Truth, and a glimpse into the true nature of the One who created us!

Let me just say: Many people criticize or dismiss the Bible without even reading it! Some believe it when someone claims there is a mistake in the Bible, or something in the Bible never happened or isn't true, and never research it and check it out. Many don't agree with something in the Bible, and reject the whole Bible as a result. The Bible has stood the test of time. In spite of its critics, it has invaluable benefits for those who let God speak to them through its pages!

***It shows us the way to salvation.*** The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy: "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed...how from childhood you have known the sacred writings *that are able to instruct you for salvation* through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:14-15). Jesus answered the devil's temptations in the wilderness by quoting from the Book of Deuteronomy: "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth

of God" (Matthew 4:4). Life is more than just material things. We need salvation; we need God.

We've all probably heard of The Gideons organization. They are best known for distributing Bibles and New Testaments in hotels, schools, prisons, the military services. This is something they've been doing since 1908. I've gone to Gideon banquets and I love to hear thrilling testimonies of how people have come to the Lord through reading a Bible or New Testament they've given out. The Bible has the power to change lives, because it shows us the way to Jesus, who is the Way!

***The Bible helps us to grow in Christ.*** 1 Peter 2:2 says, "Like a newborn baby, desire the pure milk of the word. Nourished by it, you will *grow* into salvation." Ever around a newborn baby? Ever bring one home from the hospital? Remember those first couple of weeks? It's 2 a.m. You're awakened with a noise: "Waaa...waaa...waaa." You rub your eyes, collect your thoughts. You go to that little noisemaker. "Now son (now daughter), let's reason here. It's 2 a.m. This is when I do my sleeping. Please go back to sleep until a more decent hour of the day. I'll be rested and in a better mood to feed you." That's just what your little newborn needed to hear. It's had a calming effect, and all is quiet again. Right? Wrong! That infant *craves* - that's what the Greek word means - its milk (or formula). Now maybe if mommy is breastfeeding it's not so bad, but I remember those times. Even though Nancy did the brunt of the night feedings, I remember having to wake up through the night, stumble to the refrigerator, get the bottle, warm it up, grope your way to the baby's room, get the child, stick that nipple in, and...ahhhh! From the top of the baby's soft head to its stubby little toes - a sigh of contentment! And you know what? All of that milk, all of that formula, and the baby *grew*! Do you hunger for the Word of God like that? Do I thirst for God's Word like that? Without it, we can't grow in our faith and the Christian life.

***Finally, the Bible furnishes a guide for living - for the individual, and society.*** 2 Timothy 3:16-17 tells us: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." The Bible teaches us, rebukes us when we're wrong, shows us what's right. Scripture provides a fixed and dependable moral guide and compass for every individual and every segment of society!

I like what H.G. Wells once said. He said, "The Bible has been the Book that held together the fabric of western civilization. It has been the handbook of life to countless millions of men and women. The civilization we possess could not have come into existence and could not have been sustained without it." I only hope and pray that in a time when our nation is becoming more secularized and many are dissing or dismissing the Bible, that we will discover anew what the Psalmist said, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105).

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