

## What is the Bible?

Imagine a group of friends who loved to get together every Friday night to watch a clip from their favorite movie. Let's say they love "The Lord of the Rings Trilogy" all nine hours of it. And let's face it what's not to love? But one week they watch the part where Frodo and Sam throw the ring into the fires of Mordor. And they talk about it a while.

Then the next week, they get together and watch the part where the Wraiths almost get Frodo as he and the other Hobbits are just leaving the Shire. The next week it's something else and they skip around week after week watching these clips from these epic movies. First of all, wouldn't that seem strange? And second, how well do you think you would know the movie? Would you be able to understand all the clips? Would you know the characters very well? Would you really know the meaning of the story?

Unfortunately, this is the way many people have experienced the Bible. That's why even many Christians only have a vague sense of what the Bible is about or they have big misunderstandings about a particular story in the Bible. In fact, I would say the reason why many people are confused or even appalled by parts of the Bible is because we often treat it like a book of loosely related short stories.

Maybe that's you. You read a story and it leaves you with more questions than answers. Kind of like this clip I saw the other day [upside-down car] When you watch that clip, what do you immediately think? OK, that's not normal. What did I miss here?

Have you ever read a passage in the Bible—like the Old Testament and thought, what am I missing here? Don't worry, if we're honest, it happens to everyone. There's a lot of stuff in the Bible that seems strange, primitive and sometimes even barbaric to the point that it offends our modern sensibilities.

And yet, even with that all the confusing and strange stories, lives have been transformed through it. The great early church Father Augustine was one of those transformed by the Bible. Growing up, he was no lover of Christianity. He wanted nothing to do with a book that told him he needed to temper sexual urges. But one day, he was with a friend when he heard the voice of a child saying, "Pick it up and read it. Pick it up and read it." At first, he thought it might be kids playing a game, but he'd never heard of that game before. Then it occurred to him that it was the voice of God, telling him to pick up a Bible and read it. So he did.

He opened it randomly to Romans, chapter 13, **"Not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual excess and lust, not in quarreling and jealousy. Rather, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the desires of the flesh."** (vs. 13-14)

He then realized that he wasn't reading Scripture, but Scripture was reading him. And through reading Scripture, he was captivated by the Spirit of God and was changed forever. This is a story you hear over and over through history up through today—someone, who for years had rejected Christianity, picks up the Bible for the first time and begins to read with an open mind, God speaks to them and changes them forever.

Hebrews 4:12-13 says, **“The word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”**

You see, there’s something powerful about Scripture that changes people just through the act of reading and submitting ourselves to it. It changes people. But I wouldn’t recommend taking that approach to the Bible all the time. You see, even though God might work in a miraculous way through the Bible, the normal way to experience God is to read and understand it and allow God to shape your mind and heart through it.

So, this summer, we’re going to be working our way through the story of the Bible. And the hope is that if you’re new to Christianity or you’re just exploring it, the little pieces you’ve heard or resisted will start to make sense. Or, if you’ve been a Christian for a while and already feel like you have a good grasp on the Bible, old stories will come alive for you. Next week, we’ll start with Genesis and over the summer, we’ll hit major themes all the way through the book of Revelation.

But before we do that, this week, I want to set the stage by talking about five foundational beliefs Christians hold about the Bible. My purpose isn’t to prove these foundational beliefs—that’s not the point of this series. The point of the series is to help you understand the big story of the Bible and hopefully, you’ll learn, not just to love the

Bible, but to love the God who gave it to us. If you want to talk about why we believe what we do about the Bible, I'd be happy to do that—just email me or call me and I'd love to sit down and chat with you.

But for now, let's talk about five things you need to know about the Bible. First, *the Bible was written over thousands of years by dozens of authors inspired by the Holy Spirit.*

I think there are a lot of people—even Christians who have the mistaken assumption that Christians claim the Bible was dropped out of the sky or dictated by God directly to whoever wrote the Bible. But Christianity has never claimed that. To help explain, let's watch this from the Bible Project. [What is the Bible clip]

Second, *the Bible is the true story of God's interaction with his creation.* First and foremost, the Bible is a story. It's not a law-book, although there are laws in it. It's not a science book. It's not a marriage manual, although there's a lot in there than can help your marriage. It's not God's love letter to you or Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth. It's a story—a true story. And one of the reasons people often find it hard to understand individual passages is that they don't know where they fit in the big story.

The problem is that we're mostly taught bits and pieces of the Bible—"read this chapter," "memorize this verse," or we quote a specific law, but we pull them out of context so sometimes they're hard to understand. For instance, why would God tell the Israelite's not to marry Canaanites? Is God racist? And should we read that as a universal law against interracial marriage? Well, no. Because it's all about the context.

Think about it like this...If the Bible is God's revelation of himself, how do you get to know a person? Is it by reading facts about them? You can know something about them. But the way you really know someone is to hear their story. You need to know their family, the town they grew up in, or the life events that shaped them. We are more than what we do and say at the current moment. In the same way, we can't lift one biblical story or law or teaching out of its story and expect to really know what it's about.

A while back we did a series called Jesus' Bible where we talked about the fact that many people today treat Jesus as if he lived in front of a green screen. A green screen is the green wall they use to do the weather. If you have the right equipment, you can film someone and then superimpose whatever background you want behind them. And that's what we often do with Jesus. We take random quotes or parables and put them in front of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Western worldview and think we know Jesus. But he only becomes the Jesus of our imagination—agreeing with us on our pet topics. That's why it's critical that we regularly remind us of the backstory. The Bible is God's Big Story.

Third, *the Bible is the authoritative guide for our lives and reliable in all that it affirms*. So, there's two things there—the Bible is our *authority* and it's *reliable*.

First, what does it mean that the Bible is *reliable*? Well, it means we can trust it as the accurate picture—the accurate story of God's dealing with humanity. We can trust it when it tells us how we can be saved. But, of course, this brings up a common question.

Someone will ask “Is the Bible literally true?” When they ask that question, they’re really asking, “Can I trust it?” Because they believe that if the Bible isn’t literally (factually, or historically) true, then we should just throw the whole thing out.

But when someone would ask me that question, I would ask them, “Which part are you talking about?” “Yes, where it wants to be taken literally.” And it’s metaphorically true in the places where it wants to be taken metaphorically. When the Bible says that Jesus rose from the dead, I believe it’s literally true because I believe the Bible intends that part to be taken literally.

But when Jesus says, “I am the vine, you are the branches,” I don’t take that part literally, because that would be silly. I take it metaphorically. Believing Jesus is using a metaphor doesn’t diminish its truth. It’s a powerful picture of our utter dependence on Jesus for our very lives

Asking whether the Bible is “literally true,” isn’t a question of whether we can rely on it, it’s a question of how we should read it. The Bible is not a science textbook. It’s not a diet book. It’s not a geography book. It’s not intended to be any of those things, but it does intend to guide us into truth that shapes our lives and I believe it does just that.

When we say the Bible is authoritative, we mean that we submit to the Bible as the foundation for how we view God, ourselves and the world. Now some people will ask, “Why do we need something like the Bible to be authoritative?” Can’t we just make it up as we go along?

Well, the answer is that even when you think you're making it up, you're really not. We all live according to a bigger story. Actually, that's not entirely true—most of us take bits and pieces of stories. We take the parts they want to believe and leave the others. Or we live in two conflicting stories. That's why we can be flaky and hypocritical.

For instance, an atheist friend might believe the story of unguided evolution to be his explanation for the existence. There's no God. We're just advanced animals who developed consciousness living on a big rock that circles a huge flaming ball of gas. Well, it's hard to find ultimate meaning in that worldview. Yet, most atheists live as though there is such a thing as meaning, purpose, justice and morality. It's hard to see how those things come from that story—but typically they smuggle it in from the Biblical story.

Another popular story today is American nationalism. There are Christians in America today who believe America is God's country—like the new Israel. It was formed as a Christian nation and we should keep it that way by passing Christian laws and making sure everyone lives like a Christian regardless of whether they claim to follow Jesus. Some advocate hard to keep immigrants out. But now, as Christianity loses its place of privilege in our country, they claim persecution.

But that story conflicts with the biblical story at many levels. Christianity didn't start as an American religion and it's not primarily American today. It wasn't birthed in privilege, but in persecution. Our spiritual ancestors, the people of Israel, spend 400 years as slaves and much of their existence as marginalized people or foreigners under the

control of powerful empires with no possibility of passing Christian laws. As Christians, that's our story. But because many also claim this competing story of being Americans, it's easy for them to forget and live inconsistently. If the Bible is our authority for our entire life, it's critical for us to immerse ourselves in that story.

Fourth, we should remember the Bible is ancient literature and read it that way. The Bible wasn't written *to* us, but it was written *for* us. It was written thousands of years ago to people in another cultural setting or setting that were very different than ours. This is probably the greatest reason why the Bible is confusing for people.

One of the ways the other cultures were different is that they were hearing rather than reading-dominant cultures. This is significant. Here's why. Old Testament scholar John Walton writes, *"The value that our society has placed on literacy sometimes leads to the misperception that literacy and intelligence or sophistication go hand-in-hand."*

In other words, we often view these cultures as dumb and unsophisticated. But that's just not the case. It's just that we view the world very differently. They could have written everything down and people could have learned to read, but it wasn't valued in their society. Ancient people weren't interested in the same things we're interested in.

Neil Postman writes this, *"Print put forward a definition of intelligence that gave priority to the objective, rational use of the mind and at the same time encouraged forms of public discourse with serious, logically ordered content."* In other words, when a society

becomes dominated by text, it changes the culture. The two societies think differently. So, we have to keep that in mind when we're reading Scripture.

For instance, there's been a big debate going on in American Christianity for the last few decades about whether the creation story should be read literally. And that causes big debates about whether the world was created in 6 24-hour days and if the world is 6000 years old.

But modern science is something we're interested in that they had no interest in at all. How God created the material world didn't matter to them. They wanted to know who created everything and why? What is this God like? What's humanity's place in the world? These were far more pressing questions for them. So, for us to try to find ways to make the creation story mesh with modern science is an unnecessary distraction.

When I was growing up, all the rage was trying to disprove the Big Bang. I remember going to a seminar at youth camp where the teacher tried to disprove the Big Bang because he said it didn't match up with the Biblical account.

Fast forward to today and most Christian apologists say, "The Big Bang cosmology proves the Biblical account." What changed? The creation story didn't. The science did. That's what science does, it changes. From big bang, to steady state, to multiverse theory, the nature of science is to change as our understanding grows. So, why would we try to work so hard to make the Bible fit with the current understanding of science that might be completely different in 20 years?

We write things down to communicate *facts*. We want to get the details perfect because we're interested in that. Ancient people wanted to be reliable, but they weren't so concerned about all the facts, they were concerned about *meaning*—the lessons we learn from a story. We don't learn best from facts or even laws, we learn from stories.

We know this is true. Think about this...is it more effective to say, "Don't text and drive." Or to show a news story about a teenager hit and killed a small child because they were distracted while they were driving? Story is powerful.

But we live in a society that trusts facts. That's why you'll see modern people try to discredit the Bible by finding *contradictions* other or two accounts of the same story that differ and say, "See, the Bible is a mess! You can't trust it." So, Christians—who are also looking at it with modern eyes will try to find a way to synthesize the stories.

Read the Resurrection accounts in the Gospels and you'll find they're different. Some details can be pieced together, but others are tough to reconcile. We worry about that. But they didn't. In their world, the event can be historical, but two witnesses tell the story differently depending on the point they're trying to get across.

Another example is that genealogies are sometimes different. Some skip a generation or trace a genealogy another way. They weren't considered wrong. Their goal wasn't factual accuracy like ours, it was to communicate meaning.

Or sometimes we get hung up on numbers in the Bible—especially in the Old Testament, but in a hearing-dominant society, numbers are largely symbolic. That's why

we continually see numbers like 3, 7, 12, 40, 144,000. The point isn't for us to say, "Isn't it amazing that God always worked in 7's or 40s? No, the point is that these numbers are easy to remember and they have symbolic meaning. //

One more note about this, then we'll move on to the final point. In a hearing-oriented society, Scripture is read together. In a reading-dominant society, it's done alone. Today, we encourage people to read the Bible on their own. In fact, we sometimes consider individual Bible-reading the sign of dedication to the faith.

Now, there's nothing wrong with reading Scripture on your own. But Scripture was written to be read in community. Now, you might say individual reading is better because you can study it and read it over again to really try to figure out its meaning. But think about it this way. Have you ever received a text message from someone and you didn't know what it meant? The words were all there, but you didn't know if the person was angry or being sarcastic, for instance. Was there a typo? Have you had that experience?

That's less common in verbal communication because verbal communication isn't just verbal. It's all the senses. When you speak, you can communicate emotions and urgency that you can't through text. Isn't that what emojis are for? It's a picture of a face that tries to communicate emotions that can't be communicated through text alone. So, written text is more limited than we think.

But also, when you're reading a text, you're responsible to determine the meaning. So, we're more likely to read Scripture and say, "Here's what it means to me,"

without considering what the writer intended to communicate. And because of this, our interpretation often says more about us than it does about the author of the text.

Which bring us to our final point and it's this—*the Bible isn't about you, it's about Jesus*. If we're honest, most of find ourselves at times trying to fit the Biblical story into our story. In other words, we read the parts we like because they affirm what we want to believe about the world or ourselves.

That's why people love passages like Jeremiah 29:11, **“For I know the plans I have for you says the Lord, plans to prosper and not to harm you. Plans to give you a home and a future.”** That's a popular one that we lift out of context. But we like it because it sounds good and inspirational. It looks good framed on our wall.

But how often have you seen Matthew 5:11-12 on a wall? **“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”** I don't think I've ever seen this framed on a wall.

Here's what you need to know...you will never really get to know the God behind Scripture if you think the Bible is about you. The point isn't to read it and ask how God fits into your story. The point is to read it and see how you fit into his. The way you get to know God through Scripture is by submitting yourself to what God says about himself.

More than anything this summer, what I would like you to get out of this series is not just that you would be more knowledgeable about the Bible, but that you would fall in love with the God of the Bible. That through knowing the whole story, you would be able to see the truth, beauty and goodness of God.