

What the Bible is (and Isn't)

Well great to see you guys this morning. My name is Kent if I haven't had the chance to meet you—I'm one of the pastors here. We missed a lot of you guys last Sunday—we were here, but I know a lot of you guys were still out of town or traveling for the holidays or whatever it was. If you missed last week, we kicked off a series all about the art and science of how we change as human beings. If you weren't here, I would highly encourage you to go back and grab the video or audio online. I don't really have time to recap it all in detail today, but if I were to just give you the thirty second version, it would go something like this.

We started off last week saying that pretty much all of us are interested in how we change as human beings. Especially this time of year, right? Many of us are officially five days into whatever New Year's resolutions we might have made (and I won't make us raise our hands to indicate whether they're still in effect or not—that would just be embarrassing). But this time of year and always, we want to know how we change and mature as human beings over time. And **specifically for those of us who are followers of Jesus, we are very interested in how we grow and change to become more like Jesus over time.** So last Sunday, we attempted an answer to that question: *how do we actually change?* And our answer, basically, was that **one of the primary ways that we change is through our *habits*: through the things that we do over and over and over again.** Those things have a huge impact on the types of people we eventually become.

And so we said in light of that, we want to take the beginning of each new year as a church, and focus in on one *particular* habit that has the potential to make us more like Jesus. And *this* year, the habit we're focusing on is reading and studying the bible. We believe that the Holy Spirit can work through the Scriptures to form us into the image of Jesus over the long haul. So as a way to help you develop this habit, we've put out a year-long bible reading plan that a lot of us are participating in together. It's available out in the lobby or online if you're interested, and I'll tell you more about it towards the end of the service. But to go along with *that*, we are spending the next five weeks here on Sundays talking in detail about the bible.

And specifically today, I want us to talk about what the bible *is*, exactly. That's where we're headed this morning. Now, maybe that sounds almost too basic to some of us. Some of us are like "okay, pretty sure I know what the bible is." But something I've learned in just eight years of pastoring people, is that maybe we shouldn't assume that

everyone does. And on top of that, I'd argue that an awful lot of our *confusion* and *issues* and *hang-ups* with the Bible, *could* all be traced back to not knowing exactly what the bible is. **If we understand what the bible *is*, we've got a good shot at understanding a lot of the stuff *in it*. If we *misunderstand* what the bible is, a lot of what's in it won't make much sense at all.** So today, I want us to try and clear some of that up.

So let's do it this way: let's start off by just *eliminating* a couple things the bible *isn't*, and then we'll spend the *bulk* of our time this morning talking about what the Bible *is*.

The bible *isn't* an instruction manual.

Some people see this book primarily as a book full of instructions, or rules, about what to do and not to do. Such that if we were to *do* more of the things it says to *do*, and do *less* of the things it says *not* to do, life will go better for us than it would otherwise. And that's not *all* wrong: after all, there *are* plenty of rules and instructions in this book. Old Testament and New—there are instructions about what we are and are *not* to do. But I would strongly suggest that you not read the *whole bible* that way.

One reason I say that is because the majority of the bible isn't made up of instructions or rules at all. For instance, we'll talk more about this here in a bit, but 44% of the bible (almost half!) is actually *narrative*. In other words, almost *half* of the bible isn't primarily trying to tell you what to do and not to do—it's just trying to describe for you what *happened* once upon a time. And if you try to turn all of *those stories* in the bible into instructions or moral lessons, you end up doing some really bizarre stuff with the bible.

Just as one example, I once had a pastor in South Carolina give me tapes of a series of sermons he gave titled *50 Leadership Lessons from the Life of Moses*. He had basically taken every part of the story of Moses in the bible, and for each one, pulled out a short, punchy, leadership one-liner. So just out of curiosity, I listened to the sermon on the passage where Moses loses it and kills an Egyptian taskmaster. I was so curious to hear what the "leadership principle" was from that passage. Do you guys want to know what it was? It was, "eliminate little problems before they become big problems." The next time I saw the guy who did these lectures, I was like, "so just so I'm tracking with you, you're saying that if I am leading an organization, and a person is a 'little problem,' that I should *murder* him before things get worse!?" What was even *more* troubling is that I couldn't get a clear answer out of him on that. But what had he done there? He had taken a story about something that *happened* in the bible, and tried to force it into being an *instruction* about something we *should* do. He was treating the whole bible like it was an instruction

manual. And if *you* read the entire bible like it's an instruction manual, maybe you won't go quite that far with it, but you will end up doing some really strange stuff with the text. So my point is that **while there are instructions and commands in the bible, you cannot read the bible like it's just one long collection of commands.** It wasn't *all* intended to be read like that. Second...

The bible *isn't* an inspirational quote book.

The other popular approach to the bible is to read it as if it's simply a book of comforting and inspiring quotes to make us feel good—~~and to crosstitch onto sweaters, or print on coffee cups, or tattoo on your foot, or whatever Christians do with them.~~ People that read the bible like *this* tend to gravitate towards passages like Jeremiah 29:11: “*For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*” That just *feels* good, right? Or passages in the New Testament like Ephesians 3:20: “*...to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us.*” Or everybody's favorite, mostly thanks to our boy Tim Tebow, Philippians 4:13: “*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.*” You go *win* that championship Tebow. Now those are inspiring quotes from the bible, no doubt about it. And some parts of the bible are indeed meant to inspire, encourage, and comfort us—absolutely.

But again, this becomes a *problematic* way to read the *entire* bible. Because as inspiring as some passages are, they're not all actually *intended* for *us directly*. **In other words, if you read the whole bible like this, you may end up “claiming” some promises that aren't actually yours to claim.** For example, Jeremiah 29:11 is written to the nation of Israel, whom God is leading into an extended season of *exile*, as *discipline* for their refusal to listen to him. So is it really okay for us to just take that promise and apply it directly into our lives, in whatever way we happen to want it to apply? And if we do *that*, shouldn't we also apply the passages before and after it, about God sending us into exile for our sin? Why do we get to do that for Jeremiah 29:13, but not for the part that comes *before* that, or *after* that? ~~When it comes to Philippians 4:13, Paul writes that from prison, where he is starving on and off, likely tortured and mistreated, at times just wants to die rather than continue on...and out of that place, he writes “I know how to abound, and I know how to be brought low...I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” So if you play football, feel free to put that on your eyeblack before you play a championship game—just know that that's not exactly the type of scenario Paul had in mind when he wrote it.~~ So do you see how *this* approach to the bible gets a little weird?

And this leads us to *another* problem with reading the whole bible like this: which is that you actually *can't* read the whole bible like this. To put it bluntly, an awful lot of the bible is not anywhere near as *inspiring* as those passages we just read. A lot of it isn't all that inspiring at all. Some of it was meant to *correct*. Some of it was meant to *rebuke*. Some of it was meant to *convict* and *expose*. So if you go through the bible hoping only to pluck verses of emotional encouragement, you're likely going to have to skip an awful lot of what you read. // So the point is, I don't think either of these methods work great as *primary* approaches to the bible. They're too narrow. They're too *selective*. And they leave us in the dark as to what to do with all the *other* parts of the bible that don't read like that.

So with those out of the way, I want us to spend the rest of our time talking about what the bible *is*. If it's not either of *those* things, what *is* this thing we have sitting in front of us that we're doing our best to read? I'll start off by giving you a somewhat drawn-out definition of the bible all at once, and then we'll go back through and break it down, piece by piece. So if you like taking notes, you might want to jot this down:

**The bible is a *library of books, inspired by God,*
telling a unified story, that leads us to Jesus.**

...a library of books...

First—and this might be a little jarring to some of us—the bible actually *isn't* a book. Now, it obviously *looks* like a book, it's bound together like a book, but it is not a *singular* book. It's a lot of *different* books, all in one place. 66 of them to be exact. As a sidenote, this is why *I personally* prefer the term “*the Scriptures*” to the word “*“bible.”*” Partly because *Jesus* calls them “the Scriptures.” But also because the word “Scriptures” is *plural*—so to me, it's a good reminder that what we're reading is actually not *one* book, but many. So really, what we're holding is more like a small *library* of books. And they each communicate in slightly different ways. The author of Hebrews I think gets at this idea when he says this, thinking specifically about what we call the Old Testament:

*In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets **at many times and in various ways...***¹

So the Scriptures (and here, Hebrews might even be saying *just* the prophetic books) were written *in* a variety of different ways. They all look and sound a little different from

¹ Hebrews 1:1

each other. They're written by a variety of different *people* in a variety of different *styles*. To use a *modern* term, the bible is made up of many different *genres* of literature. And here's why that *matters* so much: **you read different genres in different ways. The type of literature you're reading impacts how you read it, and what you expect to get out of it, right?** So if you're a student, and you're reading through your Western Civ textbook, you're probably reading it with a highlighter or a pen nearby, and maybe a notebook or some flash cards, in order to jot down stuff as you go. Because that's the purpose of a textbook. But you probably don't sit down with a highlighter, pen, and flash cards to read *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (or maybe you do, but I think we can all agree that that is nerd level 1000). But you probably *don't* read it that way, because *it's a different type of literature*. You also don't get a cup of cocoa and a blanket, and snuggle up in front of the fire to casually flip through the owner's manual of your car cover to cover. Am I making sense? **Different types of writing get read in different ways, because they're written for different purposes.** Some things are written for the purpose of information, some things are written for entertainment, some things are written for inspiration, some for instruction, and so on and so forth. And **to read something well, you need to understand what type of literature you're reading, and how the author intended for it to be read.**

The bible in a lot of ways, is similar to that. For instance, here are the different types of literature in the bible [[Literature in the bible pie chart on screen](#)]. Now, these are just the *major* categories—we could probably break it down even further into 10 or 20 different types. But these are the major categories. For starters, as we mentioned earlier, 44% of the bible is *narrative*—meaning its primary purpose isn't to tell us what to do or not to do—but rather simply to tell us what *happened*. It's trying to tell us a story about something that occurred. Second, right at a *third* of the bible is poetry. And those of you that have studied any English Lit know that reading poetry brings with it its *own* set of principles about how to read it and read it well that is *very different* from how you read other types of literature. And finally, 23% of the bible is what's called *discourse*, or *teaching*: which means it's trying to communicate concepts, instructions, or ideas to us.

So as you can imagine, even just these *three* different types of literature carry with them very different principles for reading and understanding what they're saying. We aren't meant to read the Psalms exactly the same way that we read Romans. And we weren't meant to read Romans the same way that we read Genesis. And if you *attempt* to read all of those books the exact same way, you will likely be very confused. And you'll probably end up getting some very confusing ideas about who God is and what he is

like. Because the bible is not a book, but a *library* of books. Second, it is a *library of books*, that is...

...inspired by God...

Second, *all* of these different writings and different genres in the bible are all *inspired* by God himself. So even though the bible is a collection of books, it is not just “*any old*” collection of books. Because *these* books all ultimately have the same person *behind* them: they’re *all inspired* by God.

Now, I need to clarify that when I say “inspired” I don’t mean that the people writing the bible were just motivated by some stuff God did and were excited about it to the point that they decided to write it down. I mean much more than that. The word *inspire*, even in *English*, has the connotations of *breathing into* something. So **when we say that God inspired the bible, we mean that he literally breathed it into existence.** We get this from 2 Timothy 3:16-17:

*All Scripture is **breathed out by God** [there’s our idea] and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.*

So as you can see, the bible claims that it is a creation of God *himself*. He spoke through human authors, but it was ultimately *him* behind it all. **When we read the Scriptures, we aren’t just reading some random people’s speculations about what God.** We are reading words that God himself prompted them to write down. **We are reading things that God himself intended for us to read, so that we might grow in a knowledge and understanding and relationship with him.**

Now, here’s why *this* part of the definition matters practically: **if the things in here are inspired by God, then to reject them, is to reject God himself.** I know a lot of people that will try to separate out their faith in God, from their relationship with the bible. So they’ll say things like “well the *bible* isn’t my authority, God is.” Or, well “only God can judge me, not the bible.” But if the bible was *breathed out by God*, statements like that don’t really make any sense. That would be like if your boss at work sent you an email telling you to do something, and you intentionally disregarded it, and when they asked you about it, you said “well *you’re* my boss—your *emails* aren’t my boss.” They would look at you like you’re crazy. And they would be *correct*. Because that is a statement a crazy person would make. So yes, sure, *God* is our ultimate authority. But one of the

ways God has chosen to *delegate* his authority to us is *through* the Scriptures. By *breathing* them into existence and giving them to us. And because of that, the Scriptures are a *form of his authority* for followers of Jesus. Make sense? So the bible is a *library of books, inspired by God*, third...

...telling a unified story...

It is so important for us to get that the bible, at its core, is a *story*. *Story* is God's chosen method of revealing himself to us, and so the Scriptures at their core, tell a *story*. Think with me about this for just a second: God *could* have chosen to reveal himself by dropping a systematic theology book out of the sky for us (Ch. 1: God, Ch. 2: Trinity, Ch. 3: Sin, etc.). But *did he* do it that way? No. Instead, the predominant method of communication in the bible is actually that of a *story*. A *narrative*.

So God could have said, "here's what I'm like: I'm patient." And then followed that with a very technical definition of the word *patience*. And occasionally, there are things *kind of* like that in the bible. But more *often*, what he does is that he tells us *stories about* his patience. He tells us a story about a group of Israelites, that he rescues out of slavery, leads through the desert, and then listens to as they complain and whine to him for *forty straight years* about their new predicament. They were really having a hard time with their new life of COMPLETE AND TOTAL FREEDOM. And instead of just wiping them out or losing his cool on them (which let's be honest: is probably what most of *us* would have done in that scenario), he shows them *constant, enduring*, grace and patience and provision. He gives them, at nearly every point in the story, so much *better* than what they deserve. And God prompts Moses to write that story down in the bible, and uses it to communicate the idea, "I am *patient* with my people."

God could have said, "I am forgiving. I forgive people—that's a thing that I do." But more *often*, he tells us *stories about* forgiveness. He tells us stories like the one of Hosea, a man in the Bible who marries a prostitute. And she steps out on him time and time again, cheats on him time and time again, throws herself at other men constantly, and Hosea pursues her time and time again, *forgives* her time and time again, extends grace to her time and time again. He works through the carnage that her sin has created, and he *forgives* her. God gives us that story—and others like it—and says to us, almost unbelievably, "*this* is what I'm like. I *forgive*."

My point is that **God, for some reason, prefers to communicate who he is to us via *story*.** Such that even the *commands* of the bible are actually *set inside of* the story. The

commands God gives Israel in Exodus and Leviticus and Numbers—those are all set *inside of* the part of the *story* that Israel is currently in. Jesus' *commands* in the sermon on the mount are an unveiling of this *new chapter* of the story of God's people. Even the New Testament letters are a part of the unfolding story—they teach us how to live and relate to one another within the *Church*—this new development *in the story* of God's people.

Now, the reason this matters is because **to understand what the bible is saying to us today, you need to have some degree of familiarity with the story it's telling.** We need to have some idea *where we're at* in the story. If you read the laws in Leviticus and Numbers without an eye to *the part of the story they are in*, you'll likely get the wrong idea about their relevance for us today. This is actually part of what the Bible Project videos (that we included in our bible reading plan) help so much with: most of them, at the beginning of the video, give some context as to what part of the biblical story you are in. Study bibles and commentaries can also be immensely helpful in this. But in order to understand what you're reading, it helps to have some idea of the part of the biblical story you find yourself in.

Author and pastor Tim Keller articulates this really well, as he does with pretty much everything. He says this:

*The reason for our confusion (over the Bible) is that we usually read the Bible as a series of **disconnected stories**, each with a 'moral' for how we should live our lives. It is not. **Rather**, it comprises a **single story**, telling us how the human race got into its present condition, and how God through Jesus Christ has come and will come to put things right.*

And that leads us straight into the *last* part of our definition. The bible is a library of books, inspired by God, telling a unified story, that...

...leads us to Jesus.

Lastly, and by far most importantly, is that this library of book is meant to *point us towards the person and work of Jesus*. We can see this when Jesus himself, speaking to a group of religious leaders in John 5, puts it like this:

*You search the Scriptures because you think that **in them** you have eternal life; and it is **they that bear witness about me**, yet you refuse to come to **me** that you may have life.²*

Here, Jesus calls out a group of people because they are searching Scriptures backwards and forwards to find “life” in them. But meanwhile, they are refusing to let the Scriptures serve their actual *purpose*, which according to Jesus, is to point people to *him*. Put another way, **the Scriptures are not an end in themselves: they’re a means to an end. They’re a way for people to encounter and know and discover and live in relationship with Jesus.**

Jesus actually says something similar in *Matthew 5*:

*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to **fulfill them**.*

So *here*, Jesus says again that the Law and the Prophets—which to him would make up the vast majority of the Old Testament—are all “*fulfilled*” in him. They are all pointing to and leading us to Jesus. They are presenting a problem that only Jesus can solve. They were describing an *ideal* that only *Jesus* can live up to. They are exposing sin in us that only *Jesus* is the answer to. **Jesus, and all the New Testament authors, continually insist that the Scriptures at their core all point us to Jesus.** Or, as we often say it around City Church, they point us to “the gospel”: to how *God, through Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, is reconciling all things to himself.* Every part of your bible is meant to direct you towards *that* in some way, form or fashion. The Old Testament *anticipates* Jesus’ arrival. The gospels are *accounts* of Jesus’ arrival. The New Testament letters are *explanations* of all that his arrival *meant*. And Revelation is about what is *second coming* will mean. The whole bible points to Jesus.

Now, a quick clarification: I don’t think this means that every single sentence or paragraph is an *allegory* for Jesus. I think if you’re not careful, believing *that* leads to *stretching* the bible to make it do that. I listened to a sermon once where a pastor was preaching on this passage from 2 Kings 4, where the prophet Elisha brings a boy back from the dead. And there’s this detail in the story where as the boy came back to life, it says he “sneezed seven times.” And on that verse, I heard this pastor say “you know what a sneeze is? It’s how the body rids irritants from its system. You know what *Jesus came to do*? Rid the irritant of *sin* from the human condition!” And I was like, “I’m sorry,

² John 5:39-40.

what?” Like I felt like I had whiplash from how quickly he did that theological trapeze move in his sermon.

And that’s obviously a somewhat extreme example. But my point is that you don’t have to *conjure up* stuff like that to see how the various parts of the bible point to Jesus. It’s generally a lot simpler than that. So in the 2 Kings story, it’s probably just that this boy coming back from the dead points forward to the day when *Jesus* comes back from the dead, and ultimately the day that he brings all of us back from the dead in the new heavens and new earth. See? I didn’t even have to bring the *sneezes* into it. So knowing that the whole bible points us forward to Jesus doesn’t mean that you have get goofy with it. But it does mean that when read correctly, the Scriptures should all lead us forward to who the Scriptures are all about: *Jesus*.

And in an even deeper sense, this means that **the reason we read the bible isn’t just to read the bible. The reason we read the bible is to get to *know*, and to come to *love, Jesus*.** So if you read the bible, and it leads you to Jesus, you’ve probably done something *right*. But if you read the bible and it doesn’t lead you to *Jesus*, you’ve almost definitely done something *wrong*. *And* the relationship should move in both directions: **a love for *Jesus* should spark in you a love for the *Scriptures*, and a love for the *Scriptures* should make you more and more *like Jesus*.**

I think when people get off track is when those things terminate on themselves. So for some, the tendency is to say “I follow *Jesus*,” but say that while not really caring to spend much time at all with the very Scriptures that Jesus had *internalized* down to the core of his being. The Scriptures that Jesus *drew from* in nearly everything he said and did. If we say we follow Jesus, there should be a desire in us to know and love and internalize the same Scriptures that Jesus knew and loved. But at the same time, there are probably others in the room that know the Scriptures backwards and forwards. We’ve got verses memorized and could spout off references and cross references and context, *but* somehow none of that is really making us much more like Jesus. We’re like the Pharisees in that we are searching the Scriptures for life, while refusing to let them lead us to Jesus.

But what we’re after is *both/and*, right? What we’re after—those of us in the room who follow Jesus—is a love for *Jesus* that sparks in us a love for the *Scriptures*, and a love for the *Scriptures* that *leads* us, over and over again, to *Jesus*.

So I’ll just close by asking two questions:

- **Is your love for Jesus generating a love for the Scriptures?** When you say “I love Jesus,” does that *include* a love for the Scriptures? A desire to study, and spend regular time in, and understand and live out the Scriptures? If not, it might be worth considering if your love for Jesus is more about loving the *idea* of Jesus, rather than the Jesus who loved and was immersed in the Scriptures. And second...
- **Is your love for the Scriptures making you more like Jesus?** If you would put yourself in the category of people who *love* the Scriptures, spend regular time in the Scriptures: is that love for the Scriptures making you more and more like Jesus? *Or* is it making you more and more like the people that Jesus said *missed the point* of the Scriptures? Is it making you *compassionate* towards all the people that Jesus was *compassionate* towards, or is it making you *self-righteous* towards them? Just as a quick tip: a good way to find this one out is to ask those closest to you that follow Jesus: do you see me becoming more like Jesus? And if not, what are the areas that I have yet to let the Scriptures press in on in my character?

The hope is that our love for Jesus generates a love for the Scriptures, and that our love for the Scriptures point us towards, and make us more like, the one who the Scriptures are all about.

Let's pray together.