

Scripture

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[0 : 00] Welcome to session five of Foundations. This week we're going to be focusing on Scripture.

! We hold a number of beliefs about Scripture. We actually did a whole sermon series on our! theology of the Scriptures. So if you're interested, you can find that in our archives. We believe that God's Word is clear, that it's meant to be understood. We believe that it's sufficient, that it contains all things necessary for us to have a relationship with God, that the Scriptures are reliable. There's a number of things that we believe about Scripture, but in this session we're specifically going to be focusing on the authority of Scripture. That when we read the Bible, when we read the words in this book, we believe that the Bible is not just advice. The Bible is not just wisdom from the past. This is a book that is meant to rule the hearts and the minds and the lives of God's people. So unlike anything else ever written in history, we believe that this book has unique authority, meaning it is the final word on what is true and real. In the Anglican Catechism, question 25, what is Holy Scripture? The Catechism says this, Holy Scripture is God's Word written.

That is also found in the Articles of Religion, the 39 Articles, which is one of our Statements of Faith. Holy Scripture is God's Word written, given by the Holy Spirit through the prophets and apostles as the revelation of God and His acts in human history, and is therefore the Church's final authority in all matters of faith and practice. So that's what we're going to talk more about in this session.

We're going to use a passage of Scripture, 2 Peter 1, verses 16 through 21, as a jumping off point that's going to anchor our discussion, because we always like to allow Scripture to teach us about itself.

That's part of what it means to believe in the authority of Scripture. So we're going to answer three questions about the authority of Scripture. Where does it come from? What does it mean? And why does it matter?

[2 : 20] So starting off, where does the authority that Scripture has, where does that authority come from? In verses 20 and 21 of this text, it says, No prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Now listen to what he's saying there. There's a category of writing that is set apart from all other forms of writing. Unlike other written documents, there are certain writings that are not merely the product of human beings, but they are also the product of God's divine activity, acting through human beings in the world. And this is a reference to what is sometimes referred to as the divine inspiration of Scripture. The word inspiration means breathed in, and Christian theologians use this word to describe the idea that God has breathed his words into Scripture. So the classic text on this is 2 Timothy 3, 16, all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness. So how exactly does that work? How does that happen?

Some people think of the idea of divine inspiration almost like a form of dictation, as though God wants to say something into the world, and so he finds someone, and he says, I'm going to speak through you, and that that person sort of becomes a kind of human word processor, and they simply write words that are dictated to them. But that's not exactly the image that we are given here in Peter. That's not accurate. Peter gives us a wonderful way of thinking about it. He says, human beings, as they are carried along by the Holy Spirit, write these words. The same word carried along shows up in Acts chapter 27. Paul and his companions are in a boat. They have in mind a direction that they want to go, but the wind carries them along in a very different direction.

And this is an image of how Scripture came to be. Human authors are like people in a boat, and they sat down to write at all of the various times and places where Scripture was written.

They sat down to write. They may have had in mind a certain direction that they wanted to go with their writing, so that they're putting up their sail, so to speak. But then the Spirit of God actually carries them along. God sets the true course of their writing. And what we have here is a much more nuanced understanding of how Scripture came to be. There is a kind of interplay between the human and the divine. Humans genuinely speak their own words, and they genuinely do that in ways that reflect their family, their culture, their level of education, their environment, their personality quirks, their temperament. And at the same time, the words they use are also just those words that God wanted them to use. You can see this when you compare different texts in the Bible. You can see this when you compare the different gospel accounts, for instance. You can see the style of each author, of each gospel writer, is very unique to them. And there are clear, observable differences between the style and the way each of the gospels is written. And yet they're all telling the same story, but through four different flesh and blood human beings. It's essential that we hold this idea together. One of the ways I think it is well expressed is to say that the Bible is just like Jesus.

[6 : 21] The Bible is both fully human and fully divine. And it's essential that we hold these things together. Because if we deny, for instance, the human element, if we deny the human element, that's very common in fundamentalist circles, then we run into problems. Some people grow up hearing a lot about the inerrancy of the Bible, and they interpret that to mean that there are no errors, there are no mistakes in the Bible at all. And then they discover that there are chronological differences between the four gospel accounts. And they see those differences, and then they begin to worry that there are, in fact, errors and mistakes, and their faith starts to unravel. It starts to fall apart. But if we remember that all of the authors are fully human, that helps us make sense of differences like that. Because we realize that certain authors, because of their personality, are not as concerned with chronology, right? So they order their accounts topically or thematically, not chronologically, right? So if we keep in mind the human element, that helps us resolve issues. It helps us realize that the problems that we might otherwise perceive to be there are not, in fact, problems at all. On the other hand, if we deny the divine element, which is common in more progressive circles, we also run into problems, right? For example, if we don't like something that the apostle

Paul writes, we can't simply write him off as a bigot or a misogynist, because Paul, though fully human, was carried along by the Holy Spirit, meaning that the Holy Spirit led Paul to write what God intended for us to read, right? So the scriptures are a lot like Jesus. They are fully human, and they are fully divine, and we have to hold those things together. So to answer our first question, where does the authority of scripture come from? Well, all authority ultimately rests with God. But scripture is God-breathed, meaning that God has, in a sense, delegated his authority to these words, which makes this book utterly unique. So that's our first question. Second question is, what does this actually mean? What does this mean for us?

The apostle Peter says in verse 19 that the scriptures are like a lamp, illuminating the darkness. So this is the image. We live in a world of darkness. God has given us a lamp to live by, and without that lamp, we would be engulfed in darkness.

So the whole course of our lives needs to be governed and directed by scripture. But that raises a very important question. How exactly does that work? How do we apply that to our lives? You might hear that question and think, well, that seems pretty straightforward. Just do what the Bible says. And you would be correct. But there is a problem with that. And the problem is that most of the Bible is not written in the form of a list of rules that we are called to live by. Most of the Bible is not written in the form of creeds that we are called to affirm. Most of the Bible comes to us in the form of stories. So I can imagine what it might mean to live under the authority of the Ten Commandments.

[9 : 51] I can imagine what it means to live under the authority of some of the epistles that Paul wrote to the churches. But how do you live under the authority of the book of Judges? How do you live under the authority of the story of Ruth? Right? Many of the texts that we have, the majority of the texts in scripture, come to us in the form of stories. And in fact, all of scripture, from beginning to end, tells one great story. How do we live under the authority of a story? See, what we typically end up doing is that we will take these stories and we will extract rules. We will extract principles from them and then attempt to live under those. But if we do that, if you really think about it, we're not really living under the authority of scripture itself. We are in fact living under the authority of a list of do's and don'ts that we have extracted from scripture. And here's the problem with that. On a basic

level, that works. There are a lot worse ways to live. But what are we really doing? And this actually comes from the historian and Bible scholar N.T. Wright. He says, this whole approach to scripture implies that God has somehow given us the wrong sort of book and that it's up to us to turn it into the right sort of book. And he says, because of that, this approach to scripture where we sort of extract rules and principles to live by, he says, that's actually a low view of scripture. He says, a high view of scripture would actually respect the fact that God has given us a story, actually a book of stories within stories, all falling within a grand narrative, what we call salvation history. He says, a high view of scripture would respect that fact. And a high view of scripture would ask, how does someone live under the authority of a story? And that's really the question we should be asking. And here's what

Wright goes on to say. He says, imagine finding an unfinished Shakespearean play and deciding that you want to perform that play. And imagine that the script only gives us the first four acts of the play. And it would be up to us to work out the fifth and final act for ourselves. Right? So, so how would we go about doing that? Well, it would require a couple of things. It would require continuity and it would require improvisation. On the one hand, we would have to place ourselves under the authority of the first four acts of that play. In other words, we would have to immerse ourselves so deeply and so thoroughly in that story that we would have such an intuitive understanding of the flow of the story that we would be able to maintain continuity with it.

Meaning we don't do anything that would break with or violate the flow of the story. But then we would have to improvise the fifth and final act, but in a way that maintains continuity with the first four acts. So let's take that idea and apply it to scripture. It is as though God has given us the first four acts of a five-act play. Act one is creation. Act two is the fall. Act three, through the end of the Old Testament, is the story of Israel. Act four is the coming of Jesus and the story of Jesus. But the fifth act is incomplete. We only have scene one of act five. We have one scene.

The Holy Spirit has come. The gospel begins to go out into the world. The church is established and begins to grow. And then we have some guidance from the apostles on how the church should function.

And then we're given a preview of how the story actually ends. We see the new heavens and the new earth. We see justice and peace reigning. We see people from every tribe and tongue and nation praising the Lord. We see every tear wiped away and all things made new. But it is up to us, as followers of Jesus, to live out that fifth and final act between the first scene and the final scene.

[14:18] And what would that require from us? Well, the same thing we said a moment ago.

Continuity and improvisation. It requires that we first immerse ourselves in Scripture, that we so deeply internalize Scripture that we develop a kind of instinct for it. If you've ever heard of the Chicago Shakespeare improv group, they are famous for doing improvisational performances of Shakespeare.

They will ask for topics at the beginning of the evening. And then with no preparation whatsoever, they will improvise an entire Shakespearean play. And it's amazing to watch. And you ask, how could they possibly do that? And it's because they immerse themselves in Shakespeare.

They develop a kind of Shakespearean instinct so that they can channel Shakespeare and improvise Shakespeare, no preparation needed. The same would be required of us. We so deeply immerse ourselves in Scripture that we develop a kind of gospel instinct, right? It can just flow out of us. We instinctively have a sense of where the story of Scripture would take us in any given situation. And as we do that, we develop this instinct that allows us to improvise, right? The more we do that, the more we feel free to improvise. In other words, to engage all of the various situations that we face here and now that are never addressed in Scripture. And just as the Holy Spirit carried along the biblical writers, in a way, we have to entrust ourselves to the Holy Spirit and trust the Spirit to carry us along as we write this fifth and final act with our very lives. Because that's what we're doing right now. We are filling in that gap between the establishing of the church and the coming of the Holy Spirit and the renewal of all things.

The final point is this. Even if we have an understanding of what that looks like, and even if we believe that Scripture has authority, why does any of this actually matter? See, none of this really matters if we don't actually want to live under the authority of Scripture. So why does this matter? Why would we allow an ancient book written thousands of years ago to have the final say over every aspect of our lives? That feels like such a burden. And yet, in verse 19 of this passage from the Apostle Peter, we see there's only one real reason that someone would do that. And that is if

you are someone in whose heart the morning star is rising. Now the morning star in this passage is a reference to Venus, because they knew that when you could see Venus, that was a sign that dawn was near. And so Peter is using this as a metaphor for Jesus Christ rising in the hearts of his people. And this brings us to maybe the most important point of all, that ultimately we don't believe in Jesus because of the Bible. We believe in the Bible because of Jesus.

[17 : 31] We believe in the Bible because the plain fact is no one held a higher view of Scripture than Jesus himself. In the wilderness, when Jesus was being tempted by the devil, he responds by quoting Deuteronomy chapter 8, verse 3. He says, man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. In other words, he viewed Scripture as coming from the mouth of the Lord. He knew Scripture by heart. He quoted it all throughout his ministry. He saw his entire mission as the fulfillment of Scripture, which he said again and again and again. And he even defined what it means to be his disciple as abiding in his words. John chapter 8, verse 31, if you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples. So this is how Jesus viewed Scripture. And if we believe in Jesus, then we have to believe what Jesus believed about

Scripture. And if we don't like it, then that's really something that we're going to have to take up with Jesus. But here's the thing. Here's the thing. Once we begin to read the story of Scripture for ourselves, something begins to happen in us. The more we read it, the more we discover that as we read Scripture, Scripture reads us. We begin to understand ourselves more. We begin to understand the world more. It begins to make sense of and connect things in our hearts and our minds and our experiences. And we begin to be enfolded into this story. So as we read about creation, we read about the way things should be. And something in us stirs because we long for this world to be as it was. We long to live in a place where there is no pain or death. We read about the fall. And we reluctantly have to admit that we are not the good, upright people that we like to think we are. We begin to reluctantly admit that there is something wrong with the world and there is something wrong in us. When we read the story of Israel, we see ourselves in their place. We recognize that we are people who, despite all of our good intentions and learning and effort, cannot save ourselves, just as Israel could not save. They could not save themselves despite all of their efforts. And then we see a God who, despite all the rejection and all the disobedience of his people, we see a God who sets a plan in motion to ultimately save and restore his people and his creation at the cost of his son's life. And then we read about the resurrection of God's son and how he ascended to the throne of heaven and how he now sits as the rightful king over all of creation and how he calls all people to himself and how he has set about healing and renewing the world. And at some point, as we read this, the morning star begins to rise in our hearts and we begin to say, I want to be a part of that story. I want to love and to serve that king. I want that to be the meaning and the purpose of my life.

The authority of scripture is not a burden. It is a gift. It is a gift. And those of us who have chosen to live under the authority of scripture don't do it because anyone has forced us to. We do it because by it we have found freedom. We have found truth. We have found light and we have found life. We do it because we know that the voice we hear in scripture is the voice of our savior and king. Because the ultimate purpose of the written word is to bring us into relationship with the living word, Jesus Christ. So that's a little bit on our view on the authority of scripture. We look very much forward to opportunities to discuss this more in person. But I encourage you this week to take some time to read scripture for yourself. There are some readings that we suggest, but take some time to read it and read it with this lens in mind. Allow yourself to be enfolded into the story and carried along by the Holy Spirit. I've spent some time praying for you. I hope this is a blessing to you and I look forward to seeing you soon. Blessings.