

Scripture - How and where God speaks

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Date: 02 June 2013

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[0 : 00] So what I'd like us to look at this evening and to carry on in following through in the next few weeks is a spiritual understanding about the Bible.

! Or if you like you could call it the doctrine of Scripture. If you're put off by the word doctrine then we just go back to a spiritual understanding about the Bible.

But it comes to the same thing. What does the Bible say about itself? Right, that's what we're going to look at. Now please excuse me, I'm going to take my pullover off so just look away because it won't be a pretty sight.

That's better for me, probably not much of a benefit for you, but anyway. What does the Bible say about itself?

What I want to do is to defend the evangelical understanding of the Bible, which is what the Bible says God says.

[1 : 17] You could enlarge on that and people can have enlarged on it, but I think that's the basic of it. What the Bible says, God says.

If we find it in the Bible, that's what it's saying, God is saying it. Okay, that's evangelical, which is what our sort of church is, is meant to say we believe in the gospel, the basic points of the gospel, like you must be born again, like we need to be justified by faith, like Jesus is coming again.

And where we get all that stuff from, we get it from the Bible. And that's what evangelical means.

And if you go back to the sort of basis of it, it comes to this, that what the Bible says, God says.

So I'd like us to think about that for a few minutes this evening. And I thought we could look at it in terms of objections. And I thought of these objections.

Number one, that it is unchristian. There's an unchristian thing to put so much weight on the Bible.

Number two, it is an unlikely doctrine and doesn't seem to make much sense.

[2 : 43] Number three, that this idea is boring. Number four, that it is difficult. And number five, that it is irrelevant.

So I don't know whether you've ever thought any of those things. You might have done. I'm sure lots of people do think things like that. So I'd like to try and think about the idea of the Bible being God's word against those criticisms.

That's the idea. And I thought maybe we could stop between each one and see what you thought.

Number one, the idea is unchristian.

That's the objection. I don't agree with it, but this is the objection. So the objection is saying something like this. Christianity, you guys, is about Jesus. And it's about the Holy Spirit.

And it's about life. And it's about love. And it isn't about some dry, dusty old book. So you evangelicals that are always going on about the Bible.

[3 : 46] It's unchristian. Come on, get real. Wake up. We talk about Jesus and the Holy Spirit and life and love. Okay, do you understand the idea of that objection? So what would we say to that objection?

Now what I'm going to do is look in the Bible. And it's a bit of a circular defense, isn't it? And I suppose the way to say it is, well, you know, we've agreed that Christianity is about Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

So that must at least be something to do with the Bible, because that's the only place you can find out about Jesus, really. So, for example, let's look at Mark chapter 8, verses 34 to 38.

And I suppose I'm saying, well, you've got, we're in agreement with something about Jesus. Now, who is the Jesus that we're talking about? What was his view on things like this?

And in Mark 8, 34 to 38, the Jesus that I have in mind said this. He called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said, if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross

and follow me.

[5 : 02] Whoever wants to save his life will lose it. Whoever loses his life for me and for the Gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?

Are you happy with that? The sort of thing that the Jesus that you're interested in would have said? I think he would have said things like that. It makes sense, doesn't it?

What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? What can a man give in exchange for his soul? That seems to fit with the sort of Jesus that's Christian Jesus.

Please note what he says afterwards. If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.

Do you notice what this Jesus said? This Jesus said, yes, I am the key. Yes, I am the centre of it.

[6 : 07] And the way it works is, if you have me, then you're safe. And if you don't have me, you're not safe.

But please notice what having me is, verse 38. If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, then the Son of Man will be ashamed of him.

Do you see the point there? Jesus is saying you can't just have a vague idea about me. The me that really exists is a me who said things.

And you can't have me without the words that I said. That's the sort of person Jesus is. I'm sure you could have lots of potential saviours who aren't that interested in the things that they said.

But Jesus isn't one of them. He said, me and my words. And you might say, well, you're only getting that from the Bible. So, it sort of defeats itself.

[7 : 10] And I'm not quite sure that I can answer that apart from to say, this is what it says in the Bible. And if you think about it, and indeed if you pray about it, doesn't it ring true?

This is exactly the sort of thing Jesus would have said. And that's exactly what he did say. He cared about his words. Let's look at John 20.

So, we're saying we want to be Christian. We want to have Jesus and the Holy Spirit and eternal life and all those sorts of things.

And John 20 verses 30 to 31 is what the Gospel writer John said.

And unless we've got things really completely up the spout, John was one of Jesus' close companions and associates.

[8 : 10] And he's one of the major sources that anybody of us know anything about Jesus. And this is what he said. This is John 20 verse 30.

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples which are not recorded in the book. Okay? But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Do you see what he's saying? He's saying, I want you to have life. I agree with that. That's what Christianity is about. And I want you to have Jesus, which is what Christianity is about. But the only way you can have that is by the things that are written in the book.

These are written so that you may believe. So to have life is to do with faith. And faith is to do with Jesus. And you can't have Jesus without the things that are written in the book.

Let's look at John chapter 6. John chapter 6, verse 60.

[9 : 22] According to the apostle John, Jesus said some difficult things. John 6, verse 60. He said, particularly, he's referring to the bit about eating the flesh of the Son of Man and drinking his blood.

On hearing it, many of his disciples said, this is a hard teaching, who can accept it? Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to you, does this offend you?

You see the Son of Man ascend where he was before. The Spirit gives life. The flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.

Yet there are some of you who do not believe. And so he goes on. Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. He went on to say, this is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him.

And from this time, many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. Well, sometimes people didn't believe in those days. They actually had Jesus standing in front of them and they said, I'll take this.

[10 : 25] I'm not up for this. Did you see what Jesus says, being up for this involves? He says, yes, it is spirit and it is life and it is Christ.

But the way you get that is via the words. Doesn't Jesus actually say, the words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.

And he is saying that the way to get spirit, life, Jesus is by the words that he said.

These are the words that are written down for us and they are the words that are in the Bible. So, although we might say, I don't really want Bible stuff to have Jesus.

There doesn't seem really to be a Jesus that we can have without the Bible. John 19 verse 28. John 19 verse 28 is a little snippet into, it's almost in passing, but it's worth noticing.

[11:48] The Jesus that is described in John's Gospel is the Jesus of whom this could be said later. This is when Jesus is dying on the cross. Knowing that all was now completed and so that the scriptures would be fulfilled, Jesus said, I am thirsty.

Stop at that sentence. So here is Jesus dying on the cross and he makes a decision to say something.

He doesn't have to do that. But he makes a decision to say it. And why does he say it? Why does he say, I am thirsty?

What's his motive for doing that? The answer is? So that scripture would be fulfilled. And it's very interesting, isn't it, that this Jesus believes that he should choose things and, this is just one example, but take his pathway through life so that scripture would be fulfilled.

Jesus himself chose to live under scripture. And the scripture that he's referring to is the Old Testament, isn't it?

[13:10] There's something particular in the Old Testament that he says, this must be fulfilled and therefore I submit myself to this course of action. So, here's objection number one, that the Bible is unchristian.

And I've tried to show that actually that's not true. If you want Christianity in any meaningful sense, you've got to have the Bible.

So I'll stop there for a minute. Does anybody want to object or ask a question or make an observation? That was number one. Number two.

The idea that it is unlikely, I suppose it follows a little bit from Steve's comment, that people would say, it just seems rather unlikely that God would work through a book.

Surely God would work by miracles, wouldn't he? Or God would put some strong sense or feeling inside me.

[14:22] How can it be just about words? When you say, oh, it's just about words, it makes it seem very trivial and very picky. You know, people just arguing about words.

All these different denominations are just arguing about words. And therefore, you know, something to be disdained. Disdained? Looked down on or not bothered with.

Well, let's see if we can make some comments about this. It's called words, number one. It's called words, number one. Well, no, this is the comment. God, the God of the Bible is a God who speaks and does things by His powerful word.

word. This is not an extra optional add-on to an understanding of God, but this is the sort of God he is. This is the way he characteristically works. So let's look at Psalm 115, which is a wonderful piece of polemic. A polemic is an argument against something. So Psalm 115 verses 1 to 11 give us the context. So we will do a bit of reading this time. So Catherine, could you read us Psalm 115, 1 to 11.

Thank you very much.

[16:48] So the Psalm is very much to do with glory and praise, not to us, O Lord, but to your name be the glory. And it is about the spiritual realities of the spiritual life. House of Israel, trust in the Lord. He is their help and shield. House of Aaron, trust in the Lord.

He is their help and shield. You who fear him, trust in the Lord. He is their help and shield. But in the middle of those comments is the comparison of what the Lord is really like and what the idols are like. So there is this choice of these two, what human beings characteristically come up with as their version of God and what God is really like, by contrast. So verse 3, one thing is our God is invisible. So you might say that's a weakness in Christian spirituality.

You can't see God. The psalmist would say it isn't actually a weakness, it's a strength because the God, the real God, isn't down here sort of 11 feet tall or 30 feet tall and made of wood like the idols are. The real God is in the important place, the place of power, the place of control, the place of glory. He's in heaven and he is completely untroubled by what we think he can and cannot do. He

does whatever he pleases. That's what the real God's like. And notice some of the contrasts. The idols, the made up versions of God, verse 5, they have mouths but they can't speak. So he's talking about an idol, painted, carved, they paint a mouth on it but it can say nothing at all. And the contrast is this, that the real God who is in heaven can speak and say things, that's what he can do. Same thing in verse 7. These idols have hands but they can't feel but the real God is aware of everything that happens. Feet but they cannot walk but the Lord moves wherever he wants to move. And these idols cannot utter a sound with their throats but God speaks. You see the idols are dumb and powerless but God, the God of the Bible is powerful, is powerful, alive and part of that is he speaks. So here's an example of it. When God wants to make everything, what does he do? So think of Genesis, so he could snap his fingers and it could say, and God snappeth his fingers and lo, there was light or whatever. But it doesn't say that, does it? Do you remember what it does say? I mean you could look it up but I expect everybody knows it. He spoke. He spoke. God said, let there be light and there was light. It's significant that the God of the Bible speaks and he does stuff by speaking. And we can say a bit more about the character of his words. So here is a relevant comment in Jeremiah chapter 23. I'm heading for you Steffi. Jeremiah 23 verses 25 to 32.

[20 : 50] Jeremiah 23. Jeremiah 23. And this is a contrast between what the idols come up with and what it's like when God comes up with stuff. So please Steffi, Jeremiah 23 verses 25 to 32.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you very much.

Thank you very much. See, here God is making a contrast between all sorts of words that people make up themselves, they're of human origin, and words that come from God.

[22 : 52] And he says the words of human origin, well, they're just dreams, and in a way they're lies. They don't benefit people at all.

In fact, they lead them astray. And he says, but my word is on a different plane altogether. These memorable words, what has straw to do with grain?

Two different things. Is not my word like a fire, declares the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks rock in pieces?

My word, says the Lord, has a quality of power. It's like a fire. And it's like a hammer that breaks rock in pieces.

I don't know whether you've ever tried breaking a rock in pieces with a hammer. Whether you've tried breaking up a bit of a concrete path or something like that. It needs something powerful to break a rock.

[23 : 54] To break up concrete. And God says, that's what my word's like, that. It's bang. It changes things. Bang.

Breaks things. Bang. Makes things. My word is different. And that's what my word is like. So, just coming back to this objection, God says it's not at all unlikely that he would work by his word. And God says it's not at all odd or inappropriate. Because God's word has a quality that human words don't have.

I've put here, mind you, that human beings are made in God's image. And as God is a speaking God, we're actually speaking creatures.

And in that way we are different from rabbits and badgers. And I'm just trying to think of another name for another animal.

[25 : 02] Cockatoos. There you are, for example. The interesting thing about animals is that they squawk and purr and growl. They don't talk. So, there is, having words is not, what am I trying to say?

I'm trying to say, having, being capable of words is not a trivial thing. It's a great privilege. It's a God-like thing.

And it's not surprising, then, if God chooses to work amongst humankind by words. Okay, that's the unlikely.

Does anybody want to comment? Number three. It's boring. I just love that as a comment on anything, actually.

I remember taking a group of, when I was a school teacher, taking a group of school children to City Technology College. And there were lasers and robots.

[26 : 10] And, well, those are things that appealed to me. All sorts of things. We spent all afternoon there. And I said to a little group coming out, well, what do you think of that thing?

And they said, it's boring. And I always think that when people say it's boring, it says at least as much about them as it does about what they've just been involved with.

Anyway, is this idea of the Bible being God's Word, is this boring? Is it tedious? Is it tiresome and unrewarding?

And I did hear somebody say, of I think really of sermons in our church, that they're tiresome. And I have a lot of sympathy for that view because I do most of them and you're the guys that sit and listen to them and I would quite appreciate it if you said, oh, it's a bit tedious.

But you mustn't confuse human capacity to communicate God's Word with God's Word itself. I'm sure preachers do sometimes preach boring sermons or unrewarding sermons.

[27 : 33] But that's not because God's Word is tedious or tiresome or unrewarding. And it's our prayer that when God's Word is ministered, that more often than not, at least more often than not, that the power of God's Word overcomes the limitations of the speaker.

And what does it say about God's Word? Does it say God's Word is boring? Let's look at Hebrews 4, verse 12. This is going to be Lindsay.

Hebrews 4, verse 12 and 13. So the question is, is God's Word tedious, tiresome and unrewarding? And this is what the writers of the Hebrews says about God's Word. Hebrews 4, verse 12. 12 and 13, please. Thank you.

It seems to me that he's saying anything but that God's Word is boring and tedious. He's saying that this is the quality of God's Word as it's properly heard and understood and as it properly impacts on us.

[29 : 14] It's living. It's active. It's sharp. It goes right down inside us and challenges us at points that we wouldn't have thought that we needed challenging on.

And it goes down and points out our motives in a way that we wouldn't have thought was proper or appropriate. But the Word of God gets in there and does that.

And it is scary in the sense that when we come under God's Word, if it's rightly understood and rightly explained in the power of the Spirit and in prayer, that there's a sense in which we are totally undone in the face of God.

God has total access to see what we're really like and I suppose in a sense we begin to see what we're really like. And I think that that is anything but tedious and unrewarding and tiresome.

I'm sure there are tedious, unrewarding, tiresome sermons but that's because somehow the human speaker has got in the way of what the Word of God is saying.

[30 : 27] And I would guess that for most of us we would say I could identify times when I've heard God's Word and it has pointed things out to me in exactly this way that I've experienced some power of it being alive and active and sharp and I've gone away with the sense that God has dealt with me and spoken to me.

I might have had the sense almost of being in heaven because I was so inspired by what I heard or I might have had the sense of being totally humbled before God because God's Word has got in and shown me truth about myself.

1 Peter 1 1 Peter 1 22 to 25 1 Peter 1 22 23 up to 25 Ray, please could you read that for us?

Now that you have purified yourselves by a pain of truth so that you have sincere life for your brothers love one another deeply and love others for you have been born again not of a perishable sin but of an imperishable through the living and enduring Word of God for all men are like glass all their glory and the power of the king the glass withers and the power of the thorns the word of God stands for us this is the word that speaks to you Thank you very much See what he's saying there? He's quoting from Isaiah who says that there's this transitory thing about humanity transitory transitory earthbound limited limited impermanent that's what humanity is like but there is something that by contrast to that stands forever and is permanent and glorious and not fading and that's the word of the Lord and then Peter makes this remarkable equation and says you people heard the Christian message and that's what's impacted on you and these two things are the same what is this message of God where do you get access to this permanence this glorious word answer in the gospel that was preached to you that's what was preached to you when you're told about Jesus Christ that's the thing you have brought this this word this living real

[33 : 25] I put real there because I think that's almost what he's saying isn't it that human power doesn't touch the deepest realities it just does a bit and then it fades away but there is something which brings us into touch with eternal permanent realities and what is it?

It's the word and that's the word that you heard when somebody witnessed to you when you did your bible study when you heard the sermon and you suddenly saw the reality of Jesus Christ you were brought into contact with this eternal glorious word of God which is anything but boring and my final comment under that heading was that we we had a minister's what was it oh no it was the planning committee of SEMS the other day I was on the planning committee of the Sussex Evangelical Ministry seminars and we were thinking about who to invite for future future years and we were saying what sort of talks helped us most and it was Graham Nichols actually who said that he he liked it when the talks enabled us to feel the weight of the text to feel the weight of the text and I thought that's a very good expression

I like that and I think that that is that is a helpful thing not just that the bible is read which is a blessing in itself but it we're able to get into it to think it through such that we feel the weight of the text and we go away with some of those sort of ringing in our our minds some of those words sort of we feel the weight of the text so that was I agree boring I've got two more to do anybody want to comment on boring let's go on and look quickly at another couple if we may so this is objection number four it's difficult the bible is difficult so people would say it's okay for clever people but not for me so thoughts on that well we do need help and if you think about it we all have depended upon a translator for the bible that we've got we never did that by ourselves did we we didn't go to the original text and read it in the power of the holy spirit we needed help from translators and that you know that's a very considerable thing we're benefiting from work over centuries because that's what our current translations are and

God has given his church gifted guides it's one of the works of the holy spirit to give people the gift of guiding us through scripture and not just the people who are alive but down through the centuries God has given great teachers and guides to his church so people like Augustine and people like Calvin people like Luther these people have wrestled with scripture and God has revealed things to them which they've written down and we're riding on the back of that even now we probably don't realise it half the time just think of our hymns and songs we benefit from them but they are themselves guides that God has given to us and we'll also say to Peter chapter 3 verses 15 and 16 this is the apostle

Peter speaking about scripture to Peter 3 15 and 16 Chris please could you read this to us bear in mind that our Lord's patience needs salvation and just as our dear brother Paul also wrote to you of the wisdom of God he writes the same way all his letters speaking in them and these letters it must contain some things that I can't understand which ignorant and unstable people distort as they do with the other scriptures to their own destruction okay so Peter's saying there are some difficult bits in scripture I suppose it means that we need to be a little bit careful on what we expect if we expect that every time we read a paragraph of scripture it will become very clear to us immediately without any help without us studying it some passages will do that and the meaning is just there on the surface for anybody but I don't think the

[38 : 42] Bible is saying that that's always the case in all the scriptures so Adam was saying this afternoon that he and Rachel have been going through the book of Leviticus together and find it quite hard to find something they could say well I've really been blessed by that well I think good for good for trying and yet I'm not altogether surprised that going through the book of Leviticus they say I don't really understand this and maybe it's a case of saying we need some help we'll read something else read something that's a little bit easier I don't know what you think about that but some bits are hard but it does say that it is not an unrewarding thing to keep trying Proverbs 2 Sedge

Proverbs 2 1-11 so this is a father speaking to his son and it's like speaking about how we approach God's word Proverbs 2 my son if you accept my words and store up my commands within you turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God for the Lord gives wisdom and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding he holds victory in store for the upright he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless for he guards the course of the just and protects the way of his faithful ones then you will understand what is right and just and fair every

good path for wisdom will enter your heart and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul discretion will protect you and understanding will guard you and so he goes on so he's saying yeah there is a great reward to be obtained but it isn't necessarily obtained just by looking at a particular passage for ten minutes he says that may be the case but there's also a certain prayerfulness you're crying out for understanding and if you give time and effort to searching he says if you look for it is for silver and search for it is for hidden treasure you'll understand the fear of the Lord so I think he's saying there's benefits to be had from God's word which are by way of maybe sitting down with a concordance and studying maybe reading a book that will help you maybe getting together with other people in a Bible study and searching things out together there is a benefit for people who are spiritually minded and spiritually serious and make an effort does that make sense that's what that's saying Psalm 19 verse 7 says it does make wise the simple so there is also this this characteristic of scripture you don't have to be clever to be blessed but that isn't the same thing as saying you can just always get the meaning of every passage by looking at it for a couple of minutes before you catch the bus or something like that so item 4 difficult looking at the difficulty of scripture and trying to say on the one hand yeah there are difficult bits but it's basically clear and given the use of the appropriate means we can come to a rock solid knowledge of the truth number five was that it's irrelevant so the objection is it is irrelevant and my answer briefly is it is not irrelevant it is directly relevant so

Jesus said that he had the words of eternal life so that's directly relevant we need eternal life and the words of Jesus are where we get them it is directly relevant for the Christian life so Jesus said you abide in me you abide in my word that's directly relevant for the Christian life and another thought that for surviving in the Christian life for fighting the fight of faith the Bible is directly relevant so in brief how did Jesus deal with temptations there in Luke 4 what did he do he said it is written and he used scripture in his spiritual life to defend him against the evil one and to do so successfully Ephesians 6 verse 17 talks about the shield of faith and the sword of the spirit as being a very relevant day by day weapon the sword of the spirit being somebody will tell us the word of God so I'm just moving on quickly and saying at the end of all that there is the accumulated testimony of countless believers over 20 centuries that the Bible is the word of God and that they and we too can live not by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God what the Bible says is what God says and that is so important to us in the Christian life with which we stop