

The Bible

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Date: 01 August 2019

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[0 : 00] Now one of the truisms, that is things that people say about Christians, or perhaps if we're a Christian, one of the cliches we use as a Christian is that the Bible is central to everything we do and are as Christians and as a church.

It's been a truism for years. But I want to start off by saying this morning that I actually think it's no longer true. The truism is still used, but it's no longer true. In recent months, the now infamous Israel Folau tweet of two verses from 1 Corinthians chapter 6, actually verses from Scripture, exposed such a massive and vicious division among evangelical Christians, mainline Christians, as to how to use the Bible and the place of the Bible in public life.

And underneath that, there's a lot of questions about how confident we are in the Bible, how embarrassed we are by the Bible, how fearful we are of offending others by our use of the Bible.

Then this week, news has broken of Josh Harris. Many of you will have read his book, I Kissed Dating Goodbye. A very, very high-profile, conservative, evangelical Christian.

And it's now come out that he has decided to walk away from God and the Bible entirely. His book sold more than a million copies.

[1 : 45] In many ways, he was a pin-up boy of lots of evangelical churches over the last 10, 15 years. Harris was caught in a dilemma.

He's lost confidence in the truth and relevance of God's Word for today's world. And he says this, he says it's intellectually easier to reject God completely than it is for him to try and justify modern views on sex, sexuality, gender, and parenting from within the Bible.

That's a massive statement, isn't it? In an interview with a liberal, progressive Christian magazine, which believes, which actually believes, the Bible can easily accommodate all practices of the modern sexual revolution.

All right, hear that again. This is an interview with a so-called progressive, liberal Christian magazine, which believes, the Bible can accommodate all practices of the modern sexual revolution.

Harris said this, if in one generation, Christians can make such a radical shift with the Bible, it starts to become silly putty that is made to say anything.

[3 : 26] You know what putty is? Play-Doh type stuff? You just shape it. If you want a new nose in your face, you just make yourself a new nose. Harris is saying it's actually intellectually easier for him to walk away from God and Christianity altogether than it is to take the Bible and try and make it say all the things our society want to make it say about sex and sexuality and gender and parenting and all those other things.

He was in a dilemma. Didn't quite want to stand with the Bible, but nor was he able just to make the Bible be what he wanted it to be either.

So we come up with a third solution that some will pillory him for and others will applaud him for. Either way, we have to wrestle with the same issue individually and as a church.

So here's a question for this morning. When you evaluate your church, and if you're a local here, as most of you are, when you evaluate this church, what do you, in your mind, think should be foundational to us as a church?

What's the non-negotiable? What do you think should shape us in all the parts that make up the whole of our church family life? Or again, if a visitor coming in here this morning were to ask you, what is the key ingredient that defines us as a church family?

[5 : 19] What would you say? Or if they said, what is our aim? We talk about wanting to engage with our local community. Well, what is our aim in wanting to engage with the local community? Would you say that the key ingredient that shapes and defines us as a church is the Bible?

That it's central to everything we are and everything we do. Would you say the Bible is the only really valuable thing we have to offer our community?

Because it offers the pathway to the truly godly life that everybody out there craves but is desperately seeking in places other than God. and then if you did say that would you actually be practically committed to it?

See, we live in an age, a digital age we're told, the age of digital knowledge. Vast amounts of information available through modern technology. And as I said last week in our Grace Life thing, the reality for so many Christians I'm not just talking about non-Christians, I'm talking about Christians as well here.

The reality for so many Christians is that their first point of authority, reference and guidance, is so often the internet. I think it's not too much to say that many Christians doubt that what is taught in the Bible is even worth reading, let alone learning when compared to the immediacy and ease of a Google search.

[7 : 12] Now, the result of this is quite subtle because the result of this sort of view of the Bible is not that God's outright denied, I don't hear Christians doing that, but that God is actually just considered irrelevant.

He's not the go-to person for our knowledge, for our guidance, for our authority. He's practically irrelevant. So, a couple of questions this morning as we move through this topic and open it up to look at it then over four weeks in the afternoons.

What is the Bible? What should we believe about the Bible and what do we actually believe about the Bible? That's two good questions to ask yourself.

Well, of course, the Bible's many things. We can say the Bible's a library of books in one book written by many different people over a period of about 1400 years, full of words, each of which is meant to convey a particular meaning and all of which together are designed to convey a particular narrative, a particular story.

Then we can say, well, the Bible's a really old book. It's a best selling book still. It's been translated into hundreds of languages.

[8 : 44] Well, that's true about the Bible. Yet, again, we have to say unbounds that it remains a very neglected book. Christians, churches, who say the Bible is their book, often have very little knowledge of what it says.

Even reject much of its contents, if they bother to read it at all. The word Bible simply comes from the Greek word for book.

That's what it is. It's Biblos, book, Bible. But our Bible is more than just an ordinary book that happens to be about God. Bible, the Bible claims to be scripture.

Scriptura, that word means the writing of God himself. The scripture, the Bible claims to be the written record of what God has said to his world and his people in the Old Testament and the New Testament periods.

Well, if that's what the Bible is, why did God need to speak? If he speaks in the Bible, speaks through the Bible, why did he need to speak?

[10 : 08] The answer is simple, as Dave introduced this morning. It goes like this. It's a since then argument. Since God fills our universe, as Rob talked about last week, in his character, in his presence, in his creative ability, since God fills our universe, and since he is so different to what we are, even though we are his creation, his created beings, and even though we're made in his image, he's still so different from us, so other than.

And since his desire is to relate to us personally, then we actually need God to tell us what he's like. because unless God takes the initiative to tell us what it's like, to tell us what's in his mind, to tell us what his purpose is, we could never, ever know.

Now, God didn't need to reveal himself to us, but in an act of mercy, and kindness, and grace, he has done so in great detail by speaking into his world, in his word.

Now, as you know, words are essential to building relationship, good relationship, deep relationship, that is. Now, there's a certain amount you can learn about a person just by observing them, so if I brought a stranger in the midst this morning and stood them up here, there's a certain amount of things you could learn about them, or at least guess about them, by simply observing them, or we can learn more about somebody by observing what they do in certain circumstances, but to get to know them deeply, to understand their character, to build that sort of relationship, then we need to speak, we need to communicate with a person, and that's exactly what God's word is.

God's word bridges the gulf, the great gulf between the otherness of God and his character and our finiteness, and it allows us to know him personally.

[12 : 41] So revelation then, my friends, which is what we call the Bible, revelation is God expressing himself. God's expression of himself.

Now that expression comes both in the words that describe his greatness and his beauty and his desirability, the words we like, but also it's an expression of himself as he describes his holiness and his justness and the awesomeness of him in judgment, the words we tend not to like.

Both are an expression of God's character. Both need to be heard equally. They tell us precisely why he does what he does in his world so we can understand his character and purpose and be in relationship with him.

So the Bible bridges the gulf, but the Bible also links the past to the present. It records God's purposes and intentions as experienced in history.

This is what this is. It's the record of God's purpose and intention as it's been experienced in history. And so it becomes for us then in 2019 the template by which we also now in our turn can encounter God and come into relationship with him in our own right, in our own time and space.

[14 : 20] Now, let me just say this. Revelation does not mean that the only knowledge we have in our world comes from the Bible.

In fact, the Bible is actually very clear that rebellious humans may reject God totally and still know and discover lots of amazing things about our world and how it operates.

The Bible itself teaches that. Chemistry, physics, biology, geology, psychology, medicine, all those other things, they all have a part to play in our world of discovering it and directing it.

They help us know our world. But the Bible is also really clear that knowledge of which we have much is not wisdom.

wisdom. And the Bible distinguishes the two because wisdom is the ability to take that knowledge and put it into the big picture narrative and discover a true understanding of life and a true understanding of how we live the good life and how we fit in the universe.

[15 : 48] And the Bible is clear, therefore, that not withstanding the knowledge we can discover quite apart from God, that we can only know our universe in its fullest and truest context as we bring that knowledge and put it in the context of God who created all.

this ultimate wisdom, says the Bible, is God's alone. And this wisdom, he generously shares with us in his written word so that we might know how to use our vast and increasing knowledge wisely and know how to live well.

Now, that's a really big check for us, isn't it? Because for generations, we've actually been told, we've been sold the line that humans can find ultimate truth and wisdom for living without need for God.

But I don't need to argue the point that the hard evidence for that proves the Bible's point that there's an awful lot of knowledge out there in our world, but very little wisdom as to how to live well.

So, next question then. What is the Bible? Why did God need to speak? The question then is, how has God spoken to us? Now, we look at 2 Timothy 3, 16.

[17 : 28] It says there, all Scripture is breathed out. by God. My friends, the Bible is God's words in human words.

All Scripture comes directly from God as he breathes out, as he speaks. What the Bible says, God says just as really as if God himself was standing here in front of us this morning speaking.

That's what the Bible claims about itself. All Scripture is God breathed. The same idea is in Hebrews chapter 1.

Let me just read it to you when I find it. Hebrews chapter 1. Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets.

prophets. But in these last days, he has spoken to us by his son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom he also created the world.

[18 : 49] How has God spoken? Well, God communicated with ordinary people through ordinary words in language which is ordinary, propositions.

That is, sentences, statements, questions, commands. So, in one sense, God has spoken in a really ordinary way.

Yet, the process was also supernatural, too. The word breathed, in Greek, contains the root word for Holy Spirit, theonistus.

God communicates his wisdom to the mind of ordinary people by his Holy Spirit, whom he superintends. And he superintends both the recording of that word initially that God puts in their mind, God's word.

He superintends that, and also superintends the process of passing it on to others through teaching, which is why we have God's word in its original form come down to us with accuracy and completeness in 2019, 2,000 years after it's written, 3,000 years after someone that's written.

[20 : 18] So God superintends the process from start to finish, and yet we got his slide back and forward.

It's an ordinary process because God didn't reduce the writers to robot status. He didn't put them into a trance. We can see the different personalities, the different contexts, the different styles of the different Bible writers, writers, and yet we're told that God superintends both the original writing, the original thinking, and then the transmission of it.

But equally clear in 2 Timothy 3, 15 and 16 is the Bible is God's living and transforming word. My friends, the Bible, whatever else you say about it, is the God's way of bringing life to people, to his people, and to growing his people, to be the people he wants them to be.

Though written in the past, it is equally applicable to us now. Look at the way the tenses change in verse 15. I, from childhood, you have acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able.

So, Timothy, you've learned these in the past. They've come down through the generations, which are able, that is a present tense, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

[21 : 58] All scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training and righteous, that the man of God, that the person of God, that the believer, may be competent, equipped for every good work.

God's word brings life. It is able to make us wise for salvation. It is useful now for growing us into his likeness.

God's word is how God makes his people and grows his people. Put it in Timothy's context.

Timothy's work was of teaching the gospel and building the church. It was a cultural context like our own. You see that in the beginning of chapter 3 and then the beginning of chapter 4. A cultural context we recognize.

People were chasing the good life. How? Through their own wisdom and apart from God. verse 8.

[23 : 11] They were making a mess of it. Look at the way it is described in there. It is relationships gone viral in the sense of gone bad that is. Verse 8.

Men who oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith. Sorry, verse 7 rather. Always learning and never able to arrive at knowledge of the truth.

See, people chase the good life under their own wisdom. They chase knowledge. They are all the time learning about this so-called good life but they can never quite get it. They can never get it onto the ground.

They can never make it real. They can never discover truth to actually free them into the life they crave.

So what Paul's encouragement to Timothy writes this young preacher? What's the tool he gives Timothy for changing lives and hearts filled with their own foolishness and determined to pursue their own foolishness?

[24 : 19] Chapter 4, verse 2. Preach the word. The living, transforming word of God.

That's your tool, Timothy. That's why you can be encouraged in a cultural context where people are totally committed to their own foolishness and don't even realize how foolish their foolishness is.

preach the word. That's your tool for changing lives and hearts.

Both the Old Testament scripture he had learned as a child and the New Testament scripture coming to him through Paul and other apostolic writers. Friends, our Bible is a unique book because it comes directly from the mind of God.

It is God's wisdom to his world. Now, again, the Bible never claims that it says everything there is to say about God.

[25 : 29] It never claims that at all. But it does tell us that in the Bible we have God's word which is everything we need to free us from emptiness, from empty living, and to make us God's people and to grow us into Christ's likeness.

everything we need. And even more directly, going back to the Hebrews 1 quotation, we have all of that personified in the person of Jesus.

John 1, 1-4, the word became flesh. God's living, breathing word came to us for what purpose?

To bring life, to move us from darkness and death to relationship with him and life. God's written word makes us wise to salvation by pointing us to Christ, who himself come into the world to complete God's purpose and actually deliver us into the good life he wants for us, the good life we crave.

And God's spirit grows us in our new life in Christ. God's spirit renews our mind and our hearts from the inside out so that we not only recognize this new life in Christ, but we desire it.

[27 : 08] And we see ourselves being equipped by God's spirit as we understand more and more how God wants us to live and what it is to be true image bearers. To Timothy 3.16, to become competent, well equipped, highly functioning servants of God who look like him, who sound like him, and who act like him, and ultimately who have hearts like him.

Now, let me finish up reasonably quickly. I'm running out of time here, so I'll rush over these things. We can talk about them more this afternoon. Given that the Bible is such a gift, given it is so powerful for bringing life, especially to us as Christians, what stops us from making it central in our lives and in our church?

I've got three things here I'm just going to run over real quick. The first is, I think, that the God of our Bible is too small.

Rob spoke last week about the character of God. He's so profound. He's so other than us. When we forget that the Bible is God's unique communication, to us, or when we have a small view of God, then what happens is that we easily get into the position where we stand over God's word, the Bible, just like arrogant teenagers who will roll their eyes when mom and dad give them wisdom and treat it as the most idiotic thing has ever been pronounced in God's world.

words, and I speak there as remembering my own teenage years. What happens?

[29 : 11] Well, we take that attitude with God. We get too small a view of God. The problem is not the clarity of God's word.

It's my arrogance, thinking that I know better, or I don't like that, so it's got to be over here, or I don't understand that, so therefore I won't believe that.

It can't be true. The Bible's always saying to us, believe, and understanding will come. Believe. Why? Believe, because it's God's word. And how dare we reject God's word and throw it back on us then, well actually God, I'm pretty sure you made a mistake here.

Had you been thinking clearly, you wouldn't have said this. God must always evaluate me. And my culture must never be the other way around.

And yet I fear that's what it's become for us as Christians. Secondly, we think the Bible is not relevant or not sufficient for the problems we face.

[30 : 27] And the argument goes like this. Well look, the fact of the matter is that we face problems on a daily basis that people 50 years ago couldn't imagine, let alone people 2,000 years ago.

So therefore, how could the Bible possibly be sufficient for every aspect of life and practice? We tend to think therefore the Bible has nothing to say on these modern issues.

And so then, if the Bible's got nothing to say, the Bible's not our authority, then where will we turn? We need help with these issues. And so we turn to Google. We turn to our peers.

Or if we're older, we perhaps just fall back on comfortable tradition. But the problem here, you see, is that we've sacrificed wisdom for knowledge.

Paul didn't need to, well, sorry, Paul didn't have to negotiate the internet or social media. He didn't have to decide what sort of car to buy. But he was a student of human nature.

[31 : 38] And he knew only too well how we naturally tend to take the good things that God gives us in his world and fill our lives with those things and exclude God, the giver of them.

He knows how these, that sort of thinking then, becomes an idol, how these things become equally or more important to us than God. And he knows the consequences of this idol worship when we are created to be worshippers of God.

It brings disaster. He didn't need to know the workings of the internet to be able to speak wisely into our lives as to the dangers of the internet and a million other things beside the internet.

We think that because the Bible doesn't mention the internet by name, therefore the Bible has nothing to say in respect of how we approach these things. We've got a wrong idea of the Bible.

And Paul not only knew how to analyze his society and his culture and his own heart, he knew where to look for truth. He knew the heart was looking for freedom, freedom from the emptiness of ways handed down by the forefathers, and he knew where to go to look for that truth.

[33 : 00] My friends, the Bible still speaks the same to us today because the names change, the faces change, the issues apparently change, but in a sense there's no change.

And finally, we've got a mechanical view of the Bible. Now this is probably the one that will get most people upset if anything gets you upset, but I don't mind getting you upset, at least you're thinking then.

Just don't take it out of me, that's all. We have a mechanical view of the Bible. Now what I mean by that is that sometimes Christians get into the mode of thinking that simply reading the Bible or learning sections of the Bible by rote is the important thing.

My friends, we're only using the Bible properly when we're reading for understanding, when we're reading for transformation. That's why I've always, over my years, had a real problem with the old quiet time mentality where you just read a portion of Scripture every day.

And I know Christians who did that religiously. They wouldn't go to bed every night before they read their portion of Scripture. But it might only be three minutes like Marty was doing, half falling asleep or checking their phone at the same time.

[34 : 19] But, you know, we've ticked the box, we've read the Bible. Or parents get children to memorize lots of Scripture. And again, that can be so dangerous.

If we think that by somehow memorizing Scripture, our children have used Scripture well and we've taught our children to use Scripture well. Memorizing is a great thing.

but only if our memorizing comes in the context also with their children of teaching them to life and transformation in that which they learn.

And again, you see, again, it applies to the internet. It is so easy today to find a verse, to find a quotation, to find a commentary by a famous preacher at the press of a button on Google.

And so again, we quickly go to that and we think, ah, yes, I've got that. Isn't that a really good sentence there? And so again, we fill our minds with knowledge.

[35 : 23] But are we using those things for transformation? Are we understanding how God brings life through His word and grows us through His word? Are we struggling for wisdom that changes the heart?

or are we just gathering knowledge? Somebody once said, I think it was Spurgeon, I'm not quite sure, said this, make no mistake, Satan is clever.

If he cannot keep you out of the Bible altogether, then he will keep you in it, but focused on minor details of doctrine, so as you're distracted and making a big fuss about very little, or he will keep you in it, but with a dull mind which is happy just to read the Bible in a year or something like that, more than desire to be changed by it.

Friends, I finish my first sentence again. Is the statement that the Bible is central to everything we are and do, as individuals here, as Christians here, and as a church, is that a practical truth for you?

or is it just a cliché? Let me pray. Lord, forgive us for sitting loose to your word.

[36 : 50] Forgive us, Lord, for zeal towards you, as Paul says in Romans chapter 10, zeal that's not directed by knowledge of your word.

forgive us, Lord, for those things that we've offered you in worship which would be offensive to you when you call us first and foremost to give our hearts, to give our whole minds, to give our whole bodies in response to you.

Help us to know your word, help us to know you through your word, and help us to value and treasure that word. In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen.