

On the Bible

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[0 : 00] Psalm 19. The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.

There is no speech, nor are there words whose voice is not heard. Their measuring line goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

In them he has set a tent for the sun, which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and like a strong man, runs its course with joy.

Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them, and there is nothing hidden from its heat. The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.

The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart. The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.

[1 : 09] The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever. The rules of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold.

Sweeter also than honey, the drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is your servant warned. In keeping them there is great reward.

Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults. Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins. Let them not have dominion over me.

Then I shall be blameless and innocent of great transgression. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

The second reading is on page 993. Matthew chapter 19, verses 3 to 9.

[2 : 15] And Pharisees came up to Jesus and tested him by asking, Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause? He answered, They said to him, Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?

He said to them, Because of your hardness of heart, Moses allowed you to divorce your wives. But from the beginning it was not so.

And I say to you, Whoever divorces his wife, Except for sexual immorality, And marries another, Commits adultery.

Morning everyone, Lovely to see you. My name is Simon Dowdy. I'm the pastor of Grace Church. Let me add my welcome to Andy's earlier.

It's lovely to see Matt and Lydia at the back with baby Otto. Congratulations to you both. Lovely to see you back so recently with us this morning. Now we prayed. So we're going to begin.

[3 : 51] If you've been at Grace Church for a while, Then you'll know that it is our normal pattern, Sunday by Sunday, To be preaching through whole books of the Bible. And the reason we do that is because God has given us the Bible as books, 66 different books.

But occasionally we have a series to see what the Bible says about a particular issue or doctrine or Christian belief. And so for the next three weeks, We're going to be thinking together about some of the issues arising from the decision back in February of the General Synod of the Church of England To bless same-sex relationships, Including the blessing of same-sex marriage.

Some of you will know that it's the end of a six-year process called Living in Love and Faith. I've tried to give occasional updates at our monthly prayer gatherings.

The final outcome is expected in the July General Synod. And yet it's already clear, I think, where the majority of bishops stands.

And although a very substantial minority, A very substantial minority of General Synod voted against the proposals in February. Nonetheless, the vote was carried.

[5 : 11] Now I've called this series Let's Be Clear. So today, let's be clear about the Bible. Next week, let's be clear on marriage. And the third week, let's be clear on our response.

So today, let's be clear on the Bible. And in other words, let's be clear that the Bible is God's word. By which I mean it's authoritative. It is God speaking, as Patasha was reminding us earlier. Hence the question there at the top of the outline, which I want to address.

Is the Bible authoritative and trustworthy as the word of God? Because it's a big claim, isn't it, to say that this book is God speaking to us.

And yet what we're going to see this morning is that that is precisely what the Lord Jesus himself believed about the Bible. And of course, to be a Christian is to be a disciple, a follower of Jesus.

[6 : 21] I take it it follows, therefore, that any genuine Christian will have the same attitude as Jesus had to the Bible. Jesus himself said, Mark chapter 8, In other words, to be a Christian is not only to be unashamed of the Lord Jesus, it is also to be unashamed of his words, his teaching, including his teaching about the Bible.

And I take it that the relevance of that, to the whole question of same-sex blessing, same-sex marriages, couldn't be more obvious. In other words, is the Bible trustworthy, or are we free to ignore it?

Is the Bible authoritative, or should instead we take our cue from what our culture says? So that's where we're going this morning.

We're going to be looking together at Jesus' attitude towards the Bible. There's a fuller outline, which you will have, a fuller outline than normal, which you'll have on the back of the service sheet. I've done that partly so that we don't spend too much time chasing verses through the Bible this morning. But I've also done it just so we can take it home and we can continue to work through some of these things for ourselves.

[7 : 58] So firstly, Jesus endorsed the Old Testament as God's word. Now I guess we all understand the concept of endorsement. Every advert for Nespresso coffee, in fact, as soon as I say Nespresso coffee, who are you thinking of?

George Clooney. Exactly. You cannot divorce the two. He puts his full weight, doesn't he, the full weight of his celebrity status behind Nespresso coffee. Well, far more significantly than that, the Lord Jesus endorses the Old Testament as God himself speaking.

So I turn, will you, to Mark. If you've still got your finger in Matthew 19, that reading will be coming back to that so you can keep a finger in there. But for the time being, turn to Mark chapter 7. Now in Mark chapter 7, the religious establishment are accusing Jesus of ignoring their traditions. Have a look at verses 9 and 10. And Jesus said to them, you have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition. For Moses said, honour your father and your mother.

Notice in verse 10, Jesus quotes from Moses in the book of Exodus. But notice the way in which those words of Moses are described in verse 9 as the commandment of God and in verse 13 as the word of God.

[9 : 29] What's more, Jesus equating, Jesus doing that, doesn't simply apply to quotes of direct speech from the Old Testament. So turn back then to that reading which we had from Matthew chapter 19 where Jesus is questioned about divorce.

And we'll come back to this passage in more detail next week. But I just want us to focus for now on Jesus' answer in verses 4 and 5.

He answered, Now Jesus here is quoting from Genesis chapter 2, verse 24, where it's simply an editorial comment by the writer of Genesis as a man and woman are created, the first marriage. But it's simply an editorial comment. And yet Jesus is saying here that actually that was the creator, God himself, who spoke these words.

But I guess that leaves the question, does it? Well, precisely how much of the Old Testament is God's word? Is it only those bits which are mentioned in the New Testament?

[10 : 58] Well, no, these are just examples of what is true of the whole of the Old Testament. We've already looked this morning at 2 Timothy chapter 3, verse 16, but that's what makes it explicit.

It's there on the outline. Let me read it again for us. All scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

And as Patasha very helpfully helps us to see, you cannot speak without hearing, without feeling the warm breath of your breathing out on your hands.

You can't speak either by breathing inwards. You have to breathe outwards. God's words are carried by his breath, just as ours are.

The Bible is God's word, God speaking. Which means, of course, it is true. The Bible is true because God is true and God always speaks the truth.

[12:12] I put John 8, 26 on the outline where Jesus says of God the Father, he who sent me is true and I declare to the world what I've heard from him. And therefore, of course, it's no surprise that Jesus regarded the Old Testament scriptures as completely and utterly reliable.

So, for example, he accepted the Old Testament historical references as true. He refers to events in the book of Genesis as true with a clear assumption that they happened.

So, the murder of Abel by his brother Cain, Noah and the flood, the judgment that fell on Sodom and Gomorrah, the folly of Lot's wife.

Similarly, he regarded the rest of the Old Testament as he refers to events back in the Old Testament. He clearly regards these as historical events which took place.

So, the wisdom of Solomon, for example, when visited by the Queen of Sheba. Elijah and the drought, the preaching of Jonah in Nineveh and his time in the belly of the great fish.

[13:22] It's why, of course, and I think it's really striking this, but it's so easy to miss, it's why in all the controversial matters of Jesus' day, when he is asked questions, he appeals to the Old Testament to settle the matter.

I was doing some cooking over Easter and I couldn't quite remember whether I should add a particular ingredient, so I asked the nearest family member some advice, should I be putting this in or not, hoping to get the answer.

And, of course, their answer was, I suppose, as you might expect, really, check the recipe. Not a particularly sympathetic answer, it was, you know, check the recipe, obviously, but it's what you do, isn't it?

You know, you go to the BBC website or you check with Mary Berry or whoever it is, you check your recipe because that settles it. You check the authority. Time and time again through the Gospels, we see Jesus doing exactly the same thing.

So I'll put one or two references there on the outline, don't bother looking at them now, but in Luke 4, when Jesus is tempted in the wilderness by Satan, Satan saying to him, if you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread, and Jesus answers by quoting the Old Testament.

[14:43] He says, it is written, man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. Scripture settles it because the Old Testament is God's word.

In Luke 10, verse 25, we're told a lawyer stood up to put Jesus to the test, saying, teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? How does Jesus reply?

He says, what is written in the law? How do you read it? The scriptures settle it. And in Matthew 19, verse 3, which we had read earlier, when the Pharisees ask, is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?

Well, of course, it's one of those hot potato questions, isn't it? And Jesus replies by quoting from Genesis, chapter 2. Time and time again, Jesus settles the questions that are put to him by reference to scripture because scripture settles it.

It's God's word. So that's our first point. Jesus endorsed the Old Testament as God's word.

Secondly, Jesus commissions the New Testament as God's word.

[16:00] And turn, if you will, to John's gospel, chapter 17. John chapter 17. John chapter 17. John chapter 17, verse 20.

Now here is Jesus in the upper room. He's just with his apostles shortly before his betrayal and his arrest. He's prayed for them, for the apostles, and now he prays in verse 20.

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word. So just have a think about this because here's the question.

How are people going to believe in Jesus when he is physically absent, which he is about to be physically absent? Answer, says Jesus, through the words of the apostles.

And earlier in this upper room discourse as it's known, we see how that is going to be possible because Jesus will give them the very words to speak.

[17:11] So turn back to John chapter 14, verse 26. Where Jesus says to the apostles, John 14, verse 26, but the help of the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all

things and bring to your remembrance all that I've said to you.

I think we'd have to say, wouldn't we, that the disciples look pretty flaky up to this point in the gospel accounts. So often they simply, they just seem to be clueless or they only really kind of half get what Jesus is saying to them.

It begs the huge question, doesn't it, can we really trust the apostles after Jesus has left as they continue to make the message of Jesus known, as they then oversee the writing of the New Testament, of the rest of the New Testament.

Answer, yes, because the Holy Spirit will teach them. Flick over the page, you get a very similar thing in John chapter 16, verses 13 to 15.

John chapter 16, verse 13 to 15. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth. For he will not speak of his own authority, but whatever he hears, he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.

[18:54] He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. Therefore, I said to you that he will take what is mine and declare to you.

Now, will you notice the chain here? The chain is kind of, it goes in reverse. So, look to verse 15. Notice the chain is from God the Father to God the Son.

As Jesus says, all that the Father has is mine. In verse 14, it's from Jesus the Son to the Spirit. And then in verse 13, it's from the Spirit to the Apostles, as the Spirit guides the Apostles into all truth. So, you have a chain of the way in which God makes things known from God the Father to Jesus to the Spirit to the Apostles.

In other words, we mustn't make the mistake of thinking that these promises here in John 14 and John 16 are for every Christian. They are very specifically promises for the Apostles.

[20:12] And they are wonderful promises because it means that as they come to write the New Testament, they're going to be able to speak and write the truth. They'll be led by the Spirit in memory and understanding.

and therefore, we can have absolute confidence in what they wrote. They're really crucial verses. They're the basis of what we call apostolic authority.

In other words, the unique role of the Apostles to teach and then write the Word of God, what becomes the New Testament. And interestingly, this is exactly what the Apostles themselves thought they were doing.

So I put there, for example, 2 Peter chapter 3 on the outline. Here is the Apostle Peter writing and just have a look at 2 Peter chapter 3 verses 1 and 2.

This is now the second letter that I'm writing to you, beloved. In both of them, I'm stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder that you should remember the predictions of the Holy Prophets and the commandments of the Lord and Saviour.

[21:21] Now, how are they going to do that? How are they going to remember the predictions of the prophets and the command of the Lord and Saviour? Answer, end of the verse, through your Apostles.

Peter wants his listeners to remember the commandment of the Lord Jesus. It's going to happen through the Apostles. And you get a similar thing in 1 Corinthians chapter 14 where here is the Apostle Paul speaking.

If anyone thinks he's a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I'm writing to you is the Lord's command. If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored.

Now, in 1 Corinthians chapter 14, the Apostle Paul has been speaking about the gift of prophecy, that it needs to be weighed. Do we think what is being said is from God or from not?

Do we think this is a sensible course of action or not? But, Paul says, you don't weigh what he writes himself.

[22:25] Why? Because he is an Apostle. And therefore, Paul says that what he is writing is the Lord's command. What the New Testament says, God says.

So then, two things. Jesus endorsed the Old Testament as the Word of God. Jesus commissions the New Testament as the Word of God.

And I want us to spend the rest of our time this morning just thinking about the implications of that. Because I take it that if we take Jesus seriously, then we'll want to take his Word seriously and we'll want to take his teaching seriously.

Just as it's pointless, isn't it? It's pointless to claim that you're taking anyone seriously if you regularly dismiss what they say or if you kind of twist their words or distort their words or actually if you kind of basically don't really want to listen to them in the first place.

simply if we take Jesus seriously, we'll accept the Bible as God's Word as he says it is.

[23 : 40] The living authoritative Word of God. Now I want us to think about two implications of that. Firstly, we can have confidence and secondly, a challenge.

Firstly, confidence. because I don't know if you've found this but those who hold the Bible being the authoritative Word of God are sometimes portrayed as kind of almost dangerous fundamentalists. It's often how the media seems to portray evangelicals. And yet, of course, nothing can be further from the truth because the Bible is the perfect expression of God's character, of God himself. when you trust the Word of God, when you trust the Bible, you are trusting God himself. When you keep the Word of God, the Bible, you are obeying God himself.

And of course, because God is good, he's kind, he's patient, he's gracious, he's merciful, he's compassionate, and he's true, it follows, therefore, of course, that what he says in the Bible is all of those things as well.

[24 : 55] It's good, kind, patient, merciful, compassionate, and true. It's hardly dangerous. The Bible reflects God's good, merciful character.

You see, put it this way, who is on the side of compassion in the debate about same-sex relationships? Who is on the side of mercy and kindness?

In the debates about same-sex relationships? Surely, it's those who hold on to the authority of the Bible as God's word. So then, as our culture shifts further and further from its Christian foundations, let's have confidence in the Bible in relation to discussions about same-sex marriage and relationships.

It's interesting, the Church of England is precisely established on this confidence, which is why it's so very grievous to see the current direction of travel. I put Canon A5 there on the outline, which is part of the canons of the Church of England, the founding documents of the Church of England, and Canon A5 states, the doctrine of the Church of England is grounded in the Holy Scriptures and in such teachings of the ancient fathers and councils of the Church as are agreeable to the said Scriptures.

In other words, the Bible is the standard by which the teaching of the Church of England is to be measured, precisely because the Bible is the Word of God. As such, it simply reflects the attitude of the Lord Jesus himself to the Scriptures.

[26 : 37] You see, what I wonder, would Jesus have said if he had been present at General Synod in person in February as they debated the blessing of same-sex marriage and relationships.

Well, presumably he would have said exactly what he said to the lawyer in Luke chapter 10 and to countless others who come to him through his ministry asking questions. He would simply have said, have you not read the Scriptures?

What do the Scriptures say? Because what the Bible says trumps the culture we live in. The fact that our culture is moving away from its Christian moorings should not mean that the culture can then trump the Bible.

Nor does people's experience. You may have noticed a lot of the debates and discussion regarding same-sex relationships and same-sex marriage are framed in terms of personal experience.

And much as we need to listen to those personal experiences, nonetheless, they shouldn't trump what God says in the Bible. So that's our first implication, confidence.

[27 : 53] Second implication is one of challenge. Ian Paul is a member of the Church of England General Synod. He used to teach at a theological college. And a couple of years ago, he wrote an article asking the question, what is the Church of England's problem with the Bible?

And he concluded by quoting the New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce, who basically said, look, there are two, well, he said this, he said, there are two kinds of sayings in the Bible which you have difficulty with.

There are some which are difficult simply because they are difficult to understand, you know, kind of what actually is the Bible saying here. But he said there are other things which people find difficult in the Bible, not because they're difficult to understand, but actually because they're difficult to accept and difficult to live out.

And Ian Paul concluded his article by saying it does seem the major problem the Church of England has with the Bible is the second kind of difficulty rather than the first. In other words, it's not that what the Bible says about same-sex relationships and same-sex marriage is hard to understand, and we'll be thinking about that in much more detail next week.

But it is that it's hard to accept in a culture such as ours, which has moved so quickly away from its Christian foundations. But let's be honest enough to admit that actually this is a problem for each one of us in this room.

[29 : 31] You see, let me ask you for a moment about your posture, not kind of are you slouching, some of you immediately kind of sitting up, sort of bolt upright as if you're an 11-year-old again at school being told to sit upright.

Then don't ask you about that kind of posture, but actually our posture as we open the Bible. Does our posture towards the Bible reflect the fact that as we open this book, we hear the voice of God himself?

love. In other words, do we stand over it, deciding what is true and wholesome and kind of accepting that and ignoring what we don't like?

Or do instead we sit humbly under it, being shaped by it and formed by it as it recasts our thinking and our perspective, as it brings about a genuine repentance and change of life?

In other words, not simply kind of following a sermon on a Sunday morning or going to a growth group on a Tuesday or Wednesday evening or Thursday morning and kind of nodding our agreements, but actually a life that is transformed.

[30 : 46] Because of course the real test of our attitude towards God's word is when we disagree with it, or at least when we feel under pressure to disagree with it. You know, you can be driving at 70 miles an hour on a motorway, keeping to the legal limit, but actually it tells me nothing whatsoever about your attitude towards the government and towards authority.

There could be a whole host of reasons why you might be driving at 70 miles an hour. It could be poor visibility, or there's loads of traffic, or you've got a clapped out car, or you're just feeling tired, or, you know, whatever.

Now the real test of your attitude towards authority is when it's a beautifully clear day, when the motorway is empty, and you're driving at a port or something like that, and everything inside you is saying, go faster.

That is when your attitude towards authority is actually revealed. So then, what is your posture towards the Bible?

When we open the Bible on our own, when we're in our growth groups, our small groups with others midweek, when we're collectively here like this on a Sunday, we're not just here to gather information.

[32 : 02] Rather, it should be with an acute sense that we are here like this this morning, in the presence of the living God himself, to study his word, to hear his voice, and that we are accountable to him, to the way in which we respond to it.

Yes, we're to have confidence in God's word. Wonderfully, we can have confidence in God's word, but we're also to be challenged by God's word as well, to be humble in our posture towards it.

Let me lead us in prayer together. Let's pray. The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.

The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart. The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.

Amen. Heavenly Father, we praise you very much indeed for your word, that the very God who made our world, who created our world, has spoken.

[33 : 24] Thank you for the confidence we can have, both in the Old and the New Testaments. We praise you for the Lord Jesus who stands at the very centre of your word, the very heart of your purposes of your world.

And we pray, therefore, please, would you make us perfect as your word is perfect. Please, would you make us wise and revive our souls.

We pray that you would help us to rejoice in our hearts as we read your word. Please, would you enlighten our eyes. and we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen.