

# The Good Book - Progressive

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[ 0 : 00 ] Morning, everyone. Oh, lively this morning. Good to see you. We're on this series here. In fact, we're on week four of this series we've been doing called The Good Book, where we're exploring what the Bible is, how we might engage with it, and how God's voice speaks to us through it.

And if you've been with us over these recent weeks, hopefully these will be sinking in the things that we've been doing, but maybe you've caught up online as well. But so far, the first week we looked at how the Bible is not so much an instruction manual, but a book of wisdom, and how what we read is a prompt for us to work things through with God for ourselves.

Week two, we then unpicked what's meant by calling the Bible inspired, that God's breath brings to life, if you like, this very human book, full of human words that are often on the ball and spot on with God, but sometimes mistaken, sometimes biased, and so on.

But God's breath is in that process of working out who he is through those words. And then last week, we looked at how diverse the Bible is, this library of 66 books written by all sorts of people at all sorts of times, and it therefore reflects all sorts of different ideas and opinions about who God is and how we're to relate to him.

And so this week, what I'd like us to do is to sort of build on these previous three weeks by exploring why the Bible can be seen as this word, why we can see the Bible as being progressive, because we're going to think through some of the ways in which these various ideas about God, which we see in the Bible, have developed over time.

[ 1 : 43 ] Indeed, as we were saying last week, talking about developing over time, the Bible was written over a period of at least a thousand years. So during that time, you'd expect there to be development and progression in people's understanding of God.

I mean, we don't necessarily think about God in the same way that our ancestors did from a thousand years ago. Now, our understanding has progressed immensely, I would say, not least because we've all got instant access to the Bible in our own language, which is a big help in trying to understand God.

A thousand years ago, though, the only way to hear the Bible was when it was read in church on a Sunday, and then it was read in Latin and Latin only as well, which may not have helped many people.

You wouldn't have had your own copy of the Bible, print and press hadn't been invented, so the only copy in the town would have been in the church probably. And yet if you did try and nick this church Bible and try and translate it into English and so on, translating the Bible into English a thousand years ago was a crime that warranted the death penalty.

So the Bible was just not accessible for most people. Thankfully, we have progressed a fair bit since then, and I'd say our shared collective understanding of God has also progressed in that time too.

[ 3 : 03 ] But with all that in mind, I don't think it should surprise us, therefore, that the way people thought about God in the thousand years or more that it took to write the Bible also progressed and developed in that time.

For example, we're going to look at a few things this morning, but I want to kick off by looking at the idea that there is one God, God and God alone. It's one of those sort of classic foundational beliefs of Judaism, of Christianity, of Islam too.

It's a belief known as the posh word monotheism. Mono, one, theism, God. There's only one God. Pretty standard, I guess, established view in the Bible, we might think.

And yet, and yet, even this most central principle to the Christian faith, not every writer in the Bible appears to believe that God was the one and only God.

You see, for much of the time in the Old Testament, the Israelites, the people of God, they believed that there were a whole variety of gods. It was just that their God, our God, you know, the capital G God, was the number one.

[ 4 : 21 ] He was the best of the bunch of all of these other gods. Now, this idea is not monotheism, that there's one God. Rather, it's a belief in monolatry.

That's the word for this, that there are lots of gods, but that one of them is the supreme God. Now, it might come as a bit of a surprise to us to think that that idea of monolatry is in the Bible.

It's belief in many gods with a top God among them. But when you flick through the pages, especially the Psalms, actually it crops up time and time again. So, just a few examples.

Psalms 86, for example, says, There's none like you among the gods, O Lord, nor are there any works like yours. Or Psalm 95 says this, For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods.

Psalms 135, For I know that the Lord is great, and our Lord is above all gods. All sorts of verses which expand this idea that people believed in all sorts of gods, but God himself was number one.

[ 5 : 27 ] There's even verses, though, which picture God as kind of holding conversations with these other gods in some heavenly realm. You know, the kind of picture we get in films like Clash of the Titans and so on, like this Greek mythology kind of stuff going on.

So, Psalm 82, with this kind of picture in mind, says, God has taken his place in the divine council. In the midst of the gods, he holds judgment. All sorts of verses in the Bible which talk of there being other gods.

And I don't know if you've ever clocked these or taken these on board, perhaps, as we go through the Psalms. We tend to ignore, I think, these kind of phrases. Perhaps we kind of interpret them as being metaphors.

And metaphors, you know, there's these small g gods, the sort of metaphors for other things, other priorities, other distractions you might have in life. You know, God of sex, God of money, and so on. But I think to take these as metaphors and not as what people actually believed would be a mistake.

Because this monolatry idea that God was simply the most supreme of gods, that was a widely held view, even by those who worshipped our God, Yahweh, and even by those who wrote a lot of the Bible.

[ 6 : 43 ] Now, did these beliefs in other gods affect and make a difference to people's daily lives? Well, yes, they did, absolutely. So we'll take Solomon, for example, the writer who said to be responsible for the book of Proverbs, some of the Psalms.

It's reckoned even that he was the writer of that erotic fiction that we mentioned last week in the Song of Songs or the Song of Solomon. So we read this about Solomon in One Kings.

We're told this, As Solomon grew old, his wives, and he had hundreds of wives, that's why he was so good at erotic fiction, who knows? But as Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods.

He followed Ashtoreth, the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molech, the detestable god of the Ammonites. So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the Lord.

He did not follow the Lord completely as David, his father, had done. It goes on to say that Solomon even built temples for these other gods in Jerusalem, same city in which he built the main temple for God, for Yahweh.

[ 7 : 50 ] And yet this guy, Solomon, is also the guy who the Bible says is the wisest man who's ever lived. I think when we read this kind of thing, I'd say the jury's out on that one for sure. I'm not sure he's all that wise, judging by this.

I guess at least though we could say, well, at least his dad, David, the Bible says, was devoted to God as the one and only God. At least David was legit and orthodox, should we say.

Or was he? Or was David legit like that? You see, there's this great little story in 1 Samuel, where David is being chased down by King Saul, who wants to kill him.

So King Saul tells his soldiers to surround the house that David shares with his wife, a lady called Michal. And it's an episode that the Bible describes like this. It says, Saul, this king, sent men to David's house to watch it and to kill him in the morning.

But Michal, David's wife, warned him, if you don't run for your life tonight, tomorrow you'll be killed. So Michal let David down through a window and he fled and escaped.

[ 8 : 57 ] Then Michal took an idol and laid it on the bed, covering it with a garment and putting some goat's hair at the head. When the men Saul had sent to capture David entered the house, there was the idol in the bed and at the head was some goat's hair.

Now it's a nice little story, kind of this decoy, Dennis the Menace, Roger the Dodger, Ferris Bueller kind of thing where you get this dummy body in a bed to put someone off the scent. Nice story. Good one. It's a good one to sort of reenact, I suppose. But with that nice story, I think there's a question here which is begging to be asked. I mean, why on earth was there a life-size idol in David and Michal's marital home in the first place?

What was that doing? Stuck in the corner waiting to be used as a decoy for a runaway. Now that doesn't sound to me like David followed the Lord completely as it says elsewhere because he had idols of other gods in his house.

And yet what's interesting, the fact that the writer of 1 Samuel, this passage, it doesn't seem to make a fuss about this idol being in the home. And that would imply, I think, that it was probably seen as pretty standard practice for the time to have these other gods and other statues of them in your house.

[ 10 : 25 ] Indeed, from what we read in the Bible, from other written records at the time, from what archaeologists have dug up and so on, for much of the Old Testament, most people, even heroes of the faith like Solomon and David, they apparently believed in other, albeit lesser, gods.

Now, what I find interesting, though, with this is that God himself seems to be aware of and even at times indulge this multi-God belief.

And I say that because if we turn to the Ten Commandments, for example, there's a second commandment, which is a famous one. It says this. It says, you shall have no other gods before me.

You shall have no other gods before me, says God Almighty. Think about that Ten Commandments for a moment because he's not saying you shall have no other gods full stop.

No, it's God saying you shall have no other gods before me, none above me. In fact, God seems to be saying, look, I know you've got these other gods. I know you believe in them, but actually you need to put me first.

[ 11 : 37 ] I have no other gods before me. And I guess whilst that kind of approach from God might seem strange, I think it begins to open our eyes perhaps as an indication of God's willingness throughout the Bible to meet people where they're at in their beliefs and then take it from there.

You know, if we remember that the Ten Commandments were given when the Israelites were in the wilderness following their escape from Egypt, Egyptian empire dominated by the idea that there were all sorts of gods.

Israelites been there some time. So that kind of culture, that belief system, it would have inevitably have had an impact on the views and beliefs of the Israelites during their time in Egypt and during their exodus, kind of wilderness wanderings after that as well.

and so it almost seems as if God, for the time being, is willing to compromise, if you like, to allow, we might say accommodate, the flawed beliefs of those who he's calling to himself.

God seems to be aware, the writers of the Bible seem to be aware that any understanding of God and the relationship that comes with it is a work in progress, always, it's always in development.

[ 12 : 57 ] See, I think we see evidence in the Bible of God's patience with people as they wrestle with what they do actually believe. You know, in general, God takes his time with people, I'm glad he does with me, God takes his time with people, meeting them where they're at in order to slowly but surely lead them into a deeper understanding of him.

Now, in time, God won't leave it here that there's loads of other gods. In time, through the prophets, most notably, he says that actually there are no other gods, that I am the one and only, to paraphrase Chesney Hawks.

It's Isaiah 43, for example, where we read this, where God says, before me, no God was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the Lord and besides me, there is no saviour.

Pretty clear cut, we might think, again, this monotheistic idea. But, what's worth remembering is this passage from Isaiah. It's one of the first times in the Bible when monotheism, this belief in one God and one God alone, was made explicit.

And Isaiah was written centuries after the Ten Commandments were first given. And so, perhaps we see that at certain stages of the faith journey of people, God seems to prioritise different things. [14:18] He prioritises the big picture, it would seem, first of all, and the sort of general direction of travel, rather than trying to tie up every kind of doctrine or loose end from the word go.

The word we might use to describe this kind of transition is this one, progressive revelation. God progressively reveals himself over centuries. You know, for the way in which God gradually expands his people's understanding over time.

And this developing depth, I think, is underlined by, we might say, the changing ways in which God is described as the story of the Bible unfolds.

So, for the people and their story, people of Israel and their story with God, if you think about it in the Bible, it starts very personally the way God is described, very individually. So, the first time we really see God engaging with people is through Abraham and he's described as the God of Abraham.

A few generations later, we then read that actually he's now going to be the God of Abraham and Abraham's son Isaac and Isaac's son Jacob becomes a God, if you like, of a family line, not just an individual, but of a whole family.

[15:31] Later on, just a few chapters later, we read of God being described as the God of the Hebrews now, a people group, if you like. But later still, we see then God being described not just of the Hebrews, but of the God of Israel, the God of a nation, the God of a whole territory.

You know, as people's knowledge and understanding of God grows, so it seems he seems to expand with them or their knowledge of him expands, going from a very sort of local family understanding to them becoming much more nationwide in his influence and power.

It doesn't quite stop there though, because when we get to Jesus, it goes to a whole new level. As Jesus doesn't call God the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, doesn't call him the God of the Hebrews, doesn't even call him the God of Israel.

No. What does Jesus call God first and foremost? He calls him Father. More than that, he calls him our Father. He's the God of all people, not just a family, not just a region, not just a nation, the God of all people.

There's this universal sense of what a good father he is for all people. And in Jesus, perhaps we see the ultimate full revelation of just how good God really is.

[16:53] I think it's as if in every generation, God helps people to reimagine their idea of who he is.

Now, if that's true, if God helps us as we go through life to reimagine and expand perhaps our view of who he is and what he's like.

So what? Theory? Maybe. I think it's got huge implications for us in practice, particularly in terms of the way we do mission and enable other people to progress on their own faith journey with God. When we're chatting with someone who perhaps doesn't know God or wouldn't call themselves a follower of Jesus. One approach we can do is to start by saying, well, in order to be a Christian, you've got to ditch that belief that you've grown up with.

It's God's way or the highway. It's all or nothing. It's turn or burn. And if you can't commit to God all in with all that you are, then why should God commit to you?

[17:55] That's one approach to evangelism, to mission. And I can see where your face is. You're not overly enamored with that one there. The other alternative, I think, and I think it's the one that God models for us through the pages of the Bible, is instead we meet people where they're at.

Not where we want them to be, but where they're at. With all of their culture, all of their inherited understanding, all of their complicated, or perhaps even misguided ideas about life and about other gods and spirituality reality and who God is.

So, the kind of things that might come up perhaps in conversation might be, might say, okay, so, talking to someone, you know, okay, you're not sure that God is real? I understand that doubt. I understand that doubt. So, let's start by exploring what life would be like if we just imagined for a moment that God did exist. What difference would that make to the everyday?

You sort of start with the doubts. You start where they're at and say, let's just suppose he is real. What difference would that make and are there things we can identify in life that would persuade us of the reality of God?

[19:10] Or, you might have someone who's into sort of Eastern mysticism and so on. So, you might say, oh, you like the teachings of Buddha. Yeah, I can see why.

There's an awful lot of wisdom in them. So, let's talk about what draws you to those teachings. What is it about those teachings you like? But perhaps even more importantly than that, what are you looking for from those teachings that would make your life better? Because for me, there's a teacher who's even wiser than Buddha and he can begin a conversation that way. Or we might say, okay, you can't get your heads around the Bible. Perhaps the way the Old Testament portrays God, you've picked it up perhaps in a hotel room over the years and thought, I can't be doing with this at all. Then we can say, yeah, join the club. I understand that. There's certain passages which really confuse us as we've been saying. It's baffling. So actually, let's not start with those passages. Let's put those aside for a while. [ 20 : 11 ] Instead, let's start with Jesus and let's see what he's like as that may help put the Old Testament perhaps into a whole new and different perspective.

perspective. You see, you start where people are at. I think that's a far more imaginative, far more effective, far more winsome way of meeting people where they're at in order to help them along their faith journey.

It's not negatively dismissing everything perhaps they've come with. Rather, it's positively reimagining what life could look like as their understanding of God deepens and their relationship with him develops.

I think that's what progressive revelation, if you like, looks like in practice. I think that's what we see outlined and endorsed in the Bible. You know, people's views over time change as they encounter more of God.

Now, one other thing as well to be good to focus on today. We've already seen how people increasingly understood that far from being one God among many, even the best of those gods, actually over time the prophets helped people to understand that God was the only God.

[ 21 : 26 ] And we've seen perhaps how people's understanding of God being their God grew from this very family sort of local idea to God being the universal God. There's also evidence, though, I think, that the writers of the Bible's understanding of God's character also developed and progressed over time.

Another little story for us to think about. Again, featuring David, he of the goat's head idol in the bed fame, we're told that he took a census of those in his kingdom when he became king.

And it's an event which is recorded in the book of 2 Samuel, which is described like this. It says, the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel and he incited David against them saying, go, count the people of Israel and Judah.

Now, David does take the census. He goes and counts the people, primarily counting the number of soldiers and military personnel that he's got.

But then we're told David regrets that census, regrets counting them bitterly, presumably because he wanted to count his soldiers. It showed that he was putting more faith in his army than he was in God's ability to make stuff happen.

[ 22 : 49 ] And so we're told that because David realized he'd made a mistake, because David sinned by introducing and doing this census, we're told God decides to punish David.

and again, we're told that God then sends a plague on the people of Israel, killing 70,000 people. I think there's huge problems with this story.

Not least that we're told it's God who prompted David to take the census in the first place and yet still proceeds to punish David and his people by killing 70,000 of them simply for doing what God told him to do.

Is that really? Is that really the way God works? Is that really an accurate picture, accurate account of his character? The writer of 2 Samuel would say yes, he'd seem to think so.

However, in stark contrast, the writer of 1 Chronicles, another book in the Bible would seem to profoundly disagree. Surely God can't be like that, inciting people to do sinful things.

[ 24 : 08 ] You see, in 1 Chronicles, this other book, which was written many centuries after 2 Samuel, the writer retells this same story but with a very different interpretation of what actually happened.

So in 1 Chronicles, when this census story is told, we read this, Satan stood up against Israel and incited David to count the people of Israel.

So which is it? They're both in the Bible. You've got 2 Samuel saying God incited David to take the census. In 1 Chronicles, you've got Satan incited David to take the census.

Which is it? Which is true? They can't both be true. They're both in the Bible, so how do we get through this? Well, I think given that 1 Chronicles is written much later than 2 Samuel, at a time when people's understanding of God would have had more time to deepen and develop, I'd suggest that the writer of Chronicles has a better, more progressive, more accurate understanding of God and the kinds of things that he would or wouldn't do.

For the writer of Chronicles and the God that he's come to know, it would seem to be inconceivable that God would incite someone to do something sinful and then punish them simply for being obedient.

[ 25 : 41 ] Instead, the writer of Chronicles says, no, Satan, Satan was the tempter in this instance. and we see in 1 Chronicles an early attempt, one of the first mentions of Satan in the Bible, an early attempt to understand perhaps where evil comes from and how it can produce suffering.

I would say 1 Chronicles is closer to the truth than 2 Samuel is. You may disagree, that's fine, you may disagree and you say, no, actually, it's in the Bible, 2 Samuel is closer to the truth and Satan had nothing to do with David taking a census, he was simply disobedient perhaps.

But as I said last week, when we look at the Bible with the character of Jesus in mind, when we put Jesus glasses on to read it, when you look at 2 Samuel 1 Chronicles, which is the more Christ-like image of God in the story?

For me, it has to be the God in 1 Chronicles, not 2 Samuel. But we need to make a choice. Which one is it? Now, difficulty is, if you continue to read 1 Chronicles, the writer still says that God does some pretty horrendous thing.

The 70,000 people still get slayed through no fault of their own really. And that perhaps is an indication of that writer's understanding of God is not quite as developed or quite as fleshed out as we might hope.

[ 27 : 07 ] But I think this 2 Samuel, 1 Chronicles comparison, I think it shows us that within a few hundred years, the people of God were progressing in their understanding of who God really is and understanding which, as we'll focus primarily on next week, gains fulfillment through the life of Jesus.

I'm thinking about it like this. You know how in a maths exam when you're asked a question and you can't just put the answer, the number of the answer, you've got to show your workings out as you go so that the exam markers know you know how to do it, not just pluck a number out of the air.

You've got to show your workings. I think we see something similar in the Bible. If Jesus is the answer, which he very often is to any question, then in many ways the Bible shows the working out that people went through in order to get to him as the full answer for who God is, for what he's like, and for how we might relate to him.

The Bible, as we say, is a progressive book. It's a book of progression, a written record of the journey people went on in their quest to know and understand God. It's a journey on which a lot of the Bible writers got a lot of things right, but it's also a journey in which various writers, I'd say, got quite a bit wrong as well, making some wrong turnings, hitting some dead ends.

You know, the views we've been looking at, like there are many gods is wrong. It's wrong. There's not. There's only one. Views like God being an angry inciter of sin. So it's wrong. It's a wrong view.

[ 28 : 46 ] And yet God, in his grace, he allows these views to be put in the Bible. He lets them fly for a while for his own reasons because in time he will correct and give greater revelation about himself, both through the other biblical writers, but most of all in the flesh through Jesus.

And so I bring it home. Where does this leave us? How do we not make this just all theory? Well, for me, I think the idea that there's progression in faith, there's progression in the Bible, I think it leaves us hopefully encouraged because just as the Bible is a book of development and progression, so too are we.

So too are you. all people who are trying to progress and develop and deepen their understanding of God. Our faith is a work in progress.

Yes, we'll sometimes get things wrong. From time to time we'll misunderstand and we'll misrepresent who God is. But in his grace, God never gives up on us and we'll instead by his spirit gently refine and correct and deepen and develop our understanding of him and expand our minds if you like to the depth and the breadth and the height and the width of his love.

finish with this from 2 Peter. Perhaps a prayer for us. Therefore, dear friends, grow, progress, grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and to him be glory both now and forever.

[ 30 : 29 ] Amen. Amen.