

The Good Book - Wisdom

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Date: 12 January 2020

Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] We're going to be starting, as the screen suggests, a new five-week series this morning called The Good Book. The Good Book is one of these many ways in which the book we call the Bible is described.

And so we're going to spend these next few weeks exploring the Bible, as you do in church on a Sunday and so on. But the difference is for this series is that I'd like us, if we can, to get behind, if you like, the stories and the characters and so on.

And instead explore the Bible as a book. You know, what exactly is this thing that we read? This famous, best-selling, most popular book in the world.

What is it that we read? How did it come into being? Who wrote it? Why did they write it? Why did they choose to include the things they did? How are we meant to read it?

And perhaps most importantly, how do we encounter God through its pages and work out our place in the world in relation to God?

[1 : 11] For me, these are big questions, I guess, which are worthy of our consideration. Because although, as I said, it is the best-selling book in the world, it's the most widely distributed book in the world. It's the most translated book in the world.

And for millions and millions of people, myself included, it's the most important and inspirational book there is. The Bible is also perhaps the strangest, the most difficult, at times the most radical, and arguably the most baffling book of all.

And I say baffling because I think that's true. Whether we've got a deep and daily love for reading the Bible, or whether it's a dusty book on a distant shelf which we rarely open.

I suspect all of us, whether at some stage or other, have read something in the Bible and thought to ourselves, I just don't get it.

I just don't get it. What kind of things might we not get at times with the Bible? A few thoughts maybe. Well, I guess for a book which is meant to tell the story of a God who is love, we might find ourselves more than a little perplexed at the amount of killing and vengeance and smiting which this God is recorded as doing in its pages.

[2 : 41] Or for a book which is meant to tell the story of a God who is eternal and unchanging, we might find ourselves feeling somewhat confused at the apparent difference between the kind of God who is revealed in the Old Testament with the one who we encounter in the pages of the New Testament.

And for a book which is meant to tell the story of a God who promises us life in all its abundant, exciting fullness, well, there are large sections of the Bible which we'd be forgiven for finding just a little bit boring sometimes as well.

However, even if we do at times think the Bible is confusing or inconsistent or hard to read, I think sometimes, hence the gasp, I think there is sometimes a hesitancy that's inbuilt in us to admit that we struggle with it and that's sometimes the case.

Indeed, when we do struggle to read or enjoy the Bible, I think we automatically assume that it's us and not the Bible which must be the problem.

I mean, it's banged into us from the word go that the Bible is perhaps the key way of understanding God and how he speaks to us. And so perhaps the assumption is that our struggles with it, which we all will have at some stage or other, must be because the problem is with us.

[4 : 06] Maybe we're not holy enough. We're not clever enough. We're not committed enough. We're not wise enough to understand it and to hear God's voice through it.

And yet I hope as these few weeks unfold that some of the guilt and the confusion, the uncertainty which we might feel about the Bible, my hope is that will be lifted from us because I suspect that

many of the difficulties we have with the Bible are not actually because of our own shortcomings and they're not because the Bible itself is a problem.

But I think they stem from some of the misinformed things that we've been told about the Bible and therefore how we should engage with it.

For example, the Bible is often called God's word or the word of God. It's a description which implies that every word on the pages of the Bible has somehow been spoken by God, implying that this is his story told in his way.

And it conjures up a picture of God almost dictating the Bible to those who have written it down and then handed it on to us. And so because of this commonly used description, you know, the word of God as the way of describing the Bible, sometimes I wonder if the boundaries between the Bible and God himself become somewhat blurred, should we say.

[5 : 44] And at times, pretty non-existent. And yet, the writer, Nick Page, who we had here a couple of summers ago to speak on a weekend for us, he puts it like this.

He says, The Bible tells us about God. It points us to God. But it is not God. But because of the language we use about it, and because of our ignorance about where the Bible actually came from, we end up treating it as if the Bible really is God.

In some ways, I guess that might explain why we're sometimes hesitant, I think, to own up to finding the Bible to be tricky. Because it feels disrespectful to God.

Like we're rejecting his words to us. Like we're ungrateful for what we assume is his key communication to us. But whilst we may or may not think of the Bible as being God, if we do think the Bible is essentially an extension of God, we need to ensure, therefore, that the Bible is consistent with God and it behaves in a God-like way, if you like.

And so, over the years, you get words like these emerge about ways you might describe the Bible. Words that we don't really use for much else other than talking about the Bible. Words like inerrant and infallible.

[7 : 09] In other words, some would say it's a book without error or contradiction, a book which is incapable of being wrong. Now, over the coming weeks, we're going to be exploring whether or not the Bible is inerrant, whether it is infallible.

But what's worth noting today, I think, is that not once does the Bible ever claim to be without error or to be incapable of being wrong.

There are other things it does claim of itself. The Apostle Paul describes the Scriptures as being another I, inspired. I'd say, yes, they are.

And we will explore in the coming weeks what that word means. But is the Bible without error? Is it without contradiction? Well, not according to the Bible itself, which I guess is to be expected because the Bible is not God and only God is perfect.

But what's perhaps more surprising is to note the Bible actually never really calls itself the Word of God or the Word of the Lord.

[8 : 16] Now, the Word of God, the Word of the Lord, these phrases, they do crop up time and time again within the pages of the Bible, such as in Genesis, right early on.

Chapter 15, verse 1, for example, we're told this, that the Word of the Lord came to Abraham, who became Abraham, in a vision. Or where, say, the prophet Samuel promises to Saul, Saul, he says this, he's going to make known to you the Word of God.

But in these kind of verses, as with many others, the Word of God, the Word of the Lord, it refers to things God might have said or communicated himself directly, you know, not as a written thing, but through the insight we get from prayer, through the insight we get, or a prophet like Samuel might get, having received that sort of revelation from God, if you like, or, as in Abraham's case, through a vision that they experienced of God communicating with them.

You might be thinking, well, hang on a minute, the Word of the... Bible is the Word of God. It says it itself. Surely it says it itself. You might be thinking of things like Psalm 119, which famously states this, that your Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light on my path.

famous words that we automatically associate with the written Bible. And yet, what does your Word mean at the top of this verse?

[9 : 47] Well, interestingly, in the original Hebrew, in the word that's translated as word, more often than not, it refers to speech or spoken word, not necessarily a written one.

And so, over these coming weeks, I think what we do well is to think carefully about what form of God's communication is being highlighted here in verses like these from the Psalms, but also across the Bible as what kind of word is it that God gives to us as a light for our path? In fact, in the Bible, the Word of God, this phrase, I think it's best understood not as a written thing at all, but as a person, as Jesus himself.

In John 1, Jesus is described as the Word of God, the Word who was there in the beginning, as we sing in some songs, the one who is the voice of God speaking creation in Genesis 1 into being. And so, when the Bible is described as the Word of God, not only is there perhaps some sketchy, biblical backing for that at best as a concept, it risks, I think, taking a title which belongs to Jesus as the Word of God and instead gives it to a book, which is perhaps not the best way to go, to say the least.

[11:18] We could say, therefore, that the Bible is not the Word of God. Jesus is. And we'll be exploring some of the implications of that as we go through.

Now, before we go too deep and too controversial, shall we say, what I'd like to do today, though, is, on a similar line to this kind of thing, but is to focus on one particular way of understanding the Bible, which I want to suggest needs to be reconsidered.

And I think it needs to be reconsidered because if we do, then I think it has got a potential to open up a whole new level of depth to the way we might relate to God through the Bible.

You see, one of the things that we're often told about the Bible is that it's a guidebook or a manual for life. It's a rule book which perhaps tells us what to do.

Perhaps you heard of the Bible being described as a map or a sat-nav which helps us to navigate God's path through life. You know, all images are metaphors for the Bible which, on the surface at least, seem to be, well, useful and make a great deal of sense.

[12:37] So if we take this idea that the Bible is a manual for life, it's based on the assumption that the Bible will give us guidance and information that it will give us certainty about the right way to live.

Clarity, if you like, for decisions that we might need to make. Clear instructions on how to live and how not to live. And if that's the case, then it follows that our job is to read it and get to know it so that we can turn to the right instructions when we need to.

I don't know if you've ever been given one of those Gideon's Bibles which they give out across the world. If you flick to the back of most Gideon's Bibles, they've got a kind of index there where it says if you're feeling, say, depressed or lonely or you've got financial concerns, turn to this verse here and that will give you insight and help give you instruction as to what to do in that particular situation.

That's the kind of thing perhaps we often think about the Bible as being. And there are certain parts in the Bible which do just that. Sets of rules and guidelines for us to follow whether that's things famously like the Ten Commandments or the advice that's found throughout the book of Proverbs. The trouble is, I think, if we look to the Bible for guidance in the same way that we might read a travel guide for a trip abroad or something or a cookbook for a recipe, I think we soon begin to realise that the guidance we receive is not quite as clear cut as we might have hoped it would be.

[14:06] So for example, let's take an instruction from the letter of Colossians which says this. It says, Children, obey your parents in everything for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord.

Perhaps we should have said this before the children went out. It might have been useful in that case. Children, obey your parents in everything for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord.

Now if the Bible is a map for life or an instruction manual to follow, you might read a verse like this and think, Thank you God, bingo, yes, I know how to do this.

Now the Bible tells children to be obedient to their parents so that is what should happen. Not only that, the Bible says that they should be obedient in everything which is pretty clear and it even talks about this obedience being a duty before God.

It's a way of life which shouldn't be questioned and you might want to quote this one if you've got kids or grandchildren to them this lunchtime. Clear guidance we might think. Brilliant. Practical rule of life that should be followed.

[15:15] Except, in practice, it's not that clear at all. What if the parent is asking the child to do something that is wrong?

Should those parents still be obeyed? Or what if the child is being told to do something that will put them in harm's way? What if the child is asked by one parent to lie to the other parent or to deny that they were hit or neglected or abused in some way?

According to the Bible, according to Colossians 3.20, children should obey their parents in everything. And yet, a commandment which appears on first reading to be reassuringly clear is actually anything but when we apply it in practice to the everyday situations which we might face. We're sticking with another kind of parent-child relationship. How about this instruction from Proverbs which says this, train children in the right way and when old they will not stray. Nice little rhyming couplet. Train children in the right way and when old they will not stray. Again, fair enough, we might think. Solid, clear, biblical guidance.

[16:35] And yet, when you think about it, what does it mean to train children in the right way? That's quite a subjective phrase. It means different things for different people. I know for me as a parent it's a constant struggle to know how much freedom to give our children in order that they might grow up the right way and we won't regret it when they get old.

I mean, just yesterday, for example, we went to visit Gemma's auntie Sue just to the next Gemma there with her partner Sheila. I went to see them in the wild west in the countryside of Herefordshire. And Sue has got this ride-on kind of mini tractor thing which our two kids were keen to have a decent go on our eight-year-old and our six-year-old.

But because their legs on this mini tractor were a little bit short, we ended up having great auntie Sue running alongside them on this tractor doing this, holding a stick down on the accelerator pedal so that they could get up some decent speed around the field.

Now, the risk assessing, risk averse parented me at the time. It's because, if this comes a cropper, I am in deep trouble here. Is this really the right thing for me to be doing or endorsing as a parent? But thankfully, for change, the more adventurous side of me won through and Bobby and Heidi had a whale of a time whizzing around this bumpy field on a tractor. And yes, an illustration just yesterday are the kind of constant struggle that parents and responsible or irresponsible adults have on the right way to raise a child.

[18:18] So when is it right, thinking further on, when is it right to let them walk to school on their own or go to the shops on their own? When's the right time for a child to have their own mobile phone or computer in their room?

When's the right time to tell your kids the facts of life? That's what we're resting with at the moment on that. I'm trying to pass the buck to Jen but she's not having it, I'll tell you that. Well, generally, what's the right thing to do if you can see that they're going to make a mistake?

Do you let them carry on and learn from that or do you protect them from harm in the first place? It's not easy. It's not easy. The Bible says train children the right way and when old they will not stray. It's an instruction which sounds great in theory but actually I don't think it's much help in practice. And yet, if the Bible really is, as we've been wondering, an instruction manual or a guidebook for life, you'd think it would give better, clearer, perhaps more nuanced, concrete advice than it does. What's more, I think we'd be fair enough in asking that the Bible wouldn't directly contradict itself in the advice it gives as well but even that seems to not always be the case.

[19:38] For example, if we stick with Proverbs, let's look at Proverbs 26, verse 4. It's worth remembering this one because it's an interesting one. Proverbs 26, verse 4 says this.

It says, Do not answer fools according to their folly or you will be a fool yourself. Do not answer fools according to their folly or you will be a fool yourself.

In other words, don't get drawn in to debates with foolish people because you'll only be sucked down to their level. Good advice, we might think.

That's Proverbs 26, verse 4. But then in the very next verse, Proverbs 26, verse 5, we're told this. Answer fools according to their folly or they will be wise in their own eyes.

In other words, do engage, do speak with foolish people as in this way you'll be able to show them the errors in their thinking. As you can see, it's guidance which completely contradicts the verse which has gone before it.

[20:48] And what are we to make of this kind of side-by-side contradiction in the Bible? It's not as if the writer of Proverbs was an idiot and sort of thought, oh, I'm just going to do something wacky here. No, they've really clocked that they're putting these contradictory Proverbs next to each other.

It must have been deliberate to pair such similar verses together. But come on, if we're looking for guidance, why is such an ambiguous, contradictory couple of verses literally side-by-side in the Bible, it doesn't help us.

It doesn't seem to make any sense. Or at least, it doesn't seem to make any sense if we expect the Bible to be some kind of instruction manual which will simply tell us to put plug A into socket B and everything will work like clockwork.

And yet, if we do look for that kind of certainty or clarity in the Bible, then I think like this, we're going to be disappointed. We're going to be baffled even. You see, the fact that the Bible directly contradicts itself, gives contradictory advice and guidance for life which can be so subjective, which can be interpreted and put into practice in all sorts of different ways, I think that seems to indicate that the Bible is not primarily designed to give us clear answers or quick fix, fortune cookie kind of solutions to our dilemmas.

Instead, it would seem this ambiguity is deliberately in there because it forces us to weigh things up for ourselves, not to check our brain at the door, but to work out what this means for our own situation, our own circumstances.

[22 : 33] And because it asks us to weigh things up ourselves, then it invites us, and this is the key thing I think. It invites us into a far deeper relationship with God and with the Bible itself.

What might that deeper relationship be built on? I think it's this word, wisdom. Wisdom. The whole book of Proverbs is about wisdom. It's not about some quick fix solution to something.

I mean, from the first verse, that's made abundantly clear. This is the opening to the book of Proverbs. It says, the Proverbs of Solomon, son of David, said to be the wisest bloke who ever lived. He's king of Israel.

And it says, this is what Proverbs is about. This is its purpose. It's for attaining wisdom and discipline, for understanding words of insight. It's wisdom which is essential for understanding and applying the truth that's found in the book of Proverbs.

And in fact, I think I'd even go so far as to say that the Bible, first and foremost, it's not an instruction manual. It's not a guidebook. It's a book of wisdom.

[23 : 41] It's a book of wisdom. Why might this be the case? Well, I think if we go back to those conflicting Proverbs, you know, on first glance, you might think, well, that's not incredibly helpful, thank you God, to put these two contradictory Proverbs next to each other.

And yet the very fact that these two conflicting pieces of advice appear side by side, I think, is a stroke of genius by the writer.

Because it's an indication of how wisdom works in practice. Which of these two Proverbs is right? Both of them. They're both right. They're both wise.

Don't answer fools. Do answer fools. That means our job is to work out which one to put into practice. And when. You know, with God's help, which one do we follow?

How do we put it into action? Proverbs shows us, I think, that reading our situation and not just the Bible is what wisdom is all about. The contradiction means we're obliged.

[24 : 46] We have to think it through. See, the Bible, I would say, is not sufficient in and of itself. But neither does it ever pretend to be.

Rather, we need the gift of God's wisdom to know how to adapt and interpret and apply what the Bible says for our own time and our place, our own situation. It might be frustrated that the Bible isn't more clear-cut than it is.

That it doesn't tell us directly sometimes what to do. But what it does do, and this is one of the main reasons why I think it really is such a good book, is that it gives us the permission, more than that, it gives us the encouragement, the springboard, if you like, to dive deeper with God, to seek His wisdom and prayerfully figure things out with God and with each other.

Why might God have set things up this way? Well, I'd say it's because God wants to ensure that we're constantly in this kind of conversation with Him by His Spirit.

Whenever we open the Bible, whenever we don't open the Bible, He wants this conversation with us. Precisely because the Bible is so open to interpretation and the application of what it says is so varied and at times unclear, we need to be asking God for His wisdom, both directly and through those around us.

[26 : 12] I wonder actually if that's why the Bible is so difficult to understand at times, why it is so baffling to get our heads round. Because if it was too simple, too straightforward, we wouldn't need God's help at all in trying to understand or apply it.

I don't think God wants us to bury our noses in a book, even a book as incredible as the Bible. Instead, I think He offers us the Bible as a way to ensure we might have an ever-deepening relationship with Him, one where His wisdom, His ways, His guidance can truly be worked out and experienced.

And I think that'll do, perhaps, for today. Do feel free, though, to discuss and come and chat with me and think this one through, the implications of this. Do chat about it in house groups because I think if we can get our heads around the fact that the Bible is a book of wisdom, not a manual for life, I think it begins to help us read the Bible in a far more creative, fulfilling, and ultimately, I would say, God-given kind of way.

The Bible is not so much an instruction manual as a book of wisdom which encourages us into a deeper reliance on God, a connection with God which is two-way, a journey with God which is varied, a story with God which is ongoing.

Now, next week, we'll explore what it might mean for the Bible to be inspired. But for now, let's stick with the wisdom and let's pray.

[27 : 43] Let's ask God to bless us, bless our Bible reading in order that it points us back to Him as the one who is the source of all wisdom.