

The Good Book - Inspired

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 19 January 2020

Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 0 0] We're into this second week, as Ian was saying. We just started it last Sunday, this series we're doing called The Good Book, where we're spending five weeks looking at the Bible, but not just looking at the sort of characters and parables and history and so on, which it's full of, but looking at the Bible as a book, as a book.

What is the Bible? How are we meant to read it? How is God involved in his pages? And what difference is that meant to make to our lives?

All good questions, I would suggest, to ask of The Good Book. And if you were here last week or you've caught up online, you may recall we were challenging, perhaps somewhat, the idea that the Bible is this kind of map or an instruction manual, which we read to get sort of clear-cut advice or guidance on how to live.

Occasionally, that comes, yeah, but for the most part, it seems, his teachings can be interpreted and applied in so many different ways. That far from always being clear-cut, as we were saying last week, actually we need God's wisdom to know when and how to apply its words to our own individual and collective situations.

As we were saying, the Bible is not God, so neither is it sufficient in and of itself. Instead, it pushes us, as Ian was saying just now, into a deeper relationship with God in order to get our heads around what the Bible might have to say to us.

[1 : 3 3] And indeed, as we saw, the Bible never really thinks of itself or describes itself as a guidebook or a manual for life. Instead, it seems, we're to work out with God what difference these stories make for our time and our place and how we're to understand God.

Now, I also said last week that when we call the Bible the Word of God, not only is that a title which the Bible never really claims for itself, but on those occasions when the phrase, the Word or the Word of God or the Word of the Lord does appear in the Bible, seems to primarily refer to the spoken word, which people share, telling the good news of God's love.

Good news is a word we often use instead of the gospel. Gospel means good news, but literally it's like good spiel, good spiel, good words, good spoken, good news.

And then perhaps most importantly, we were saying, above all, it's Jesus who is the Word of God, and it's His voice above any other, which is the spoken, communicated, and hopefully received Word of God.

Now, can Jesus speak to us through the Bible? Absolutely, absolutely. And that's hopefully what we're going to be unpacking a bit today.

[3 : 0 2] Indeed, as we touched on briefly last night, one of the most quoted verses in the Bible, which is seemingly talking about the Bible, is this one from 2 Timothy, where it says this.

It says, all Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness.

All Scripture is inspired by God. Now, if we look at what this word, inspired, actually means, if we start with an English definition, we'll get onto the Greek a little bit later on, just to keep you on the edge of your seats with that kind of stuff.

But the English definition can be used, this word inspired, to describe something like this, that's something of extraordinary quality, as if arising from some external creative impulse.

And this creative impulse, this creativity, seems to be important, because we often speak as someone being inspired when they do something which is out of the ordinary, which transcends the norm.

[4 : 08] So you might find there's a sports person, Tiger Woods there. He's inspired after all his back surgery to pull off perhaps an unexpected win. You've got a musician. Musicians are often said to be inspired perhaps when they write a great song or they play or improvise, you know, a great virtuoso solo.

Equally, though, in the sort of creative industries and so on, advertising, strap lines, and campaigns can be seen as being inspired in the way they capture the public's imagination.

If something is inspired in our understanding of it, carries with it, I think, this sense of an idea or a performance being fuelled by something outside of ourselves, as the definition says, some kind of external, outside, creative impulse which rises up.

Now, if we take this inspired word, if we applied the understanding that we've got here to the Bible, I don't know about you, but I've tended to perhaps picture the people who wrote the Bible as being in this almost sort of trance-like state, as if God was sort of dictating to them what to write, and kind of the words, almost they switched their brain off and the words just sort of came in some subconscious kind of stream of consciousness way from God, just flowed onto the page.

This idea of God dictating the Bible to people. And there are some passages in the Bible which kind of back up this idea, not least in 1 Peter, chapter 1, verse 20, 21, where the writer is talking about how the words of the prophets, which are recorded in the Old Testament, came about.

[5 : 55] The writer says this, he says, no prophecy of scripture came about by the prophets' own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, the old human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

And so here there is, I think, this idea of God giving people his words specific words, if you like, at certain times. And these prophets are described as being, it's a nice phrase, being carried along by the Holy Spirit.

You know, God's spoken word given through the prophets which is then recorded on the pages of our Bibles. And that to me makes a lot of sense. Makes a lot of sense. As it ties in perhaps with these direct words from God that people can sometimes sense and experience and share in our own times.

You know, we might call them perhaps words of knowledge or something, specific words of insight that God might give us for someone's situation and which we perhaps feel compelled to give sometimes, which can be quite specific.

You know, occasionally we get them here, you know, we sense that someone's got an issue that God's given us insight into. You know, someone says, I think there's someone here who's got a pain in the left ankle from injuring themselves at football on Tuesday night and someone says, yeah, that was me, thank you God.

[7 : 17] And then they go up in the front and then God can maybe heal their ankle injury that they received playing football on Tuesday night. I don't know if anyone was playing football here on Tuesday night if your ankle's a bit dodgy, but that's not a word then by the way.

Don't balance that one. But it's that kind of example. I guess what I'm saying though is that to go back to last week's word, we'd be wise, I think, to accept that God sometimes does speak directly to us, you know, through each other perhaps in this almost kind of dictated way, specific words for specific times.

And I know I myself and I'm sure many of us here we're grateful for the times when there's been a specific word of encouragement or guidance or something that we might have received. I guess the question is though, can we say that of the Bible as a whole, that it's the whole thing is written as if dictated by God?

Is that the kind of picture perhaps we get when we read all of it? You see, I'm not so sure because when we look at other passages in the Bible, we read of what are some very human opinions and biases coming through which would not seem to be directly inspired by God.

Let's have a look and see if I can explain what I mean. Most obviously, for example, there are verses when the writers in the Bible readily admit themselves that actually they're not sure it's inspired by God.

[8 : 55] Let's take for example 1 Corinthians chapter 7 where the apostle Paul he says this about marriage. He says, to the married I give this command not I but the Lord a wife must not separate from her husband but if she does she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband and a husband must not divorce his wife.

To the rest I say this I not the Lord. If any believer has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him he must not divorce her.

Now, it's a teaching which Paul gives on marriage and divorce and just as an aside from what we're doing really this morning if you'd like the chance to unpack this particular passage we're not talking about marriage and divorce this morning but we have done in the past and this is a complicated passage to get our heads around perhaps.

So what I did yesterday I put an old talk from about four years ago that we did on divorce it's back on the church website on the talks page if you want to have a listen to that because that might be helpful for us if some of these things in here might be unsettling us somewhat.

Hopefully we've unpacked that in the past and again I commend that one to you on the church website to have another listen should you wish. The reason though for using this passage this morning nothing to do with marriage and divorce is simply to open up our thoughts as we focus really on what Paul says here about the source of his teaching and so just to highlight in verse 10 for example he says this to the married I give this command not I but the Lord but then as we saw two verses later he says this to the rest I say this I not the Lord is it the Bible what are we to make of this both verses are there in this inspired book but here it seems Paul almost seems to bottle it he hasn't quite got the courage of his convictions it seems this teaching he's pretty sure is a command from God whereas this one he's wavering and he even says actually this is me talking don't count this as coming from God but it's in the Bible so that kind of seems to throw a bit of a spanner in the works of the view that the scriptures are God's voice to us when Paul himself seems in practice to shy away from that view what's more there are other occasions in the Bible when a teaching is given but which seems again to be based perhaps more on individual opinions individual prejudices sometimes of the writer than it does seem to be inspired by God let's stick with

[11 : 40] Paul another letter that he wrote this time to a guy called Titus and Titus lived on the island of Crete in the Med so Paul spent some time warning Titus about false teachers on the island of Crete and Paul defends his position by saying this one of Crete's own prophets has said Cretans those who are from Crete are always liars evil brutes lazy gluttons this saying is true Cretans are always liars evil brutes lazy gluttons this saying is true now here Paul is quoting an ancient philosopher from Crete from about 600 BC a guy called Epimenides or Epimenides cheery looking fella there in that particular sculpture but he Paul quotes this assertion from Epimenides that everyone from Crete everyone from

Crete is a liar a brute and a glutton and Paul says yep I agree that's true that's true and it's in the Bible and yet I want to think really really Paul everyone on Crete without fail is a liar a brute and a glutton I mean that's such a sweeping stereotype to tar a whole island with the same brush we might even say it's racist even to have that kind of stereotype about a certain people group and yet Paul says it in a letter in the Bible that it's true hmm now is that a view which has been dictated if you like from God is that a view that's been inspired by God I don't see how it can be in fact I think Paul is wrong in these verses you see we could argue that these and other passages in the

Bible reveal not so much the views of God but a very human view of some of the writers of the Bible trying their best in their time to be in line with God yes and to hear his voice but they are unable to be completely free it seems from their own flaws their own baggage their own prejudice sometimes their own cultural blinkers Bible therefore I would say speaks with as much as a human voice as it does with the voice of God and as I say that if you think I'm not sure about this I'm not quite sure where you're going with this making you feel a bit uncomfortable maybe let's consider the Psalms for example Book of Psalms 150 Psalms they are shot through with opinions and views which reflect a very human perspective on life for me I think that helps to explain much of the violence that often appears in the

Psalms and I'll use one as an example so if we take Psalm 137 for example it's a Psalm all about the way in which the people of Israel feel despondent and angry about their treatment at the hand of the Babylonians the people from Babylon and so the writer of Psalm 137 he's hacked off or she's hacked off obviously brimming with anger at the injustice of their treatment and they say this of Babylon happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks now these are the kind of words that we might imagine God has dictated to someone happy are you with babies and children being murdered are those sentiments which we would say we inspired by

God not I think when we hear Jesus saying let the little children come to me and do not stop them that's what I think God thinks about children not that there's happiness when they're dashed against the rocks and murdered now this desire I would suggest to murder innocent children it's a totally human view and yet it's founded in the pages of the Bible why is it there what I want to suggest because the Bible is written by humans and it reflects the imperfect diversity of their views we'll unpack this a bit further in the coming weeks but I think this understanding that it's a human book in many ways helps to explain why sometimes the human writers record God himself as committing the most atrocious acts of violence when he said to have wiped out whole populations of people in an act of genocide when

[16:49] God seems to apparently condone people taking virgin women as permissible spoils of war and so on is God really endorsing that is God really saying that is he like that is that the God who we see revealed in Jesus the image of the invisible God and I want to say for me no it isn't which means that maybe we have to conclude that either God changes from the Old Testament to the New or and I think this has got more legs and this is more like it the ancient limited human understanding of just who God is what he's like and what people feel he's asking them to do that may well be mistaken even in the pages of the Bible there's a biblical scholar Pete Enns he puts it like this he says when where and under what circumstances they lived all affected how the biblical writers perceived

God their world and their place in it we'll read that again when where and under what circumstances they lived all affected how the biblical writers perceived God their world and their place in it and so for example if you live in the ancient world where everyone thinks that the earth is flat and there are four corners to it it's no wonder that many of the biblical writers also thought the earth was flat it doesn't make them right they're wrong the earth's not flat we know that it just means they were a product of their time with the knowledge they had or equally and more importantly if you live in a very tribal sort of violent world where the gods are seen as generally being warmongers it's no wonder sometimes that the biblical writers also thought of God as something of a warmonger I would say that doesn't make them right it just means they're a product of their time and the common understanding that there was in their day and age and so if as I'm suggesting the Bible is a very human book it begs the question how are we to understand that verse that we started with from 2

Timothy that says all scripture is inspired by God all scripture well I think it helps to see what this word inspired actually means we've done it in the English definition but what does it mean in the original Greek language in which the verse was written and the good news is it's quite a mouthful to say it's this word which is theopnioustos theopnioustos now we've done a bit of Greek over recent months and you're getting bilingual now down to your very toes so this may not help you to order a beer next time you go to Thassos or something but it's a good word to learn so do you want to say theopnioustos after me one two three now the interesting thing with this particular Greek word is that when it appears in 2 Timothy that's the only time in all of the written works that we've got both the Bible and other books that this word appears doesn't appear anyone else in any ancient written texts and so most scholars agree that actually this is a word which Paul the writer essentially made up it's a made up word it's not a real word you wouldn't find it in a

Greek dictionary of old but instead it's a hybrid of two other words two other Greek words which when said together may ring some bells for us so it comes from the word theos meaning God and which refers to breathing so literally the word we translate as inspired often in the Bible actually literally means God breathed and there are some English Bible translations which helpfully use this very expression as in all scripture is God breathed and yet because there are no other uses of this term in any Greek literature it makes it tricky to know what was Paul getting at when he made up this word why did he choose a word that didn't exist and bring it into being so perhaps for example if we think that all scripture is God breathed perhaps we think that means that all scripture comes out the mouth of God back to this idea we were discussing last week about it literally being

God's word to us and yet as we've hopefully been seeing not everything indeed I'd say far from everything in the Bible would seem to be the kind of things that the God who we see revealed in Jesus would want to endorse or dictate to human writers now instead seems to me the best way to understand what Paul meant by this God breathed term is to see perhaps on what other occasions in the Bible we hear about the breath of God because that might help us know what Paul had in mind when he's talking about it good news is there are plenty of times where God breathes in the Bible so we'll just pick out a few most famously perhaps you're already thinking of this one at the beginning of Genesis one of the first times about God's breath we read this Genesis 2 7 then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and the man became a living being the breath of God therefore brings life indeed God's breath is called the breath of life elsewhere that sense is echoed but taken a little further such as in

[22 : 52] Job 32 it says age should speak advance years should give wisdom but it is the spirit in a person the breath of the almighty that gives them understanding so the breath of God brings life yes but it also is said to give understanding too well then how about another little verse in Ezekiel where the prophet has a vision of a valley of dry lifeless bones and God says of these dry bones I will put breath in you and you will come to life then you will know that I am the Lord it's God's breath that brings otherwise dry things to life it's God's breath again which gives knowledge then you will know not just understand but know that I am God and then finally one more for now a story which I'm sure Paul himself would have known about even though the New Testament wasn't put together when he was writing

Timothy but it's a story that would have been handed down to him one which is recorded in John's gospel again this one may spring to mind when we read about the resurrected Jesus saying to his disciples peace be with you as the father has sent me I am sending you and with that he breathed on them and said receive the Holy Spirit this is perhaps my favourite one because here we get a picture I think of what God's breath really is it's his presence breathed into us in a way which not only gives us life but enables us to be sent to give that same message of God's life giving spirit to others and so if that's perhaps how God's breath is seen in other places in scripture what might we conclude from this it seems to me that to say something is God breathed means that something which is otherwise lifeless comes to life that something which is dry and dusty becomes a channel of understanding and knowledge that something which is not inhabited by God's spirit instead becomes a home for the very presence of God and so when

Paul says as he does that all scripture is God breathed it's not I want to suggest a way of describing the way in which the Bible was written as in it's dictated by God where there's no human voice at all no it's not that I don't think rather it's a way of describing the way in which God brings to life the human words on the page to give us understanding and knowledge and wisdom about who God really is and when we get that kind of breath giving us life through the spirit through that breath speaking through the Bible it's then when we combine a lot that Jesus says okay you're ready to go and he sends us out to share that life giving breath that life giving spirit with those around us and that's why I think Paul says that all scripture is God breathed he doesn't say all scripture was

God breathed it's not about the way it was written or it was written although of course God has been involved in that process as we're going to unpick further in the weeks to come no all scripture is God breathed in the present and I say that because he is present in our reading of it he's present in the way which brings the Bible to life it's his breath which speaks to us through the Bible in all of its complex and ambiguous and imperfect and challenging and unique and diverse and I have to say brilliant ways and it's that kind of understanding perhaps that my hope is that we might grasp something of that as a church that we'd be invigorated and animated and enlivened by God through the breath of his spirit which speaks to us both directly into our lives but also through the words of the Bible you know when we read the Bible in the company of the spirit the one who gives us wisdom the understanding it gives us of God and his ways in effect it breathes new life into us that's why the Bible

I would say is such an important and life-giving and life-shaping story a lot to think about perhaps I grant you that I just want to close with this in that Paul goes on from that first half of the verse that all scripture is God breathed to explain why he thinks God breathes into the Bible why does God breathe into the Bible well as the full verse says all scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching rebuking correcting and training in righteousness so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work we read the God breathed Bible so that we might be equipped by God to put what we learn from it into action equipped by him by his spirit for every good work and so may we all be inspired in every sense of the word to do God's good work this week

[28 : 30] Amen Amen God bless you