

The Bible Problem (Evening Service)

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[0 : 00] Lord God, you spoke from Mount Sinai, and it was terrifying. But in your tender mercy, you gave us your word through the prophets and the apostles.

And yet, we confess that we take your word for granted. We don't read it. We don't take it seriously. We pray, Heavenly Father, that by your Holy Spirit, tonight, we would be able to sing with the psalmist that your word is more precious than gold and sweeter than honey on our lips. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Hey, y'all. Welcome to evening service. Good to see you. My name is Jeremy.

It's a beautiful Vancouver evening. And we are all indoors. We've just read a 2,000-year-old book out loud to one another.

[1 : 08] And now we're going to open it up and take it seriously. Do you realize how strange that makes you? Do you guys know how crazy you are? Leo and I think you guys are nuts.

There's a great slogan down in Oregon, keep Portland weird. I think maybe perhaps our new slogan for St. John's should be keep St. John's weird.

It's weird to take a book so seriously in Vancouver today. Don't you think? Especially one that's written before paddle boards, before prescription drugs, hot yoga, indie rock bands, and glass bongos were ever invented.

What relevance can a book so ancient and so out of touch have for us today? We've been looking at a lot of problems with Christianity. And tonight's problem is called the Bible problem.

The Bible problem goes something like this. The Bible is historically unreliable, culturally regressive, which makes it impossible for me to take it seriously.

[2 : 09] And ultimately, truth and meaning are all subjective anyway. So the Bible has no more authority over me than anything else should. And our scripture tonight that's going to help us to dialogue with this problem is going to be 2 Peter chapter 1, 15 to 21.

It would be great if you had your Bibles open to 2 Peter chapter 1. You just heard it read. We'll begin with that first problem. The Bible is historically unreliable. An argument for dismissing the Bible's historicity, it goes something like this.

You can't know for certain that something happened 2,000 or more years ago. And then, of course, we all know that even though, I mean, it happened so long ago, but not only that. It was only written down years later after that.

And by then, it was mostly legends and propaganda. It was the church that started to turn Jesus, the peasant preacher, into the divine son of God to validate their own power. Here's a great quote from Karen Armstrong.

She's a best-selling skeptic. We know very little about Jesus of Nazareth. The first full-length account of his life was St. Mark's Gospel, which was written sometime around 70 years A.D.

[3 : 23] or about 40 years after his death. By that time, historical fact had been overlaid with mythical elements, which expressed the meaning that Jesus had acquired for his followers, rather than a reliable, straightforward portrayal.

I mean, Armstrong raises some great questions. And I think she even gives Mark's Gospel a pretty reasonable conservative date of 70 A.D. But is she right about the New Testament mixing myth with history?

Well, for that, I want you to look closer at 2 Peter 1, verse 16 with me. Let's read it together. I don't want you to overlook something very obvious here and important.

Do you see how Peter uses the word myth? Peter knows what a myth or a legend is. And he says very clearly that the Jesus story is not meant to be read that way. In fact, the word myth, whenever it's used in the New Testament, it's always used in a negative way.

It's always used as a contrast with the truth of the Gospel. Armstrong's argument, in other words, is not left open to us by the New Testament writers. Peter continues, This is Peter describing what he saw on the mountain when Jesus was transfigured into this glorious figure before his eyes and he spoke with Moses and Elijah the prophets.

[4 : 58] So, what I'm trying to say is that careful testimony and empirical evidence using the five senses is very important to Peter and actually to all the other New Testament writers as well.

You can have a look at John's first letter or Luke chapter 1 to see examples of that. And that Peter, it's not just a concern for historical posterity.

He's not just writing a history textbook. Let me show you. We're going to take a little, just a little excursus off to the side here for a moment from our main theme.

And I want to show you how eyewitness testimony actually impacts Peter's pastoral theology. In other words, what he believes and what he teaches. To do that, I want you to listen again to verse 16.

Peter says, The Greek word that's translated here, coming, is parousia.

[5 : 56] It's the usual New Testament word for when the writers are talking about Christ's second coming in glory. And the word power, the power and the coming, the word power is also used elsewhere to refer to Jesus' second coming at the end of history.

And if you look further down at verse 19, there's this strange little place where he says, Pay attention until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

Well, this actually may be another reference, another way of him talking about Christ coming back in glory. He's saying that when Christ comes again, it will be as much brighter as the rising sun is brighter than the nighttime.

Why am I telling you this? Remember I said that history impacts theology, that what Peter believes and what he teaches. And so a major theme of Peter's letter, to Peter, we call it, is a call for Christians to be ready for Jesus' second coming.

In fact, we read in chapter 3 that there was false teachers who were saying, Ah, don't worry about it. Jesus isn't coming back. So Peter says, Don't doubt that this is going to happen.

[7 : 06] It's not just a clever myth. And as proof, listen carefully here, as proof for the truth of Jesus' promise to return, Peter testifies to the historical event of the transfiguration.

Peter's historical eyewitness testimony, it provides the basis for the apostolic teaching on the second coming here. Let me say that one more time. His historical eyewitness testimony is providing the basis for his apostolic teaching on Jesus' second coming.

Now you may be surprised that Peter uses the testimony of the transfiguration and not something like the resurrection or even the ascension to teach about Christ's second coming. But that's not really the main point here.

Peter asks, How do we know that Jesus will return? How do we know? And Peter answers, Let me share my eyewitness testimony with you and then you'll know that it's true. Because I've seen his divine glory and it's the real deal.

I've seen it. And when he comes again, it's going to be just like that except even more incredible. What I'm saying is that historical reliability, it matters a lot to Peter. And it should matter a lot to us too.

[8 : 17] But we don't need to separate historicity from our faith or our belief. Christianity is reasonable. It's rational.

Don't be afraid to put it to the test. Don't be afraid to ask tough questions. Engage with the text. Engage with your mind. Engage with your heart. And encourage your friends and your family who have doubts.

Encourage them to ask tough questions too. And then read the text together. Open it up and wrestle with it together. Well, we've discussed the historical problem.

But what about the Bible's cultural worldview? Isn't that even more problematic? So let's turn to the second problem. The Bible is culturally regressive. Here's a quote from popular atheist Sam Harris that captures this critique winsomely.

Let's imagine that an omniscient God is going to write a book for us. Isn't that a great way to start? Think how good that book would be.

[9 : 22] But there's not one reference in the whole Bible that couldn't be written by a first century person. There's nothing about infectious diseases, about electricity.

It's all just Iron Age barbarism and superstition. There is more relevance, more wisdom for the 21st century in any book off the bookstore shelf than in all the pages of the Bible.

Every science, cosmology, economics, biology, they all have more wisdom to offer us than this archaic ancient text. We know more about ourselves today than anyone writing in the Bible, which is a distinctly inconvenient fact for anyone wanting to believe that this book was written by the creator of the universe.

End quote. So, the Bible is hopelessly outdated and embarrassingly obsolete. But the key word might just be Harris' use of the word wisdom.

Did you hear him use the word wisdom a couple of times? Every science, cosmology, economics, biology, all have more wisdom to offer us than this archaic ancient text. He seems to be using the word wisdom as a synonym for knowledge and for information.

[10:40] But I think that's where he makes a misstep. That's where he makes an important misunderstanding that the Bible makes a very important distinction between information and knowledge and wisdom.

We just came out of a sermon series in Proverbs. That was one of the big ideas in Proverbs. knowledge and information is not the same thing as wisdom. Would you agree that undoubtedly we have access today to more information than we ever have in human history?

But, does anyone brag that we're wiser than ever before? Does Wikipedia make you wise? Let's look again at 2 Peter 1.

This time, look with me at verse 19. Peter says, we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place.

So, Peter's using a metaphor here of a light shining into a dark room. And he says that without the lamp you only see darkness. It's pitch black. Knowledge and information, they come through empirical sciences, the types that Sam Harris is bragging about.

[11:56] But, do these sciences, do they give us answers to our deepest human questions about who made us and why we're here? Do they point us towards a telos, a goal, an end for life?

Peter says, God's revelation, his word, is the lamp that reveals true wisdom. The kind that lies entirely outside ourselves and cannot be discovered by scientific experiments and empirical reason. It reveals, God's word does, the person of Jesus Christ to us as the word of God who took on flesh and dwelt among us. Right at the heart of the scriptures.

We heard last week how this Jesus, he came and he spoke and he offered new life in a way that no one has ever done. so that his disciples said to him, who else shall we go to?

You alone have the words of eternal life. You might have heard Christians describe scripture as a means of grace.

[13:06] A means of grace. It means a gift from God to bring us into life and relationship and to restore our true humanity through Jesus Christ. What I'm saying is this is not cultural regression.

This is universal good news. Now if you or someone you know is wrestling with this cultural regression problem, I want to highly recommend Tim Keller's very helpful book A Reason for God. He's got a whole section in there where he suggests whenever you encounter a passage in the Bible that seems uncomfortable, you immediately ask several questions and we don't have time to go into all those questions but I want to highlight one of them.

One of the questions is this. What if, so you're going to ask yourself, what if my problem with the text might be based on my unexamined assumptions and beliefs in the superiority of my historic moment over all the others?

Did you get what he was saying there? What if my problem with the text might be based on an unexamined belief in the superiority of this historic moment over all other previous?

[14:18] Sometimes we call this cultural imperialism. The belief that our part of the world or our time in history is more advanced, more progressive than any other time in history. And that's the very thing about the word culturally regressive.

Regressive implies, what does it imply? It implies that we think we're progressive. Well the irony, I hate to break it to you, the irony is that someday future cultures and generations, they're going to look back at us in 2018 and you know what they're going to say?

Boy, weren't they primitive? Weren't they regressive? Because the, when we open the Bible, what I'm trying to say is it doesn't just belong to one generation or one culture.

That's the beautiful thing about Scripture. It's a message of salvation in Jesus Christ that's universal. So ask yourself, what happens if you open your Bible and you start tearing out all the pages and eliminating the things that offend your sensibility and offend your sense of free will? Offend your sense of freedom? What do you get? You get a much thinner Bible. But you also get a God made in your own image.

[15 : 40] Because challenge and change as Deb was sharing are part of a healthy and loving relationship. A healthy and loving marriage or a friendship. Challenge and change have to be a part of that.

Our relationship with God through his word is no exception. Alright. We've tackled historical reliability and cultural regressiveness, cultural values.

But the third and the final objection, I think it's probably the most common in the West today. And it goes like this. Truth is all subjective anyway. In the end, it's just your interpretation.

Let's start with another quote, this time from Frederick Nietzsche. You have your way, I have my way. As for the right way, the correct way, and the only way, it does not exist.

Subjectivism is the air that we breathe in Vancouver. What's true for you is true for you, and what's true for me is true for me. Here's a quote from John Stott.

[16 : 48] Our present age is distinguished by the cult of the open mind, but we're in danger of having our minds so open that our brains are going to fall out.

And then here's G.K. Chesterton diagnosing this problem a hundred years ago. Maybe you've heard this quote before, it's a great one. What we suffer from today is humility in the wrong place. Modesty has moved from the organ of ambition to the organ of conviction, where it was never meant to be. A man or a woman was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth.

This has been exactly reversed. We are on a road to producing a race of men and women too mentally modest to believe in the multiplication table. I ask you, what kind of people is postmodern subjectivity, what kind of people is it producing?

Because we were told that freedom from truth was meant to empower us, but it seems to me that men, women, and children today are more anxious, more self-doubting, and more insecure than ever.

[18 : 03] The cultural narrative, it shouts to us, go on, write your own story. But all we seem capable of doing is binge-watching other people's stories on Netflix.

So what can we do about it? What can we do about it? We need to ask a question which lies behind subjectivism concerning authority. The question goes like this, whose authority am I under?

Who has the ultimate say? Who gets to decide what's right and wrong, what's true and false?

Because it's clear, it's becoming clear anyway, even in pop culture, that absolute subjectivity, which absolute subjectivity is an oxymoron anyway, but it's a dead end.

It's a philosophical dead end, it's a lifestyle dead end. And I want you to notice how behind the word authority lies the root word author.

Author. So ask the question in a different way. Who is the author of my story? Or to what story do I belong? And let's take one more look at 2 Peter chapter 1, this time verses 20 and 21.

[19 : 20] Beginning at verse 20, Peter says, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of scripture comes from someone else's interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

The Bible, friends, is God's big story. It's an utterly unique book which is described by the Apostle Paul as God breathed, a work of divine inspiration.

inspiration. John Stott says, by divine inspiration, we mean that scripture is the word of God through the words of human beings.

The word of God through the word of human beings. A divine human cooperation. Human authors, even while God was speaking to and through them, were themselves actively engaged in historical research, theological reflection, and literary composition.

If we allow for a moment that this miraculous idea of divine inspiration, that this book that we take for granted so easily, that it could actually be true, what are the implications for our quest for meaning?

[20 : 38] It means that the cult of the open mind is a lie. It's a counterfeit. There is an author and there is a story. And you and I, we can choose to reject the authority of God, the author, but we

can't just dismiss him as subjective.

Or we can choose to stand under this book as our authority and discover what this story is all about. And when we open it, we discover that God's written a drama about a loving, self-sacrificial rescue mission, which offers objective meaning, complete freedom under loving authority, and invites you and I to participate in the triune God's own perfect love and life for eternity.

It's a story like no other. And it's the best story ever written because it's true. So let me close by reminding you what a strange group you are. If you own a Bible, don't you dare keep it behind a glass door.

Don't you just keep it on the bookshelf. Wear out its pages. Write in it. Read God's Word. Open it up with your non-Christian friends whenever you get the chance.

Offer to read it with someone who's asking tough questions. And as you read it, read it on your knees with a posture of humility and of hunger. Pray into it.

[22 : 13] Chew on it. And enjoy it most of all. Because you might be holding the most supernatural thing that you've ever touched. Just don't ever take it for granted.

Amen.