

The Bible Problem

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Date: 22 July 2018

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[0 : 00] We praise you God our Father for the promise of your guiding hand that we've just celebrated together. And for the light of your word. Our hearts are dark and deceptive and disobedient.

And we ask now that as we hear the voice of your Holy Spirit. You would give us that humility we need to receive the word as life and food and light and love.

For the sake of your Son we pray. Amen. Please be seated. It's great to see you. Please turn your cell phones off.

That would be terrific. Unless there's a very important message coming in which we all need to hear. Now I hope you don't feel that when we pray as we always do at the beginning of a sermon. That it's an empty repeating ritual. We do it because we believe we are in the presence of the living God. The one who made all things.

[1 : 05] And who speaks today through the words that are written in the Bible. And we believe that we can know him. And that he shares his life with us. But I just, as we come to this today.

To the average secular West Coast individual. What you are doing, what we are doing this morning is very odd. It's very strange.

We should gather together and do this. Listening to a document that's thousands of years old. Before the invention of the blessed iPhone and internet. Listening to it as though our lives depended on it.

It's so strange that we should give our time and energy to this book. And try and seek to read it on a daily basis. As though these were the words of life that we desired more than gold.

As life and food and light. And I think that's why today's objection to Christianity is so understandable. That is that the problem with Christianity in today's issue is that the Bible is wrong.

[2 : 13] And it comes in two different forms, this argument. It's wrong in two ways. And each of the ways that it's wrong has a little slogan that goes with it. The first is the Bible is historically wrong.

And the slogan is you can't take it literally. So the Bible is full of religious stories that have nothing to do with this now. You can't take it historically. You can't take it literally.

It's like a book of Greek myths and legends. It's historically inaccurate. That's the first way the Bible is wrong that we hear today. And the second is that it's culturally wrong.

And therefore, and the phrase, the slogan that goes with that is, that's just your interpretation. We feel that some of the teaching of the Bible is, well, it's obsolete and offensive.

It teaches things we no longer believe. They're aggressive. They'll put us back years. The Bible's teaching on slaves and gender roles. They're just insulting for us today because we've progressed so far.

[3 : 21] We're a sophisticated people. And the easiest and most dismissive way of dealing with this is to say, that's just your interpretation. I've got a different interpretation. And for us as peace-loving Canadians, it's very difficult to know what to say when someone says that.

The Christian faith requires belief in the Bible. And this is a major stumbling block today. But it's perfectly understandable. You know, since we believe that the words of Scripture were breathed out by God, the Holy Spirit, and we believe that it takes the Holy Spirit to open our eyes and our minds and our hearts to see it and believe it, it means that all the best arguments and all the best facts and truths in the world don't have the power to change someone's view of the Scriptures unless God, the Holy Spirit, is at work in their lives.

So as a Christian, you can have all the facts on your side on this. But since we're dealing with God and his revelation, this is a profoundly spiritual exercise.

And without prayer and without humility, there will be no light or life. So having said that, what I would like to do with you is take these two current ways of saying the Bible is wrong and see if we can understand them a little better.

Then look at what the Bible says with each of them and then reflect on some things that might be helpful to say. Is that all right? Just nod. Thank you.

[4 : 50] Is that okay? Good. Good. So let's take the first way the Bible is wrong. It's historically inaccurate and the phrase, you can't take it literally.

I heard a guy this week who his neighbor found out he was a Christian. And when the neighbor found out that he was a Christian, the neighbor launched into a long speech, a prepared speech, about how Christianity, how the Bible is just a regurgitated myth.

The idea that Jesus was born of a virgin or that he rose from the dead, it's stealing from an old Egyptian myth. And after about 10 minutes, my friend said to this guy, where did you get all that stuff?

And he said, oh, the History Channel. But I've checked it on the internet. Now, if what he believes is true, then you can't take the Bible literally.

And I think, think about this for a moment. People are kindly disposed. And so they don't want to just say the Bible's full of lies.

[5 : 53] And if you're a believing Christian, they let us down gently. And they say, you just, you can't take it literally. It's full of symbols and stories and myths and nice allegories and moral lesson.

So please don't, please don't take it literally. There's another strand that's joined us in the last 10, 15 years from the book, The Da Vinci Code, which was made into a movie.

I'm not going to ask how many people have read it and been to the movie, because then I would think less of you. I read it, but I didn't see the movie. Actually, I'll tell you the truth.

When I got to about page 90, I was so angry with the book, I threw it across the room and it broke in half. So my wife read the first half and I read the second half and we came to the same conclusion.

The Da Vinci Code, very popular. It's based on the idea that the Gospels about Jesus are sort of a whisper game. And were never written down until 100 years after the birth, after Jesus had gone.

[6 : 54] And those who wrote what we've got as the New Testament hid the real truth about Jesus. And since history is written by the winners, the version that we've ended up with is the one that Constantine the Emperor wanted.

And that's the Bible we have today. Dan Brown's book is a fiction which claims to be true, writing about the New Testament, which claims to be true as though it's a fiction.

And it sold 80 million copies and was made into a movie that grossed \$758 million worldwide. What that all means is this, that the general popular view of the Bible is that we can't really know what happened.

You can't really trust the Bible. You certainly shouldn't base your life and beliefs on that book. And I think, as I said before, I think people feel generally sorry for us as Christians that we spend so much energy on this ancient book.

It's okay for us to do this so long as we do no harm to others or don't say it might be true for anyone but ourselves. So what does the Bible say? What sort of claim does the New Testament make about itself?

[8 : 08] And in 2 Peter chapter 1, which I had read, it's a wonderful section because it's written probably around 65 AD, certainly before 68 when Peter was executed AD, which is 30 years or so after the resurrection of Jesus.

And there are already people around in the church who are saying that the Bible is just full of myths and stories. What you apostles taught and what the Gospels have are myths.

So let's just dive into verse 16, shall we, in chapter 1. It would be helpful if you had your Bible open. 2 Peter chapter 1, verse 16, page 1018.

The Apostle Peter says, Just notice in the sentence before, he speaks in the singular, I, me, my.

He's conscious he's about to die. He's writing this letter consciously so that after he dies, his words will continue with his readers. And then in verse 16, he switches to we.

[9 : 36] He's speaking about the apostles. He says, We were eyewitnesses. We were there. Verse 18, We ourselves were there.

Later today, you should have a look at the next book in the Bible, 1 John. As the apostle John says, We heard, we looked, we saw, we touched. So Peter is saying, this is very helpful.

I know what myths are, but what we preach to you has nothing remotely to do with myths or legends or made up stories. We didn't invent it. We didn't make it up. We've borne witness to what we saw. We were eyewitnesses. And this is generally the claim of the New Testament. Peter and the early writers knew what myths were, but our faith does not rest on legends.

This is the same way Luke's gospel begins. Luke says, I've gone back to the eyewitnesses to write an account of what was accomplished among us.

[10:42] And that means the nature of Christianity is that it is based on real events in history, and you cannot reduce that to myth. So if Jesus didn't heal the sick, for example, it's not a symbol of anything.

And though the historical record is pregnant with meaning, and the meaning of some of those historical events reaches out into eternity, without the events themselves, we have no Christianity. That's the nature of the claim of the New Testament documents. And I think this is a great help for us when people say you just can't take the Bible literally. It's just symbols and stories.

And I think we have to say it's true. There's a great deal of the scriptures that's poetic and fills the imagination. But if someone is willing to slow down and think about this, it's not difficult at all to show that the New Testament writers claim to be eyewitnesses to real events.

When you write something, you usually indicate what sort of writing you're doing. If you work for a finance company, and if you have to write up the report for the board at the end of the financial quarter, or if you're a reporter and you write a story, you write a report on what has happened, and if I take what you say and say, well, you can't take this literally, what I'm actually saying is I don't believe the truth of what you've written.

[12:14] I think you're lying. And people really don't want to say that Peter and James and John are lying. So when they say you can't take it literally, they're actually being a little bit condescending toward the New Testament, patronising and superior to the original authors.

You should know too, and this is very encouraging, that in the last 50 years, every historical and archaeological discovery that have been made demonstrate that the New Testament and the Old Testament are accurate, and they're way too early to be myths or legends.

By the end of the first century, there are hundreds, if not thousands, of documents, accounts of Jesus' life circulating. And in the last 30 years, there are all sorts of scholarly books showing that the New Testament writings are historically reliable.

Let me just pause here and say, if you have someone in your life who's a friend who's saying this to you, you should use other folk in the congregation as resources in this. I mean, I look out and I see Bill Reimer, who is in charge of the Regent bookstore, he will give you armloads of books that have been written in the last 30 years, fabulous books.

Cindy is here, the librarian at Regent College. She will give you two armloads of books, as long as you bring them back, of books on this. There's a lot of very good stuff out there.

[13:43] See, if you're going to start a religion and pretend that it's based on historical facts, you've got to wait until all the eyewitnesses die out.

And if you're going to write a claiming historical fact-style religion, you don't include all the embarrassing details about the shiny new Christian leaders. You certainly don't say, you certainly don't put the Apostle Peter cursing Jesus and denying Jesus, or the other Apostle's running coward when he's crucified.

You wouldn't put Jesus on the cross saying, God, why have you forsaken me? And you certainly wouldn't have him in the Garden of Gethsemane asking God to take away the cross from you. And you wouldn't put eyewitness details in the text.

And there are lots of eyewitness details in the Gospels that are just lovely. One of my favourites is when Jesus is feeding the 5,000, Mark tells us there's a lot of green grass in that place. If you've ever been to Galilee, it's decades between green grass in Galilee.

Or there's a cushion in the back of the boat. Or the guy, they mention the name of the guy who carries Jesus' cross. Paul says, you know, one of the resurrection appearances, there were 500 people who saw him risen.

[14:55] And the implication is, if you don't believe me, go and ask them. So if people say that the Bible is wrong, that it's myth or it's legend and not history, it might be helpful just to say to them, how did you come to that conclusion?

And if they're genuinely willing to talk, say, I want to introduce you to Bill Reimer and Cindy. However, there are great limitations on this, aren't there?

You can show that the Bible are historically accurate and miss the real issue. I had a friend and after a year of going through the evidence, they said to me finally, okay, I believe the evidence. I believe this is historically accurate. And then they said, but so what? And that brings us to the second point. And that is that the Bible is culturally wrong.

And the slogan that goes with this is, that's just your interpretation. And I think this is more tricky and more widespread in our context.

[15 : 59] To many, the Bible is culturally and personally offensive. It says things to us we no longer believe to be true. I mean, as postmoderns, the very idea that who I am has anything to do with an ancient story handed down through the generations is awful.

The past is boring, people say. You know, to say Jesus rose from the dead and will come again, well, that's just your interpretation. And you know this, but our children are being raised and have been raised in an education system where the emphasis is firmly on subjectivity.

If you've read the curricula in primary school and in secondary school, when a class is reading a text, the issue is not what the author means, but how you respond, how you interpret, how you make meaning out of that text.

Saying that there is meaning in the text that we have to follow along with is seen today as a dangerous crushing of individual expression, counterproductive to creating safe spaces for young people who feel different.

And the slogan, that's just your interpretation, is the slogan of subjectivism. It comes from the fact that we believe there's no truth out there. It's only my experience and what I perceive.

[17 : 21] You read it one way, I read it a different way, another person reads it a third way, and that's okay. All three, even though they might be completely contradictory, they're all three are fine. And it sounds humble, but it's incredibly condescending because it means I have a bigger truth than you and the bigger truth is that everything's subjective.

Therefore, you see, the meaning of the Bible completely depends on the individual who's reading it and interpreting. And you can take it to mean whatever you want it to mean, which means it can't have authority over me.

Well, what does Peter say? This is astonishing. Have a look down at verse 17.

And Peter was overwhelmed and overpowered and did what Peter always does, and he put his foot in his mouth. And Luke tells us that even though they saw the glory, even though they were eyewitnesses to the glory of the Lord, they didn't understand what was going on.

So Peter well understands there are limitations to being an eyewitness. You can see something without really understanding what it means. Until someone who really is in the know explains that it is just your interpretation.

[19 : 09] That's why Peter says, we weren't just eyewitnesses, we were earwitnesses. The God of all the earth came down on the mountain and spoke in an audible voice, this is my beloved son with whom I'm well pleased.

This, this one, the fulfillment of all the Old Testament. You hear what Peter is saying? Peter is saying, that wasn't my interpretation, that's God's interpretation of who Jesus is.

So when we as Christians say that the Bible is the word of God, we're not saying that we're trying to raise this book up to the highest level and highest honor that we can take it up to.

We're saying that the living and true God of all the earth has come down and chosen to reveal himself publicly to his people so that we might know him. And that was the point of the reading from Deuteronomy.

What people have ever heard a God come down and speak words to them? It's God who takes the initiative to disclose and reveal himself so that we might know him and be saved.

[20 : 10] Inspiration is an activity of God. That's why Peter says this astonishing thing in verse 20. Just look down to verse 20, please, with me. Knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of scripture comes from someone's own interpretation.

I believe the Bible says that. Since it's God who is speaking, the interpretation never arises from any individual human mind.

This has vast implications. It means that the Bible interprets itself. When there's something that's not clear in the scriptures, we use what is clear in the scriptures to interpret it. It means that no

Christian and no church and no individual stands over the scripture, but the scripture stands over us and judges us and corrects us and gives us life and health.

It's not fundamentally up to you and me to interpret the scriptures. How can that possibly be true? Verse 21. For no prophecy, and here he's speaking mostly of the Old Testament, no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along, born along by the Holy Spirit.

This is fantastic stuff. It means that the Bible has a dual nature. It is the product of both God and humans. When Jeremiah prophesied, when Moses wrote down, when John wrote his gospel, they weren't passive instruments taking dictation robots without the intrusion of their own individual personalities.

[21 : 52] That's why when you read John, it's different than reading Peter. Different style, different images, different speech patterns. What they wrote and what they spoke were genuinely their own words.

And that means we use all our human tools at our disposal to try and understand it. At the same time, no prophecy of scripture ever had a human origin, Peter says.

But the human authors were carried along, born somehow by the Holy Spirit, so that what they ended up writing was exactly what God wanted written as the words of God.

The same God who spoke audibly on the mountain, therefore now speaks through the words that are written in scripture. And that also means that we can only truly receive what God has written in scripture by the power of the Holy Spirit, who works in humble hearts, obedient hearts, ones that are ready to love the truth.

But we have to keep these two sides together. Scripture originates with God, but comes to us in human words. So we read them with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, on our knees, seeking increasing clarity.

[23 : 06] And that also means that what the Bible says has to be able to contradict us and offend us. Otherwise, you've just created a God in your own image. Otherwise, God becomes a puppet or a robot and not a real personal living deity who's different than you.

I mean, so many of the objections to the Bible today come directly out of our present cultural worldview, our Western worldview. I'm very conscious that the series that we're looking at right now, the objections we're looking at, like, you know, the exclusive claims of Jesus, Christianity is a straitjacket, how can the God of love be a God of wrath?

They're all uniquely Western questions. Jeremy Curry, who's speaking at the missions lunch today, exclusive claims of Jesus are not a problem in traditional cultures.

And it's culturally imperialistic of us, on our behalf, to write off the Bible culture as being limited without acknowledging the fact that our culture is limited as well.

Tim Keller, who's a pastor in New York, Jim Saladin is a pastor in New York. Tim Keller, Jim hasn't written any books yet, but Tim Keller's written lots of books. And he points out that if you eliminate what offends you in the Bible, if you pick and choose so that you have a God who can't contradict you, his phrase is, then we create a Stepford God.

[24 : 32] Stepford Wives was a novel, and it's been made a couple of, a sci-fi novel about a town called Stepford, where the men turned their wives into robots, who were perfectly compliant and beautiful, who would never cross the will of their husbands.

And it's a, it's a creepy movie because in the end, there's no real relationships. If you don't trust the Bible to challenge you and to change you, then you can't have a personal relationship with God.

It's only when God can say things that outrage you or make you struggle, that you've got the real God outside yourself, who's willing to reveal himself. So how do we wrap this all up?

Let me just say two things. By way of conclusion. If the Bible is the word of God, it must be very powerful. We ought to try to stop arguing about it, and get, try to get people to read it.

Charles Spurgeon, lovely preacher from 150 years ago, he pitches the line, he pitches the Bible as a caged lion, with us arrayed around the cage, trying to defend the lion against its enemies and attackers.

[25 : 41] And he says, don't defend the lion. Let it out of the cage. It can take care of itself. And I think this is very important for us.

It's crucial for us to be able to answer questions when people call us to account for the hope that's in us. Yes, it's a good thing to be able to explain why you think the Bible is historically reliable, and

why you think it is true.

But in the end, God really doesn't need us to defend his word. It is his word, and what we need to do is to offer it to others, praying that God would meet them in it.

And if you have a friend who's interested, offer to meet with them and read it together, and I have a terrific resource I can give to you for that. Secondly, I just, I have to say this, if, if it is the word of God, the best way of growing in your trust in God, and growing to know God better, is to read it. We don't say this often enough at St. John's. It's a very good thing to read it prayerfully and humbly, submitting your mind and your conscience and your affections, asking to know him.

[26 : 53] All of us need a plan of daily reading. And don't read books about the Bible. Go to the Bible itself first.

And don't come to the Bible asking if you can get something out of it. That's not what it's there for. It will change you, but that doesn't happen quickly.

It happens over time. The way God's word captures our hearts is over time as it captures our mind. So, it's a very simple application.

Read the Bible. Let's pray together. Our Father, we bless you for the grand privilege of having in our hands this sacred text, this written word that you have inspired by your spirit.

And we do confess that so much of it is still unknown to us. And we pray that you would help us to be faithful witnesses to the beauty and loveliness of this and that you would help us to grow to know you more deeply as we seek to refresh our own Bible reading.

[28 : 16] And we pray this for the glory of your son. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.