

### 3.4 HOW CAN I GET THE BEST STUFF FROM THE BIBLE?

#### **Preamble**

A little recap. Our first night we talked about why thinking about questions of faith—and Jesus specifically—can be challenging and difficult, yet also rewarding. The next week we talked about why Jesus might be particularly helpful to give some attention to, and how to consider him in the context of world religions. Last week we talked about why and how to pray.

Today I'd like to talk a bit about the Bible because most people exploring faith—or, more specifically, faith in Jesus— find this to be a key part of that search.

Growing up I mostly heard the bible through Sunday school stories. There is a fairly typical cannon of bible stories that are usually told to kids: Noah and all the animals (though of course they leave out the genocide part), David and Goliath, Daniel in the lions den, etc. I would occasionally try to read the Bible on my own, but I usually found it pretty boring and incomprehensible. I also made one common mistake that some of you may have also made: I tried to read the Bible through from beginning to end in order. This goes alright for a while. Genesis, the first book, is pretty interesting, and the first part of Exodus isn't bad. Then you come to Leviticus, which is entirely composed of ancient laws, many of them dealing with circumstances and practices that seem bizarre and irrelevant, and if you make it through that the next book, Numbers, begins with 12 chapters worth of lists.

Part of this was probably just being a kid - the Bible is a pretty complicated book - but the thing that made the bible come to life for me in the end was participating in a particular Bible study group. The group was lead by someone who was both very passionate about the Bible, and very knowledgeable, and as we read and discussed together I began to develop a growing fascination with the Bible. I discovered that if I was willing to drop some assumptions and do a little work to see the Bible for what it claims to be, rather than what I thought/wanted it to be, that it became a beautiful, challenging, fascinating and practical book. I personally have come to love reading the Bible from an intellectual perspective: I enjoy the challenge and fun of learning about ancient cultures and working to carefully parse difficult passages. I also have found the Bible to be a good thing for my life in all kinds of practical ways. Tonight I want to spell out how that can be possible.

#### **1. What might we expect from the Bible?**

##### **1. It's hard to understand.**

##### **2. It's too old to be relevant.**

Here are a few things we might be tempted to expect. First, that it will be hard to understand and second that it will be too old to be relevant. The Bible was written a long time ago, obviously. It was written to very different cultures than we experience. Some of us might have read some other old literature, so we might have some familiarity with ancient cultures. But the Bible can seem like a really distant culture. In the early books it deals with a stone age, nomadic people, living in the desert. I grew up in a modern city. How on earth could stories written about such different people have meaningful things to do with my life?

##### **3. It has too much material.**

Thirdly, you might expect that it would have too much material, that it would be hard to find what's valuable in it. It seems so long and it all seems so different. How would I know what to

read? Would I, for instance, want to read this prayer book called Psalms? It seems pretty bloodthirsty, which seems like an odd way to learn about prayer. Should I read these fairly straightforward narratives about Jesus that you find in the New Testament—except for the one, John, which is not very straightforward? Should I read little tips for living from Proverbs? Should I read sex poetry from Song of Songs? Should I read obscure, hard to understand laws from Leviticus and Numbers? How do you get good stuff out of all so many different perspectives?

#### **4. It's a rule-book to be obeyed.**

And finally, you might expect it's a rule-book to be obeyed. You might regard that as positive or negative. If you're not excited about the thought of a divine rule book, you might imagine the unpleasant prospect of finding a book telling you all this stuff you don't want to do. Or you might think, fabulous! This will give me rules for a happy and good life. But you might find that those rules take a bit more teasing out than you were hoping for.

### **What will I find in the Bible?**

#### **1. 1600 years worth of stories of relating to God.**

What will you actually discover in the Bible? I think you'll find sixteen hundred years worth of stories related to God. And I think you'll discover that you have quite a bit more in common with the sweep of people there than you might initially have thought.

#### **2. A surprising ability to speak to your situation at key moments**

Secondly, I think you'll find a surprising ability for it to speak to your specific situation at key moments. I'll actually tell a personal story about this a little later on.

The Bible describes itself in a strange way. 2 Timothy describes the Bible as being living and active, piercing right to the center of one's heart. As if the words of the Bible itself are meant to be alive and cutting in a good way—cutting right to the heart of things—almost in the way that we think of Jesus being alive.

And in fact, there are three things in the Bible that get the same metaphorical name of “the Word of God.” The Bible is called the Word of God in that passage I just described. Jesus gets called the Word of God in the first chapter of John's Gospel. And “God's Word” in the Bible is also when God talks to people directly. All three of these are supposed to be ways in which we hear from this living God who talks with us about our lives, about where we're supposed to go and what we're supposed to do. And the Bible is a key part of this.

#### **3. An emphasis on relationship rather than rules.**

Another thing I think you'll find is an emphasis on relationships rather than rules. You may remember this question Leah asked a couple of weeks back, namely, what if the universe is relational? What if truth is relational rather than propositional or abstract? What if anything we know about the world we know in context of relationship? I think this is one surprise we get when we read the Bible. When we read normal nonfiction, what most of us are expecting are truths, abstract thoughts that some author has very wisely discerned about the universe. So we might come to the Bible thinking that this will be an extremely helpful book that will have some great things to tell us about the universe, which it certainly is. But what we find are not so much rules or truisms, but pathways into a happier, richer, relational world, where you're actually relating to Jesus, to God, and to other people.

## **What does the Bible say about people that read it?**

The Bible says good things will happen for these people who actually read it. Here's something it says from Psalm 1:

Blessed is the person whose delight is in the law of the Lord (which is the Bible) and on his law he or she meditates day and night. He or she is like a tree planted by streams of water which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. What ever he or she does prospers.

So, what it seems to be saying is, "Wow! Here's the good life! Here's a picture of the person who's going to get the kind of life we all hope for! That's the person who's always meditating on the Bible, always thinking about it. They're like a tree that's planted by the water and so gets constant nourishment."

That same striking promise comes up in other places. So Joshua—in the book of Joshua—is an invading general facing challenging odds. He's told that he's going to win and will prosper if he meditates on the words of the Bible day and night. As if he won't just be a good and godly person if he does that, but will be a conquering general.

I have one fun Bible passage to chat with you about, which—to me—highlights a few surprising and helpful things about how we can expect to interact with God and with the Bible. I'm going to read to you the entire passage.

Mark 4:1-20: Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times." Then Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!" Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? The farmer sows the word. Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop-- thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown."

*Three words to keep in mind as you read the Bible:*

**1. Observation:** *What does the passage say?*

**2. Interpretation:** *What does the passage mean?*

**3. Application:** *What does the passage mean for me?*

To start with, I'd want to let you know about a theory that many people have about how to get the most out of reading the Bible. It's encapsulated in three words: observation, interpretation, and application. Observation is: "What does it say?" Interpretation is: "What does it mean?" And application is: "What does it mean for me, or for my life?" I think many of us just want to cut right to application. "So what?" Or we want to come up with deep meaningful truths: interpretation. But we rarely want to sit and actually just observe what's there: "What does it say?" Which short-circuits the impact of the passage in question on our lives. So, let's see if we can do a little bit of observation, interpretation, and application here and see where that gets us.

So, Jesus is teaching where? (From the middle of a lake.) Why? Why would he do such a thing? (He's being mobbed.) Yes, so he wants to get away from the mob. Any other reason for him to be sitting on a boat and teaching people? (Water provides natural amplification.)

And who is he teaching? (The crowd—which we find includes some friends of his.) And what's the story he tells about? (Seeds.) And what are the insights he gives people about seeds? (Different ways to grow.) What does he begin and end the story with? ("Listen!" And, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear.") Anything else you notice about the story he tells? (On the one hand, it's sort of a simple little story. He's not teaching rocket science. And he was probably talking to a lot of farmers.)

So what happens next? He finishes the story and then what? (He's "alone.") How do you imagine that would have happened, given the big crowd? (Maybe he rowed the boat to another part of the lake, and the people we hear about came to him.) And who came to him? (The Twelve—and "others.")

Jesus says to them, "The secret of the Kingdom of God has been given to you. To the others he spoke in parables so that they would be ever seeing, never perceiving and ever hearing but never understanding. Otherwise they might turn and be forgiven." (This is a quote from Isaiah.) What do you make of that? (It sounds mean.) How so? (He won't let them see because he doesn't want them to be forgiven?)

So then he interprets the parable. Could somebody paraphrase what his interpretation of this parable is? What's this parable actually about? (The way different sorts of people respond to God's Word.) So what are the four different soils? Can you briefly define what they are for me? Let's start with the path. (The seed gets sown, and it's like,clank! The birds come and eat it.) And what's the rocky soil? (It grows quickly, but has no depth and burns away in the sun.) And the next one is? (Thorns. It grows but then the concerns of life and the world choke it to death.) And what's the last? (The good soil. Yields big harvest.)

Let's go back a bit. Jesus told them, "The secret of the Kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside, everything is said in parables." How exactly has the secret of the Kingdom of God been given to them? Do they understand the parable better than the other people? They seem to be fairly clueless. So how exactly are they different than people on the outside? (Maybe it's literal. The people on the outside are in fact outside—of the room.)

So for the people who aren't with him, who walked away, what do you think they got out of the parable? (Not much!) I might even suggest that the people who left are all one particular type of soil only. I think they're the path. They hear this little kid's story about farming and then they leave. I think they have one of two choices. Either they'd say, "That was the stupidest thing I've ever heard! This guy is about the most overrated teacher I've ever heard of!" Or they could say, "Now that is what I call teaching. That is really profound." But still be left with nothing other than their own "deep" but irrelevant interpretations.

Either way, I think, they've got nothing. The seed makes no difference to their lives. The only people here who are even in the game to be the other three sorts of soil are the people who are with him. We don't know that they're good soil yet. But they do have the secret to the kingdom of God, which seems hopeful. We know that they at least could be good soil.

"The secret of the Kingdom of God has been given to you. For to those on the outside, everything is said in parables." Meaning the words of the teaching won't actually do them any good. That's what a parable is here. So what's the secret of the Kingdom of God that's been given to them?

I think that, in some sense, the secret to the Kingdom God is response to Jesus. Tracking Jesus down and asking him what he was talking about, that's the secret. So we're left with this odd thing. In this parable, the words of the parable themselves are not initially the issue. And we're in the same position as his listeners. We just read the parable. We don't get it. Nobody gets it. I don't think it's possible to get it. What do we make of Jesus telling stories that cannot be understood?! That's an interesting pedagogical plan! And yet he has a plan, and the plan is to provoke response out of us. Remember that he began by saying, "Listen." And he closed by saying, "For those who have ears to hear, let them hear." And then Jesus says this other challenging thing: that outsiders will be "ever seeing but never perceiving, ever hearing but never understanding. Otherwise they might turn and be forgiven." How on earth do we understand that?

But what if Jesus is saying, "I'm not going to give you a rule book and say: I hope it goes well; be good students; study that book; good luck." It seems like he's saying: the only people who are going to get relationship with God are going to be people who relate with God. There's no short cut; there's no way we can just go off on our own in a corner and get what God wants to give us. It has to be interactive. If it's not interactive, there's nothing.

The universe, again, is relational. Maybe Jesus doesn't want anyone to turn and be forgiven because they said the magic incantation. Maybe the only way in is through the secret of the Kingdom of God, through responding to Jesus, finding him, talking with him, asking for help.

I remember one time when I read this, I had an emotional response. I was in the middle of a group talking about this passage. I was particularly struck by the image of productiveness. The good crop multiplies 30, 60, and even 100 fold. I find that image very appealing. I want that kind of fruitfulness in my life. I want to be multiplicative.

Clearly this is not the sort of world where, where there was one seed, now there are two. This is a world where—if it all goes well—what God puts in us has its own internal energy. Our role seems to boil down to cultivation, to gardening. We can't make the seed grow. But maybe we can do something about the thorns. Again, hearing that for the first time, I just thought, I want

that for my life. I want a life that makes an overflowing difference. I want life that's about more than just I put in a nickel, I get out a nickel.

A few more things to keep in mind:

**1. Expect more than factual information.**

Here are a few more thoughts on how to read the Bible. Expect more than factual information. Don't settle for getting the facts. Having read a few books in school, we tend to just want to learn something, master it, and be done with it. But, again, Jesus seems to deemphasize, to a degree, the information itself. He doesn't seem to want to make us into people that are impressed with ourselves because we know so much.

**2. Let yourself be profoundly puzzled.**

Secondly, let yourself be puzzled.

I think that one of the most important skills in dealing with the Bible is becoming comfortable with being uncomfortable. The Bible says many things that are uplifting, encouraging, and enlightening. It also says a lot of things that if we take them seriously should be pretty disturbing.

I think that what can often happen when we encounter something disturbing in the Bible is one of two things: either we just give up on the Bible as offensive and irrelevant, or, this is what tends to happen to me, we try to gloss over the difficult parts or explain them away in superficial ways. This approach is difficult to maintain because the Bible has a lot of disturbing stuff that isn't easy to resolve quickly, and is hard to ignore. There are a lot of murders. There are some pretty difficult statements made about slaves. Jesus in the passage we read earlier today said some confusing, disturbing things.

I remember at some point the leader of a Bible study group I was in said something that I found very helpful. She said, in reading the Bible, one of your goals should be to find something that disturbs you. You haven't really read a passage closely till you find it disturbing, and that emotion drives you to ask questions you otherwise wouldn't have asked. And what she was saying was, unless you are puzzled and work it out, you will never get anything from the Bible. Without that, the information you read will just float through your brain and float out with no lasting impression.

Be patient. Sometimes the resolution for what troubles us in the Bible can take awhile. The a-ha moment might not be there immediately. You've got to stick with it and hang in—as we've just tried to do with this parable.

**3. Respond to what you hear.**

Lastly, respond to what you hear.

As I've already mentioned, I think one of the great things about the Bible is that it often has an uncanny ability to speak to us at key moments in our lives. Probably the greatest struggle I've had so far with my faith was dealing with the fact that I grew up in a great family that I loved and that was also very christian. That might sound like a silly thing to complain about, and believe me, I'm very grateful. For some people that might not have presented any problems, but I have a very particular kind of mind, and for me it raised an issue. Namely: how do I know that my faith is because of something real, and not simply the result of my family. I like my parents a lot, so it

makes sense that I'd be interested in what they were interested in, and maybe that's all there is to it. Put more bluntly, how do I know that if I grew up with parents who were just as loving but were atheists, that I wouldn't be an atheist now? I suppose it's very likely that I would.

I found this very disturbing, because it made me feel like my faith wasn't really my own, but was just something circumstantial. I began to feel a lot of anxiety. I felt distant or board in church, but all the while I continued with various church activities. In particular, I still very much enjoyed studying the Bible. I ended up with a group of people reading the first four chapters of the gospel of John, one of the books that tells the story of Jesus' life.

There are a lot of different themes that come up in those chapters relating to what it means to know Jesus and to know God. Many of the stories deal with how we can come to know God, and how we can have confidence in our faith. In the final story we studied Jesus meets a woman and has a powerful interaction with her, and she is so excited that she runs off to tell her whole town what happened. The towns people are impressed by the woman's story, and many of them also come to have faith in Jesus. A little later on, Jesus also heads to the town where the woman lives, and the citizens are excited to meet him. At the end of Jesus visit, they say to the woman

"It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world."

I still remember how I felt when I first read that verse. Here in the bible were people who's faith had started through another person, but had now come to be based on a their own interaction with Jesus, and they were thrilled about it. I felt as if the Bible were saying to me "what you want: to make your faith more your own, and to make sure it's really something you believe, that's a good thing. Jesus wants that for you too."

Now there was still a long process ahead of me of reading theology, and studying the Bible more on my own, and thinking through things, and having conversations. What did happen right in the moment when I first encountered that verse, was that I suddenly felt like my struggle was legitimate. I felt a great sense of freedom to explore whatever questions might come my way, and I felt encouraged that other people in the past had gone through a similar process. So that's my story of taking the Bible seriously.

### **Some practical steps**

Let's see if I can cut to some practical stuff. It's commonly asked of me, "Is the Bible inerrant? Infallible? What words do I use to describe the Bible?" I don't have many words that I use to describe the Bible. But I think a helpful assumption is that God intended everything that is in the Bible to be there. But that doesn't mean that we necessarily understand it right. I think that the Bible is awesome, helpful, and smarter than me, but that doesn't mean that I necessarily understand it to the point that anything I ever say about the Bible is true to the Bible. Anything I say about the Bible should not be recorded for posterity. This discussion of the parable of the seed and the soil doesn't mean that our understanding is true. But the story is true. Whatever's said in the Bible is worth me grappling with as best as I can.

The way to avoid absurdity as we think about the Bible is to ask ourselves what the author of the passage in question was trying to say. So, for instance, Jesus said that the mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds. We now recognize that it's, like, the fiftieth-smallest of all seeds. There

are plenty of seeds smaller than the mustard seed. So is the creator of the universe saying such foolishness? And you call the Bible inerrant!

Maybe you get my point. You can go down that road if you want, but maybe pulling back a bit we can ask ourselves, what was Jesus' point in talking about the mustard seed as the smallest of seeds? Maybe he's talking about God's word also being small but then growing to a big height. And, at the time, people did regard the mustard seed as being the smallest of all seeds. So I suppose Jesus could've said, "Let's take the mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds—well actually it's not the smallest of seeds. But I know that and you don't. Give it a few millennia and you'll know that there are many, many seeds smaller than the mustard seed. But, for our purposes today, let's consider the mustard seed which you ignorantly regard as the smallest of seeds, okay?" He didn't do that. He just spoke to them.

The way out of this crazy space is to ask: what is the author driving at? I suppose you might ask, "Isn't God the author?" Absolutely! But at the same time, the Bible does have human authorship. Some other holy books don't claim that. The Koran claims that golden plates were given to Mohammed. The Bible doesn't claim that. It's "The Gospel According to Mark". No one's hiding the fact that this guy, Mark, wrote it. And so Mark had a point of view that seems to have endured throughout the millennia as being a really helpful point of view. And understanding that point of view is what we're trying to do as we read.

Some practical steps

### **1) How much to read?**

A few final tips. How much to read? Considering what we said about prayer last week, as much as you can, but start small. Don't start big and quit. So we recommended at least 5 minutes a day for prayer. And 5 minutes a day for the Bible. Most people can do 10 minutes a day. If you can do more, by all means go for it. But the key is to get rolling and be consistent.

### **2) Which Bible to use?**

Which Bible to use? I have a bias. My bias is a modern translation. A famous modern translation is one called the New Living Translation or the NLT. This is relatively easy reading for the most part. Or try the NIV, New International Version. Or the NRSV, the New Revised Standard Version. Look for something modern. The one I feel prejudiced against in this view is the King James Version. Many people read and love the King James, usually because it was the Bible they grew up with, which is fair enough. But I don't think you love it because it speaks your language, unless you happen to speak 16<sup>th</sup> century Elizabethan English, the King James can tend to be pretty confusing. It seems to me that the Bible is not there to be admired. The Bible is there to be read and obeyed and followed and lived. So you're looking for what helps you do that. Your looking for a version you can act on.

### **3) Where to start?**

And finally: where to begin? That was my mistake. Do not begin at the beginning and read until the end. The Bible itself is not one long book. It's actually a collection of 66 books written by maybe twenty different authors. So, I would personally recommend starting with one of the Gospel stories about Jesus, probably one of the first three, which are the most straightforward: Matthew, Mark, or Luke. And I would read one of those all the way through because I think that would give you a nice intro to the person of Jesus who, by the end of the Bible, is its hero, its centerpiece.



Once you finish that, I'd recommend going to the next part of the story, which is called Acts of the Apostles. It's a pretty terrific story. I think you'll find it reads like a novel. It's quite a gripper. At that point, you have many options. You could read the rest of the New Testament. Or you could jump back to the Old Testament and read Genesis, the very first book of the Bible. It sort of sets the tone of everything you see later on and tells some pretty fascinating stories about the early biblical characters. You could go anywhere from there. All to say, I would start with a gospel.