

## **Reading the Bible for All Its Worth**

### **Isaiah 55:6-11 and 2Timothy 3:16-17**

This morning I'd like to talk about reading the Bible for all its worth. There is a very good book with the title, "**How to** *Read the Bible for All Its Worth*" and I highly recommend it. It goes through all of the different types of literature in the Bible, like Old Testament historical narratives, the Old Testament Prophets, Jesus' parables, Paul's epistles, Psalms, apocalyptic literature like the book of Revelation, and so forth, and gives us solid instruction about how to read and understand those parts of the Bible. It's super helpful.

I'm not going to give a "how to" sermon this morning, but more of "how come?" message about what the Bible is and isn't, what it's for, and how we approach this extraordinary book (or collection of books, actually).

I was motivated to develop this message today, largely because the use (misuse, actually) of the Bible by Christian nationalists and by certain leaders in our country has been upsetting to me, because it's the worst kind of use/misuse of our sacred Scriptures.

Throughout the centuries there have always been some people, usually preachers and politicians, who misinterpret the Bible, and even abuse it, for the sake of achieving or maintaining power, for gaining personal prosperity, or who

want to exert control over others. Those people have historically been on the margins of leadership and society, with exceptions during certain cycles of history when they manage to make their way onto center stage. The challenge *right now* is that we are living through one of those exceptional times in history when it is indeed people in very public places of leadership, on center stage, who are using the Bible wrongly.

Part of the challenge, always, is that people can make the Bible say whatever they want it to say. They can use it to justify slavery if they want to, as was done in our country's history, or they can make a case for misogyny, as some still do. They can make the Bible say, as some do, that only exactly 144,000 people are going to heaven. Because, in an obscure reference in the book of Revelation it says there were 144,000 people who survived a tribulation of some kind. Never mind that billions and billions of people have lived on earth over several millennia. But only 144,000 make it into heaven? That isn't how the book is meant to be interpreted.

They can use the Bible to scare the hell *out of* people, or scare people *about* hell, which, again, is not what the Bible is for or how it is to be used. The Bible rarely speaks about it, actually. But because there are some, who I playfully refer to as hell enthusiasts—they seem enthusiastic about the prospect of there

being a hell and a God who has a need to send people there—because there are those who talk about it regularly, it has gotten way too much play in churches and in the public square over the years, and we get the impression that it's mentioned on every page.

I can confidently tell you that of all the topics addressed in the Bible, including by Jesus in the gospels, hell—or some concept of a shadowy place on the other side of this life—is talked about *almost never* in the Old Testament, and *only a handful of times* in the gospels does it get a mention, typically at the end of one of Jesus' parables, and *never* in any of Paul's epistles. That may surprise us. The book of Revelation is a completely different animal that needs another message by itself, but it's a book that is filled with visions and symbolism, and is not meant to be interpreted literally. It's more like a surrealist art display.

I mention this today because I conversed with someone about it recently who had the same experience as dozens of people I have known over my 30 years of ministry, from all kinds of backgrounds—Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Lutheran, Catholic—who have told me that the church they went to growing up, or as an adult, talked about hell every Sunday. That's wackily out of proportion. I'm one of those who thinks that we should talk about the things that the Bible talks about the majority of the time. And hell is not one of them.

Not to mention that our understanding of hell today, which is more of a popular cultural image that comes from a combination of scary movies and bad Biblical interpretation, is not what is truly taught in those few texts in the Bible that mention it. It doesn't mean what we think it means. Maybe more on this another time. I'm not a hell enthusiast, obviously, and I'm not even sure there *is* such a place that people get sent to. I think that people create their own hell—for themselves, and, unfortunately, sometimes, for others. And God keeps inviting people out of that darkness and into the light of the Kingdom.

Church sign blooper: "What is hell? Come listen to our preacher."

This is all to say, we can make the Bible say just about anything we want it to say. But the Bible doesn't exist to help us say what *we* want to say. It's there to help us listen to what *God* wants to say—to us. So, this morning, I'd like to talk for a few minutes about what the Bible is and isn't, how we approach it and receive what's in it, and generally what the goal of having a Bible is. We heard a wonderful text from Isaiah that Katie read, an ecological image about God's word being like rain that refreshes the earth and helps it become fruitful. Our next reading is from Paul's letter to his young apprentice Timothy, about God's Word.

*2Timothy 3:16-17: "All Scripture is inspired by God (literally, "God-breathed) and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,*

*so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”*

Message Translation: *“Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God’s way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us.”*

This is the word of the Lord.

What is the Bible? What is it for? How do we approach it, read it? These are good questions, and it’s good to review these things from time to time.

Let’s start with some things the Bible is not. These are some common misconceptions about the Bible and what it’s for. What the Bible is not:

1. A how-to book. The Bible is not a book you pull off the shelf when you want to figure out how to do something. Ever notice that when publishers want to create a comprehensive guide to a particular subject, they often use the word “bible” in the title? For example: “The Backpacker’s Bible” or “The Quilter’s Bible” or “The Jeep Owner’s Bible.” These are all books that tell you how to do something or fix something or create something. The *Bible owner’s Bible* is not like that. It has some parts like that, but that isn’t what it *is*.

If the Bible is something we open only when we get in a pickle and need an answer for something, or need to know what to do in a certain situation,

then I think we're going to be disappointed, or perhaps even confused.

Because often times the Bible leaves us asking more questions than giving us easy answers. I'll come back to this in a couple moments.

2. A rule book. It is not like the NFL referees' book of comprehensive rules for football; what they players can and can't do, and what sanctions come to bear if they break the rules. It is not like a country's legal code which lawyers interpret to determine what is legal and what isn't, or, what someone can *get away with* and what they can't. Obviously, the Bible *contains* rules and law, but that's not what it *is*. In fact, Jesus' most stern criticism of the Pharisees is that they made God's word a burden by making it primarily a set of laws to obey. Rather than the wonderful words of life that the Word of God really is.
3. A book of inspiration and advice. Again, it contains some of this, but that's not what it *is*. We don't go to the Bible the same way we go to, say, Chicken Soup for the Soul, or some other self-help book. If you go into a bookstore, particularly a Christian bookstore, you can find any number of "inspirational" books, which lift quotations out of the books of the Bible. One of them I saw at a bookstore was titled "100 promises of the Bible." It contained promises like, "*not a sparrow falls from the sky apart from your*

*father's will,"* and *"he has counted all the hairs on your head."* Those are lovely, but if you look these passages up in the Bible, they are spoken by Jesus in the context of his telling the disciples, *"You will be persecuted, thrown in prison, and some of you will be put to death because of me... Yet, not a sparrow falls from the sky..."* So, these little one-liners are nice promises that make us feel good, but sometimes they are plucked and isolated from their context—the context of Jesus preparing his followers for the coming persecutions they will need to endure from the Roman authorities.

So the Bible is not a book of inspiration and advice. There is inspiration and feel-good wisdom, but there is just as much challenge and correction, and invitation to change of mind and heart.

4. The Bible is not... a weapon. To be used against others. The Bible is not to be used to control or guilt trip any person, and it is not to be used by a leader of any country to justify war, certainly not a "holy war"—which is a contradiction in terms; there is no such thing as a holy war. Watch out for Christians who are war enthusiasts! (they are usually hell enthusiasts)

As a way of summarizing all of this, we could say that the Bible is not an answer book. If we use it that way, then we are doing exactly, that—we are *using*

it. But the Bible is not meant to be used; it is meant to be lived in, taken in, and listened to. God means for Scripture to shape *us*, and make *us* useful for God's Kingdom purposes, as Paul put it to Timothy. It is, as the author of Hebrews puts it, "living and active..." It is "God-breathed, inspired..." (we might say, in-Spirited) as Paul puts it. Isaiah's lovely image is that it nourishes and creates growth and abundance; fruitfulness.

So the Bible is not an answer book. Again, sometimes we read it and come away with more questions than we approached it with. It's much like some peoples' encounters with Jesus. They approach him with a question and leave with more challenging and personal questions, from him, to reflect upon. He didn't want them to have answers or just be inspired—he wanted them to be changed. And to follow him in the Way—the Kingdom Way.

There are some things that The Bible is not. So, what is it? What is it for? How should we read it?

A good question could be: what makes our Scriptures unique? What sets the Christian Scriptures apart and makes the Bible the true Word of God? Two things (among many, but these I think are most important):

1. The Bible, as a whole, is The Story (capital T, capital S). The Story of who God is, and who we are, and of the long history of God bringing salvation to

the world—from Genesis to Revelation. It is *The Story* of God’s faithful pursuit of people.

So when we read one of the books of the Bible, we ask ourselves, “How does this particular part fit into the larger narrative of God’s salvation story and plan? We don’t go to, say, the book of Numbers or Leviticus, and begin to pluck out a verse here and there and say, “God says we must do this” and “We must not do that.” If we do that we’ll get bogged down in strange and ancient rules and practices. Rather, we go to Numbers and Leviticus and ask, “How was God at work at that time, bringing wholeness to the world, and working *with* his people and *through* his people to bring wholeness to the world (salvation)?” We might ask, what principles were at work that are part of the golden threads that run throughout the entire Story?

What’s unique about the Bible is that the vast majority of it comes to us as narrative. Scripture comes to us mostly as story. And, it comes to us as poetry and song. One-third of the Bible is in poetic form: songs, prayers, reflections, prophetic speech; this also makes it unique. But poems and songs also tell a story, and they are part of the great Story of salvation in the Bible.

All of this makes the book relational—and that’s the main point. The Scriptures are relational because our God is relational. And we can relate to

story. Jesus' favorite teaching method was storytelling. Parables. To tell us who God is, who we are, and how we can relate to this God who loves us, and pursues us. Isaiah tells the people: seek God, return to God, call upon God. This is relationship language. It's like someone reaching out to a friend, saying, "Call me back! I miss you."

And the thing about the stories in the Bible is that they are about people like us, who make mistakes and have mishaps, along with successes and achievements; who experience times of loss, and gain; times of trusting God and times of forgetting God. This aspect of the Bible convinced me, as a young adult, that it's true. Because this isn't propaganda; if it was propaganda the people in the Bible would make no mistakes, and there would be no contradictions or questions. The Bible is very real, with stories of real people, like us. And that makes it relational, and it reveals to us along the way that God is gracious.

Someone described the Bible this way: as the difference between recipes and valentines. Recipes give us formulas for what to do to make dinner, but we can't relate to recipes, or even the author of a recipe book. But we can relate to valentines and the author of valentines. The Bible is a collection of God's valentines to the world. Love letters from God!

So the Bible is The Story, which makes it relational—it invites us into deeper relationship with our God. Which leads to the second unique aspect:

2. When read with the intent to be guided by the Holy Spirit, it becomes a living, breathing encounter with *God*, and it draws us into the grand ongoing story of redemption, which changes us. (repeat)

It draws me into the Story and I become part of something large and expansive. With the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit, I become part of God's salvation story, and I discover that God is changing me, and working his purposes out through me, along with a whole lot of other people.

I would encourage you to read the opening lines of a couple of Paul's letters—specifically Ephesians and Colossians—to hear Paul speak to this big grand plan (the great Story, if you will) and how God is working out his will, as Paul says in Ephesians, “as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and on earth.” That sounds like something big that God is up to! We typically read past lines like these, because, we typically read the Bible to get to the practical stuff. But if we don't see or hear this, we miss out on how God, through Christ, has initiated a grand vision and plan, some great purpose that we are swept up in, and become participants of, as God works out something magnificent. That's pretty exciting to me.

The other exciting thing the Holy Spirit does as the Christian reads the Scriptures: the Holy Spirit speaks to each of us in unique ways and we are changed as a result of that encounter. Because an encounter with the Scriptures is meant to be an encounter with the living God. When we read Scripture under the Holy Spirit's guidance, it points us to its living center, Jesus Christ. The *written* word points us to the *living* Word, Jesus Christ. Even the Old Testament, because it points, in anticipation, to the coming of Christ. And, of course, the New Testament, in fulfillment of the coming of Christ.

The Spirit makes it come alive—lifts words and phrases and stories off the page and speaks to us and changes us. If we are open and willing to let it do so.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer: “When reading the Scriptures, the primary interpretive question is not “Do I understand this passage?” but “How is this text attempting to change me into the likeness of Jesus Christ? Behind all Scripture is not simply the question “Do you agree?” but rather “Will you follow where it is leading? Will you choose to follow Jesus?”

This is why it pains me to hear leaders in the public square use the Bible manipulatively. Especially when the quotes they use seem to be exclusively from the Old Testament. I wonder if any of these people have even read the gospels. There is no humility as they quote the Bible, no asking “How is this attempting to

change me into the likeness of Christ?” Only attempts to make the Bible say what they want it to say, for the use of power and control.

God wants to make people part of his *ongoing* salvation story. Scripture is relational and personal, and comes alive to us—and in us—by the guidance of the Spirit. And it changes us, step by step.

Yes, there are challenges in understanding what we’re reading, and we need some help. That’s why good Bible study materials, and books like *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* are helpful. Because they will help us get through the historical and cultural and language barriers in it. So we can then ask the good questions, like Bonhoeffer suggests, about how this Word from God is continually inviting me to be changed, and follow.

The first time I read the Bible was as a senior in high school. I was a new Christian, through Young Life, and one of our leaders told the story of the prodigal son, and how this father let us son take his share of the inheritance and go and do whatever he wanted to with it. But then he came to his senses and decided to go home, and his father saw him from a great distance and ran to him and welcomed him home, and threw a party for him.

I was mesmerized by that story and went home and read it for myself in Luke’s gospel (my Young Life leader had given me my first Bible). It was in reading that

story that I felt like I was reading about myself; I found myself in that story. And, I found God. I didn't grow up going to church so I had no idea who or what God was, except, perhaps from some t.v. caricatures or from what I accidentally heard from people around me from time to time. And from my own intuitive sense that there is a God out there, who made this big incredible universe, and this amazing earth.

But in reading this story, it became so clear to me: This is who God is; the loving parent who will run and risk tripping and falling on his face to embrace not just me, but anyone who wants to know God, know themselves, and be part of what God is up to. It all came together for me and made sense.

David Allen Hubbard (was the president of Fuller Seminary when Heidi and I were there): "Apply all of the text to yourself, apply all of yourself to the text. And see what God will do."

Be Thou My Vision