

How to Read the Bible

What is the Bible then? The record of God revealing himself to human beings all through history, and especially in the greatest revelation of all: God's Son, Jesus Christ. The account of the great controversy between God and the Devil, good triumphing over evil, and how we all are involved in the battle over the nature and character of God. The demonstration of how God came to save us and to re-make us in his image. The evidence of God's salvation.

Universe-wide themes! So it can't be just a good book, or sublime literature, or human imaginings. Take or leave it—the Bible says of itself: this is God speaking to you. Question is, can we trust this God?

For to answer the question "Can we trust the Bible?" really means answering a deeper question: "Can we trust the God the Bible describes?" So what of the God of the Bible? Doesn't really matter whether the Bible can be trusted if we can't trust the God it speaks of!

From Eden to Exodus, from Mount Sinai to the Mount of Olives, from Galilee to Gethsemane—the chorus of the Bible is: God can be trusted! He really does do what he promises. He really can fulfil his claims. He really is as he says. How do we know? Because he *demonstrates* it!

The Bible is not full of pious sayings and religious instructions. Instead it shows how God acts and reacts to human beings. The Bible tells the story of how God so loved the world that he was willing to do absolutely everything—even to die on the Cross—to win us back.

Take time to check out this God. He doesn't say "Believe blindly in me." He says, "Take a look. See the kind of person I am. Examine my record. Understand my nature. Then accept me for what I am. Look at what I can do for you. Salvation unlimited!"

Reasoning with God

"Come let us reason together," says God. That's what the Bible says. In clear and simple terms it tells us how God is involved with us. The evidence is overwhelming. So why do so many ignore the Bible, then? Why do so few people trust the Bible?

People don't generally reject the Bible because it contradicts itself, but because it contradicts themselves! Sadly most don't want to know what the Bible says because they don't want to know God. As Josh Billings suggested: "Almost any fool can prove the Bible ain't so—it takes a wise man to believe it." So let's leave aside all the pointless quibbling over this "inaccuracy" or that "mistake" in the Bible. It either is the word of God or not. That's the question. Either it is a pack of lies, or the deepest truth. No two ways about it.

How do you decide, then? How do you decide personally whether you can trust the Bible and its God? Only one way—read it, and find out! Start with the heart of the Bible, one of the gospels. Ask yourself questions: What is this telling me? Who is this person Jesus who claims to be God? Is he trustworthy? What did he do? How does this affect me now? Only by doing such an experiment will you find out the truth for yourself. "The Bible must be its own argument and defence." (H.J. Van Dyke).

Only then will you really know, instead of relying on other people's ideas and opinions. As Charles Hodge said: "The best evidence of the Bible's being the word of God is found between its covers." For personal experience is the only way the Bible can be analyzed and judged trustworthy. So maybe we need some practical recommendations for how we use the Bible so we can become wise.

Useful questions

Allow me to make a few suggestions. To understand the Bible you need to ask the right questions! The first and most obvious is to do with the basic sentences—do you understand the actual words used? The first role of language is to agree what words represent. Because if two people use one word and yet mean different things, no wonder there's misunderstanding.

The second is to ask for the meaning, not just of the words, but of the whole passage. "What is it all about?" or "What is the author getting at?" The way in which words are put together leads you to make some decision as to what the passage itself means.

The third is to ask the reason why! What is it for? Why is this being written, what is its purpose? And of course this can be the most hotly debated, for different people see different reasons and purposes.

These are the basics, and they apply to any kind of writing. But for the Christian, treating the Bible as the Word of God, there's a fundamental aspect that must be added—what does this tell me about God, how I relate to Him, and why is this significant in the context of the universe-wide conflict over the character of God? We need to understand what God is trying to communicate—and why is he communicating!

Rudyard Kipling was right when he spoke about his six "honest serving-men":

"I keep six honest serving-men
(They taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who."

So let's ask some of these useful questions!

What is the Bible? Is it a code-book? A system of rules? A treatise on achieving salvation? None of these—it's a record of the divine-human interaction, and how this is significant. Therefore you must discover through the events recorded and the prophecies and the poetry the underlying Biblical philosophy. If you use it as a source of quotable quotes you will miss its essential meaning and purpose. For the Bible is a whole, not just an accumulation of texts.

What is the Bible for? is the second question. If we take its own self-described purpose, it is to help us understand how God acts in human history, and how he operates. The accounts are first for those believers of the specific time, but principles can be derived that have general application.

How to use it? We have not done well sometimes. We chop the Bible up, and then re-assemble it as we want! We make up our "Bible studies" that string texts from all over the Bible together instead of reading it through. To use a little here and a little there means we end up with just a collection of "littles." For every "proof text" can be countered with another, and hurling dismembered pieces of the Bible at each other is no way for Christians to behave. It always reminds me of unruly children at a birthday party. Instead of sitting down to enjoy the feast, they start throwing it all at each other, so that all you end up with is a total mess.

Most of all, after all these questions mentioned above, always make sure you ask the God-question: *what do I learn about God and his character from this passage?*

Remember never to use one text in isolation. There's a major danger of misuse and misunderstanding if we do not relate ideas/words/themes to other instances in the Bible. The most

important concept is CONTEXT, CONTEXT, CONTEXT. We need to understand what's going on, and why, if we are going to be able to derive the foundational principles that apply to us today.

Ask yourself (using the six honest serving-men):

What is the theme? Try to sum it up in a couple of words.

What is the author's intention? Write out a brief statement of the aim.

What is the where and when? In other words, what is its geographical, social, situational, practical and historical context? How are these aspects relevant?

How is the thought/idea/story worked out? Why is it in the Bible? What is it for? (Purpose)

Why is it relevant? What is the message? (Meaning)

What is the conclusion? What is the result?

How does this influence my understanding of God and his character? How is God involved? What are the consequences for any aspect of God? Who is this God that is described?

How does this all apply to us/me? Why is it important? Who is affected?

Presuppositions

When it comes to reading the Bible, we all bring many presuppositions to the book. It is virtually impossible to examine it on its own merits, because it has come to mean so many different things to different people. But only as we allow the Bible to speak for itself will our Bible reading be meaningful.

Someone called the bible the world's least-read best-seller. It is viewed as a good book, but few examine why and how. It may be viewed as literature, and be read that way. Some want to turn it into a code book. Others dismiss it altogether as the ramblings of ancient men.

So how to use the Bible? How to share the good news with those for whom the Bible is not a trusted authority? How is it possible to convey the idea that this is the word of God without becoming pretentiously pious or sounding weird? How can we use the Bible with those who do not accept it as valid at all?

Some practice what we might call "bibliomancy." This is flipping through the Bible and randomly pointing at a text to determine one's fate, rather like astrology. Others take the words, and apply them literally and directly to their situation, without regard to their original intent. That's rather like reading someone else's mail and believing it's all about you! Still others claim to read the Bible as today's newspaper, applying every aspect to current events.

I would suggest going to the core—the gospels. For while the whole Bible is a wonderful record of divine-human communication, sometimes we do not read or understand too well... That's why Jesus came. Even though we value every word of Scripture, we must see the Bible in the context of the coming of Jesus to reveal God to us. As Jesus himself said, to committed Bible students, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me." John 5:39 NIV.

Inspired

The question of inspiration is often misunderstood, and can lead to many mistaken ideas. The concept that the Bible was given by dictation from God is not endorsed by the Biblical evidence. Human writers wrote using human language as they communicated God's ideas. While the Holy Spirit guided, so that there was no error in fundamental spiritual issues, each writer could only express the truth to the extent they understood it. But over time there is advancement

of truth, deepening of understanding, growth in meaning. Especially is this true as we compare the New with the Old Testament. We do not say that previous writings are deficient in truth—rather that each writer wrote what he understood. With the coming of Jesus, things become so much plainer, wider, and deeper. Jesus himself said, “You have heard it said,” referring to the Old Testament, and then told his audience, “But I tell you...” In no way was this to do away with the truth of the past, but to explain it more clearly. The result: we are the most fortunate of anyone in history, for we live with the benefit of the accumulated explanations of so many of God’s penmen.

The Bible as a Guide to Life

God wants us to grow in his grace to become mature, developed individuals who understand and identify with their heavenly Father. The Bible helps us to see this. In its case studies of those who have known God, as well those who have not, we can learn lessons about growth and development. Growing towards God as did his friends—Moses, Abraham, Job—leads to convictions as to God’s benevolent purpose to all in his universe. The Bible reveals this God to us in many and various ways—even in the “bad parts”!

For these reasons studying the Bible is vital—not as a routine act or as a requirement, but as an essential part of our growth as Christians. It’s not a book, but a life-guide.

Even here it is not a self-help book. Quite the opposite! It points out that we cannot save and heal ourselves. That help has to come from outside of us, from God. Nor is it a cookery book on how to bake a life, full of recipes. Rather it just tells the stories, and leads us to come to our own conclusions as to how to apply the lessons learned. Far from being “morality tales,” God graciously presents in his book all the faults and failings of humanity, together with God’s involvement as he acts to save and heal. We also recognize that sadly we often limit God in his ability to help. We see that God repeatedly tries to help us to grow and develop, yet all too often he is rejected, or the human response is deficient. This healing of God comes only as much as we allow it, within the context of our own life-experiences. That is why no two lives are the same, and how Jesus had no “formula” for treating those around him. That should make us compassionate to those we seek to help through as we share the good news of God.

Conclusions

So what conclusions do we draw? We may say that the Bible “is a good thing.” We may conclude it is reliable and helpful. But as we have previously noted, unless it makes a difference in the way we think and live, it is all pointless. That the Word of God endures is surely significant, but of far greater importance is the way we use the Bible and how its lessons impact who we are.

Is it really true, as Matthew Arnold said, that “To the Bible men will return; and why? Because they cannot do without it”? Often our lives seem to say that we are quite prepared to do without it. At this point we may be tempted to make some renewed commitment to Bible study. All well and good. But rather like New Year’s Resolutions, such a commitment may not last past January. Bible reading plans can be helpful. The idea of reading a chapter a day may work. Devotional guides have their part. But unless we see that the Bible is *essential* to us then these will only be devices to try and force us to read the Bible. Instead of all such programs, would it not be better to ask what questions most concern you and start looking in the Bible for answers—

or even more questions? As John Newton observed, “Only God is permanently interesting,” and the Bible helps us to discover God. Even perceived problem issues can be a place to start, for at least we know we are genuinely interested in them. These are more than side-issues; they are important aspects of how we understand God’s character.

There are plenty of questions to consider, both about the Bible, and about God. What we should do is not simply to read, but to think and search for understanding of truth, particularly looking to Jesus who said, “I am the Truth.” For ultimately it is through knowing and trusting the God of the Bible that we can accept his gracious salvation, live lives for him, and look forward to an eternity with him.

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