

I would be hard pressed to say that I have spent as much time on any recent sermon as I have on this particular message. ‘Why,’ you may ask, ‘would this message be so difficult?’ Well let me start by saying that distilling 2,000+ years of thought on the topic of the Bible into 20-30 minutes is a daunting task. Add that in those 20+ minutes I need to keep your interest by making this more than a lecture, and ultimately inspiring you to see the value of the Bible for your personal life as you work at centering your life on loving God and loving others. **2 Timothy 3:14-17**

One of the reasons why this message on the Bible is so difficult is because we live in a day and time when saying, ‘*The Bible says...*’ is not seen as an authoritative statement of fact but as an invitation to start a fight!

And I can understand why many today don’t like a statement like, ‘*The Bible says...*’ For far too long, people have misused the Bible for their own purposes seeking to justify their own ideas and actions. And some used the Bible as a rule book by which they sought to judge the character of others based on how well people complied with what they thought was important.

And while many would like to believe what ‘*The Bible says...*’ about how we are to live; there are many passages that just don’t make sense and as a result leave us scratching our heads and abandoning the rest- if not all of it.

I’m certain that many of you have your own questions about the Bible. Some of those questions may be as simple as which version should I read; while other questions may be as difficult as reconciling portions of the Bible that appear to glorify the murder of innocents over against the words of Jesus to love one’s enemies.

Whatever your questions, I want you to know that here at Linglestown Life you are welcome to ask questions; especially the hard ones! We may not always agree on the answers, but we certainly want to be able to have a conversation that is respectful of each other’s opinions. After all, what we want to encourage you to do is ask and know that together we will be in search of the truth.

And maybe that is a good jumping off point for this message. If you remember the definition of a disciple I shared last week; that of *centering our life on loving God and loving others*, remember that I mentioned that the reason we use the word ‘centering’ as opposed to ‘centered’ is because we are in a life-long process of being transformed into disciples.

I can tell you that centering my life on loving God and loving others has certainly been a process when it comes to how I read, understand and apply God’s Word, the Bible. How I come at the Bible today is informed by 50 years of life experience, years of reading the Bible, discussing and learning from others; and most importantly I believe- asking God to allow the Holy Spirit to inspire my understanding of the Bible.

So if the Bible is essential to being a disciple; let’s start with a few basics. ‘**What is the Bible?**’ Well one of the best definitions to use when answering that question is that the Bible is a *library*. The Bible is not one book, but 66 books written over thousands of years by multiple authors. The first half, the **Old Testament**, or as some prefer to describe it, the Hebrew Scriptures, is 39 books that record the history of the people of God.

The Old Testament includes history, poetry, prophecy, and wisdom literature written over the course of 1,000 years by approximately 30 different writers. The Old Testament, as you find it in your Bible is accepted by all 3 of the world’s great faiths- Judaism, Christianity and Islam. (Bet that last one confounds some of you; but that is for another sermon!)

The 27 books that make up the **New Testament** were written within 70 years of Jesus' resurrection. The books that make up the New Testament, were written by eye-witnesses to Jesus, or by those who were the close companions to the first disciples. The important thing about the proximity of the authors to Jesus life and to the people who knew the accounts presented is that they were still alive to verify what is written.

The books of the New Testament have been accepted by the church since the earliest days of the church. They are attested to by numerous references found in the writings of the early church fathers; and while Dan Brown's *Davinci Code* and the History channel specials about the Bible always ask about a number of other books; there is no reason to believe that any of them are anything more than myths that grew up over time 100's of years after Jesus resurrection.

Now I've mentioned Jesus' resurrection twice and I want to say something about that and the Bible. What if I told you that for 250 years after Jesus' resurrection people became disciples of Jesus without the aid of the Bible as we have it today? That's right, for 250 years, what transformed people's lives was not the Bible.

Any idea what did transform people for those 250 years?

The transformation came through an event, not a book. The event was the resurrection of Jesus. And everywhere they went they told people the story of the resurrection of Jesus. They didn't quote chapter and verse; they shared the story of how Jesus lived, died and was resurrected. And most importantly, they shared how that event; the resurrection of Jesus changed their lives and how it could change others' lives as well. *Acts 4:33; 17:18*

The Bible's authors over the course of more than a thousand years were telling God's story and inviting us to find our place in that larger story. Everything, from Genesis to Revelation, is a story that has a connection to a culture, a time and place, a person or people; all of which God uses to tell His story- a story that always points to Jesus.

N.T. Wright, a scholar who has written extensively on the authority of the Bible has probably given us the best explanation of the Bible's trajectory by describing the Bible like a play with multiple acts. And understanding that trajectory and the stories told in each act help us in our reading of the various books that make up the Bible. So let me tell you about these Acts.

Act One is Creation. Genesis tells us why stuff is here and the fact that God made it and it is good.

Act Two is The Fall. Specifically in Genesis 3-11, but really throughout much of the Bible, tells how everything that God created beautiful and good has been messed up by sin. Probably no single verse pulls it all together the way Genesis 6:5 does: *The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.*

Act 3 is Israel. Act 3 begins with God seeking out a man named Abraham and offering this relationship: God says, I'll be your God, you will be my people, and through you the whole world will be blessed. Genesis 12:1-3

Act 4 is the Life and Ministry of Jesus. Mark's gospel introduces Jesus entrance into his ministry by saying, 'The time is fulfilled.' (Mark 1:15 KJV) It is as if Jesus says here everything that God has been doing in these previous acts has all been leading up to me. Jesus is the climax of God's story, but Jesus isn't the end of the story.

Act 5 is the church. And what God provides to the church is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God empowers the church on Pentecost and enables people to hear the story of God. *Acts 1:8* The church grew and continues to grow as the Spirit empowers disciples of Jesus to tell God's story in their own story.

You and I are in Act 5 today. And that same Holy Spirit is still in the business of inspiring us to see our story as part of God's great story arcing across the pages of the Bible and into our daily lives. And just like the early disciples, God is depending upon us to tell the story! Which means we need to know The Story, so that we can live the story.

The Bible is God's story intersecting with our story. The Bible is God's invitation to all of us to find ourselves a part of God's larger story. And herein is something I want to challenge you to do as you read the Bible- put yourself into the story.

While the Bible may have been written more than 2,000 years ago; you can be assured that the stories in the Bible which involved people just like you and me are still relevant to our lives today. Real human beings in real time experienced God's presence in a real and personal way. Their story is written in the Bible for us to learn from their encounters with God.

And here is a great advantage that you and I have; when we read the story, we can experience the same Spirit of God, breathing life into the written word so that it becomes a living Word in us.

But you'll never know that unless you start reading the Bible. But when you do **start to read the Bible**, when you seriously undertake to know how your life is a part of God's great story; you will experience what Paul said to Timothy: 2 Timothy 3:16-17

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching the faith and correcting error, for re-setting the direction of a *person's* life and training *them* in good living. The scriptures are the comprehensive equipment of the *person* of God and fit *them* fully for all branches of *their* work. J.B. Phillips [Italics – gender neutral]

If you want to seek to be a growing disciple of Jesus, if you want to work at centering your life on loving God and loving others; then you need to **establish a disciplined study of and reflection on the word of God.**

So how do you do that? That is one of the wonderful blessings of the age in which we live. The Bible is probably the most accessible book in the world. You can read it in nearly every language, you can access it in hundreds of different translations, and you can read it anywhere and at any time- even on your phone!

So all you need to do is start reading! May I suggest that a good place to start is in the story of Jesus found in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Another great thing is to have a plan. You can create your own, or you can access hundreds through *YouVersion*.

One other thing, find someone to share your reading with; someone that can help encourage you to keep reading and maybe even discuss what you are reading together.

Two hundred and fifty years ago, John Wesley, wrote a few encouraging words to the early Methodists about their approach into a disciplined reading of God's Word. I think Wesley's words still can teach us how to read and get the most from the Bible. Here is a paraphrase:

1. Set apart a little time every day for reflection on Scripture.
2. Read with the single intention of knowing the will of God, and make your own resolution to follow it.
3. Begin your time with prayer so that your understanding of Scripture is shaped by the Spirit who inspired it. Close your Scripture reading in prayer so that the words you read will be embedded in your heart.
4. Pause to examine yourself by what you read in order to praise God for the ways your life has conformed to God's will and to be conscious of the ways in which you have fallen short.
5. Use whatever insight you receive immediately so that the written word will have its full power in your life.

<http://gbqm-umc.org/umw/wesley/bible.stm>

So there you have it; a very cursory look at the Bible and what it means for a disciple of Jesus. As we close this morning I just want to challenge you to take the first step and start reading the Bible. Whether I answered your questions, I believe that you can benefit from reading the Bible.

And as we close will you join me in this prayer from the Book of Common Prayer; the prayer is simply an invitation that you can use before you read the Bible...

"Blessed Lord, who caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that by patience and comfort of Your Holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which You have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. " (Book of Common Prayer, p. 236).