

## OUR LIFE TOGETHER

### LESSON FIVE: LIFE TOGETHER - WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT THE BIBLE

We now enter a new direction in this study of our “life together” - several lessons about the beliefs you will hear us teach at Christ Presbyterian Church.

Years ago, when I served a church in Minnesota, I had an extended conversation with another pastor. We talked about a wide range of issues - mostly issues facing the church.

He said what he thought, and I said what I thought. We often agreed. When we were finished, I thought of something I had never realized before. “Carl,” I said, “we can offer our opinions all day, but the bottom line is this: ‘Hath God said?’”

Has God said anything to us about the issues of this world and our lives? If so, we need to hear and heed what he has said!

We believe the answer is yes. We believe God has spoken...in the Bible.

In this lesson, let’s ask and answer two questions:

\* What do we have in the Bible?

\* What do we do with the Bible?

#### WHAT DO WE HAVE IN THE BIBLE?

The Bible is the most purchased book in human history. According to booksellers, it is also the most stolen book in human history!

Most of us have one, two, three or eleven of them. But what have we purchased and possessed?

#### *WE HAVE SOMETHING THAT IS...NECESSARY*

Creation tells us much about God. Psalm 19 announces,

*The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.*

*Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.*

As we observe the design and wonder of creation, we learn that God exists, and we discover some of what God is like.

Think of the *beauty* of a rose. What beauty must reside in God's heart, to create this?

Think of the *complexity* of the human body. What glorious designer, could have fathomed and fashioned this?

Think of the *power* of a spring storm. How great is this One, whose creation thunders this way?

We sometimes describe this as *general revelation*. God has revealed some general truths about himself in the creation. The glory of the creation reflects the glory of the Creator!

But this is not enough. Creation tells us much about God, but we also need the Bible.

Why? Paul explains in Romans 1:18-19:

*The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.*

What has God made plain? His *invisible qualities*. In what? Creation!

But we don't see it. Because we no longer live in perfect communion with God, we suppress the truth about God. We see this especially in those who delight in the wonders of this world, but deny the existence of the God who crafted it all.

This means we need not just a general revelation, but a *special revelation*. The Bible is necessary for us to learn what we need to know about God, his ways, and his will.

### ***WE HAVE SOMETHING THAT IS...REVEALED***

What is a "revelation"? It is the opening of a mystery. In the Bible, we believe God has revealed the mysteries of history and eternity.

Who is he? Who are we? Where did we come from? What is our calling and our destiny? How does God get us there? The Bible is the story of God's dealings with people, through all of history.

But how did we receive this revelation?

The *act* of revelation is God opening his truth to his chosen prophets and apostles.

For example, you read Old Testament prophets like Daniel, Isaiah and Jeremiah, and you read the words of men who claim those words were given to them by God.

Jesus and the people of the New Testament believed this. Jesus sometimes challenged how the Jewish leaders were *interpreting* the Bible, but he accepted and asserted the Bible as revealed.

Then from Jesus himself, as we saw in an earlier lesson, we find the promise of more revealed truth, when he tells the disciples in John 14 that the Holy Spirit will help them recall his words.

The *text* of this revelation was originally written in Hebrew (with some Aramaic) in the Old Testament, and in Greek in the New Testament.

The Old Testament manuscripts were carefully preserved and copied. As for the New Testament, while we don't have the original manuscripts, we have numerous copies that allow us to know what the text originally said - with a high degree of accuracy.

The *recognition* of revelation is the process of the church arriving at the 66 books we have today. By the time of Jesus, the 39 books of the Old Testament were generally recognized as revelation. In the early years of the church, the 27 books of the New Testament were recognized as revelation.

We cannot "prove" the revelatory character of the Bible as easily as we can "prove" who wrote the first article in yesterday's newspaper. But the Bible has withstood centuries of criticisms, and many archaeological discoveries have affirmed the accuracy of the Bible.

Is the Bible revealed by God? Yes, it is a matter of faith. But this faith has a good foundation.

### ***WE HAVE SOMETHING THAT IS...INSPIRED***

We hear the word "inspiration," and we think of the artist who says, "I was inspired to construct

this masterpiece!” That’s not inspiration. It is not just a general giving of strength to people.

Inspiration is also not mechanical dictation, like bosses used to do with secretaries. We sense this as we read the different styles of the individual biblical writers.

Inspiration is *God’s sovereign giving of his words to human writers*. God prompted them to write, and he guided them as he wrote. They are the writers, but God is the Author.

We understand this as we consider two New Testament verses:

*\* 2 Timothy 3:16: All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness...*

Scripture is the product of the “breath” of God’s Spirit. In a mysterious way, he “breathed” the words God wanted into their minds and hearts, and they wrote them down.

*\* 2 Peter 1:21: ...prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*

Writer Michael Green uses the image of sailing to explain this: “The prophets raised their sails, so to speak, and the Holy Spirit filled them and carried their craft along in the direction he wished.”

We believe the Bible is *inspired in every part*. Some accept the New Testament as inspired, but not the Old Testament. Others accept certain words of Jesus, but not others.

This feels like a clumsy attempt by these critics to avoid verses they don’t like!

We also believe the Bible is *inspired in every word*. Some accept the Bible as inspired, but they say the thoughts are God’s, not the words.

This feels like a clever attempt by these critics to avoid ideas they don’t like!

Think of it this way: if God is God, and if he wanted to reveal truth to us, isn’t he big enough to make sure we receive what we need, in the way we need it?

### ***WE HAVE SOMETHING THAT IS...RELIABLE***

In a baseball game, when a player misplays a ball, he is given an error. (For the Cincinnati Reds,

this happens a lot. But I digress.)

Did God “misplay” in his inspired revelation?

No. We believe that in the original manuscripts, the Bible is without error. This is known as the doctrine of “inerrancy.” The history is really right, and the commands are really true.

We may not have a perfect grasp of how it all fits together. We may be confused by the way the biblical writers recorded history, and we may be bothered by the way biblical writers approach the issues of our hearts and lives.

But it does not follow that if we don’t get it, God didn’t get it right. If he is God, and he is a God of truth, and if the God of truth wanted to reveal truth to us through inspiration, we can believe that he did it right. We may get some details confused. But that is our error, not his. The Bible is fully reliable.

#### ***WE HAVE SOMETHING THAT IS...AUTHORITATIVE***

Now we begin to get personal. Let’s face it: in our culture, we don’t like the word “authority.”

I am reminded of a “Garfield” cartoon. He is watching television, and the announcer says something like, “Have a good day!”

Garfield angrily clicks off the channel, saying, “Nobody tells me what to do!”

In churches like ours, we sometimes speak of the Bible as “the only rule for faith and life.” The Bible does not speak to every issue of life. It does not tell me how to fix my refrigerator, or how to drive to Detroit, or how to defend against Kobe Bryant - although it does tell me what should be in my heart and on my lips as I do all of this!

But it does speak to issues of faith and life, and when it speaks, it speaks with the authority of the God who reliably revealed it through the inspiration of his Holy Spirit.

Author R.C. Sproul once called his students’ attention to this saying: “God said it. I believe it. That settles it.” Sproul said this saying is too long. It should be, “God said it. That settles it.”

We do not grant authority to the Bible. Because it is from God, it has an authority all its own. As we read it, we read it not as an *opinion* or a *perspective*, but as *truth* we must believe and follow.

Conversely, when we read, think or hear something, we have to test it against the Bible.

\* I may read, "There are many ways to God." But the Bible tells me Jesus is the only way.

\* I may think, "She deserves whatever I say about her." But the Bible tells me not to slander.

\* I may hear, "Evolution is the only way to understand the world." But the Bible tells me that God created the heavens and the earth.

Hath God said? If he has, that settles it.

### ***WE HAVE SOMETHING THAT IS...UNDERSTANDABLE***

Let's keep being honest: we find parts of the Bible hard to understand. The Westminster Confession says it this way: not everything is "alike clear."

True, but what is clear? Enough is clear to lead us to Jesus, and enough is clear to lead us to be like Jesus.

Remember the phrase, "faith and life"?

Faith is believing in Jesus. Life is living for Jesus. We may not be able to sort through every detail of every verse, but we also do not need a Ph.D. to know what the Bible is all about.

The same Holy Spirit who *inspired* the words of the Bible, *illuminates* our hearts to understand, accept and follow the Bible. For the unbeliever, the Bible is maddening at worst, and mysterious at best. But for the believer, there is illumination. The "lights" go on. We "get it."

### **WHAT DO WE DO WITH THE BIBLE?**

If the Bible is necessary, revealed, inspired, reliable, authoritative and understandable, it should be a big part of our lives - no matter how many of them we have!

## **WE MUST...READ IT**

Author Ravi Zacharias recalls a story from his youth. It is the tale of a wealthy man on a long journey. He is joined by a thief, who pretends to be his friend but is secretly looking for a way to steal the wealthy man's gems.

Each night, they would check into their room, and the rich man would hide his riches. Each night, the thief would search everywhere, but he never found the goods.

At the end of the journey, the wealthy man stepped on a train and said, "I know you are a thief, and that you were looking for my treasure. You looked everywhere but under your own pillow. It was right there every night. Treasure was nearer to you than you realized!"

The Bible is a treasure. We search all over for ideas, solutions and answers. Could treasure be nearer than we think?

Some like to read a lot. There are all sorts of "Read Through the Bible" plans.

Some like to read a little. The issue is not quantity. The issue is whether you are reading this treasure.

But what if you can't read? What if you never learned? What if your eyes are failing you?

We are blessed to live in an age when the Bible can fill our ears, even if it cannot fill our eyes. There are all sorts of Bible translations on CD. They are well done. You can "read" that way!

**BUT!!!** Still being honest, we may read, but not know how to grasp what we read. The Bible was written a long time ago. I offer you two basic principles for reading the Bible.

### **1. UNDERSTAND THE SETTING.**

We have tools to help us bridge the gap between yesterday and today:

\* *A good Bible dictionary* will help you understand the culture of the Bible, and how it compares to our culture.

**\* A good commentary will help you understand the details of particular portions of the Bible.**

Here is the goal: put yourself back in the setting in which the biblical words were written, so you can understand what is being said and done.

For example, think of a well-known story: the parable of the Good Samaritan. A man is robbed and hurt, and after two men pass him by, a third man stops and helps.

As you understand the setting, you will know that...

- > The road in that story was a dangerous road.
- > Jews and Samaritans had a lousy relationship.
- > Priests and Levites were some of the religious leaders of the day.

From this, you discover that the Good Samaritan did his good deeds at great risk to his own safety and reputation. Understanding the setting helps you to discover this - and begin thinking about what this story means for your life.

## **2. USE THE REST OF THE BIBLE.**

If the Bible is reliably revealed and fully inspired by God, the different parts will fit together to make the whole.

This is the issue of *context*. We see how the words we are reading are related to the words close by, the words in that book, and the words in the Bible as a whole.

Pastor Dan Doriani illustrates the importance of this:

*Imagine for a moment that you are walking through your church building in the middle of the week. Your feet make the only sound in the empty building, but as you turn a corner you begin to hear an animated conversation. Actually, it is only half a discussion - someone is on the phone.*

*You catch a word or two, and then hear your name. Realizing that you are the topic of conversation, you move, almost against your will, toward the voice. As the conversation grows louder, you decide the speaker is a fellow choir member. You hear him say, "You don't know John*

*the way I do. He can't be the one. It's contrary to his nature. He simply is not capable of it. It has to be someone else."*

*The conversation begins to wind down and you tiptoe away, wondering, Who was on the other end of the line? What were they talking about? What was the other person saying? What does my 'friend' from the choir think of me?*

*Naturally, everything depends on the context of his remarks. But a little thought shows there are several contexts.*

*The comments of the other party to the conversation are central. Was he accusing you of starting a vicious rumor? If so, the choir member thinks highly of you and was defending you. But if the other party was proposing that you fill a leadership position, then your 'friend' was belittling you. If the conversation were transcribed, the words before and after the speech you heard would be the literary context of the discussion...the sentences before and after the text you are studying.*

If this sounds too much like 11th grade English class, I am sorry! But if we are going to use the Bible as we should, we have to be thoughtful and careful in our reading.

The best way to make sense of the Bible is to use the rest of the Bible. As you read and learn, you will understand more of the overall message, and that will help you grasp the meaning of a particular passage.

### ***WE MIGHT...MARINATE IN IT***

Notice that I said, "might." But this is a good idea.

What do I mean by "marinate"? Well...

How about a good steak, oozing with your own special, cooked-in juices? We can't do that right now, can we? Why? Because a good steak takes time to prepare. Maybe you marinate it overnight. Maybe you cook it long and slow. This should be our approach to the Bible.

Some people will marinate by *meditating* on the Word. This is when you think carefully about a

portion of the Bible. Maybe you write as you think.

Some people will marinate by *memorizing* the Word. This is when you find a way that works for you to be able to recite small or large portions of the Bible.

In either case, you will find that God's truth is filling your mind and heart in a new way, and affecting the way you think, speak and live.

### ***WE CAN...PRAY OVER IT***

Do you ever wonder what to pray? I do! I have learned that a great way to pray, is to pray the words of the Bible. Why? Because we know we are praying what God wants for us!

Obviously, we can't do this with every single verse of the Bible. But especially as you think about the teaching sections, you realize that you can do this.

Here is an example. In Romans 12, Paul offers a series of commands about love, such as...

"Hate what is evil. Cling to what is good."

"Honor one another above yourselves."

"Do not repay anyone evil with evil."

Pray those words back to God! Pray them for yourself, for your loved ones, and for the people you will meet that day.

What will happen? God will answer, and God will use your prayer to transform you.

### ***WE MUST...LIVE IT***

Author Neil Postman once described something he called "L.I.A.R." - Low Information Action Ratio. He said that we consume oodles of information in our culture, but do little with it.

Are we this way toward the Bible? What do we do to live out the words we read in the Bible, the challenges we hear in sermons, or the truths we read in Bible teaching of all sorts?

In Matthew 7, Jesus closes the Sermon on the Mount by calling his readers to not just hear the

Word, but to put it into practice.

In our homes. On our lips. With our children and grandchildren. As we talk to people. As we write checks. As we work and play.

Hath God said? Yes! How then will we live? Changed in every way!

### THE END OF THE MATTER...

We read in 2 Peter 1:3,

*His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.*

Since Peter writes elsewhere in his letters about the “Scriptures,” we can be confident that he is thinking of the “special revelation” knowledge of the Bible here.

But what does he think of this? He declares that God has given us “everything” that we need to know him, and live for him.

The Bible is sufficient for our faith and our lives! We may not think that. But it is true.

If we are going to live this real life with real faith, the Bible provides all we need to know, and all we need to follow.

We read in Hebrews 4:12,

*For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.*

The Bible strikes right to our hearts. This is painful, because our hearts need help! But this is good, because as God’s Word helps us, we become more like Jesus Christ.

A story is told of an old man living in Kentucky. Each morning, he would be found at his kitchen table, reading from his Bible. His grandson wanted to be like him, so he asked, “What good does it do to read the Bible?”

The grandfather had his coal basket in his hand, and he told his grandson to take the coal basket

down to the river and bring back some water.

The boy did, but the water all leaked out of the basket before he got back to the house. The old man told the boy to do it again. And again. And again.

Finally, the boy cried, "This is useless!"

The old man said, "Look at the basket." It had been dirty from coal. Now it was clean. The man told his grandson, "You may not understand or remember everything you read. But when you read it, it will change you from the inside out."

May our "life together" be characterized by knowing what we have in the Bible, and using it well - in a way that will change our lives, and enrich our life together.