

Alpha 5: Why and How Should I Read the Bible?

by Senior Pastor: Bill Couch
Copyright © 2010, Bill Couch. All rights reserved worldwide.
This material may be printed or copied for personal use only.

This morning we continue with our series of messages based upon the questions asked in our Alpha Class each Wednesday evening. Alpha discusses the core questions we have about the Christian faith. Today our question is “Why and how should I read the Bible?”

2 Tim. 3:14-17

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, ¹⁵and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Many people struggle with the Bible. They ask: “Why does God seem so harsh in the Old Testament?” “How can we reconcile the biblical account of creation with modern science?” “Should we interpret everything in the Bible literally?” I wish we could deal with all of those questions. We will only be able to touch on some this morning.

Some people avoid Sunday school and small groups because of a lack of knowledge of the Bible. They are afraid of being embarrassed by the leader asking them to look up a passage in Habakkuk, and they have no clue where to find it. First of all I would encourage Sunday school teachers and group leaders never to call on someone to look up a passage. Either ask in advance or ask for a volunteer to look it up. But don't call out someone by name. We need to make all our groups a safe place for those just beginning to get familiar with the Bible. I would also encourage you to take our “Discover Bible Basics” class next time it is offered. When you finish you will be able to find your way around the Bible. Don't let your fear of embarrassment keep you from learning God's Word. We are all in this together.

Why should we read the Bible? Because it is God's Word—the primary way he reveals himself and communicates his purposes.

Let's explore for a moment what the Bible is not. First of all the Bible is not a science textbook. This is perhaps one of the most frequent places where people get hung up with the Bible. The Bible does not teach us how God made the universe. The Bible is not concerned with dinosaurs or fossils. The Bible reveals there is a God who created the heavens and the earth. While the Bible may be accurate about some scientific things, it is not intended to be a science textbook. The Bible is primarily interested in answering two questions: "Who?" and "Why?"

When you scan the creation story in Genesis chapter one, you quickly see the word used most often is "God." That answers the "Who?" question about creation. God created the world and all of life. Science is intended to answer two completely different questions: "What?" and "How?" We abuse science when we ask it to determine what is right and wrong. Consider the invention of the nuclear bomb. Science can tell us how it works and what will happen if it explodes. It cannot tell us if it is right or wrong to make a nuclear bomb or use one. Those questions are outside the scope of science. On the other hand, the Bible cannot tell us how a nuclear weapon works. That is outside the scope of the Bible. The Bible can provide us with ethical principles to guide us in deciding if and when to use a nuclear weapon.

Secondly, the Bible is not a history book. It is not intended to give us the history of the world or even of the nation of Israel. The Bible is historical and contains accurate historical information. It is grounded in the history of real people in space and time. But it is not intended to be a history book. About 150 years ago, one man totaled up all the genealogies in the Bible and concluded the world was created on October 9 at 9 am 4004 BC. He used the Bible for purposes it was never intended and came to a false conclusion. The

genealogies in the Bible are not complete—sometimes several generations are skipped. They are representative of a family tree, not comprehensive family trees.

Thirdly, the Bible is not one book but many. There are 66 different books by over 40 authors over a period of 1500 years. The Bible contains different kinds of literature: poetry, prose, historical theology, letters and prophetic teaching. It is important to ask what kind of literature I am reading and to interpret it accordingly. Does the author use symbolic language? Then I should interpret it symbolically not literally. When a Psalm says that “the hills clap their hands” we are not to take that literally. On the other hand, if an account is written historically, I should not interpret it symbolically. For example, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is written historically. In one of his letter to the Corinthians, Paul suggests they talk to eyewitnesses if they want to get the facts about the resurrection. All of scripture is God-breathed. The Holy Spirit inspired and directed the authors. He did not dictate it to them. They each wrote in their own style. God used real people with unique personalities to write each book and the variety of authorship shows. However, as we read the entire Bible, there is an amazing sense of unity in the message of this book about God and his purposes.

We have talked about what the Bible is not; so what is the Bible? The Bible is principally a theological book. Theology is the study of God. The Bible is a book about God. God is the principal character, actor and subject of scripture. The Bible is not primarily concerned with science and history, but how God interacts with science and history and all of life. The Bible reveals God’s purpose and design for his creation—it answers the question: “Who made us and why are we here?”

As a theology book the Bible focuses on the “who” of creation. It makes it clear that before anything was created, there was God. “In the beginning God...” He is the initiator of whatever process (the “how”) was used to created the universe and life. Science and the Bible go together. Actually to get the complete picture of life, they need each other. Science

without the Bible has many unanswered questions. It cannot answer the most important question: why are we here? If you only have science you must conclude that we are an accident, and life is meaningless. Science cannot answer the question how things become more complex over time. If there is no higher power and intelligence directing the process of life, how could human beings have developed from primordial soup? If you take a box of rocks and shake them up for millions of years, a computer will not eventually emerge. If you shake up chemicals for millions of years, life will not be formed that will eventually evolve into a human being. Chance and accidents don't explain the complexity and order of the universe and life as we know it.

The Bible reveals to us there is a Creator who is all powerful and capable of bringing order to the universe. He is the one who created life. When we read the story of Adam and Eve, it is not intended to tell us how God created human beings. It describes for us God's purposes in creating life. Adam and Eve are real people and are representative of all of us. Their story is our story. God created us in his image and placed us in a paradise where we could enjoy a relationship with him. He created us with free will. Adam and Eve could choose to eat the forbidden fruit or not. It was a choice. The forbidden fruit represents desire of all of us to be our own God and call our own shots. We have all made the decision to eat the forbidden fruit--to go our own way and separate ourselves from God. As a result we made a mess of things because we cannot run the world without the guidance of the Creator. We unleashed evil and death in the world. We want to get back to Eden. God puts in motion a plan to redeem us from evil and death and restore us to paradise. The story of Adam and Eve describes the problem for which Jesus Christ is the solution. Read the story of Adam and Eve asking these questions: What does it teach about God? What does it teach about me? Don't ask the Genesis story to explain how the universe was created.

Secondly, the Bible is a book about human beings. This book contains the stories of real people like you and me. Some people say they don't want to read the Bible because it is all about saints, and they can't relate to people who are so good. It is obvious they have never read the Bible. The real people in the Bible make mistakes and commit sins and fail. David was an adulterer and murderer. Abraham was a liar. These are the stories of real people who struggle with what it means to be human in a fallen world. Their stories reveal how none of us has any hope without God's grace and mercy. They wrestle with the same questions we all ask. Job wrestles with the question: "How can God allow good people to suffer?" Ruth is the story of three women who are struggling to survive in a hostile world. The letters of Paul let us know there is no perfect church. Every letter he wrote addressed some problem in a church.

The book of Jonah is an amazing story about how we struggle to do God's will. God tells Jonah to go and preach a message of repentance to the city of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire. The Assyrians had conquered Israel, and the Israelites had suffered greatly at their hands, so Jonah had no desire for them to repent. He wanted God to wipe them out. Have you ever felt that way? Jonah refused to go. Instead of going to Nineveh, he got a ship heading a thousand miles in the opposite direction. Have you ever responded to God that way? A terrible storm comes up, and Jonah confesses that it is his fault. He is running from God. He convinces the sailors to throw him overboard. As soon as he hit the water, the sea became calm. Along comes a giant fish and swallows up Jonah. He sat in the belly of this fish for three days before he repented of not doing what God asked him to do. Some people get all hung up on how he could survive in the belly of a fish that long. That misses the point. The point is: have you ever run from God and found yourself in a stinking mess but still refused to repent and do what God asked? Finally he repents, and the fish vomits him up. Ever felt like that? Then he goes and reluctantly preaches the message of

repentance to the city of Nineveh. They listen and repent. God spares the city. Has God ever used you in spite of yourself? Then Jonah goes out and pouts because they did not get wiped out. Ever feel that God is just way too forgiving of your enemies?

The Bible is full of real stories of real people and their real struggles.

The Bible is a lamp unto our feet. The Bible shapes the kind of persons we become.

Everything we take into our mind shapes us. If you spend your time reading trash or looking at pornography, it is shaping who you become. If you spend your time reading the Bible, it will shape you to become like Jesus.

How to Study the Bible? Let me offer some suggestions using our scripture passage to get started:

1. "All scripture is God breathed." Pray. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you understand his Word. He inspired it, and he can best interpret it. We need divine help to understand and apply it to our lives. Pray this simple prayer: "God, what do you want to say to me?"
2. "All scripture is useful for teaching": What does this passage teach you about who God is and who you are?
3. "All scripture is useful for rebuking": Does this passage rebuke you in any way? Does it reveal a pattern or habit that is inconsistent with God's will? Does it tell you to get rid of something in your life? Does it remind that you are running from something God has asked you to do? Will you confess that to God and ask his forgiveness and power to change?
4. "All scripture is useful for correcting": How does this passage call you to align your life with God's will? What positive thing is this passage calling you to do or be or experience?

5. "All scripture is useful for training": How does this passage train you to become more like Jesus? What spiritual disciplines or practices does it advocate that would open you to God's presence?

Reading and studying the Bible is a lifetime journey. As you study it, it gets richer and richer in its meaning and its impact on your life. It reveals the truth about God and us. This is the most amazing book ever written. Read it on your own and become part of one of our Bible studies where you can learn from each other. Will you let God speak directly to you through his Word this week?