

Back to Basics: God's Book

Responsive Reading, "God's Book" ¹

Our "Back to Basics" series has now looked briefly at each Person of the Trinity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit, and in these last two messages we look at "God's Book" and finally at "God's Purpose." Today's message revolves around three very important words: "*revelation*," "*inspiration*," and "*illumination*."

To give you the end from the beginning, REVELATION involves the *unveiling* of Truth, INSPIRATION involves the *recording* of Truth, and ILLUMINATION involves the *understanding* of Truth. Try to keep those distinctions in mind as we unpack each one in turn.

"**REVELATION**" means "to uncover" or "to unveil," the idea being the removal of obstacles to perception, the stripping away of that which keeps one from seeing something as it really is. The idea of revelation has to do with disclosure rather than discovery; that is, with God's self-disclosure rather than with our discovery of things about God. Revelation involves the disclosure of God's Person, the disclosure of God's Character, and the disclosure of God's Purposes—the disclosure of what alone is True and Real.

There are two types of revelation, "general revelation" and "special revelation." "General revelation" is God's self-disclosure in a general way to all people at all times and in all places. Paul wrote that "*since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse*" (Romans 1:20; cp. Psalm 19:1-2).

Through general revelation, God's nature is seen in our nature, since we were created "in the image" of God (Genesis 2:27). That is, we can reason, feel, and imagine; we are free to act, to respond, and to love; and we have an inner moral sense about what is right and what is wrong. These characteristics correspond to aspects of God's own Nature.

Although we can learn a great deal about God through general revelation, the truth of the matter is that God wants a much deeper and more intimate relationship with you than general revelation can bring about. Besides, we often don't pay very much attention to general revelation. We tend to take the witness of Creation rather for granted, choosing not to listen very carefully when Creation speaks—though sometimes, as in the week just past, that voice is impossible to ignore.

In contrast to God's general revelation that is available to all people, God's special revelation is available to specific people at specific times in specific places. Special revelation is particular, personal, progressive, and redemptive. Special revelation comes to us chiefly through the Bible as illuminated by the Holy Spirit, and, since it is the Bible that teaches us about who Jesus is and how the Spirit works, understanding the Bible is essential to understanding what God is up to and what God's purposes might be in our lives.

You probably know that the word "Bible" comes from the Greek βιβλος ("biblos"), which referred to the outer coat of a reed called papyrus that was used to make "paper" beginning about the time of the Exodus. You also know that the Bible has two sections, called "testaments" or "covenants." A "testament" or a "covenant" is similar to what we call a "contract" today—a document that states the terms of agreements between two or more parties.²

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on November 4, 2012.

² Technically, these covenants were/are similar to ancient suzerainty treaties, or treaties between greater and lesser parties.

What we call the “Old Testament” is of course actually the Hebrew or Jewish Scripture, representing the covenant God made with Abraham and with Abraham’s descendants after him. The “New Testament” represents the subsequent covenant God made with those who place their faith in the Messiah the Old Testament promised—Jesus of Nazareth, the eternal God in human flesh. Our second key word, “**INSPIRATION**,” has to do with how God’s revelation was recorded in written form.

Of course, rather than being a single book, the Bible is actually a library of sixty-six documents written by thirty-eight authors over some 1,400 years. Although such spans of time and variety of authorship would ordinarily lend themselves to confusion and contradiction, the process of inspiration caused God’s Book to tell one consistent and coherent story. This overarching Story is the story of Who God is, who we are, what our purpose is, how we messed that purpose up, and how God provides a way for us to get our lives going in a different direction.

Although there are various ways of organizing these sixty-six documents, one of the most common ways of doing this organizes each Testament into five sections:

Old Testament **Law** (Pentateuch): Genesis-Deuteronomy

Old Testament **History**: Joshua-Esther

Old Testament **Poetry**: Psalms-Song of Songs

Old Testament **Major Prophets**: Isaiah-Daniel

Old Testament **Minor Prophets**: Hosea-Malachi

New Testament **Gospels**: Matthew-John

New Testament **History**: Acts

Paul’s Letters: Romans-Philemon

General Letters: Hebrews-Jude

New Testament **Prophecy**: Revelation

The original copies of these sixty-six books are called “autographs.” The fact is that we don’t have a single one of them, and it seems to me that this may be intentional on God’s part, because if we had even one of the autographs, we would be sorely tempted to worship it in the way religious relics of all types are worshiped the world over. The preservation of an autograph would prevent the achievement of its real purpose, which is to help us to know and to love God. We worship God, not a book, however special that book may be.

But while we have no autographs, we do have over 5,500 Greek manuscripts of portions of the New Testament. Counting all languages, we have nearly 24,000 early manuscripts of the New Testament, each of which can be checked against the others like lines of bearing from GPS satellites. This is considerably more cross-check information than we have for any other book from antiquity. As just one example, there are only about 650 copies of Homer’s *Iliad* in existence today, with the oldest copied 1,000 years after the original was written.

Compare that to nearly 24,000 documents or parts of documents we have of the New Testament, the earliest being only about thirty years after the events themselves (as 1982 is to us). This is truly astounding, and through these cross-checks (and similar ones with the Old Testament) we’re actually considerably more certain today of what the original texts said thousands of years ago than we would be if we had only the autographs themselves.

“Well, we may know what the original text said,” you may ask, “but how do we know that what that text said was accurate and true?” That’s a very good question, about which a great many books have been written. While it’s true that we still have many questions about what the Bible records, so many seemingly improbable things in the Bible have been proven

to be accurate that fair observers give the presumption of accuracy to the Bible, even if we don't understand some parts of it at the moment.

Let me offer a few examples as they relate to Jesus. Professor Simon Greenleaf has noted that in terms of our normal standards for courtroom witnesses, "There is enough of a discrepancy [between the Gospel accounts] to show that there could have been no previous concert among them; and at the same time such substantial agreement as to show that they all were independent narrators of the same great transaction."³

And Professor Craig Blomberg said that "The strongest argument [for the truthfulness of the Gospels] is what we never find in [them]. After Jesus' ascension there were a number of controversies that threatened the early church [such as whether believers should] be circumcised, how speaking in tongues should be regulated, how to keep Jew and Gentile united, what are the appropriate roles for women in ministry, [and] whether believers could divorce non-Christian spouses.

"These issues could have been conveniently resolved if the early Christians had simply read back into the gospels what Jesus had [supposedly] told them from the world beyond. But this never happened. The continuance of these controversies demonstrates that Christians were interested in distinguishing between what [actually] happened during Jesus' lifetime and what was debated later in the churches."⁴

Those same Gospels record a number of Jesus' teachings that are difficult to understand. Interpretation of Jesus' ministry would be much easier without them. If the Gospels had been written by revisionists who were trying to make their own points and advance their own causes as spin-masters do today, they would have deleted such teachings rather than faithfully recording their perplexities. Revisionist gospel writers would have removed the scandal of the crucifixion and put in something much more politically helpful; and they would most certainly have painted themselves in a better light than what the Gospels actually record.

Just think about the images of Jesus you saw in Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ*.⁵ Why would a bloody, lacerated corpse like that inspire anybody? Can you imagine such a bloody corpse inspiring a persistent, worldwide movement of people who hope to someday have a body like that? And yet within five weeks of the crucifixion, over 5,000 Jewish men (not counting women and children) had professed their faith in this very thing. What sense does it make that these early followers of Jesus got together every week to celebrate the fact that Jesus had been publicly slaughtered in a grotesque and humiliating way? And we're going to celebrate it again today.

Professor Ben Witherington asked, "Why is there no other first-century Jew who has millions of followers today? Why isn't there a John the Baptist movement? Why, alone of all first-century figures, including the Roman emperors, is Jesus still worshiped today, while the others have crumbled into the dust of history? It's because this Jesus—the historical Jesus—is also the living [and eternal] Lord. That's why. **It's because he's still around**, while the others are long gone."⁶

And this brings us to the reason why we honor the Bible as we do. We honor the Bible because nearly every verse of God's Book either points forward to Jesus, tells the story of His

³ Cited in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), p. 46.

⁴ Craig Blomberg in Strobel, p. 42.

⁵ Mel Gibson, *The Passion of the Christ*, Newmarket Films, 2004.

⁶ Ben Witherington, cited in Strobel, p. 141.

life on earth, points backward to that life, or points forward to His return. As Richard Foster put it, “everything in the Bible either looks forward to Christ or flows from Christ.”⁷

We honor the Bible because the Bible is our compass, our heaven-guided GPS, and it is a reliable and trustworthy one. Yet even as we honor the Bible we need to remember that the function of a compass or a GPS is to take us somewhere. The point is not the instrument itself. The point of the instrument is to take us to Jesus.

A great many of the people who heard Jesus speak, who watched His life and who met Him after His resurrection, concluded that they would be fools not to follow Him. In the centuries that have followed countless others have come to the same conclusion, once they’ve really understood things as they are; that is, once they’ve seen the compass work.

That’s what happened after Peter’s famous sermon in Acts 2. Peter simply preached the essentials of the Gospel: (1) *God proved that Jesus was his Son* through many signs and wonders; (2) *You killed him*; (3) *God has raised him from death*; (4) *therefore you can be saved from your sin by trusting in Him*. And Peter later pointed out that “*Jesus left you an example, so that you can follow in His steps*” (1 Peter 2:21).

And so, after REVELATION and INSPIRATION, we’ve now come to **ILLUMINATION**, which is the understanding and comprehension of Truth. Although examples could be given literally without number, let me offer just two: Louis Lapidus grew up Jewish in Newark, New Jersey. As he studied the Hebrew Scripture, Louis found the testimony of Isaiah 53 to be so breathtakingly descriptive of Jesus of Nazareth that he first thought that Christians must have somehow twisted Isaiah’s words, 700 years after the fact, to make it look as though Isaiah was predicting Jesus. Yet after further study, Louis eventually decided that Jesus was indeed the long-promised Messiah.

My friend, Joe Bell, a Messianic Jewish Rabbi, came to Jesus from Orthodox Judaism in New York through the very same experience. The written Word of Isaiah 53 brought Joe to the Living Word who is Jesus. As Hebrews puts it, “*In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son*” (1:1-2).

So why do we honor God’s Book? We honor God’s Book because “*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work*” (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

We honor God’s Book because through it we know that “*Long ago, even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. His unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ*” (Ephesians 1:4-5, NLT).

Will you dare to read what God has written to you?

⁷ Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith* (HarperOne, 2001), p. 227.

God's Book

Reader One: *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).*

Reader Two: *The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The decrees of the LORD are firm, and all of them are righteous (Psalm 19:7-9).*

Reader One: *For the word of God is alive 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 (Hebrews 4:12).*

Reader Two: *Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:20-21).*

Reader One: *God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill? (Numbers 23:19).*

Reader Two: *"Is not my word like fire, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" (Jeremiah 23:29). "[My word] will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11).*

Reader One: *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17). And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself (Luke 24:27).*

Reader Two: *In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word (Hebrews 1:1-3a).*

Reader One: The Word of God for the People of God.

Reader Two: Thanks be to God!