

The FRAMEWORK of Faith: How to Read the Bible

The Foundations of Faith

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For as long as I can remember, I've loved The Bible. My earliest ideas about it came, not surprisingly, from music. As a church-kid I learned "*Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so*" and "*The B.I.B.L.E. Yes, that's the book for me. I stand alone on the word of God. The B.I.B.L.E.*" One of my earliest memories is being in my grandma's kitchen: I would get my grandpa's Bible out of the drawer, place it in the middle of the floor, stand on it (like the world's tiniest soapbox) and sing, "*Standing, standing, standing on the promises of God!*" To my childhood mind, The Bible was the foundation on which we stand, literally. And throughout my youth, any efforts to take faith more seriously meant a renewed commitment to Bible reading.

At 17, I decided to devote my life to God. I found a secluded spot, placed my Bible on the floor, knelt down and prayed. Shortly after, I attended Bible School, where we didn't study church history, ministry philosophies, or systematic theology; we studied *The Bible*. My classes were *Genesis*, *Psalms*, and *Ephesians*. Afterwards, I began leading and writing songs for church, drawing inspiration from *The Bible*. Being *Biblical* was very important to me. In those days, I remember Jeff Lockyer asking me to read a book about the church. I responded arrogantly, "*I've got 66 books on the go and, when I'm done with them, I'll let you know.*" (What an idiot!)

What I'm getting at is, for as long as I can remember, I've loved the B.I.B.L.E. But over the last few years, I've begun to wonder if I've loved the Bible *too much*? Have I given it more prominence in my life than it intends to have, and been more devoted to it than Jesus was?

Last week, Jeff Martens urged us to see faith, not as a *bounded* set, dividing people into *in* and *out*, but as a *centered* set, defining faith as a life of following of Jesus. The question is, if faith is about not just being *into*, but actively *following* Jesus, what role does the Bible play?

Now, I know that for some, maybe especially those newer to faith, this may not actually be the most pressing question about The Bible. Perhaps you're in a place where you're still not entirely clear on what The Bible even *is*. So, to start, let's begin by asking, *what is this book?*

First, the Bible isn't actually a *book* at all; it's a collection of stories, poems and letters, a library of 66 books, grouped into two sections. The first 39 – often called the *Old Testament* – are actually the Hebrew Bible. They tell Israel's origin story, its laws, customs, and epic struggle, the building of Jerusalem and its temple, and the rise and fall of its heroes and kings, right up until

~400 years before Jesus. The remaining 27 books – *The New Testament* – begins with four biographies of Jesus, sometimes called *The Gospels*, written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Matthew & John were two of Jesus’ original 12 disciples who recorded their firsthand accounts of His life and teaching. Mark wrote his book on behalf of Peter, another disciple. Luke, who’s gospel we’re reading as a church this month, never actually met Jesus, but set out to detail as accurate an account as possible, based on his investigations and interviews with eye-witnesses. Then, The Book of Acts tells the story of the early church, followed by 21 letters written by the disciples and early church leaders like The Apostle Paul, and James, the actual half-brother of Jesus. Finally, we have the apocalyptic masterpiece (*also written by John*) called *Revelation*.

Historically, this collection wasn’t finalized until about 300 years after Jesus, meaning early Christ-followers didn’t even have Bibles. Even then, with only a few copies, transcribed by hand and carefully guarded by the church, the majority of Christians likely never saw one until several centuries later. In the 1400’s, The Bible was one of the first books to be mass-produced. The early printing press could print ~200 Bibles every 3 years, which were in Latin, a language read by only a handful of educated people in any given region. It would be centuries before ordinary people had access to a copy of the Bible in their own language, if they could read at all. As of 2022, the full Bible has been translated into over 700 languages, the New Testament into more than 1,500 additional languages, and bits and pieces into ~1,000 more.

That’s what the Bible is from a *structural* and *historical* perspective. But is it more than just a literary artifact and, if so, what exactly *is* it? As you can imagine, there are countless views on this. Some claim it to be the literal, capital “W” Word of God, while others view it as merely a work of fiction, or even fraud. Disclaimer: we can’t unpack all these views today, so if you’re still unsure about the reliability of the Bible, this is a safe place to explore those questions. In fact, we’ve provided some helpful resources on our online service page. But for today, I’m going to approach the question, “*What is The Bible?*” from the perspective that The Bible is what it claims to be. So what *does* it claim to be? What does the Bible *say* about what the Bible *is*?

In a letter written by Jesus’ disciple *Peter*, he describes what the Bible is like this:

“Most important, you must know that no prophecy of scripture represents the prophet’s own understanding of things, because no prophecy ever came by human will. Instead, men and women led by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.”

2 Peter 1:20-21 (VOICE)

Peter says that our starting point, when approaching the Bible, is to recognize that it's much more than a collection of man-made opinions and out-dated religious ideas; it is a divine communiqué whose origins are in the very mind and heart of God. The women and men who wrote the words contained in its books were *led* or *inspired* by the Spirit of God. This is exactly with that the Apostle Paul writes in a letter to a young pastor named Timothy. He says:

“All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training” (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

The word *inspired* comes from the Latin *spire* which means *breath* or *spirit*, and is why some versions say, ***“All Scripture is God-breathed.”*** This is what theologians and scholars call the *Doctrine of Divine Inspiration*, and it deals with questions like: *If God inspired the Bible, does that mean everything in it is historically accurate, scientifically precise, with no contradictions or errors whatsoever? Did God dictate word for word, or is it inspired in the way that some movies are “inspired by true events”? Is every verse equally inspired, weighted with equal importance?* These big questions are better left to Biblical scholars far more intelligent and educated than I. But, for today, I want to suggest that our starting point, when approaching The Bible, should be to recognize that the message contained within its pages comes to us from a ***DIVINE ORIGIN.***

To be clear, the Bible *itself* is not divine and never claims to be. And when we treat it like it *is*; that's idolatry! The Bible is not God, but its stories, poems, laws, and letters come to us *from* God, on God's initiation. And so we approach them with a *humble* and *submissive posture*, that positions our lives under the authority of God. We don't skim its pages to confirm *our ideas* – we study them to conform to *God's ideals*. We don't treat it like a *fortune cookie* or a *magic 8-ball*. (*Illustrate: Is now the best time to invest in real estate, or bitcoin?*) We read it with a *“not my will, but Yours be done”* disposition, responding obediently to God's prompting, expecting to be changed as we surrender to God's leadership, to be *taught, rebuked, corrected, and trained*. Anything short of this, and we've already missed the whole point before reading a single word.

Now, if the Bible invites us to submit to God's leadership, where exactly is the Bible leading us? Does its God-inspired rules and rituals function like an external moral compass? Is it a clearly and cleverly laid-out set of step-by-step instructions that, if followed to the letter, guarantees a good life now and a golden ticket in the afterlife? If your idea of the Bible comes from how many self-proclaimed *“Bible-believing Christians”* talk, it might shock you to learn that the answer is a resounding *“no!”* That's not at all what The Bible is. In fact, one of the biggest critics of this view of Scripture is *The Bible* – or more specifically the Apostle Paul, who wrote one of its letters specifically to *discredit* and *dispose of* this very idea. He writes:

“What is the point, then, of the law...? ...its purpose was to make obvious to everyone that we are, in ourselves, out of right relationship with God, and therefore to show us the futility of devising some religious system for getting by our own efforts what we can only get by waiting in faith for God to complete his promise. For if any kind of rule-keeping had power to create life in us, we would certainly have gotten it by this time.”
Galatians 3:18-22 (MSG)

Paul – a former member of the religious sect called *The Pharisees*, who believed that strict adherence to the rules of Scripture was the key to securing God’s approval – after encountering Jesus was convinced that he, despite his sincerity and passion, had gotten it all wrong, missing the whole point of Scripture altogether. Which, he goes on to explain, is that:

“The law was our tutor to bring us to Christ.” (Galatians 3:24)

This is the Bible’s ***DINSTINCT OBJECTIVE***: to lead us to Jesus. We don’t read The Bible as a goal, but as a guide, pointing us to, and stimulating a personal encounter with the person of Jesus. The same Jesus who, according to his best friend John, agreed with Paul, saying:

“You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.” John 5:39-40

Jesus is saying that the Scriptures are like a treasure map meant to lead us to him. But he warns that if the foundation of our faith is The Bible, we risk misreading the map and missing the treasure. You don’t study a treasure map just to understand the map, to love the beauty of the map, or defend the accuracy and authority of the map, but to find the treasure it points to!

Jesus offers a framework for faith, not rooted in rules, but in a relationship, not confined to the pages of a book, but connected to the person of Jesus. And the people who knew Jesus best got this. When his best friend John wrote his account of the life of Jesus, he begins, ***“In the beginning was the word”*** (John 1:1), a not-so-subtle nod to the first sentence of The Bible, ***“In the beginning, God SAID....”*** (Genesis 1:1) At first, God’s word was only spoken, passed along orally, and eventually written down by *priests* and *prophets*, many of whose books start the same way: ***“The word of the Lord came to Isaiah...”, “The word of the Lord came to Ezekiel...”, “The word of the Lord came to Zechariah...”***. But John says that in Jesus, ***“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”*** (John 1:14) Imagine! For centuries, people relied on second-hand oral or written records, like a game of telephone with God. God was just *words* to them. But then those *words* were incarnated in *The Word*– a living, thinking, feeling, three-

dimensional, full-colour, high-definition, flesh and blood person. Yet in the centuries since, we've gone and reduced that person to black & white, shoving them back into the pages of a leather-bound book, leaving a kid like me standing on a pile of paper and ink, believing I was standing on life's true foundation. What a tragedy! And all because I mistook the map for the treasure right in front of my eyes. Look at this example from the Book of Hebrews which, in my youth, was always used to emphasize the importance of The Bible:

“For the word of God is living and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword, even penetrating as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from HIS sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of HIM to whom we must answer.”

Hebrews 4:12-13

Don't be confused: The Word of God is not *The Bible*; it's *Jesus*. Or, as one author has said, *“The Word of God is inspired, inerrant and infallible and when he was 18, he grew a beard.”*

Am I saying we should get rid of our Bibles? Why even do things like *S.O.A.P.* or a Bible reading plan? Why have we spent years teaching through Exodus? The reason is that, as Peter, Paul & John said, the Bible is a reliable, inspired, tutor that leads us to a personal encounter of the presence and person of Jesus. That's the Bible's **DISTINCT OBJECTIVE**: to point us to Jesus.

So then, let's look to Jesus. In his most famous sermon – *The Sermon On The Mount* – he sums up a life of faith, and doesn't fail to address the role of Scripture. Early on, he clarifies:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets [shorthand for all the Scriptures]; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”

Matthew 5:17

When he says he's come to fulfill them, he doesn't mean that he's come to affirm, uphold, or even obey them (*he often doesn't!*) but that, just like a high school diploma is the *fulfillment* of (hopefully!) four years of schoolwork, the coming of Jesus is conclusion or graduation ceremony for the Old Covenant, which was governed by the Old Laws, contained in the Old Testament. *Old* isn't simply a reference to its age; it's more like the word *previous* or *former*, like your old house, your old phone, or your old school. The *Old* Covenant, recorded in the *Old* Testament is like our *old* school that we don't go to anymore. We've graduated and need to move on. This makes sense of why Jesus goes on to say things in his sermon, like, ***“You've heard it said...”***, then quoting Old Testament verses like, ***“you shall not murder”*** or ***“eye for eye, and tooth for tooth”***, then saying, ***“but I say to you...”*** and correcting or even contradicting what was written.

Jesus isn't just updating the old system, or modernizing it for a new generation; he's replacing it with a new and better one. The Old Covenant, as Hebrews 8 says, is "*obsolete*", along with all its burdensome laws. They've *fulfilled* their function of *leading us to Jesus* and, while it's nice to visit your old school and remember what got you to where you are now, you don't re-enroll in its classes. Through Jesus, we live in a *new* age, participants in a *new* covenant with God, governed not by archaic laws written on stone tablets, but by a new and better law, written on our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Jesus says:

***"A new command I give you: Love one another.
As I have loved you, so you must love one another."***

John 13:34

When Jesus issues this *new* command, he's not simply adding one more. This isn't the 11th Commandment. It's a whole new law: The Law of Love. And it only has one rule: to love others the way Jesus has loved us. This is the final point: The Bible, in its **DIVINE ORIGIN** that invites us to submit to God's leadership, and with its **DISTINCT OBJECTIVE** of leading us to *Jesus*, inspires a **DAILY ORIENTATION** of love. God-submitted, Jesus-centered, Holy Spirit-empowered love. Let me be clear: if Bible reading leads us anywhere else, if it leaves me an arrogant know-it-all instead of humble and submissive, if it leaves me focused on sin instead of on Jesus, if it leaves me thinking poorly of others, or in any way unkind, I'm reading it wrong. If I'm not inspired to increasingly follow Jesus and practice humble, self-sacrificing, others-oriented love, I'm misreading the map and missing out on its treasure. This brings us back to the verse we started with, maybe the clearest verse on what the Bible says about the Bible:

"Every scripture is inspired by God and is USEFUL for teaching, for showing mistakes, for correcting, and for training character, so that the person who belongs to God can be equipped TO DO EVERYTHING THAT IS GOOD."

2 Timothy 3:16-17 (CEB)

The Bible is useful for teaching, correcting, and training us to *do everything that is good* – to *love*. But it's only *useful* if we *use* it. It can only have this impact on you, if you read it. That's why we've invited you to read through Luke with us this month. And if you missed last week, or forgot, you can still join in. Start today. If you don't *or can't* read, have it read to you, or access one of the many free audio Bible resources online. But read it. Read it slowly and in small doses, but read it. Read it regularly and prayerfully. Read it with others. Ask questions, and resist easy answers. But read it. Read it submissively. Read it conversationally, knowing that Jesus, the living inspiration of the text, is with you as you read. Read it, not for *information*, but for *transformation*, not to be *sure*, but to be *shaped*, in humble submission to our Heavenly Father,

to encounter Jesus, and be empowered by The Holy Spirit to live a life of love. Before long, you'll discover that its stories, poems, and letters are a rich tapestry representing the full spectrum of the human experience, inviting us into the adventure of a lifetime, not contained within its pages, but leaping off of them into your and my day-to-day life.

One of our parenting strategies has been to instill values in our kids in the form of some simple, easy-to-remember sayings. One of our favourites is: *we love people; we only like things*. We *love* our friends Vera and Nolan, but we only *like* hamburgers We *love* our uncles and aunts, but we only *like* Pokémon and Star Wars. Maybe, like me, you've *loved* the Bible. Maybe you've only *liked* Jesus. Today, I'm asking you to reconsider and reprioritize – to *like* the Bible, but *love* Jesus, and to embrace a Biblical framework for a life of faith by standing with me, not on the *written* word of God, the B.I.B.L.E.; but upon the *Living* Word of God: J.E.S.U.S.