

What We Believe...About The Bible (Part 3)

Psalm 119:9-16

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We've spent the last two weeks talking about how we can believe the Bible is God's Word and you can go to our web site at firstbaptistwellsboro.com if you missed those sermons. Today I want to focus on *why* we should bother with this admittedly ancient document. What purpose does it serve in our day?

The writers of the venerable Westminster Confession of Faith put it this way, "The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture."

In other words, the Bible is essential in revealing God and His will; in revealing salvation through faith in Christ; in preserving and making known His truth; in establishing the Church; and in enabling Christians to battle sin and Satan.

To do this, the Bible wasn't written like a handbook where we can look in the table of contents for topics like "overcoming sin", or "church". It also doesn't claim to provide everything we'd *like* to know about God and His ways. But using historical narrative, poetry, prophecy, letters, parables, and other types of writing, God communicated what we *need* to know, so this morning we want to catch a glimpse of the important things the Bible reveals to us.

The thread that ties the whole Bible together, from mankind's fall into sin in the first book, Genesis, to the restoration of all things in the last book, Revelation, *is the story of God's plan to redeem a lost and sinful world*. Beginning in the OT we see God establishing relationships, or covenants, first with individuals and then with the nation of Israel. God expects loyal faithfulness from His people but time after time they fail. A system of sacrifices is put in place to remind them that they need to seek His forgiveness but also to point out that animal sacrifices aren't sufficient to pay for our sins. Only a coming Savior, God's Son Jesus, who is revealed in the pages of the NT, can offer a sufficient sacrifice, which He did by dying on the cross. The job of Christ's followers is to work together telling others about Jesus until He returns to establish His kingdom once and for all and create a new heaven and earth, completely free from sin.

Once we have that over-arching thread in mind, we find that the Bible teaches us about the world and our place in it. This is God's creation and we are its caretakers (Gen. 1:26). But it's a fallen world because of sin and so humanity is lost and far from God. That's why the followers of Jesus have been given the mandate to "...go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19).

What else is the Bible good for? Well, II Timothy 3:16,17 says “[16] All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for *teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness*, [17] so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” We all have a part to play in God’s kingdom and doing His will. Part of the reason He’s given us Scripture is to *teach* us what His will is and how we participate in it. It also *rebukes* us, that is, it calls us up short and reveals areas where we’re sinning. It *corrects* us by telling us what to do to stop sinning; and then it *trains us in righteousness*, that is, in the right, God-pleasing ways to do things.

Psalm 119 is an excellent example of how God’s Word trains us in righteousness, in other words, in how to live the way God wants us to. In Ps. 119:9, 11 we’re reminded that Scripture tells us how we can avoid sin and so please God. “[9] How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to Your Word.” “[11] I have hidden Your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.”

Part of the function of the Bible, then, is to tell us how to please God. In His mercy, He hasn’t left us to wander aimlessly, hoping that something we’re doing is going to please Him. Instead, He gives us His word, which tells us that He’s pleased with such things as honesty, faithfulness, compassion, showing love, honoring our parents, patience, etc. If we’re wondering if we should hold a grudge, if we should forgive, if we should care about those less fortunate, how should we treat others of different nationalities or races – all this and more is addressed in the Bible. Sometimes straightforwardly (as in Mark 12:31 “Love your neighbor as yourself”) and sometimes in the form of a story (as in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:25ff, where Jesus tells of a Jew helping a despised Samaritan).

So, as you’re reading the Bible, to get the greatest value for your daily life, one of the things you can be looking for is what sorts of behaviors make God happy and what causes Him to be angry. And then you check your own life. How am I doing with the things that make God happy? What do I need to do to improve? Have I asked God’s help to do better?

Another thing we can be looking for in God’s Word is what He tells us about Himself. The better we know God, the better we’re able to trust Him and the more likely we are to follow Him. In Gen. 18:25 Abraham says, “Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”, so we know God is just and does what is right. We know from Num. 23:19 He doesn’t lie; we know from Ps. 86:15 He’s compassionate, gracious and patient; we know from 1 John 4:8 that His controlling attribute is love; on and on we could go.

Let me suggest that you keep a few sheets of paper in your Bible as you read. You might write “God is...” and then under it ‘patient’ and next to that, write Psalm 86:15 and any other verse you come across that mentions His patience. Do the same for other character traits of God (e.g. forgiving, generous, trustworthy, etc.) or indeed for any topic. Over time as you read God’s Word, you’ll develop a great list of His attributes and where in the Bible they’re mentioned. More importantly, you’ll be learning a whole lot about what kind of God we serve and trust in.

Of course, the Bible tells us a lot about ourselves, doesn't it? The world views mankind as basically good, with a few bad spots that can be corrected if we just are educated the right way. Sadly the truth is the exact opposite. Jer. 17:9 says "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" That's the bad news. The good news is that while God's Word makes plain we are all sinners, and that the consequences of our sin is eternal punishment, it also tells us God has provided a sacrifice for our sins in His Son Jesus and that through placing our faith in Jesus we can be forgiven and have eternal life (Romans 3:23; 6:23; 5:8; 10:9,10; John 3:16).

But we don't just get the bare facts about our need of salvation. We're told we have an enemy, Satan, and that the Word of God is our weapon, the sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17), which has the truth we need to fight Satan's lies. We're also told that as followers of Jesus we are new creations (II Cor. 5:17), and that we each have spiritual gifts (I Cor. 12:1ff.; Rom. 12:6ff), so each of us, while not perfect, is important to the work of Christ's church and making Jesus known.

But how do we understand the Bible? There are so many parts that are so confusing! Well, it's true that many parts are difficult but it's also true that with some effort, most of the Bible is comprehensible. We don't have even a fraction of the time to cover the topic of Bible interpretation but let me say this. First, read Bible passages, not just a few verses. Try to get a sense of the main point of the passage, rather than getting caught up in the details. Second, buy a study Bible (NIV, ESV). A good study Bible is an invaluable tool that gives you information on each book as a whole and individual verses. Third, use a concordance. A concordance, lists all the words in the Bible and what verses they can be found in. Sometimes the concordance is a stand-alone book, sometimes it's bound at the back of your Bible. It's a critical tool for finding things in Scripture and I use it *all* the time. For example, if I want to find out more about God's love, I look up "love" and then look for all the verses that mention God's love. It's tremendously helpful.

Read God's Word passage by passage, use a study Bible to help with background and hard-to-understand verses, create your own topical list of words and the verses where they can be found. And *meditate* on what you're reading, don't just let the words swim past your eyes. Psalm 119:15 says "I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways." Allow God's Word to shape your thinking, and so, to shape you.