

## John 5:39

### Why The Bible?

**Introduction:** On January 1st we began a journey as a church community to read the whole Bible in one year. And we are dedicating this year to reading, studying, applying and discussing scripture.

**Why are we doing this?** Well, for a few reasons - Literacy among Americans is low - *According to a study conducted in late April by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Institute of Literacy, 32 million adults in the U.S. can't read. That's 14 percent of the population. 21 percent of adults in the U.S. read below a 5th grade level, and 19 percent of high school graduates can't read.*

The message of the Gospel and the story of Jesus were written down for us and compiled in a book we now call the Bible. These weren't just events based on what was happening at their time but claimed to be a continuation of the story and revelation of the Jewish Bible or scriptures - The Law, the Prophets and the Writings. *Christians are people of "the book", the Bible.* Yet, most Christians have never read through the Bible or even a whole book in the Bible (This is ok if you can't read or if you don't have access to a Bible, but most of us have multiple Bibles). These days we tend to get our Theology from Podcast, sermons and tweets, and maybe if we were a bit more studious we pick up a book on systematic theology or christian living on a certain subject.. But this leaves us divorced from the story, context, and customs and ultimately the meaning of the Bible..

So, as we read through, and study the Bible this year, it will help us to grow in our understanding of the full narrative and grand story of salvation. And by God's grace to find our story being caught up, shaped and defined more and more into the Biblical story.

As I've said many times before the church is now facing a big problem and that is - that a Biblically illiterate culture is using the Bible to attack a Biblically illiterate church. It used to be that people and modern culture saw the Bible as prudish and outdated, now people see the Bible as morally reprehensible and dangerous to human rights and human flourishing.. The argument goes - if we are going to progress as the human race we need to get rid of oppressive religions and their religious dogma.

Reading, and teaching through the Bible will allow us to cover the major themes as well as “big problems” in the Bible..

## **1. The Problem with the Bible**

1. So as we begin this year of reading the Bible lets just get out in front of it and say - As Christians we have problems with the Bible, we are uneasy about the Bible. There is stuff for all of us in the Bible that we scratch our heads at, things that most of the time we try to ignore or maybe weren't in the Bible. So many of us have no idea of what to do with a large portion of scripture - but we know Jesus, we love the message of the Gospel, we love and believe in the vision of the Sermon on the mount, the teachings and way of Jesus...we're good with Jesus, we want to follow Jesus - but the Bible as a whole seems to be an out of date part of Christianity that most of us are rather embarrassed about. If your my age - it's like that stage of your life when you had a proper Mullet and wore a fanny pack.. we all know it happened we just don't like talking about it... So what do we do?

## **2. Reform the Bible?**

1. Amber Dillon, a writer for the UK newspaper The Independent, wrote in 2013, "I do not have a problem with the Church of England. I happen to think Christianity, and religion in general, is something that should be celebrated and cherished.
2. For example, the Christian teaching of true charity (giving time and love to people in need, not just throwing money at causes) is something that is incredibly important in modern society. Christianity is not the issue. The Bible is....I'm a self-proclaimed theology geek and so, naturally, I was excited by the debate surrounding Christianity during the vote for female bishops and gay marriage. 'Could this be the start of a new denomination' I thought 'Will I see another reform?!' but I have been disappointed that the issue of the relevance of Christianity in the contemporary world had not been addressed, despite it receiving so much criticism in recent months. I can't help thinking that some of the Bible's teachings are irrelevant to modern day life and I feel that it is time for Christianity to move on, and that Christians should accept the Bible as a product of its time... she goes on to mention the Book of Leviticus forbidding the mixing of certain fabrics and not eating shell fish... then comments... *"If Christians accepted the Bible as a product of its time there would be no more animosity and hate directed at the*

*Church because of their controversial beliefs that contradict our progressive society."*

1. So her solution to the problems in the Bible is to simply accept the Bible as a human construct of its time - it lacks little relevance to today. Interesting that she's talking about Gay marriage in one breathe and brings up shell fish and mixed fabric laws as her basis for dismissing the bible's teachings on sexuality- these are two radically different topics - one of human sexuality and identity and the other of diet and clothing). Interesting as well that there are certain teachings of the Bible that she readily accepts - charity, love, personal investment in people, but cannot accept other parts based on the fact that they contradict our progressive society...
2. Very similar is the classic Piers Morgan objection, this one from his interview with Joel Osteen - *"Shouldn't the scripture be dragged kicking and screaming into the modern age. I mean... eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, not everything in the scriptures, really, is, in my view, conducive to modern life. I mean, like everything else, doesn't it have to move with the times and isn't it down again to people like you to interpret it in a way that evolves when you're known as a very progressive preacher? - Piers Morgan*
3. C.S. Lewis referred to this kind of thinking about one's own time and culture as intellectually superior to other times and cultures as chronological snobbery..*"the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited."*
4. Lewis explains what's wrong with this approach: *"You must find out why it went out of date. Was it ever refuted (and if so by whom, where, and how conclusively) or did it merely die away as fashions do? If the latter, this tells us nothing about its truth or falsehood. From seeing this, one passes to the realization that our own age is also 'a period,' and certainly has, like all periods, its own characteristic illusions. They are likeliest to lurk in those widespread assumptions which are so ingrained in the age that no one dares to attack or feels it necessary to defend them."* - C.S Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*.
1. This does not seem to be a good solution to problems with the Bible.

### 3. Cut it up and cut it out?

1. Another option is to get rid of what is offensive in the Bible, mainly by getting rid of the Old Testament.
2. In an interview with Jonathan Merritt, Mega-church pastor Andy Stanley said: "I'm convinced that we make a better case for Jesus if we leave the Old Testament or the old covenant out of the argument." - We can make a better case for Jesus than the case Jesus made for himself?
3. In recent years, Andy Stanley has encouraged getting over "the Bible tells me so." He actually claimed in 2016 that the church veered into "trouble" when it began to make its arguments on the basis of the Bible. He cited "deconversion" stories in which people told him that they lost their Christian faith when they lost confidence in the Bible. He said: "If the Bible is the foundation of your faith, here's the problem: it's all or nothing. Christianity becomes a fragile house of cards religion."
  1. In some sense I understand where Andy Stanley is coming from, there are some people whose understanding of the Bible is so literal it's mind boggling - you have to be a young (Flat) earth, literally six day creationist, who believes the Devil put dinosaur bones in the ground in order to thwart the teaching of creation. They have a golden tablet view of biblical inspiration - God literally spoke every word of scripture and the human writers simply wrote it down... and when you start looking at the historical evidence for the Bible you realize that that's not the way the Bible was put together... and that literal six day creation is only one way to read and interpret the text.... My Grandfather was a Pastor and good Bible teacher and was knowledgeable about many things, but he was taught that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible, and so when Numbers 12:3 says, "**Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth.**"- My Grandpa would say, Moses could write that about himself because he was that meek.... This is a fundamentalist, and overly literally interpretation with the scripture and you run into so many problems with this..
  2. Andy Stanley is taking a deconstructionist view (Isn't everyone these days) which can be very helpful in getting us through dogma and tradition, but often times deconstruction leaves us with chaos and anarchy and only trusting in our own wisdom

and understanding to guide us, which leave us with little meaning, guidance or purpose... and that's the problem with this view - in the end, I am the one who is the critic and shaper of the Bible, rather than the Bible critiquing and shaping me. I decided what the Bible should and shouldn't say, I judge for myself, what is right, wrong, good, beautiful and true... am I, or are you wise enough, mature enough, learned enough to do that??

3. And of course there are real problems with the Bible; it has horrible things in it. And people have used the Bible to justify terrible things throughout history: Slavery, mass genocide, oppression of women and sexual minorities, the holocaust, the denial of science and true progress, and the list goes on. You can use the Bible to destroy someone's life - and many people do. There are People and practices in the Bible - you should never emulate. As Eugene Peterson says - "caveat lector," read with caution." The Bible also doesn't always comment on the character and actions of certain individuals (positively or negatively) but often expects the reader to know (as they've followed the story from the beginning) and to think through and weigh out whether the actions align with the good God scripture reveals or are rather acts of human rebellion and sin that are out of line with the good creation that God intends. (Polygamy; slavery; incest, rape, oppression of women; Jacob and Rebecca's deceit of Issac; Judah the Great x Grandfather of Jesus, The Judges, The kings )
  1. If you have kids that are challengers and questioners - and your trying to teach them the Bible - you know the problems that I'm talking about. A few months back, my sons, Judah and Hudson were wrestling and beating each other up. Hudson happened to be losing this fight when I intervened. Hudson said to me, it's okay dad, I've been asking God to give me the Holy Spirit so I can beat up Judah like Samson beat the Philistines.... Okay, I see where you might have gotten that idea... The Bible is really confusing at times.

### **3. Some Reasons for the Bible**

1. But on the other side the Bible has been used to do some of the greatest good in the world - health care, orphanages, the arts, the

abolition of slavery, the civil rights movement, women's rights.. and so on

1. Alvin J. Schmidt in his book, *How Christianity Changed the World* attributes - The sanctification of human life; the elevation of sexual morality; Women's freedom and dignity; Charity and Compassion; Hospitals and health care; Education; Labor and economic freedom; Science; Liberty, Justice and human rights; and the Abolishment of slavery all to Christianity and Christian teaching.
2. Not only that but the Bible is the number one best selling book in the world, 5 Billion copies sold, about 100 million copies are sold each year. It has been banned by governments through history and is still banned in many countries today because of how dangerous it's teachings, ideas, and message. I mean, doesn't the American rebellious spirit in you want to read it, and see what the hype is all about???
3. **Jesus and "The Bible"**
  1. I think for Christians, followers of Jesus, those who have received and believed the Gospel - a good question is what did Jesus do with "the Bible" or the scriptures? Did he dismiss them as irrelevant and outdated, did he unhitch the Old Testament from who he was or what he was doing???
  2. Jesus spoke to the religious leaders of his day who prided themselves on their knowledge of scripture. He said, **"The Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen, and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe the one whom he has sent. You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life." - John 5:37-40**
  3. Or there is that passage at the end of Luke where Jesus gives the most Christ-centered Bible study ever - He said to two disciples, **"O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. - Luke 24:26-27**

1. Jesus saw himself as the main character of and culmination of the Biblical story - it's all, ultimately, pointing to him.
2. Jesus constantly quotes the Bible - he said again and again in his teachings - it is written...or have you not read.
3. In all His teachings He referred to the divine authority of Scripture (the Old Testament) (Mt. 5:17-18; 8:17; 12:40-42; Lk. 4:18-21; 10:25-28; 15:29-31; 17:32; 24:25-45; Jn. 5:39-47).
4. He quoted the Old Testament 78 times (at least that we have recorded), the Pentateuch alone 26 times. He quoted from Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Psalms, Proverbs, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Amos, Jonah, Micah, and Malachi.
5. Jesus was raised in a Jewish household where the scriptures would be taught and discussed, day and night. Most Jewish boys could recite the Torah, and the Psalms were the songs and prayers of the nation of Israel. Jesus life was immersed in Scripture.
6. It is believed by many Bible commentators and theologians that while Jesus was being crucified he was reciting the Psalms to himself. The Gospels record his reciting Psalm 22:1 **“my God my God why have you forsaken me and psalm 31:5 “into your hands I commit my spirit”**... Could it be that Jesus was comforting himself with these words and songs? Beginning with Psalm 22 and ending with Psalm 31.
  1. At Jesus’ darkest hours he turned to the scripture for hope - Psalm 23 the Lord is my shepherd..I shall not want..even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will not fear for you are with me.....Psalm 24 - Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully. He will receive blessing from the Lord and righteousness from the God of his salvation”. Psalm 25 - In you, YHWH my God, I put my trust. I trust in you. Do not let me be put to shame nor let my enemies triumph over me.....Psalm 26 - Vindicate me, O YHWH for I have led a blameless life....Psalm 27....the lord is my light and my salvation..whom shall I fear. Psalm 28 - to you YHWH, I call; you are my rock, do not turn a deaf ear to me. If you remain silent I will be like those who go down to the pit....”

1. Jesus breathed, he ate, and drank, in the scripture. They were his source of comfort and hope.
  2. When Jesus was attacked and tempted by the Devil in the wilderness each time he used the scripture and submitted himself to it's authority.. As he said to the devil when he tempted him -"**Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.**" Jesus lived by the scripture they were his daily sustenance.
  3. There is way to read and study scripture that misses the main character and the main point and we have to beware of doing this. But just because people have missed the point and misinterpreted the Bible should not keep us from reading and studying the scriptures that ultimately point to our great savior Jesus Christ..
  4. "Let the reader beware. just having print on the page and knowing how to distinguish nouns from verbs is not enough. I might own a morocco leather Bible, having paid fifty dollars for it, but I don't own the word of God to do with it want ever I want; God is sovereign. The word of God is not my possession. The words printed on the pages of my Bible give witness to the living and active revelation of the God of creation and salvation, the God of love who became the Word made flesh in Jesus, and I had better not forget it. If in my Bible reading I lose touch with this livingness, if I fail to listen to this living Jesus, submit to this sovereignty, and respond to this love, I become arrogant in my knowing and impersonal in my behavior. An enormous amount of damage is done in the name of Christian living by bad Bible reading. Caveat lector, let the reader beware." - Eugene Peterson, Eat This Book.
4. **Conclusion:** Okay, you say, I get where you're coming from - The scriptures are ultimately about Jesus and the message of God's great rescue of the world through him -but there are still things in the Bible that seem so out of line with that, and out of line with the character of God. What do we do about that? I would say this:
1. There is a passage in the Gospel of John where Jesus starts getting real with the multitudes that are following him.. I mean, he draws a definitive line in the sand and says unless you eat my flesh and

drink my blood you will die in your sins,- you will be cut off from the Kingdom of God.. and other very offensive language.. the result was that many who were his disciples turned away from following him... Jesus then turned to Peter and the the other disciples and said, “Do you also want to go away”?

2. I'll be honest, there are many things in the Bible that I still don't understand, that I wrestle with, that I'm still working through - I don't have it all figured out, I'm not sure anyone totally does. But for me, or you to think that we can dismiss the Bible, or cut out portions of it that we don't agree with or have a hard time with is incredibly arrogant. Besides that, if I only read, and submit myself to things, people and situations that I agree with 100% I will grow lopsided, and unbalanced. I will be stunted in my mental, emotional, relational and spiritual maturity - So then, are we willing to humble ourselves to the scrutiny of scripture rather than us being the judges? If we can do this we will grow immensely.
3. Also, for me, when I find something in scripture that seems out of line with the revealed character of God I fall back on what I do know. We need to use the clear passages of scripture to help us interpret what is unclear in scripture...What I do know is this - the life, character, person and work of Jesus are incomparable with any other person in history. His words, his compassion, his humility, his grace, his sacrifice on the cross.. I have never heard more powerful, life giving words or ever heard a greater message in my life. And this leads me to say with Peter and the other disciples - **“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.”**
  1. *“Test the alternative answers to the worlds major questions, and we, too, will come to Peter's perfectly put questions and affirmation: Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of deep, lasting life, and we have come to believe and so to know that you are the Holy one of God.” - Fredrick Dale Bruner*
4. As we read through the Bible this year as a community I encourage you to:
  1. **Think Deeply:** about what you are reading - what it meant to the original recipients, what it means in the grand narrative of the scripture - how does it ultimately point us to Jesus? Think about what it means for your life in following Jesus.

2. **Express your doubt:** Dishonest doubts are both proud and cowardly; they show disdain and laziness. A dishonest doubt is to say, “what a crazy idea!, and then just walk away. “That’s impossible” or “that’s stupid” is an assertion not an argument. It’s a way of getting out of a hard decision. Honest questions are humble because they lead us to ask questions and not just put up walls. So please bring your true doubts before God before his word, before others Christians, before your pastors and leaders..
3. **Surrender:** If I follow Jesus will I have to give up... will I have to pray, read my bible, give up sex, quit my Job. But here we are negotiating the cost rather than counting it. Usually we are willing to give up things, but we aren’t willing to give up the right to decide what those things are. Like Peter and the other disciples, we may not have all the problems solved—the problems of following Jesus and saying yes to his teaching and his Lordship and his saving work. He may confuse us at times, and baffle us with things he says, and provoke us, and offend us. But ***“Your heart must say something like,” I do not know all that you are going to ask of me, Lord. But I’ll do whatever you say in your Word, whether I like it or not, and I’ll accept patiently whatever you send into my life, whether I understand it or not.” We cannot say to Jesus, you are my consultant, I will be happy to take your recommendations and I might even do some of them. No. if you want Jesus with you, you have to give up the right to self-determination. - Tim Keller***