



**Date:** November 24 - 25, 2018  
**Speaker:** Paul McIlwraith, Teaching Pastor  
**Scripture:** What is the Bible?

As the legend goes, around 1946, a dirt poor 16 year-old, Bedouin shepherd named Muhammed was looking for his lost sheep. He was convinced that they had taken refuge in a cave that ran along the edge of the Dead Sea, which borders Israel. He grabbed a few rocks in his hands, as he thought if he threw them into the cave, he would scare the sheep to come out. But when he cast the stones, instead of the bleeping of the sheep, he heard the sound of breaking pottery.

He entered the cave hoping to discover some lost treasure but was disappointed to find only jars stuffed with rolled up scrolls. Over the next few days, Muhammed and his cousins took several of the scrolls back to their camp and hung them over tent poles. They thought at the very least, they would come in handy for starting their camp fire each night. Convinced that they had nothing of real value on their hands but needing money, two of the cousins bundled up the parchments and walked into the shop of an antique dealer in nearby Bethlehem. They sold the seven scrolls that remained for the equivalent of \$10 Canadian. The antique dealer later resold them for five times that price, making a tidy profit. Today, they are priceless and better known as the Dead Sea Scrolls. Have you heard of them?

It seems that the antique dealer's sale sparked a bit of curiosity. Which led to an extensive archaeological dig that lasted about a decade and turn up more than 800 scrolls throughout 11 different caves in that area. This discovery would fundamentally change the way Jewish people and Christians understand their religions.

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls was one of the most important Biblical discoveries of our life time. Why?

The scrolls are the earliest known copies of the Hebrew Bible, familiar to us Christians as the Old Testament. They were written in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, and include manuscripts or fragments of every book in the Old Testament except the Book of Esther. All of them were created nearly one thousand years earlier than any previously known biblical manuscript.

The Dead Sea Scrolls were such an amazing discovery because they were in excellent condition and had remained hidden for so long (over 2000 years), but this is probably the most significant point. This discovery gave more authenticity and confidence in the reliability of the Old Testament because there were minimal differences between the manuscripts that had previously been discovered and those that were found in the caves.

If you have ever travelled to Jerusalem, perhaps you visited the "Shrine of the Book" in the Israel Museum. It was built in 1965 specifically to display the Dead Sea Scrolls.

If you are just joining with us today, welcome. We are glad you are here. This weekend is a little unusual. Last week, we finished a five-part message series on the Parables of Jesus and next weekend, we launch our Christmas series, entitled *The Gift* and begin Advent. So today, it is a bit of a stand-alone. We have done this periodically throughout the year. Just taken some time to do a one-off message on a key biblical or theological concept. In the last twelve months, we have covered the significance of communion and the Lord's Supper.

We have unpacked the symbolism of baptism and the reason why Jesus called his follower's to be baptised and today, I want to look at the bible.

I know what you are thinking; Paul, we do that every week, but I am talking about why we even reference the bible. Why do we stand here and ask you to take out your bibles and follow along? Why do we encourage all of you to read your bible? What is the big deal about the bible not just to us, but to millions around the world?

I saw an article this week, that former first Lady, Michelle Obama has a new book out. It is her memoir entitled "Becoming". Have you seen it? Anyone bought a copy? If so, you are not alone. Just this week, her book was just dubbed the fastest selling book of 2018. It sold 725 000 copies (including Kindle) in one day. Not bad. Not bad at all.

The Bible? Over 100 million copies of the bible are sold, annually. Year after year after year. It is the most translated book in history with at least one book of the bible having been translated in over 2 500 languages or dialects. On top of actual books, last year alone, YouVersion's Bible App was downloaded over 300 million times. You could say the bible has mass global appeal and it is far from a one hit wonder.

Do you remember your first bible? I remember mine. I am not sure who I got it from. I would have been 7-8 years old. It was black with a zipper around it. It was a King James translation of the bible which meant it was a little difficult for me to understand with all the thees and thous but I carried it with me each week to Sunday School and Church. I don't know what became of it, lost somewhere along the way.

Just short of my 13<sup>th</sup> birthday, I was baptised and my grandmother presented me with this bible. Inside she wrote, *To Paul on the occasion of his Baptism, 15<sup>th</sup> February, 1976. This Bible was given to your Grandfather McIlwraith when he joined Knox Church in 1927.*

I cherish this bible, not necessarily for the content inside. Again, it is a King James translation so I don't really read it. It is important to me because it was my Grandfather's.

He wrote his name just inside the front cover, *W. R. (Walter Reed) McIlwraith, 1927.* I never knew my grandfather. He died the year I was born. This is the only thing I have that belonged to him.

Perhaps you have a bible like this as well. A family heirloom passed on to you through generations. Something that is sentimental to you and takes a valuable spot on your bookshelf at home.

If you grew up in the church, chances are that you were told that the bible is God's word and that it is all true. Maybe you were told that you were to never set anything on top of it. Never use it as a door stop or paper weight. Never write in it or tear the pages. This is the Holy Book and should be treated with the reverence it deserves and we believed it. We believed what we were told about the bible even though we had never read it and chances are that we were told some of these things by people who had never read the bible in its entirety either. The fact is, that most Christians still haven't read the whole thing. Maybe it is because no one ever told us why we should read it.

Maybe your church experience has been one where each week, the sermon would mix and match Old Testament and New Testament passages and concepts but no one ever explained to you why one was called Old and the other, New. The fact is that the whole thing seems rather old doesn't it?

Maybe nobody ever explained to you that it is a book written by many different authors over a long period of time and it is one book but it actually comprises a number of smaller books. Maybe no one ever explained to you that the Bible contains many different genres and literary styles and extends beyond many different contexts and cultures. Maybe no one ever told you that the Bible has been translated into many different readability levels so if the one that you are holding in your hands is not as understandable to you, there are many other choices. Did you know that?

Maybe someone put a bible in your hand at one point or gave it to you as a gift and told you how important it was to read, but never explained why. Has that been your experience? Let me see if I can shed some light on that today.

First, let's start with, *what is the bible?* If I asked you, *what is the bible?* What would you say? The word "Bible" comes from the Latin and Greek words meaning "book," which is a fitting name, since it is, a book. But in reality, it is a collection of books. There are 66 books in total in the Bible.

There are 39 books in the Old Testament and 27 books in the New Testament.

Just as a caveat, if you grew up in the Catholic Church, your bibles probably included some more writings between the Old and New Testament called deuterocanonical books or the Apocrypha. These are significant writings but not considered to be a part of the bible by Protestant churches.

So, 66 books in the bible, but here is the amazing part. There were about 40 different human authors who contributed to the Bible and they came from all walks of life. There were kings (David). Fishermen (John). Priests (Ezra). Government officials (Nehemiah). Farmers (Job). Shepherds (Amos) and even a doctor (Luke). The bible was written over a span of 1500 years, in three languages, Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek and includes many different literary genres including narratives, poetry, letters, history, wisdom books, apocalyptic writings and the Law. Now considering all of that diversity, there is incredible unity in the bible, with common themes woven all throughout the pages. I think we saw that in the message series we did last year called, *The Story*.

The reason for the Bible's unity is due to the fact that, ultimately, it has one Author—God Himself. Human Beings may have written the words, but it was God who orchestrated it all. I love how,

2 Timothy 3:16 says it.

*All Scripture is inspired by God.*

Another translation says,

*All Scripture is God-breathed.*

The human authors wrote exactly what God wanted them to write. His breath was on them and the result was the perfect and holy word of God.

Psalms 12:6 says,

*The Lord's promises are pure,*

2 Peter 1:20-21

*Above all, you must realize that no prophecy in Scripture ever came from the prophet's own understanding, or from human initiative. No, those prophets were moved by the Holy Spirit, and they spoke from God.*

God is the author of the Bible who chose to use humanity to be his instruments.

Let's take a little closer look at how the bible as a whole is divided up. The two major divisions are probably more familiar to us. We have the Old Testament at the beginning of the bible and the New Testament that follows it.

A Testament states a belief or gives some sort of direction. The document that people leave behind when they die is known as the "last will and testament". It gives lawyers directions for how to divide up a person's possessions among family and friends. We can also say that getting an "A" on your math exam is a testament to your math skills. Or when you give some money to the poor it is a testament of your charitable nature. A testament is a strong statement of belief.

In the bible, the words, *testament* and *covenant* are sometimes used interchangeably. A covenant is a relationship based on mutual commitment and belief that involves promises and obligations. God made many covenants with us throughout the bible and we make covenants as well.

Just yesterday, I stood before two people as they promised, *to love, comfort, honour and keep one another in sickness and in health and forsaking all others be committed to each other as long as they both shall live?* A marriage vow is a covenant with one another before God. A commitment that involves promises and obligations.

Sometimes you may hear the Old Testament referred to as the Old Covenant and the New Testament as the New Covenant. It contains strong belief and direction based on a commitment that involves promise or obligations. That is what is describe in these two sections of the bible. So, if I were to give you the Coles notes version or for the younger generation here, the Spark Notes of what the Old and New Testament were about it would be this:

The Old Testament is the story of a nation.

The New Testament is the story of a Man.

To expand it a little bit more, the Old Testament describes the founding and preserving of the nation of Israel. God promised to use Israel to bless the

whole world. Once Israel was established as a nation, God raised up a family through whom the blessing would come: the family of David. Through the lineage of David was promised one who would bring about the salvation of humanity. That is the Old Testament in a nutshell.

The New Testament details the coming of that promised one. His name was Jesus and He fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament as He lived a perfect life, died and rose from the dead to become the Saviour of humanity.

The details of how that all plays out is captured in the individual books of each of the Old and New Testament.

Let's have a closer look at the Old Testament. The 39 books are divided up as these genres:

1. **Pentateuch/ The Law/Torah** - 5 books:

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy

2. **Historical Books** - 12 books that give the history of the people.

Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther.

3. **The Writings/ Poetry/Wisdom Literature** - 5 books:

Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon

4. **Prophets** - 17 books: Major and Minor does not identify the importance of the book but the length.

Major Prophets - Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel;

Minor Prophets - Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi.

When you understand the genre, the literary style of each book of the bible, then it enhances your ability to read and understand what is going on. Think of it like this. If you showed up at Budweiser Gardens for a classical music concert and instead the Rolling Stones show up, you would not get much out of the

concert but a bunch of noise. You were prepped to listen to a different genre of music.

That is why it is important to understand the genre of the books of the bible. To gain a deeper understanding for what is going on in the text.

Let me test you. What genre would this be? The Law, Historical, Poetry or Prophets?

*The sons of Abraham were Isaac and Ishmael. <sup>29</sup>These are their genealogical records. It would be historical because it gives a genealogy. 1 Chronicles 1:28*

What about this one?

*Kiss me and kiss me again,  
for your love is sweeter than wine.  
<sup>3</sup>How pleasing is your fragrance;  
your name is like the spreading fragrance  
of scented oils. No wonder all the young  
women love you!*

Some of you are thinking, *is that in the bible!?* *Where is that one!?* See what you have been missing! That is found in *Song of Solomon 1:2-3*. It is Poetry. This is what I used to read to Carolyn when we were dating.

Understanding the genre of the passage gives greater understanding to our reading and interpretation of the text. Historical writing tells us what happened but Wisdom and Poetry books are important because they explore questions about suffering, love and wisdom around our relationship with God and others.

Now just a couple of other things to make note of. These books in the Old Testament and the bible in general are not arranged in chronological order. If you begin reading in Genesis through to Malachi, you are not reading the Old Testament in chronological order, it fluctuates.

For example, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah appear in the first half of the Old Testament but based on the date they were written, they should actually fall near the end. The order of the books is more around topical themes.

Secondly, when you open your bibles, you see how they are organized and arranged with chapters and verses.

That is not the way they were originally written. The books were written out manuscript style just flowing with no breaks and written on big pieces of papyrus rolled in scrolls. The bible was divided in chapters in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and into verses in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. They are entirely human made and are inserted for one reason primarily, for convenience.

So that preachers like me, can look out at the audience and say, *okay turn to,*

**Psalm 119:89**

*Your eternal word, O Lord, stands firm in heaven.*

As some of you know Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the bible with 176 verses. If I just said, *find these words in the book of Psalms,*

*Your eternal word, O Lord,  
stands firm in heaven.*

Without giving you a clue, or a marker on where to find it, we would be here until next week looking it up. We know many of our favourite passages by chapter and verse. John 3:16. Proverbs 3:5-6. Jeremiah 29:11. It is convenient and easy to reference.

Let's turn our attention to the New Testament. The 27 books are divided up as these genres:

1. **The Gospels** 4 books

Matthew, Mark, Luke, John

2. **The Acts of the Apostles** Historical. It tells the history of the early church.  
1 book

Acts

3. **The Epistles/ Letters written by the Apostle Paul** 13 books

Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians. 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon

4. **The Epistles/ Letters not written by the Apostle Paul** 8 books

Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Jude,

Let me chime in here with another note. The authorship of the books of the bible always seems to be a debatable topic amongst biblical scholars. Even when the book has someone's name attached to it, there can still be some skepticism.

For example, there has been a lot of questioning as to whether Matthew, Mark, Luke and John actually wrote Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. This sort of activity gives biblical scholars something to do. All that to say that the book of Hebrews listed above as not written by Paul, could have, in fact, been written by Paul. They are not 100% certain.

**5. Apocalyptic or Prophecy Literature** 1 book

Revelation

Let me say a couple of words about a few of the genres in the New Testament.

The word gospel is derived from the Greek term, *euangélion*, which simply means good news or good tidings. So the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are books that contain good news but not just any good news, like the Leafs won last night or the stock market went up or you won the lotto grand prize jackpot. Those all might be interesting and exciting things but they are not world changing good news. These New Testament gospels record the good news of God's action in history to bring people into a life-saving relationship with him through Jesus. That is Good News!

The final book of the New Testament and the bible, Revelation is a unique literary genre known as apocalyptic literature.

The word, apocalypse comes from the Greek word which means to reveal, to uncover or disclose. This is why Revelation is such an appropriate name for this book. Revelation has proven to be quite controversial over the centuries with many contrasting opinions on how we should interpret it. One distinctive about apocalyptic literature is that it makes use of imagery; things like symbols, numerology and metaphors that help to paint a picture.

### Revelation 13:1

*Then I saw a beast rising up out of the sea. It had seven heads and ten horns, with ten crowns on its horns.*

What?

In the Old Testament, books like Daniel and Ezekiel contain elements of apocalyptic literature, as well. How else do you explain?

### Daniel 7:7

*Then in my vision that night, I saw a fourth beast—terrifying, dreadful, and very strong. It devoured and crushed its victims with huge iron teeth and trampled their remains beneath its feet.*

Or

### Ezekiel 1:5-6

*From the center of the cloud came four living beings that looked human, except that each had four faces and four wings.*

These are not literal creatures but metaphors or visions that the author describes for a purpose, which is, to point us to the future. To a future thing, a future person or a future event so that ultimately God can be revealed.

The purpose of the book of Revelation is clear right from the start. It says in,

### Revelation 1:1

*This is a revelation from Jesus Christ. The Book of Revelation is to reveal Jesus.*

Christians have speculated for years about the contents of Revelation. Whether it is about having 666 or bar codes stamped on our foreheads, or apache helicopters flying over-head, or submitting to one world government, or meteorites crashing into the earth or being “left behind”, all of that is left up for debate. But one thing we must not forget, Revelation is about Jesus, not just the end of the world. It is a book about the worship and praise and the ultimate revealing of Jesus Christ.

### Revelation 4:8

*Day after day and night after night they keep on saying,*

*“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty—*

*the one who always was, who is, and who is still to come.”*

Jesus is the central character in Revelation and in the Bible—this whole book is really about Him. The Old Testament predicts His coming and sets the stage for His entrance into the world. The New Testament describes His coming and His work to bring salvation to sin stained humanity.

So, we have talked a bit about the distinctives of the bible. It is God breathed and inspired yet authored by many people over a long period of time, in many different styles and genres across different cultures and contexts. This is good and interesting information but how did it all get compiled into this one book. I mean there were a lot of writings and stories during the time of Jesus. How was it decided what would be placed in here? In this book?

Well, the process took centuries and a lot of thought, discussion, debate and prayer. In the end, these 66 books were writings in which the faithful heard the voice of God in a very distinct way. This led to this book being designated as an authoritative guide for Christian lives and beliefs. It became the biblical canon.

The term canon, (notice it is one “n” not two, I am not talking about something that shoots iron balls at ships) is a collection of writings that carries authority in a given religious community. It comes from the Greek word *Kanon*, which means, a measuring stick.

The biblical canon, is the standard or the measuring stick by which the Christian community evaluates their beliefs, practises and ethical behaviour. You may wonder, why do we want standards? Why not just let everyone determine what is right and how to act? Whatever will be, will be.

Well, without standards, there is no group. There is no movement. There is no church. There is just a bunch of people spread out in a certain setting. Standards are what binds people together and

unifies them into a group. Just think of the groups you belong to.

Maybe it is a guy's poker night, or a gourmet cooking group, a sports team or a political movement but they all have agreed upon purposes and rules by which to operate. Whether they are written down or not. If you don't believe me, try hiding a card up your sleeve on poker night. You will find out the rules pretty quickly.

Likewise, all religious groups must have some guide for their beliefs and practices that establishes their identity. Without those, there is no reason to come together as a group. Standards also create boundaries which is particularly important when a group faces opposition because people want to be clear what they are willing to sacrifice for.

The early Christians and Jewish people, just after the death and resurrection of Jesus needed some sort of authority or standard to guide them. So they developed a canon. A set of authoritative writings which became the bible. The process was very complicated so I will spare you the details, but I encourage you to research it on your own. It is very interesting. The compilation of the Old Testament is the result of ten centuries, a thousand years of research, work, thought and the work of the Holy Spirit. The compilation of the New Testament was also very important because just after Jesus died, there were many contradictory teachings and the early church needed an authoritative guide for its beliefs and practices.

One of the main criteria for any writing that was included in the New Testament was something called, apostolicity. That is, it had to be written by, or related in some way to, an apostle.

Who better to understand Jesus' life, teachings, death and resurrection than the ones who were closest to him. The ones that walked with him every day.

Since the Apostles had been the authorities within the church since its beginning, the people looked to their writings as guides that would serve them even after these apostles were dead and gone. All of the authors of the New Testament books were either Apostles or had a close connection to an Apostle.

Now, Paul was not an original Apostle but his writings were accepted into the canon of the New Testament because of the direct experience he had with the risen Jesus on the Road to Damascus.

As I said, there is so much more I could say on this topic but this is a sermon and not a seminary lecture so let me wrap up by referring back to a verse I used at the beginning.

*2 Timothy 3:16.* Do you remember it? It says

*All Scripture is inspired by God.*

God is ultimately responsible for this book but notice as the passage goes on.

*All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right.*

All Scripture is God inspired and breathed but here is the key point. It is useful! This book is useful. Have you found that to be true in your life?

As we close, after giving you all that other background information, can I suggest to you four reasons why the bible is useful for our lives?

- 1. The bible is an unfolding of God's redemptive plan for humanity and it reveals Jesus.**

It is the bible that gives us, followers of Jesus, both individually and corporately as the church, our marching orders. We are to live under scripture because that is the way we live under the authority of God.

And notice, we are not worship the bible, we aren't. We worship that which the bible reveals. We worship Jesus, our Saviour.

The second reason why the bible is useful for our lives.

- 2. Scripture grows and strengthens our faith.**

In the church, we call it discipleship, which simply means the process by which we grow in our faith to become more like Jesus. The Bible is the primary

means that the Holy Spirit uses to bring about life transformation and growth.

The third reason why the bible is useful for our lives.

### **3. Scripture helps us to make decisions and guides our lives.**

God promises to guide us through His word. In *Psalms 119: 105* it says...

*Your word is a lamp to guide my feet  
and a light for my path.*

I love that imagery.

Let me ask you a question. When do we need light? In the darkness. Have you ever tried to find your way in the dark? God says to all of us, this is how much I love you, I want to give you my wisdom to shed light on the dangers that life may bring our way. Those lurking in the darkness.

The fourth reason why the bible is useful for our lives.

### **4. Scripture will change your heart.**

Scripture doesn't just grow our faith, it can and will change our heart through the Holy Spirit at work in the pages of the text. When your heart is changed, your life is changed. Some of you have found that to be true.

So there you have it. There is so much more I could say but I hope you have gained a little more understanding for this book, the bible and the reason why each week, we anchor our messages around what God says through it. It is also why we encourage you to engage it on your own, each day.

*All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right.*

And that my friends, is the truth. **Amen? Amen.**

## **Points to Ponder**

### **What is the Bible?**

**With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.**

1. Can you remember your first bible? When and why did you receive it? Do you have a family bible at home? What does it represent to you?
2. What have been your experiences with church and the bible? You may have been encouraged to read your bible but has anyone ever told you why or how to read it? Share some of the ways you have tried to make bible reading a part of your daily routine. What have been some benefits to this activity? What have been some obstacles?
3. What are some misconceptions you have had about the bible? What have you learned about the bible that has enriched your relationship with Jesus?
4. Share a favourite book of the bible or verse. Why is it so meaningful to you? Do you understand the context of the verse or book? Who was the verse or book originally addressed to and how does its message transcend time and culture to impact your life?
5. Can you think of a time when you had to make a major life decision? Did you go to the bible to help you make that decision and guide your life? If so, describe how it was helpful.

### **Prayer and Action Item**

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. Pray specifically for a deeper understanding of the bible. Pray that you would come to see it as a significant resource and God given guide for our life.