

Big Questions

3. Is the Bible Outdated?

October 2, 2022

Text: John 5:39, 2 Timothy 3:14-17, Matthew 4:4

Welcome to Crossroads! I'm Jonathan, and I'm one of the pastors here. Today, we're asking the question, "Is the Bible outdated?" That's a great question, because there's a lot of things that have happened in the past that have no bearing on my life today. Some things don't age well.

Consider fashion trends. It's really good that some of them have died out. [Photo shown on the big screen.] Back in the Victorian era, arsenic dresses became a popular trend among the wealthier class. The shade of green was produced by dyeing the material with large amounts of the toxic chemical arsenic, which means that those wearing the dresses would come down with symptoms of nausea, impaired vision, and skin reactions.

In the 1760s, British aristocrats were in a competition of who could look the most ridiculous as they had a fashion trend called "Macaroni" [Photo shown on the big screen.] They consisted of gigantic wigs that were topped with a feathered hat. This utterly terrible fashion was immortalized in the tune "Yankee Doodle" in the line "stuck a feather in his cap and called it macaroni!"

I know I'm not exempt to terrible fashion decisions. As a child of the '90s, I got swept into the parachute pants craze. [Photo shown on the big screen.] Us '90s kids spent way too much money at Hot Topic to look this bad!

Many view the Bible this way. Sure, it might have some inspirational parts, but it's an old book that is boring and hard to understand. It's got strange rules about things like not wearing clothes with mixed fiber. There's plenty of good literature in the world by authors like Charles Dickens or Toni Morrison, but that doesn't mean we need to base our life on them.

Others may believe the Bible isn't just irrelevant, it's harmful. In fact, a school in Texas recently banned the Bible in their schools because of parents objecting to its use. Now, it might not surprise you that, as a pastor, I'm a fan of the Bible. But that hasn't come without its challenges. I remember being gravitated to the stories of Jesus I read in the Gospels. I could hardly fathom how someone so wise and perceptive of the human heart had lived like this in history. It felt that as I was reading, Jesus was reading me. But then I would read other parts that seemed so difficult to understand, like why would God tell Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, his only son? It was shocking to me that Abraham would even consider it! Today, I'm going to be presenting some ideas I've learned over time from people like Nicky Gumbel, Michael Bird, and Amy Orr Ewing.

I recognize that today, there's a spectrum of views represented in this room when it comes to how to view scripture. I'd like us to consider that the reading of the Bible is not just beneficial but indispensable for living a fulfilling life that brings flourishing and wholeness. That's because **the Bible holds the timeless story that leads us to life.**

The story of the Bible is timeless because it applies to every age, even as cultures change. Maybe that's why the Bible remains the most popular book in the world. It's the most successful piece of literature of all time. It's the best-selling book this year and last. It's not mentioned in bestseller lists because it would get old showing the same thing every week.

Not only is it a popular book, but it's powerful. Millions of people around the world would say that reading it has been life-changing for them -- including myself. Why would it be life-changing? Well, in the words of the Apostle Paul, it is "inspired" by God. **2 Timothy 3:16** *All scripture is inspired by God...* Another translation of that same verse says that all scripture is "God-breathed." The Apostle Peter wrote, *Prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.* **2 Peter 1:21.** God's truth was infused into people as they communicated through their own personality to their own culture.

For thousands of years, countless people have realized that the Bible is more than just a good book. They encounter the God who revealed Himself to the Biblical writers. This is the idea of **1. Revelation: divinely given and humanly composed.** God worked with and through people to reveal Himself.

As a kid, I remember thinking that the Bible was given by golden tablets being beamed down from the sky. But, in fact, the Bible is written by human authors -- at least forty of them. Included in that bunch are kings, the poor and marginalized, philosophers, fishermen, historians, and poets. We now have a collection of 66 different writings that make up the Bible. The word "Bible" actually is translated "book," and was originally plural, so it was "the books." When you hold a Bible, you are holding a library of books that were written over a span of 1600 years! How did that process work? Was it like God took control over the author's hand functions so he could make them write exactly what they wanted?

Actually, many of the examples of how the inspiration of scripture took place are written about in the Bible. **Genesis 15:1** says, *"The word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision..."* The phenomenon he experienced was passed on and preserved, first through an oral tradition and then written down. The Gospel of Luke is written by a doctor who is very open about why he's writing. **Luke 1:1-4** *Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us...* So, he's compiling eyewitness accounts for the story he is sharing. *With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I, too, decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent*

Theophilus... He's writing to his friend, Theophilus, so that he can know about how God has been revealed through Jesus of Nazareth.

After being written down on scrolls, copied, and widely used among believers for hundreds of years, these books were eventually "canonized." This means they got an official stamp of approval by many trusted leaders to make the final cut of the Bible that we have now. Contrary to conspiracy theories that fictional books like *the Da Vinci Code* have generated, the process didn't come from a politically motivated council meeting. While a council did convene, they just formally recognized the books that were already widely accepted and used by the faithful.

So, God partners with humanity to reveal who He is. Tim Mackie uses the famous "Hand drawing hand" painting by MC Escher as a picture of how Biblical revelation works. [Photo shown on the big screen.] One of these hands represents God's hand at work, and the other is the people who wrote scripture. Both hands were at work in the making of scripture. If you take away one hand or the other, it doesn't give the full picture of how God partnered with people to speak his word to us. This leads us to one of the foremost challenges when reading scripture, which is that **it is written for our time but not about our time.**

This is often what's frustrates modern readers. We come from our own cultural perspective, with our own problems and questions. The Bible is a story, but that story includes parts that might seem a bit strange or even shocking. To read scripture in a way that is beneficial, we have to realize we are traveling to another time and place. We instinctively do this when we travel to different cultural contexts. In some cultures, it's customary to greet others with a kiss, whereas for many in the U.S., that can be seen as a step too far! There are many places where people would be offended if you walked into their house with shoes on. If we travel to another culture, we learn what the norms are and learn to operate in a different way than our native culture.

Reading the Bible is a cross-cultural experience! The Old Testament is written in an Ancient Near East context. Things that seem strange to us today were just a part of their life. A verse prohibiting wearing clothing with mixed fibers is referencing Canaanite worship practices called "sympathetic magic," which held that symbolic actions could influence nature and the gods. God is making it clear that those who follow Him don't need to engage in these practices for his favor and provision. You might not have thought much about mixing fibers, but people back then had! So, the Bible is not about our time, since we don't expect our fabrics to give us a supernatural advantage in life. But is for our time, in that God still wants us to trust him above any other power.

In the Ancient Near East, animal sacrifice was a normal religious practice to appease the gods. When things got bad with raising crops or a famine, sacrificing children wasn't unheard of either. So, when God tells Abraham to sacrifice his only son, most readers would be tracking with the story. What was unusual was that God would

provide a substitute. The point is that the God of the Bible is different from the pagan gods others worshiped.

Rather than working to understand how God has spoken through history, some can make the mistake of discarding the Bible as irrelevant. Or we can run the risk of picking and choosing the parts that we want to pay attention to. But, if God is revealing himself and his purpose for us through scripture, we want to take that seriously. As Michael Bird puts it, **what it teaches is normative, not negotiable**. What the Bible teaches becomes the normal way we operate as followers of Jesus. I don't only follow the command to forgive when it's convenient. I'm regularly going to be challenged and stretched through scripture. **2 Timothy 3:16-17** *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. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work.* Let me ask a question: How do you know anything is right or wrong?

The reality is, most people accept what the society around them tells them. It's easy to follow the crowd. That's why parents tell their kids, "I don't care if everyone is doing it. If all your friends jumped off a bridge, would you do it too?" Truth is, yes, a lot of people would. That's why bungee jumping is a thing! Society's sense of right and wrong changes over time. For example, 150 years ago in our country, there were strict morals surrounding sexual conduct, but racism was seen as normal. Today it is exactly opposite. So, which is right?

God is our objective source of moral truth. The Bible is useful for anchoring us in God's unchanging truth about right and wrong. Verse 16 says that the scripture is *useful* for rebuking and correcting. It is not outdated. The Bible will give us God's standard, so we can ask him for the power to live in a way that honors him. And it will equip us to live a flourishing life -- "every good work." Because scripture is God-breathed, followers of Jesus, we adjust our behavior to what the Bible says. We don't try to edit or correct what it says.

That's why, throughout history, Jesus followers lived differently than the world around them. But what about those obscure Old Testament laws, like not eating shellfish? Doesn't that show that the Bible's morality gets outdated? No, it doesn't. The Old Testament contains moral law, ceremonial law, and civil law. Dietary laws like eating shellfish are ceremonial, and their purpose was fulfilled when Jesus came, so they no longer apply. The moral laws, like the Ten Commandments, still apply. In Acts 15, the church made it clear that we do not have to abide by the ceremonial law, because Jesus fulfilled its purpose. So, the scriptures can anchor us in God's truth about right and wrong.

2. Relationship: scripture points us to Jesus. *...from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.* **2 Timothy 3:14-15.**

The Bible ultimately points to Jesus and the relationship we can have with God through him. Jesus himself says this. In **John 5:39**, Jesus is talking to religious leaders and says, *“You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me.”* Some experiences are hard to fully capture in a picture.

It’s just like when you go on social media. People are posting pictures of their experiences, whether it’s something with their kids, seeing something beautiful in nature, or attending a great concert. We record the moment so we can share it with others! The recordings and pictures can never quite live up to experiencing it for yourself, though. I can see a picture of an amazing-looking burger, but it’s different when I eat it myself.

In the same way, the Bible itself says it can’t fully capture the experience of encountering God. (John 21:25) Everything written in the Bible ultimately points to Jesus and the abundant life we can have in him. The point of the Bible isn’t that we would follow a bunch of rules or know facts about God. The point is that we would know God and experience his great love firsthand and be able to reflect that same love back to him and others. Any healthy relationship has boundaries that help us to love others better. That’s the purpose of scripture’s guidelines.

When I feel stuck in scripture, sometimes I’ll ask, “how does this point me to Jesus?” Or, “how does Jesus answer the problem that I’m reading about in this part of the Bible?” We want to equip you to hear from God through scripture. Next week, we start **Following Jesus** [Slide shown on the big screen.] One of the weeks includes a practical look at how to read scripture. Whether you’re just curious about following Jesus or a lifelong follower, this will give you practical tools to experiencing a lifelong journey with God.

Finally, scripture is 3. **Revolutionary: God changes us when we apply the Bible.** In **Matthew 4:4**, Jesus quoted the Old Testament, *“People do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”* The Bible is precious because of the life that it points to in Jesus. This applies to things like how we walk with God in suffering, fighting injustice, and maintaining healthy relationships.

Scripture has revolutionized my own life. It was through reading scripture that I was captivated by the person of Jesus and wanted to devote my life to becoming like him. It’s helped me realize the way that I’ve caused pain to others or to realize selfish tendencies. It’s challenged me to the point where I realize I can’t do things on my own, so I need the Holy Spirit to guide me and help me. It’s even helped me step out in faith to pursue praying for healing of others. The trajectory of my life is different because of the truth I’ve learned through scripture.

The Bible is so revolutionary that in many places in the world, governments have banned its use because it will threaten the status quo. But followers of Jesus

passionately work to bring it to others because they know the life in Jesus it points to is transformational. [Video shown on the big screen.]

The Bible is precious because it leads us to life in Jesus. When you apply it to how you live every day, it leads to the abundant life that God created you for.

[1] Bird, Andrew, 7 Things I Wish Christians Knew about the Bible

[2] <https://www.educationnext.org/texas-school-district-bans-the-bible/>