

Christ Presbyterian Church
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John Crosby
Is The Bible Relevant Today?
2 Timothy 3:16

The Old Testament proclaims,

⁸The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever [Isaiah 40:8].”

In the same way, the New Testament says,

¹⁶All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ⁷so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work [2nd Timothy 3:16-17.

Really? The Bible is literally the breath of God, this book from a different culture that seems so old and ancient. Really? In the culture we have where the world look has been replaced by Google and who knows what comes next, to talk about the Bible seems not just an act of faith but, frankly, it feels like it's out of date. The first question that we wanted to answer was what somebody a little more honest than many of us wrote, “How can I trust the Bible?” Is it really God's Word or is it just sort of a library like Sarah Norton was talking about where I can pick and choose the Book that I need? Each week underneath the question that's being asked, I'd like to suggest that there are other questions that people are *really* asking. Let me give you the three that I thought I heard most often underneath this question. The Bible was written so long ago, how can this really be God speaking to me in such a different world? Second, how can I trust that this is God's Word? And then third, what about the parts of the Bible that are hard to buy into because of our culture or because they make God seem, well, terrible?

I think that one of the challenges we have is that people have often misused the Scriptures. We can make the Scriptures say anything we want, but then is it really God speaking to us? I believe that God does want to speak to us. I think that when we are healthy, we hunger to hear God. This particular talk is crucial because much of the rest of the series about questions will depend upon it. The answers that I offer to these questions come from the Bible, and if we don't trust the Bible, how does it make any sense to somebody who is struggling to believe?

We are here in this church because 600 years ago a reformation occurred that returned the Bible to the place of primacy in trying to determine what God would say. Martin Luther believed that the Bible would be best understood by a believer instead of somebody who told them what God was saying to them. He said, “I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God . . . here I stand, may God help me, Amen.” For us, reading Scripture is somehow listening to God and the flipside of that is, when we read Scripture without listening to God, we are sabotaging that Scripture. I want to do two things. First, I want to give you some building blocks about why you would believe that the Scriptures are

trustworthy and then I want to go back quickly and talk about those three questions that are common to people's mistrust of the Bible. This is where it becomes more conversational.

1. I did not become a Christian because I believe that the Bible is inspired or that it was God speaking to us. Instead, I became a Christian because I had enough confidence in the story that was being told to me about Jesus that I decided Jesus was who the Bible said He was, that Jesus was worth believing in and trusting in and following with my life. The first building block is to believe that the Bible is fideistic, in other words to say, *I believe in the Bible because of my faith in Jesus*, not I believe in Jesus because of my faith in the Bible. That is an important difference. Do you get that? I believe that the Scriptures are important, but that came long after I started to believe in Jesus. Actually, part of the reason I believe in the Scriptures is because Jesus believed in the Scriptures. That big word *fideistic* means you don't have to believe that the Scriptures are the absolutely inspired, infallible Word of God in order to be a Christian, but you have to believe in Jesus.

2. The second thing I wanted to get to is that as I started to read the Bible, it was incredibly confusing. There were parts that seemed archaic and other parts that seemed confusing and some that seemed convicting, and at some parts, I'm thinking, really? People are supposed to believe that? One of the things that helped me was when I started to believe that the Bible was not written to be a history book or a law book or even a theology textbook, even though people have gone to it for those reasons.

I believe that *at its root, the Bible is a story*. According to N. T. Wright, "The Bible is not an early version of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*" or as we would say, the Bible is not an early version of Google. The whole Bible is a story that has a trajectory. It's a story that has chapters that are going somewhere. It's about God establishing His Kingdom on earth the same way that it is in heaven. It's about God coming back for His people and completing the project that was begun at creation and aborted at the fall. And so, if you're going to understand the Bible, if you're going to trust the Bible, you have to understand the story. It's like if I turned to you and said, "I just can't believe Frodo is going to trust Smeagol. Bad things are going to happen." You'd be going, "What?" But if you had read *The Lord of the Rings* or at least seen the movies, if you had read the long story of *The Lord of the Rings*, you would know these creatures and know they are way late in the story.

3. The next thing I want to say is that *understanding the story and where things fit in is crucial to knowing whether you can trust it*, so let me give you the Bible in three minutes as a story, three minutes of chapters. The first chapter of the Bible begins with the story of God creating the world. It is good and it is beautiful and we are participants. Then, the second chapter is that it is broken. There is the fall. Not only is creation broken, but our relationship with God is broken and there is a story bigger than ours—evil has come into the world from the outside. The next chapter of the story says, God will not leave it there. Instead, God goes and chooses a group of people and over time He reveals Himself to them. He makes a promise to the nation of Israel called a covenant and gives them laws of life. Almost all of the Old Testament is about this covenant of Law where God says, "If you do your part, I'll do My part. I will be your God and you will be My people." That's the third chapter and, frankly, it doesn't work too well because it's like putting a Band-Aid on a cancer. It's like putting lipstick on a pig. We obey the Law for just a minute, and then we go the other way, and so the fourth chapter is crucial. The fourth chapter says that at a specific time, God sent Jesus into the world, not to talk about the Law and how

you need to work harder, but to talk about grace and how God wants to come and draw you to Himself and love you to life that is meant to last forever.

That fourth chapter sets the stage for the chapter that we're in now, the fifth chapter, the chapter of the church where it has gone from the Law of Moses to the grace of Jesus. Jesus promises that when the church starts, the Holy Spirit would come and be with each one of us, helping us to bring this Kingdom of Heaven on earth and promising that as we said last week, we would be, "completely fearless, absurdly happy, and in constant trouble." That's the story of the church until the end comes when Jesus returns. Those are the chapters of the story. It's important to know where you are in that story. The key to the story is the Rosetta Stone. Remember the Rosetta Stone, where there was the same passage in two different languages? Nobody knew the old language, but they knew this language, and when they saw that this word means that and this word means that, that's the Rosetta Stone. That's how you understand a language that you don't have.

4. Here is the second big word of the day. If the first word is *fideistic*, I believe in the Bible because first I believe in Jesus, the second big word is *cruciform*. Cruciform means if you want to understand the Bible, understand Jesus. The whole story is tied into the story of Jesus and Jesus interprets the story for us. In the Book of Hebrews, it says,

¹ In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. ³ The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word [Hebrews 1:1-3].

In these last days, He has spoken to us through His Son. The clearest picture we have of God is in Jesus. As a matter of fact, one of the writers of John's Gospel says this.

³⁰ Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name [John 20:30-31].

That's the important thing, so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His Name. So we interpret the Bible through the lens of Jesus, seeing God best represented through His grace and mercy and justice and truth. That's why I trust in the Bible. I trust in the Bible because I've come to believe that Jesus is who He said He was and because I'm trying to follow Him, when Jesus says that the Scriptures are inspired. I want to listen to what God says through those Scriptures.

Okay, your questions, three of them. This first question is a great one. **"The Bible was written so long ago, how can this be God speaking to me in such a different world that we live in?"**

The last chapter was written 2,000 years ago and it probably goes back 3,000 years. Well, I think part of the problem is that when you see the Bible as a history book or a legal book or a theology book, then sometimes the pieces don't fit. Sometimes it's hard to figure out how *this* culture can interpret *that* law, so if I take it instead as a story, then

God can speak to me about timeless truths. N. T. Wright once said, “We need to stop giving 19th century answers to 16th century problems, and instead start giving 21st century answers to 1st century problems.” We ought to give 21st century answers to questions that are timeless, that are still with the human heart.

The second thing I’d say to “How can I trust that this old Book can still speak to me?” is that it is startling how little the Bible has changed. People used to say, “Oh, you know, they just kept changing it to keep it up with the times” and then they started to find bits and pieces of the Bible that were written just 50 or 60 years after the events happened. “Well, yeah, that’s true, but what about the Old Testament? That was written thousands of years ago.” And then we found the Dead Sea Scrolls in a cave just south of Jerusalem that are over 2,000 years old and they are exactly the same as the Bible that you have. Because the Bible was seen as sacred, nobody wanted to mess with it and so even if you don’t understand it, you can at least have some confidence that this is the original piece.

The last thing I’d say about how you can believe that God speaks to us from such a long-ago place in a far-away time is that it’s very important to understand what was going on back then. I call it the imperative of context. It’s imperative to understand the original setting in a time where women not only did not have the vote, they were seen as property and not people. This was a time when slavery might have existed in as much as 60 percent of the Roman Empire, and a time when the truths that we have today about modern science or sociology were not there. It is imperative to understand that this is the time in which God chose to write these timeless truths, and understand it clearly.

Presbyterians are not fundamentalists. Fundamentalists say, “The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it.” I believe that the Bible says it and I want to understand what it means, because only after I understand what it means can I chose to follow it. It’s the beginning of the discussion rather than the end of it. Saying “The Bible says it” doesn’t settle it. What does that mean “The Bible says it”? How can I hear God speak to me? For me, a phrase I’ve often used is that *text without the context is just a pretext*. Somebody is just telling you what to do without telling you how they got there. God loves your questions about the Bible.

The second question was, “How can I believe when there are so many fanciful parts, when there are whales swallowing people whole and talking snakes and snakes that swallow other snakes? What’s all this stuff with the snakes?”

May I just suggest two things, that you would never read any other book that way and if you get the idea that the Bible is a story, then you realize that stories have lists of facts and they have law parts. They have poetry and they have stories and they have songs. All those are different genres of literature, and so again when I am trying to understand what it means that God is omnipotent, when I read “God makes the mountains quake,” it doesn’t mean that the mountains literally have to quake. This is a poetic image that helps me understand in ways like when a painting helps me understand things that a scientific formula can never get into my heart. We need to understand the genre that has been used.

Even folks who are very liberal about the Bible, and I am not, but even folks who are very progressive about how to understand the Bible have come around to say, “The important

thing is not whether this happened or how it happened, but that it is in the story and we need to understand the point of the story. What is the point of this miracle? Whether they believe the miracle happened or not, there was a point to the story and that is the important thing.” I would agree. I would agree that the important thing is that when Jesus heals a cripple’s hand and straightens it out, the important point of the story is that Jesus is saying, “I have the power to forgive sins and to show you this, look at this hand!” That’s what we need to be focused on. The power is in the point of the story.

But I don’t think that you can trust in the Bible as God’s Word unless you really believe that there is a supernatural, a super natural, that God comes from the outside and changes the normal course of events. The reason things are in the Bible, important words to hear, is because they are freaky. The reason things are in the Bible is because they are unusual. They are things that are not normal that God draws attention to and says, “See! I acted here like this. Learn this point.” It is unusual, but it is also supernatural intervention, and so some of the reason that the Bible is hard for us to understand is that we have become so scientifically determined, that unless it can be repeated, “Unless You can turn that second rock into another piece of bread, then I won’t believe it.” Well, there’s a confusion, isn’t there? Between science, which is the observation of the repeatable, that’s what science is, and history. History is the story of what happened and why, without the idea that it should be repeated. Wellington will never defeat Napoleon again, but that doesn’t mean it didn’t happen. It is history and we need to understand it. That’s why it’s imperative for us to understand the story of the Bible.

I tend to be, not a literalist, but orthodox in my understanding of the Scriptures. I have no problem believing that the God who created the Andromeda strain could create a fish big enough to swallow a person and keep that person alive for three days. That’s not a big deal to me. I think God could carpet it and air condition it too, but I think the important part of the story is that Jonah went into the fish not wanting to follow God and he came out of the fish saying, “Okay, God, where do You want me to go?” *That’s* the story that God is trying to get across.

The third question, **“What about the parts of the Bible that are hard to buy into because of our culture or, frankly, because they seem to make God terrible?”**

This is where I wish that we had a cup of coffee, because this is a great, great question and a big one. If you don’t struggle with some of the Bible, you are not reading the Bible. If you don’t have questions about why they did that, your friend needs to nudge you and wake you up. This is a complicated Book. Some of it, I believe, is meant to make it complicated and hard to believe. I don’t mean to play with answers here, but I’ve got to tell you, if there is a God who is a billion-watt bulb and you have a 50-watt circuit, do you think you should be able to understand everything? I don’t!

One of the problems that I have with modern folk who read the Bible is that they shrink wrap the Bible into their size of imagination rather than letting the mess, the mystery, the grandeur of God, mess with them. And I think one of the reasons that I find credibility in the Bible is that the tough parts are still in there. They are, frankly, a sign of its authenticity, that we would struggle with slavery, that we would struggle with the role of women, that we would struggle with the genocides that happened in the Old Testament.

It's probably not God if I agree with everything in it. It's probably not God if it sounds a lot like my political agenda.

The second thing that I would say about the parts of the Bible that are hard to buy into is that I think we need to go back to the idea that it is a story and the bulk of the Bible is a story of a broken world, a story of the way of a world that is not the way that God intended it. Now, whether that results in religious wars or weird holiness codes so that this small group of people would act differently from all the people around them to show that they believe in God, that's because the Bible is trying to show that the world is broken. It's trying to show that the best attempts of humanity to make themselves pleasing to God are futile, and when God tries to speak to us, we hear Him through a glass darkly. So, when I have somebody come up to me and say, "How do you justify the bloodthirsty God of the Old Testament?" I say, the same way that I struggle with slavery or a woman being sold. I don't know. There are parts of the Bible for which I need to say, I don't know and I've studied this all my life.

I would ask you to reserve judgement instead of pretending like you can know it all; to believe that if we diligently study the big story, some of the details will come clearer, but the big story is much more important than a lot of the details that I don't understand. Humility is an imperative. My wife went to seminary and she was a lot more fun before she went to seminary. But one of her professors was great. His name was Don Verseput and he said, "I believe that God's Word is authoritative and inerrant and inspired and I am neither authoritative nor inerrant nor inspired." I'm saying that because I believe God's Word is inspired. I believe that my interpretation of it, your interpretation of it, is not necessarily inspired. We need a strong sense of humility. We say around here, "I believe that the great thing about the Bible is that the plain points are the main points. Any of you can get it—the plain points are the main points. It keeps hitting you over the head with it."

The last thing I'd say about this idea of the hard parts of the Bible is that I think too often the problem is not that I don't understand it, it's that I don't want the Bible to say that. I'm a modern person. I tend to believe in sociology more than I believe in Scripture. I have to watch out for that. I tend to believe that science provides ultimate answers even when I know better than that. Mark Twain once said that it wasn't the parts of the Bible he didn't understand that bothered him, it was the parts he *did* understand. The parts of the Bible he understood, he couldn't live out. And whether it's about our inability to forgive or our use of money or our sexuality, in the end I believe in the trajectory of the Bible. I believe that the Bible has a trajectory that, frankly, says yes to women's rights and says yes to the abolition of slavery and *no* to prosperity as a sign of faith. I think that the contrast between Jesus and the pagan kings was a sign that Jesus was saying *no* to prosperity as a sign of faith. I think that the Bible has a trajectory sexually that is saying that when we went from the garden, we went down from there. I believe the trajectory is down that is calling us to not change a Biblical sexual ethic that is rooted in creation. I believe that the trajectory of the Bible is not about getting even, it's about forgiving. It is about constantly serving. I *should* struggle with the Bible. If you are not struggling with the Bible, I question whether God is speaking to you through it. Having said that, I wouldn't have it any other way.

We had three different funerals here this past week; two of them were very big. They were prominent folks. I believe those are the times where the Bible comes into its own. I believe when

you get past all the stupid intellectual questions that we frequently use, I am often using intellectual questions to get around something I don't want to do and I know a lot of people who are in the same boat, but when you stand at the coffin of a friend or you weep at the loss of a daughter, then only the Bible can speak to us. That's the Book that will be read in a hospital bed and in a jail and in a crisis because in the Bible, you hear,

⁴ Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil;
For You *are* with me; [Psalm 23]

When a marriage dies or when hope gets lost, I believe God's Word has God-breath power. The same words that created the world bring it to life. They convict me of sin. They bring hope and despair and power in weakness and light in the dark. The Bible says,

¹⁰⁵ Your word *is* a lamp to my feet
And a light to my path [Psalm 119].

It's the story that will give your life meaning. It's worth the time and the effort to read it and study it. People complain the Bible is not easy but, really, what in life that has great value and is deeply worthwhile is easy? Work at it. Whisper it to yourself when you wake up in the morning, when you go to bed at night. Write down little parts of it on sticky notes so you can remember them. Join a group. You want to understand the Bible? Join a group, study the Bible with other people who are trying to live it out. Read the Bible. It will come alive to you. Don't read the Bible and you will criticize it from a distance forever. Get a Bible app for your Smartphone. Do whatever it takes to become a student of the Bible. Remember this: study it, meditate on it, memorize it, ask questions about it, but most of all, do what it says. Sometimes you cannot understand it until you obey it. Submit yourself to the God who breathes into this Book. Don't be driven by your experiences or your desires or by what is culturally trendy. Let your life be driven by the living Word of God.

The Bible says that one day Jesus is coming back and sin and death and pain will be defeated. It says this world will be made radiantly and gloriously new, and one day we will enter a new story, a sixth chapter. And according to the Bible, that new chapter is better than anything you can see or even imagine. Turn the page.

Lord God, I thank You that You speak to us and You have not stuttered. You want to speak to me and You want to speak to my brothers and sisters here and You have given us this wonderful story, the story of Your creation and our fall, of Your justice and grace, and Your Spirit that will not let us go. I pray that You will give us the courage to be people of this Book, not blindly and slavishly, but as intelligently and humbly and faithfully as we can, that You would speak to us and that You would speak Your breath into this Word. In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.