

# **Christ Presbyterian Church**

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**John Crosby**

## **Building Blocks of Faith: Scripture**

### **Deuteronomy 6 and II Timothy 3:13-16**

We all have gifts. One of those gifts is that, when we come together, we are able to learn from each other. This summer we would like to learn together in a little different way. Our elders have observed over the last several years that the tension in the American church seems to be growing. We are more easily fractured. We are easily divided; and, in that environment, it becomes more important for us to love one another no matter where we are. It also becomes important for us to know what we believe and why we believe it, so we thought this summer we would start a periodic series on the building blocks of our faith that we would expand upon over the next several years. We thought that we would begin the series by answering the question *How do we hear God speak to us best?* How do you hear God speak to you?

People would answer that in very different ways. When we were in Washington, D.C., Maggie, our 23-year-old was just a toddler at the time, Laura was saying something to me about hearing God's voice. From the backseat Maggie pipes up, "I hear God talk to me." Wanting to encourage her, Laura said, "Oh, that's great, honey. How does God speak to you?" "God just does. God speaks to me." Then she cocks her little blonde head and goes, "There He is. He just said something now." "What did He say?" "Can't tell you. It's a secret." When Maggie says, "He just said something now," we smile because she is a child. When we hear an adult say, "I hear God speak to me now," we often will check their hands for weapons or we will check our wallets to see if they are still there because people who speak in God's Name so often have an agenda of their own.

In our world, 95-96 percent of human beings on this planet profess some kind of belief in a superior being, in a God, however they perceive of that God. And we believe, as followers of Christ, that many of us know a lot about that God whether we are Christians or not. We believe that there is a thing known as common grace, that God speaks to everybody on the planet in different ways but that there is a general knowledge about God that comes from nature. We look at the stars and we see that there must be a star maker, a star orderer. We look at the things that people do to each other that are terrible and the things that are sacrificial, bad and good, and our conscience tells us that there must be something more to us than just being animals. We are somehow created by God. On days when the world seems like it will burst with joy, there is a sense of not being alone, that life is a good gift. There is, I think, a general knowledge in most human beings that there is a God; but, if you want to get from here to there, if you want a path, like Rich talked about through life, then you need to hear more specifically from God and for that we believe you need some kind a map. You need a map through life.

The idea of a map became clearer and clearer as the story of God was taught from generation to generation—from the Israelites to the followers of Jesus. After the followers of Jesus started to die and were replaced by the early leaders of what came to be known as *the church*, they looked around at the world and said, "There are places where God speaks to us, but we need a

map. How do we decide when it is God speaking and when it is too much chili from last night's meal?" So the church started to pray and think and talk about how God speaks to us most clearly and came up with a very fancy word. We are Presbyterians. We like fancy words. The fancy word is quadrilateral. *Quadri* means four, right? Four sides. God speaks to us primarily through a quadrilateral, in four different ways.

God speaks to us, first, through the idea of the *traditions* of the church. Over time, the people of God passed from one generation to the next the truths that they had discovered. Sometimes those are just traditions but sometimes they are the way that God speaks to us in all ages. Other times we believe that God speaks to us through our own *experiences* of life or someone else's experiences of life. How can those be interpreted as God speaking to us? Still others believe that the primary way that God speaks to us is through the Old Testament, the New Testament, the Letters, the *Scriptures* that Rich talked to us about this morning. They believe that that is the way that God speaks to us most clearly. Then others say, "God gave us brains. God intends us to figure out this world and follow Him through this world," and that is the way God speaks to us through *reason*. Traditions, experience, Scriptures, and reason are the four ways that we believe God primarily speaks to us. Which is the most important?

Well, often the church has gone to one hand or the other. Sometimes it is just tradition, "Because I said so." "This is the way we have always done it." Sometimes it is just Scripture where they look on page 37 for the answer. Sometimes it is experience, the Civil War, the Great Depression, those profound experiences that shake the way the entire church looked at God. Other times it is through the advance of our ability to reason. So if I am a *reasoner* and you are a *traditioner* and you are an *experienter* and you are a *Scripturer*, how do we catch a clear voice?

The reformers, that is Luther and the folks who came along to try to bring the church back to its beginnings, said that all four of these are valid but they are not all equal. They proposed that *tradition* was a way that God could speak to us but only as interpreted through the Scriptures, that *experience* was a way we hear profoundly but my experience is not necessarily God speaking to me nor is it yours. Both of those have to be guided by, informed by, judged by, the *Scriptures* where God speaks to us. In the same way, *reason* is an invaluable aid but any thought I have, like the bumper sticker says, "You need to remember this: not all the thoughts you have are right" needs to be subjected to God's voice speaking through Scriptures. So the reformers, and we would be part of the reformed tradition, believe that the Bible has to be the interpretation of how God speaks to us most prominently, not only the Scriptures but the Scriptures as seen through a particular lens. The writer of the Hebrews says this to the church in chapter 1,

<sup>1</sup> In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, <sup>2</sup> 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.

God speaks through the prophets in the Scriptures in different ways, but Jesus has changed everything and became the center of the way that God speaks to us. The Old Testament was very clear that, when God spoke, our response was not just to listen, not just to understand, but to obey. In Deuteronomy 6, Moses says this as he brings the people out of slavery,

<sup>1</sup> These are the commands, decrees and laws the LORD your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, <sup>2</sup> so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the LORD your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life. <sup>3</sup> Hear, Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, promised you.

And then this is the most famous part of the Old Testament for the Jew. It is called *The Shema*. If you only understand one part of the Old Testament, hear Deuteronomy 6:6. It begins with,

<sup>4</sup> Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. <sup>5</sup> Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

Jesus would say, "That is everything. And the second is like it, Love your neighbor as yourself."

Then Deuteronomy 6:6 says,

<sup>6</sup> These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. <sup>7</sup> Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. <sup>8</sup> Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. <sup>9</sup> Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

That is what a *mezuzah* is. Scriptures are on the doorframes of the Jewish house. "Write them on your gates." And then in Paul's Letter to young Timothy, we shift from the story of the Jews to the story of all God's people following Jesus. Paul talks to young Timothy and I would like you to read this with me, 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 3, beginning with verse 14:

<sup>14</sup> But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, <sup>15</sup> and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>16</sup> All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup> so that all God's people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

"But as for you, continue in what you have learned . . ." That assumes that you have learned it--what you have become convinced of, what you think is right--because you know the people who taught you. You see something in them that makes you want to follow this. From infancy you have known the Scriptures that will lead you to salvation. That is the foundation and is seen as the foundation of how we hear the voice of God. Amidst all the different voices of the world, how do you hear the voice of God? You learn to hear God's Word spoken and written through the Scriptures. It is the foundation; and, for about the last 1,500 years, the church has agreed that it is the most important way to hear God. For about the last 500 years, Scripture has been the consensus around which Christians have authority to say, "We believe. God said." But in the last generation or two, that consensus has broken down. As our communities become more pluralistic, the Word is just one of many words. As we start to see the Bible saying different things, it fades from public consciousness with huge impact on us.

There is a book about 15 years old now called *The Battle for the Bible*. It says that there are different ways of looking at the Bible that divide even the Christian Church, and that is what I mostly want to talk about today. The first group is folks who would say that the Bible is a great old, sacred story from which we glean fruits. We hear echoes of God's voice talking and that helps us. That is the purpose of the Bible. But they would say that science is what we learn here and now; and, if science contradicts what it says in the Scripture--because we know that you can't really believe in something you can't see or verify--then that pushes the miraculous out. In the same way, pluralism pushes our culture against the unique claims of Jesus, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Light." "No one comes to the Father but by Me." No one? And so we diminish that part of the Word. That tolerance, which in many ways is our new God, pushes out those laws in the Bible that are unpopular, uncomfortable or, frankly, not followed at all. The Bible is a nice old, sacred story.

The other faction in this battle for the Bible is those who would say, "The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it." They would hold the Bible up as something that they love, and then they would smack you on the head with it as a club. So often what is profound about these folks is, there are no questions that can be asked. "That settles it." And it is often a club used to beat people up for the sins they happen to have which I don't happen to have. It's an interesting way to look at it.

So you get these two extremes. And then another voice in this battle for the Bible says, "God helps those who help themselves." What is the problem with that Biblical view? It is not in the Bible! And as we look at the Bible itself less and less, these other voices speak louder and louder. It is just our prejudices and our preconceived notions that say, "This is what God says to us." This is a special challenge for preachers, this idea of how will you teach God's Word. How do you teach people to hear God? It is as old as the New Testament itself. Remember Paul just talked to young Timothy? This is how Paul ends what he says to Timothy.

<sup>1</sup> In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: <sup>2</sup> Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.

This is what I want you to listen to.

<sup>3</sup> For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. <sup>4</sup> They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. <sup>5</sup> But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

It is not new. People want to hear what they want to hear. Those who lead them want to tell them what they want to hear. Is that the policy? Just ask the preacher. And then, frankly, when somebody does say, "No, no, I am going to try to understand what God said, and then I am going to teach the people," what pastors tend to do is, we tend to chastise people instead of teach them. Eugene Peterson said, "I was disappointed that my people's reading of the Bible didn't seem to be any different from the way they read the sports page or the comic strips or the want ads. I wanted to wake people up; but, in retrospect, I realize that my strategy was mostly carried

out just by raising my voice.” Maybe if you yell at people, they will get it better. I don’t think helps. I think we need to talk together. I think we need to learn, and I think we need to be taught as well as we can what the message of God’s Word is. I think there is a problem for *all* sides of the battle of the Bible and that is this: when we see the Bible as a problem to be solved, figuring out what doesn’t fit into our lives and then sanding off the rough edges of the Bible, it slips into our way of thinking more easily. We want to use it for comfort; and, if it doesn’t work comfortably, we reconfigure it so that it will fit. I’d like us to hear *all* of what God has to say to us and struggle with the parts we need to struggle with and learn from the parts that we need to learn from and be comforted by the idea that God wants to bring us words of life.

So, during this period, I want to give you some of the tools that I think will help you and me, together, hear all of God’s Word to us. If you want to understand the Bible, realize that it contains lots of laws and commandments, but it is not meant to be a law book. It has tons of philosophy in it, but it is not meant to be a world view, a philosophy that is clearly thought out. There is a lot of history in it but it is not primarily a history book. What *is* the Bible?

I think scholars today would come to the consensus that, most of all, the Bible is written down and **intended to be seen as a story**. The Bible is a story that God uses because we remember stories so much better than we remember lists. The Bible is a story that teaches us about God’s interaction with the planet and the people He loves. That story can be understood better if you see that, like all stories, it has an arc with an introduction and a conclusion and a crisis in the middle. In this story, there are usually five ways that this story unfolds. It talks about creation. You are not a mistake. You are not an animal. You are a beautiful creation of the God who loves you and the whole world. Then the crisis comes in the fall. That relationship with God is somehow broken so that we don’t walk with God so that God can say, “Watch out for that pot hole.” We stagger through life and often, when we see something we know God wants us to do, we still don’t do it. Our relationship with God is broken, and the world’s relationship with God is broken.

The story goes on to say, how does God fix it? That leads to chapter 3, which is called the covenant. God starts to show His presence to the world, to a specific group of people, and said, “If you will do these things, you will see Me go by. I’ll be your God, but we will walk together.” The agreement that God makes with Abraham and Moses and David and all the folks in the Old Testament is called a covenant that we learn from. Then the story funnels to the great center which is the life and the teachings and death and resurrection of Jesus, the Cross. We believe that the cross and the empty tomb are God’s rescue plan in the story. God saw that we are broken and unable to get to Him, so He comes to us and rescues us and promises to make us new. And working out of that is a new community of rescued people. We wait for the end of the story which is the return, the coming again of God. That is the story. Try to figure out where the part that you are reading fits into the big story and what it is saying from God to you. Don’t try to make the Bible something that it is not.

The second thing is just as small, and that is people who study the Bible as their vocation come up with what are called rules to keep us from abusing God’s Word. One of those rules is very easy. I could teach it to you in a minute. **The main points are the plain points. And the plain points are the main points.** So what are the plain points? The main points are the plain points, and the plain points are main points so when you see something that is very clear in Scripture, usually because it is repeated here and there and all through Scripture, it is a main point. It becomes plain.

I am saying that because the flip side is also true. If you only see something once, if you only see it in scattered, very small, hard-to-understand verses, it (a) may or may not be true and you may get that wrong, and (b) it is probably not one of the main points--not that it is to be thrown away--but it is not as central to the story as these others points are. One time, one verse, one little story is not enough to shape your whole world view.

Okay, what is the key test of how God speaks to us? We believe in this community that the key test of how Scripture speaks to us is when a group of people decides that we will submit to God's speech to us. Not that we will hear it; people hear it all the time. Not that we will even understand it; it gets complicated. Sometimes we understand the wrong thing; even when we understand it, that is not what it means. I think that **God's Word becomes God's Word when we hear it and understand it and agree with it and submit to God's whole Word, even the parts we don't like, even the parts we don't completely understand.** Isn't that what faith is about? Isn't that what part of the concept of faith is? That you walk by faith because you don't understand the whole thing but you know just enough to take another step, trusting God more than we trust our culture or our education or even our desires or even our experience because we are learning to trust God. When you get out there near the edge, you have to be more and more humble. You may very well be wrong but in the parts that we do understand, we will not hear God speak to us clearly unless we have agreed that we will submit to Him.

The challenge for us is that there is a huge difference between interpreting the Bible and picking and choosing--picking those parts of the Bible that I want to follow because I like them and choosing to set aside those parts that I don't. Do we trust God's love enough for the whole story, even the parts of the story that seem unpopular to sophisticated, 21<sup>st</sup> century people? Eugene Peterson again, "Scriptures' stories don't, like fairy tales, court our favor. They don't flatter us. They don't please us. They don't enchant us. They seek to subject us; and, if we refuse to be subjected, then we are rebels. But when we submit our lives to what we read in Scripture, we find that we are not being led to see God in our stories. We are being led to see our stories in God's story. God is all around us. We are called to be citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven subjecting ourselves because we are subjects of the King, subjecting ourselves to the King's commands and figuring out how to do that graciously and humbly and faithfully even when we don't completely see the end of the story."

Now I've got to tell you, if you are not struggling with reading the whole Bible, I question whether you are reading the whole Bible. I have been doing this for 30 years. I struggle with reading the Bible as the whole story, and the parts that I struggle with are not the parts I don't understand. That was Mark Twain. Remember Mark Twain? He says, "It is not the parts of the Bible I don't understand that get me in trouble; it's the parts that I do understand that get me in trouble." And I'm just like Twain. I battle with some parts of the story about sexuality. I battle about how it means that Jesus is the only way, but as I battle with it, as I try to subject myself to that part of God's Word in the story, that is where learning comes, about God, about myself, about our church.

One of my friends thinks the Bible is written by people who don't like hard-working, wealthy people. He says, "I've worked hard. I feel like the whole Bible is trying to make me feel bad about that." He says, "So I really like those Old Testament stories. In Old Testament stories the people who do good get rewarded." So he just reads the Old Testament hero stories. I've got another friend who says, "That Paul! I don't like Paul. He doesn't like this, and he doesn't like that. He tells me to do this and not to do that. I don't like Paul." So this person just reads Jesus.

He goes, "If it is in the red letter part of the Bible, that is the part I'm going to obey." But I have a woman friend who, frankly, who said, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus! There has got to be more than Jesus!" And I have a lot of friends who say, "You know, if you just keep the darn Book closed, it doesn't mess you up. If you just keep the Book in church where it belongs and not in the bedroom where it doesn't belong, not in the schools where it doesn't belong, not at work where it doesn't belong, not in my wallet where it sure doesn't belong, then it will all be fine." But it seems to me that is where God's story wants to get into action.

I can only keep hearing God to the extent that I am willing to obey God already. In faith when I lack confidence or understanding or it is countercultural to say, "God help me!" because I think that God tells us the really hard parts of the story and the confusing parts of the story and the very narrow-minded parts of the story, I think God tells us all of that not because God is trying to mess with us. I think the story is to tell us that God loves us, that God wants us to have life in abundance and together. Sometimes when somebody says they love you, it sounds like a sonnet, doesn't it? It sounds like that beautiful music we heard this morning. Sometimes when somebody tells you that they love you, it like those new warnings on the cigarette package, the pictures of people who are dying because they are smoking. "I love you. I'm putting this on the cigarette package. I love you." Sometimes they say, "I love you," and it is "I want you to have as much as you want." Other times it is "I love you. I know you don't want to hear this because you are only six years old but you are going to have to go through chemotherapy, and all your hair is going to fall out, and you are going to feel sick till you die. It is the only way I can love you." We have to decide; will we submit? God's law is for our good, not for our fun but for our good. So Jesus will talk about the abundance of life and sacrifice in the same sentence whether that is about sex or marriage or money. He ends the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew with these words,

<sup>24-25</sup>"These words I speak to you are not incidental additions to your life, homeowner improvements to your standard of living. They are foundational words, words to build a life on. If you work these words into your life, you are like a smart carpenter who built his house on solid rock.

A rock in the middle of the storm. That is what I want for you. For me. For us. The hard as well as the good. I want us to struggle with how to understand it. I want us to be humble about the parts where we can disagree and I want us, together, to keep hacking away at it to follow God instead of following all the other voices that tickle our ears.

The Bible ends with the vision that the apostle John receives in the Book of Revelation. It says, "The angel came to me and put the scroll before me and said, 'Eat this book.'" Don't read it. Don't listen to it. Don't understand it. Don't sing it. Eat it. Get it inside you, and sometimes it will taste awful because all we like to eat is candy, but when we eat the book, it changes us. There are hard things in this book, hard things to hear, hard things to obey. Words in this book difficult to digest can give us indigestion, but every careful reader of the Bible is struck by how odd it is, how unaccommodating it is to what we are used to and what we respect. It is not an easy read. I say, "Thank God!" If it was an easy Book to read, if it was stuff that I completely understood, stuff I completely agreed with, then, really, would it be written by God? Wouldn't I expect that if God were saying some things, that it would be things I didn't understand or didn't like? When we pick and choose in the Bible, we take the claws out of the lion so they cannot help us. Readers

become what they read. If Scripture is to be something other than gossip about God, it must be brought inside and obeyed. From Psalm 119, Rich told the children,

<sup>105</sup>Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.

And it is because God loves us and the world is dark that He wants to give us a light, but we have to walk in it to really see. May God bless us together as we hear about His love and His life for us.

Lord Jesus, I thank You for my sisters and brothers here, some of whom have read your book cover to cover, generation after generation, and know it better than I do. Others of whom are going, "I've got to get one of those." I thank You that Your Word is so in front of us, and I pray that You will help us to help one another hear Your voice, follow that voice, and submit because we are citizens and not the kings and queens of heaven. You are! Bless us with Your Word that gives life. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. 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.*