

“Conversations with an Atheist—The Bible’s Confusing Passages”

Today we continue this series of messages called “Conversations with an Atheist.” What we are doing in this series is responding to the criticisms of contemporary atheists like Richard Dawkins author of *The God Delusion* and Sam Harris, author of *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*. What Dawkins and Harris and others are saying is that it is time that the world woke up and eliminated religion all together. These contemporary atheists are not content with the separation of religion and science, or the separation of church and state, they simply want the elimination of religion. They state that religion is a delusion, it stunts scientific discovery, causes suffering, and is ultimately dangerous to humanity.

So what we’re doing in this series is addressing the critiques of religion, specifically Christianity, that they’re leveling and having an intelligent, faithful, loving conversation. Some of the criticisms and critiques that these contemporary atheists have are valid, and we need to hear them. They are putting a mirror up to us for us to take a good look at ourselves and we need to see that image. But listen, some of their critiques are **not** valid and we need to state why. So far we’ve talked about science and religion, when religion goes bad, violence and wars in the name of religion, and today, the Bible’s disturbing passages.

As I’ve read Dawkins, and Harris, and Hitchens and others; as I’ve watched talks they’ve given, one thing that comes up almost every time is some reference to the Bible and some of the passages in there that really are disturbing. But let’s be honest, these passages disturb believers too. Are we really supposed to stone disobedient children? Should young women who lose their virginity, be killed by their own fathers? What about how women are viewed in the Old Testament?

Maybe you’ve felt that way as a believer. You’ve been reading the Bible and come across passages that are just so far removed from our reality, so disturbing that you’ve said, “I just can’t see how that could be the word of God.” Or maybe you’re a seeker; you’re asking serious questions about the faith and wanting to more but you get stuck, or hung up, on those strange passages in the Bible.

So today we’re going to take a specific look at this question of how we understand the Bible’s disturbing passages. If you were to read the books by Dawkins or Harris, or any of the contemporary atheists they would point out a number of challenges when it comes to the Bible. I want to look at four in particular today.

The first criticism that atheists often have of the Bible is factual errors and internal contradictions. Some Christians are raised with the understanding that the Bible is a perfect, error-free book. But it doesn’t take long as you read it to find things where you say, “Wait a minute. In one place it says this, in another place it says this, how can those line up?” In one place it says Ahaziah was 22 when he became king. In another place it says he was 42 when he became king. Which was it?

Some atheists point out the differences in the resurrection stories of Jesus in the gospels. One Gospel says that on Sunday morning, Easter day, the women came to the tomb, the stone was still in place over the tomb, and an angel came and rolled the stone away and sat on top of it. It says that there were guards who fainted in fear of all this. But in another Gospel it says that when the women arrived the stone was already rolled away. It doesn’t mention guards at all; and there are two angels, not one, and they’re sitting off to the side, not on the stone.

In another Gospel it says that only Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and when she got there the stone was rolled away but there are no angels mentioned. She leaves and comes back and there are two angels inside the tomb. Which is it! Some people work real hard to solve these inconsistencies by smooching all the stories together, but that kind of does an injustice to all the stories. What if instead we say, “Even though these writers disagree in some of the details, this is what they do agree on: The stone was rolled away, the tomb was empty, Jesus’ body was gone, there were messengers there who told the women that Jesus wasn’t dead, but alive.” That’s the point of the accounts. But you have to have a view of the scriptures that allows you to say, “That’s the point, don’t get hung up on the details.”

The second challenge that critics pose about the Bible is the cultural practices of the Bible that are oppressive. Specifically slavery and women’s rights. If the Bible is the literal word of God, then when we come to some of the things practiced in ancient times that are wrong, we expect that God is going to say, “Stop doing that.” But instead, we see God saying, “Keep doing that.” In the Old Testament, especially the first 8

books, women were expendable. Yes, you also read in the Old Testament how treasured women are, how loved they are. But I'm a father of 2 daughters and there are places where, when I read, it makes me angry.

When it comes to slavery, the Bible assumes that slavery is just part of life. It gives guidelines on how people should treat slaves. The authors of both the New and Old Testaments couldn't imagine a world without slavery, it was so prevalent in their culture. Today we look back and say that slavery is wrong, it is morally reprehensible for one human being to own another human being. But why didn't God say that?

Of course the story of our spiritual ancestors is that they were slaves in Egypt and God set them free. So we do get a glimpse of God's heart there. And Jesus talks about speaking good news, of setting the oppressed free. We get a glimpse of God's heart there, too.

A third criticism that atheists often level at the Bible is related to immoral and unthinkable commands. These are things that God seems to command his people to do. You read them and think, "Wait a second, that doesn't sound like a God of mercy and a God of love!" The book of Joshua in the Old Testament is the story of the Israelites conquering the land of Canaan. And as they went into that land they were command to destroy the cities that were there and in some cases to kill every man, woman and child.

Today when we see innocent women and children being killed in Iraq, or Africa, or anywhere else, we cry out for justice! We rail against the killing of innocents! And yet in the Old Testament, we're told that God commanded the killing of children?

In the Old Testament we also see a number of things that were punishable by death. The death penalty was carried out by stoning. The convicted person was brought out, and the people would pick up large rocks and pummel their body until they were dead. The crimes that required the death penalty were things like adultery, or having sex outside of marriage. Another offense that required the death penalty was if children were rebellious and disobedient. If a person was caught working on the Sabbath, they were to be stoned to death. If someone were found worshipping another God, they were to be put to death.

When we read those we have to recognize that there wouldn't be a single person in this room today if we practiced those commandments! Because at one time or another we've done one or more of them. We rebelled against our parents, or were disobedient, or worked on the Sabbath, or something else that was worthy of the death penalty.

And it has to make you wonder, how these commands fit with what Jesus did. One time a group of religious leaders caught a woman in adultery and they dragged her out and were about to stone her to death. Jesus stopped them saying, "The one of you who is without sin, throw the first stone." One by one they dropped their stones and walked away. Jesus helps that woman off the ground and says, "Where are your accusers? Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more." That's a very different picture of God than we find in the commands of the Old Testament to kill those caught in adultery. What do we do with that and how do we make sense of it?

Another critique that gets leveled at the Bible by atheists is the picture of an angry, violent, vengeful God. There are scenes in the Bible like in Exodus 32 where God gets so angry that he metes out terrible vengeance on his own people, through his own people.

These are the central criticisms leveled at the Bible, primarily the Old Testament. The disturbing stuff is there. But, in fairness, let's look at the bigger picture. There are 23,000 verses in the Old Testament. The disturbing passages of the Old Testament happen in about 200 of those verses—less than 1%. So there are 22,800 verses that picture God as merciful, just, a shepherd who loves his sheep, one who cast their sins away as far as the East is from the West, one who is a father who loves his children even though they push him away. The most prevalent picture of God in the Old Testament is one of compassion, patience and love. But those 200 verses are the exceptions. What do we do with them?

I'll tell you what most Christians do, we cop out! We say, "I don't want to think about it." And we just ignore it, it's upsetting, and you'd rather me not talk about it. But this is our Bible and people are going to ask you questions about it and you should be able to have a good, solid answer!

So, if were to take the entire Bible and ask, “What in this book is the word of God and what is the word of human beings?” That question itself stirs lots of debate among Christians. Whole denominations have been split apart by that debate.

But I believe that the Bible itself answers that question. We know who wrote the Gospel of Luke. He says, “I, Luke, am writing these things, I’ve researched this, I’ve studied this and pulled together various accounts and I write this Gospel so you might know what we believe.” What I’m getting at is that the Bible itself says that it is a book that is a partnership between God and human beings. I believe that God inspired the Bible and he worked through human beings to bring it to us in the form we have it today. A few people say that God literally dictated every word of scripture and merely used human beings as a hand to hold a pen that God moved. This view would say that the word of God is without error.

On the opposite side of the spectrum are those who would say that the Bible is not the word of God at all, but the words of human beings only. That the Bible is like any piece of ancient literature written by men (literally, men wrote it). It’s interesting, but not holy and not the word of God.

But listen. In between these two views there are a whole lot of people. I’m one of those people. There’s a place in between the extremes that says that the Bible is **both** the word of God **and** the words of men. That men wrote in the light of their historical and cultural understandings. They wrote with the limited scientific knowledge they had at the time. They wrote under the influence of their biases, and under the influence of their cultures. And at the same time God somehow spoke through them.

This mix of humanity and divinity points to a view of scripture called **Progressive Revelation**. Progressive revelation says that God was content to allow us to discover things about God over time. God doesn’t attempt to get us to know everything about him all at once. You understand how this works in your life. For those of you that are Christians, when you first became a Christian you understood certain things, but years later you understood them better, or differently. God didn’t insist that you understand everything perfectly the first day you became a Christian. You’re allowed to grow. And if that’s true for individuals, wouldn’t it be true for societies, and the human race and even the biblical authors?

So here’s what we find in the Bible. In progressive revelation things get clearer and clearer over time. God calls Abraham, but we can’t forget that Abraham’s parents worshipped many different gods. They were polytheistic. But God didn’t seem to judge Abraham’s parents because of that. No, God says to Abraham, “I’m going to let you in on a little secret. There’s really just one of me. There are not lots of gods, just me.” So Abraham begins to believe in one God. And God calls him and sends him to a new land. Sheer obedience. Abraham starts to understand. But when Abraham goes to Egypt he tells a few big lies to save his skin. He doesn’t realize that that’s not how God wants him to live his life. God has to go in and fix that.

There are a lot of things that Abraham doesn’t understand which is why 400 years later Moses comes along and through Moses God makes things more clear. God tells them what he expects his people to be and do. Moses gives 613 laws and 10 commandments to the people. Abraham didn’t have the 10 commandments but now, 400 years later, things become a little bit clearer through Moses. Progressive revelation.

Now fast forward another 400 years and we find the prophets. The prophets say, “We know Moses said these things to you, but God now says, that he doesn’t care about your blood sacrifices, he’s looking for mercy and he wants to know where your heart is.” So things become clearer with the prophets.

Then we come to the time of Jesus. And Christians believe that in Jesus God’s word came to us not **through** a human being, but **as** a human being. God didn’t just give us inspired word, but God became flesh, human being, and walked among us. John says, “**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us**” (John 1:1, 14, NIV).

Christians believe that when we look at Jesus, and listen, to him, and see him we have the clearest picture of God. Suddenly we have 20/20 vision and we can see things about God we couldn’t see before. That’s why we look at Jesus as the lens through which we understand the rest of the scriptures. So, if there is something in the Old Testament that doesn’t line up with Jesus, we say he’s the clearer picture. He is what helps us make sense of the past and what God is really about.

I get my eyes checked every year and if you’ve been to the eye doctor you know how they do it. They put this big thing in front of your face and they flip the lenses back and forth and ask you, “Does this look better

or does this? And this one or this one? Which is clearer, this one or that one?" And each time he does this things get a little shaper and more in focus. His goal is that you have as close to 20/20 vision as possible.

I see the Bible in the same way. Those who lived in ancient times, the Old Testament authors, they're hearing from God, they're experiencing God, and they're interpreting God's word to them in the light of what they could know and understand, and gradually that becomes clearer and clearer and clearer. We have to allow for that in the Old Testament. In those passages about God being a violent warrior, when they were written, all of the people of the near east saw their god's as warriors, as fighters. So, "My God is stronger than your God." That's the only way they could imagine God. Not as a loving father, but as a warrior God. We have to allow them to live in their own time, but we look at what they wrote and say, "What does it mean for us today in the light of Jesus?"

And what I think you'll find, if you approach those disturbing passages of the Old Testament, you see that those people understood God to be that way, but when I look through the lens of Jesus, who loves lost and broken people, I have to say, "Maybe they didn't have as clear a picture then as we have today as we look through Jesus. Things become 20/20 when we look through him."

For some of you, what I've said so far, you're saying, "Wow, that makes sense; that explains some of those disturbing things." Others of you who have been Christians for a while may be saying, "But Aaron, if there were things that we look back in the Old Testament and say aren't right, then how can we trust anything in the Bible?" For some Christians, if we question parts of the Old Testament then that opens up questioning the whole Bible and we'll have to throw it all out. Unfortunately some liberal Christians have done that. But that's ridiculous.

A few years ago I was preaching here at Saint Paul's and I was talking about running. And how I started running a few years ago. And as I was talking I said that I run about 10 miles a day. Somebody caught me afterward and was asking how I got in so much running, and did I really run 10 miles a day. I said, "No, I said I ran 10 miles a week." They said, "Nope, you said 10 miles a day." Sure enough, it was on tape. I said 10 miles a day. I made a mistake.

But let me ask you. Because I said 10 miles a day instead of 10 miles a week, does that discredit everything I said in that message that day? Or even worse, because I said 10 miles a day instead of 10 miles a week, does that discredit everything I've ever said in messages for the last 15 years? Or is it possible that God still speaks even when I get my words a little mixed up. That's my constant prayer. "God use me, so that something I say might touch the hearts of someone." And some of you say that happens sometimes. And that's not discredited because I had a brain lapse and said 10 miles a day verses 10 miles a week, or whether Ahaziah was 22 or 42 when he became king, or whether there were two angels or one angel at the empty tomb, or if the stone was rolled away from the tomb before or after the women got there. That's how I see the Bible.

And when it comes to the idea of why didn't God speak out against slavery, against the mistreatment of women, I see the patience of God with us human beings. He allows us our ignorance, and he allows us to see things in the limited way we can see them.

Think about our own U.S. Constitution. It's a truly beautiful document, majestic in its understanding of liberty, and yet we still didn't give slaves their freedom, and we still didn't give women the right to vote. Does that take away from the majesty of the U.S. Constitution? No. It just recognizes that people are bound by their time, and over time we come to see things more clearly and we still value and treasure that Constitution. And if that's true of the constitution, how much more so of the founding documents of our faith.

I want to end in this way. I want to challenge you to open up your scriptures and actually take the time to read them. Take a Bible from here if you don't have one. Open it and read. Some of you will disagree with what I've said today, but you don't read your Bibles. Some of you will agree with what I've said, and you don't read your Bibles. I've got to tell you, you are missing out. These are words of life. They're meant to shape our soul and through them God speaks, he cuts through the junk of our lives, and offers us joy, and hope; we find words that carry us and sustain us and challenge us.

This week, if you use your study guide you'll read Abraham's story. God says to him, "Abraham, I'm going to bless you so that you will be a blessing to the world." I read that and I hear God's voice saying, "Aaron, as you follow me, I will bless you, so that you can bless the lives of others." You can hear that same voice. God called Abraham at the age of 75 to start a journey and a nation. How cool is that?! At age 75 Abraham's best years were ahead of him! Scripture can speak to you and call you no matter what your life situation.

I think about last week. I went to the hospital to be with Church Owens and his sons as his wife Pat was struggling for life. What do you say in a situation like that? I reach in for scripture, like Psalm 46. **"God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea...be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:1-2, NIV).** Those words written 3,000 years ago still speak when it feels like the world is falling down around you.

When I'm with a family and a loved one has died, the words of Psalm 23 are always there. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Even though I walk through the valley of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me..."

I think of the words of Jesus and how his words jump out at me. On the last night of his life when he gets down on his knees and washes his disciples' feet and says, "Listen to me, if you want to be truly great, then you must understand that greatness is in serving other people." That defines our lives.

The letter to the Corinthian church, 1 Corinthians, Paul lays it out. They're speaking in tongues and having all these amazing spiritual experiences, but they're nasty to each other. Paul writes, "Even though I speak in the tongues of men and angels, if I don't have love, I'm nothing." Those words pierce my heart.

I encourage you, I beg you, to take the time to read the book. Read the Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament. If you're not a believer at least try this, say, "God, I'm not even sure I believe in you, but please speak to me through these words." See what happens this week. And if you're a long-time Christian, don't just talk about the book, open it up and read it. And see if doesn't offer light on the path of your life. And for today, that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank Rev. Adam Hamilton, Senior Pastor of The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, for his resources for this message series.