

“Introducing the Bible—Opening it Up”

Today we’re starting a new message series on the Bible. For a lot of people the Bible is a very mysterious book. It’s so ancient that many people wonder if it can possibly have anything to say to people today in the 21st century. More people than ever are not reading the Bible, yet more people than ever express an interest in what it says. Even for people who don’t believe God, the Bible has a powerful influence. This book is foundational for Judaism and Christianity and it is seen by many as a way to hear from God, and find meaning in life. But it’s seen by just as many others as confusing, archaic, and disconnected.

I want us to spend some time demystifying the Bible—understanding it as a book and learning about it in broad strokes so that it becomes more approachable, more accessible, more understandable, easier to open and use. Yes, I want to demystify the Bible. But listen carefully, at the same time I want us to re-mystify the Bible. To see it more than just a collection of old literature, but as a supernatural way that God chose to speak to humanity. As a way to offer us power, and life, and purpose. A supernatural way to hear from the God who made us. So on the one hand I want to demystify this book, and on the other I want to re-mystify it, to reclaim its holiness, and our awe of it.

Today I want to begin a broad look at the Bible in. So, first of all, grab a Bible from under the chair near you and hold it in your hands. You may have to share (some of those books there are hymnals). But get one and just hold it in your hands.

One question I get on a regular basis is, **“Which version should I read?”** You do have choices. They are all basically the same, but have some differences. The King James Version has been around since 1611. It’s the version that the Gideons hand out, it’s what you find in hotel rooms, etc. It is one of the oldest translations produced on a large scale. It’s a very poetic translation but it is not the most accurate translation. As with all translations it comes from Greek and Hebrew texts. But since it was translated, older Greek and Hebrew texts have been found, and translations have become much more accurate. Besides that, the English it uses is archaic and English words that meant one thing in the 17th century, mean something different today. The King James is a beautiful, poetic translation, but I don’t recommend it for daily use.

Now the King James Version was updated in 1901 and called the American Standard Version. That version was revised again in 1946 based on better Greek texts and understanding of Greek grammar and vocabulary—it was called the Revised Standard Version. And that was updated in 1990 because of changes in the English language and new discoveries of Greek texts—it was called the New Revised Standard Version. It is one of the most accurate versions today.

I use the New Revised Standard Version in my studies as well as the New International Version (which has been updated into Today’s New International Version).

When it comes to study Bibles I recommend the New International Version Study Bible. A study Bible is vital because it not only has the Bible text but it also includes footnotes about what the text means. It will have maps and a section in the back that lists different key words in the Bible to help you find a particular passage.

A study Bible can help answer a lot of questions and explain a lot of the meanings as you read along and as you grow in your faith. This is so important if you are going to do any kind of personal study. The NIV study Bible is great and I highly recommend it.

If you have just become a Christian a Bible that might be very helpful is the NIV Life Application Bible. It has footnotes at the bottom of the page that explain not only what the text means, but what it means for your life.

There’s also the Harper-Collins Study Bible and the New Interpreters Study Bible. The commentary in these study Bibles is all on a spectrum. Some are more conservative, others less conservative.

Let’s look at some common questions. First **“What is the Bible?”** First, “Bible” means “book.” It is actually a book of books. It’s 66 books that contain lots of types of literature. There are parts that are history, some parts are poetry, some parts are law, others narrative, stories, songs. It’s important to know what type of

literature you're reading as you read. The Bible was composed by a number of different authors over a period of about 1,500 years with strands of it going back way before that. It didn't just drop from the sky like this. That's important so that we see that the Bible has a context, it has human authors inspired by God.

The real question we get into as Christians is "**How did God inspire the Bible?**" Some say that authors closed their eyes and God moved their hands to write. One reason I don't believe that is that we find grammar that's different in one place from another, and style differences, and words used in different ways. I'm thinking that if God dictated the whole thing to writers in a trance, it would all sound exactly the same, but it doesn't. In fact, Paul writes a number of times in scripture, "I, Paul, am saying these things to you." He's writing letters, like you do. Luke, in the beginning of his Gospel says, "I've taken the time to research all these things, and pull all this together for you." As you read the Bible it sounds like Paul here, and Luke here, and David here in the Psalms. And it sounds like God throughout, from beginning to end.

I like to look at the Bible like we look at Jesus. Christians believe that Jesus is both fully divine and fully human. Now that's hard for us to get our brains around, but that's what we believe. God became flesh in Jesus--Jesus was a human being and God at the same time. When I look at the Bible I see it as both human and divine. God is the primary subject of the entire Bible. It's about God and God's relationships with human beings. So God is the subject, but God is also indirectly the author. God is the inspiration behind the scriptures.

Most scholars and pastors today think of the Bible as that meeting place of God and human beings. God spoke to the hearts of particular authors, moved their hearts, but they still had to write down in their own words what they felt God was saying. Next week I'll talk in detail about how we understand and reconcile the violence in the Old Testament and the picture of God painted there as being so wrathful and angry and jealous.

So we have to be careful as we look at the Bible recognize both its humanity and its divinity. The Bible is the inspired word of God, but we take into account the context. And more than anything Jesus is the standard that we measure everything else against. Jesus was God's word made flesh.

Let's move on and look at the structure of the Bible. There are two testaments in the Bible. Old and New. Open up your Bibles to the New Testament, the gospel of Matthew. Put your finger there. (use table of contents if need to). As you look, what percentage is Old and New? Approximately 75% Old, 25% New. Testament means covenant. That means a binding legal agreement. The Old Testament is God's agreement with the people of Israel through Moses. That agreement was about following the 10 commandments and 633 other laws that God gave. God said to the Jews, "If you obey my commandments I will be your God and you will be my people. If you fail to keep my laws here is how you find forgiveness." That was the binding agreement between God and his people. In Jeremiah 31:31 God says, "**The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant...**" (Jeremiah 31:31, NRSV). A new covenant.

Jesus at the last supper takes the cup and says, "**This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you**" (Luke 22:20, NIV). Jesus is saying, "I'm making a new contract with you. A new way of salvation, by trusting in my life, my death, seeking to follow me and allowing my Spirit to live in you." We now have a new way of following God, not based on following the 633 laws, but based on a relationship with Christ. So the Old Testament is the old covenant made with Israel through Moses. The New Testament is the new covenant made with all humanity through Jesus Christ.

A question that lots of Christians, as well as people checking out Christianity, ask is "**How close is our Bible to the words as originally written?**" You know the telephone game you played as a kid? You sit in a circle and one person whispers something to the next person and they're supposed to whisper it exactly to the next person and so on around the circle and then you see what the last person says and it's never the same as the original. Some say the Bible is so old and been translated so many times, is it accurate? Moses lived 1200 years before Christ, 3200 years ago, the disciples were writing the New Testament 2000 years ago. How accurate are these texts today?

Here's how we have the Bible as it exists now. As manuscripts became old and worn they were recopied by people who devoted their lives to copying the scriptures by hand. Many of those ancient

manuscripts still exist. In fact the Bible has more old copies than any other old book. One huge piece of evidence for the accuracy of translations is the Dead Sea scrolls. The Dead Sea scrolls were composed between 200BC and 68 AD. They were hidden from the Romans and found in 1946. They contained a complete copy of Isaiah. That ancient text was identical to what we have today. Those early scribes took their jobs so seriously, their copies were unbelievably accurate with each generation of copies. You can trust your Bible.

Here's another good question. **"How do we handle this book?"** I think we could learn something from Muslims on this. Muslims believe that the Koran is sacred and because it's sacred they don't put it on the floor, they don't use it as a coaster, they don't just toss it in the back seat of their car. They consider it something sacred.

Christians don't look at the Bible in quite the same way, but I've seen Christians do things with their Bibles that they just shouldn't do. Take this as something very sacred and important. How you treat it physically will say something about how you treat it in your heart. But listen it's OK to write in your Bible, to underline, to take notes. That honors God's word. It helps you to remember significant things and find them again in the future. Jotting notes in the margins of your Bible about why a passage jumped out at you or how God spoke to you through it is a good way to have spiritual anchor points in life.

More than anything I want us to know that the Bible is meant to be read! All of us, not just preachers, are meant to take the time, open it up and read it. God wants you to hear what's in here. It's an awesome story and God speaks to you personally through it. Here are a few suggestions: Use the table of contents in the front, don't be embarrassed. Get some dividers at a book store so you can navigate around quickly. Use the concordance in the back. Let's say you remember a psalm about shepherds but don't know where it is. You look up "shepherd" in the concordance and it will tell you every instance of that word and you can find what you're looking for. "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul...Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me..." (Psalm 23, NIV).

As you take time to read the Bible, also take the time to pray. God speaks through the Bible in a very unique way, unlike other literature. God's spirit works through that so it's important to connect to God. Before I read the Bible I start off by saying, "God please talk to me today through your word. Teach me. Challenge me. Correct me. Help me to hear what you want to say to me today."

The Bible is timeless because God does speak to us in fresh ways each time we come to it. A couple of years ago I was reading the story of Peter being sent to the non-Jews in his area. That was huge for a Jewish man to do, it was unheard of. He actually goes into the home of a non-Jew, a Gentile. Something he had never done before. I pictured him crossing the threshold of that doorway, and crossing into a whole new way of serving God. I had read that many times in my life, but God used it that day in a fresh way to tell me that I was about to cross over some new thresholds too. Thresholds of service, of going to new countries like Nicaragua, of doing new things, like training pastors, new things like serving on boards of agencies to help shape them. God's word is alive and God uses it to speak a fresh word to us. But we have to open it. It's amazing the things we'll do regularly, diet, exercise, watch dancing with the stars. What if we read the word of God regularly?

Here's how we read it. We read it in two ways: Informationally and devotionally. When you read the Bible informationally you are trying to find out who, what, when, where, how, and why. You're trying to understand your faith. This is very important. There are a lot of us in this room who believe but we don't understand. We're almost Christians, but not-quite Christians. A lot of people in America say that they believe in God but they know very little about the faith they confess. God doesn't want us to be ignorant about what we believe. We are to grow in the grace and knowledge of God. We're to let the Bible instruct us and teach us. But we've got to be willing to open it up and read it. Use a study Bible, read the notes, use the maps. The internet is rich with information, but be careful, there's a lot of misinformation out there too.

The best way to study the Bible is with a group of people. This allows you to share from your perspective and hear other's perspectives. Their perspective might bring light to you. When I'm in Bible study I always hear from someone else. They keep me from going in weird directions. Something happens when you study with other people.

This book isn't just for pastors, you shouldn't be satisfied that your pastor or small group leader knows the Bible, it's God's gift for you to learn and devour and put into action.

Not only should we read the Bible informationally, but we should also read it and study it devotionally. This means that we not only try to find out the who, what, when, where, how and why, but we also ask, "What does all that mean for me?"

You see our souls are like wet clay ready to be shaped and formed. When you pray and say, "God I'm reading the Bible right now just to know you better and let you speak to me." When you do that and you open up the Bible God begins to form your spirit, your hopes and your dreams and your values and your identity all by reading. Read informationally and devotionally.

As I wrap up I want to say this. 20 million Bibles are sold each year. Another 40-60 million are given away free each year. That makes Harry Potter books look like drop in the ocean. The Bible is the bestselling book each and every year. No other book even comes close. There are an average of 3 Bibles in every home in North America. 92 percent of Americans own one. It seems to be the book that everybody **wants** to read, and everybody wants to **own**, and everybody wants to understand. But fewer than half of us open just once a year. We seem to revere the Bible, **but we don't read it.**

According to another survey, 64 percent of Americans don't read the Bible because they're too busy. And 80 percent say that the Bible is confusing. **But** two-thirds of Americans say the Bible holds the answers to the basic questions of life. We seem to know that there is something there. We are drawn to this book like no other book. But something keeps us from going deeper into it.

The good news is that every Sunday we go back to this book and learn from it and listen for God's living voice in it. That is what we do here on Sunday but I want to challenge you to do more. You need to go adventuring into this book for yourself. We provide study guides each week. Use them. We provide Bible studies and other courses all year long. Take part. If you are searching for answers, direction, meaning please know that the living God of the universe wants you to have these things too, and he wants to tell you how to find them by speaking to you, primarily through his word.

Worshipping together and serving together are absolutely necessary if we're going to grow in our faith, but the other crucial element is to open God's word, enter into God's word and listen. And as we go on that journey today, that is the good news. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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