

October 16, 2016
2 Timothy 3:14-17, 4:1-5
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'Shaped by the Word'

A young boy lived with his grandfather on a farm in the mountains of eastern Tennessee. His grandson wanted to be just like his Papa and tried to imitate him in any way he could.

Each morning, Grandpa was up early reading from his old worn-out Bible. One day the grandson asked, "Papa, I try to read the Bible just like you but I don't understand it, and what I do understand I forget as soon as I close the book. What good does it do to read the Bible?"

The grandfather quietly turned from putting coal in the stove and said, "Son, take this coal basket down to the river and bring back to me a basket of water." The boy did as he was told, but by the time he got back to the house, all the water had leaked out.

His grandfather laughed and said, "You will have to move a little faster next time," and sent him back to the river with the basket to try again. The boy tried over and over, running faster each time, but always the basket was empty before he returned home. Out of breath, he said, "See Papa, it's useless!"

"You think it is useless?" the old man asked. "Look at the basket." The boy looked at the basket and for the first time realized that the basket looked different. Instead of a dirty old coal basket, it was clean.

"Son, that's what happens when you read the Bible. You might not understand or remember everything, but when you read it, it will change you from the inside out."¹

¹ King Duncan, *Collected Sermons*, ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc.

Timothy's mother Eunice was a Jew, and although his father was a Greek, his mother and his grandmother Lois diligently taught him the scriptures from early childhood. As a young adult he began traveling with the Apostle Paul and is mentioned in four of Paul's letters as an emissary or messenger to the churches. Paul loved him like a son. He sent Timothy to strengthen and encourage the churches Paul had planted, and Paul waited with hope to be cheered by good news from Timothy that the churches stood firm in their faith.

Paul's second letter to Timothy, written from prison in Rome, was perhaps the last of his epistles. Paul urged Timothy, "Continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned them, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." Paul had high expectations of Timothy because of his upbringing and knowledge of scripture.

Paul reminded Timothy, "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work." Another word for "inspired" is "God-breathed." David Leininger calls this the most dangerous verse in the Bible. Folks interpret that phrase to their own advantage. 1) Some folks like to think that God dictated the words themselves and people wrote them down, and therefore we can count on every word. That is the position Muslims take regarding the Qur'an -- God gave Muhammed the very words to write down, which means in order to be accurately understood it must be studied in Arabic. Think of the myriads of Bible translations we choose from! 2) Some folks use it like a Ouija board. By simply opening the Bible and choosing a verse randomly, their questions will be answered. 3) Some folks take a verse or phrase out of context to prove an argument -- which means you can make the Bible say anything you want! Like the old man who opened the Bible and read, "Judas went out and hanged himself." He opened it again and read, "Go thou and do likewise." A third attempt revealed, "What you are about to do, do quickly." William Sloane Coffin once bemoaned, "Christians use the Bible much as a drunk does a

lamppost -- more for support than for illumination." Leininger warns, "a text without context is a pretext."²

What does it mean that scripture is "God-breathed?" 1) The Bible is a lens through which we learn who God is and what he expects of us. 2) The Bible informs and transforms us. 3) It is alive and appropriate in all ages of history. Have you ever been surprised by a brand new insight from a familiar passage of scripture? 4) The Bible is the most reliable guide we have for life. It equips us for service to others, as Paul notes, "so that the man (or woman) of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

We should note that when Paul says, "All scripture is inspired by God," he means the Old Testament. The New Testament didn't exist in Paul's lifetime -- we could say that he and his coworkers were still *living* the New Testament. It wasn't until many years later that the church identified the gospels, the Acts and certain epistles as Scripture. Yet even though the Old Testament scriptures predated Jesus, the disciples understood that Jesus they preached about was the fulfillment of prophecies found in the Hebrew Bible.³

In the last 50 years, the Bible has been number one on the best seller list. The Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life published results in 2010 from an extensive survey on religious knowledge in North America. There were questions about Christianity and the Bible, as well as Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic core beliefs. The results were surprising. "Out of 32 questions, atheists and agnostics averaged 20.9 correct answers. Jews got the right answer 20.5 times and Mormons 20.3. Evangelical Protestants only managed 17.6 correct answers, while "mainline" Protestants scored 15.8 right responses."

A Wheaton College professor found that ignorance of the Old Testament extends to the church as well. "His surveys show that students who have attended Sunday school all their lives, have watched innumerable episodes of Veggie Tales, and have listened to

² David Leininger, "The Most Dangerous Verse in the Bible," *Lectionary Tales for the Pulpit*.

³ Anonymous, *Kindling the Presence of God* (a sermon)

countless sermons, cannot identify basic facts about the Old Testament:⁴

Philip Yancey found that “80% of Americans claim to believe in the Ten Commandments,” but can name less than four of them. “Half of all adults cannot identify the Bible’s first book as Genesis. And 14% identify Joan of Arc as Noah’s wife!”⁵

One pollster asked people whether or not they believed the Bible to be the ‘revealed Word of God: or merely a great piece of literature. Over 80% of them said they believed it to be the ‘revealed Word of God,’ yet more than half could not name one book of the New Testament.⁶

Maxie Dunnam asks, “Is there any merit in being able to name the books of the Bible or in being the 80% of our nation who believe that the Bible is the ‘revealed word of God’ if we are not making that Word the rule of our Christian faith and practice?”⁷

These are depressing facts to those of us who believe in the inspiration of scripture. I’m guessing that within any congregation there are people on all points on the spectrum of Bible knowledge. Where would you put yourself? The Church of the Brethren believes that our creed is the New Testament. Maybe you, like Timothy, were taught the Bible from early childhood -- do you continue to read it with a desire to know God? Have you allowed the Bible to change your life or thinking? Like the story of the little boy and his grandfather, we may not understand or remember all we read, but with the Holy Spirit’s guidance, reading scripture can change us.

I mentioned earlier that the verse, ‘All scripture is inspired by God’ can be dangerous one. It’s important to know what the Bible is and isn’t. These are my personal precautions for reading scripture, as my teachers have taught me.

⁴ Christine Wicker, *God knows my heart* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1999), p. 175.

⁵ Philip Yancey, *The Bible Jesus read* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House), p. 18.

⁶ Maxie Dunnam, “More than a book” (a sermon)

⁷ Quote from John Wesley

- I consider scripture to be 'God breathed' but it isn't perfect and inerrant. We read things that seem to contradict each other or things that seem to contradict with who God is. As Father Bill once told some of us at a church board retreat, "Everything in the Bible is true, and some of it actually happened." You may not be comfortable with that, and that's OK. But my belief in God is not founded on one word or shaken by an occasional allegory. God is greater than the book that tells us about God. Truth isn't dependent on perfection. Consider the reasons I say that:
- The Bible is a library of books. Like any library there are different types of books (i.e., history, stories, poetry, wisdom literature, prophecy, gospels, letters, and literature about the future) that must be interpreted differently.
- The Hebrew people were storytellers, and their history was passed from generation to generation through its retelling.
- The original sources of scripture were written and rewritten by human scribes, then translated and retranslated right up to our present day.
- The original written text had no spaces between words, used no vowels, and was not written in chapters and verses.
- Understanding history and context, and basing our faith on the overall message of the Bible rather than a smattering of verses, is more helpful and important for reading scripture responsibly. This to me is very important and is the source of much conflict within the church of Jesus Christ.

As I see it, the Bible is not so much a theology as a conversation into which we are invited by God. It doesn't so much tell us what to believe as it does how to live. Scripture leads us into a relationship with God and strengthens our faith in God.

As Paul told Timothy, "the sacred writings are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." So, my friends, continue to seek God! Read scripture and let it change you from the inside out.

As you read, check your understandings with others so you are not led astray. Learn to see the truth of God in the Bible. Let its wisdom instruct your faith. And may the Holy Spirit guide and equip you for the job God created you to do.

May it be so!