

March 27, 2022

Nuts and Bolts of the Christian Life: Reading Scripture

2 Peter 3:1-2, 14-18

Our scripture today comes from 2 Peter chapter three. We will read the first two verses, and then verses 14-18:

3 This is now, beloved, the second letter I am writing to you; in them I am trying to arouse your sincere intention by reminding you ²that you should remember the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets, and the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken through your apostles.

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¹⁴Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; ¹⁵and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given to him, ¹⁶speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures. ¹⁷You therefore, beloved, since you are forewarned, beware that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless and lose your own stability. ¹⁸But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

We've been talking all month about foundational practices that are a part of every growing Christian's life. We've talked about gathering with other believers, doing acts of mercy for those in need, and last week we talked about prayer. The first two practices I said might start off feeling mechanical, but that in time would become natural. With prayer, though, I said the pattern might be different. When we begin in our faith, prayer often feels wonderful and life-giving from the start, but then – when questions and difficulties arise – it can become harder. This is because we often start out with an inadequate definition of prayer, as a way to get God to do stuff for us, and if that's how we think of prayer disappointment is inevitable. But if we rethink our definition of prayer – as an openness to God, rather than a hotline to God – prayer can become something far better. That was what I talked about last week. Today's foundational practice follows a similar trajectory: reading scripture.

The fact that reading the Bible makes the list of the “Nuts and Bolts of the Christian Life” shouldn't be a surprise to anyone. It's no secret that we Christians have a sacred book – the Holy Bible – that we care deeply about. Like the Jewish and Islamic faiths, we are People of the Book, claiming that our sacred text was, in some fashion, given to us by God. As 2 Timothy 3:16 puts it, *All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.* Our Christian Bible includes all the Jewish scriptures – the Hebrew Bible – along with our own “New Testament,” which tells about Jesus Christ – his life, his teachings, his death, and his resurrection – along with a scattering of other books, mostly letters, in which early Christians try to make sense of the story of Jesus. This book tells who we are:

where we came from, what defines us as a people, and where we place our hope, so *of course* I'm going to say that reading it is an essential practice for growing in faith.

And, as with prayer, this works pretty well at first. You see, most of us start out learning the Bible in select passages that we encounter in Sunday School, Bible Studies, sermons, and devotional books. Sort of a greatest hits album, and these selections are genuinely great. We learn Psalm 23 and Psalm 139, and we're drawn to the God pictured there, a God of tender love and care. We read the stories of God delivering his people from slavery in Egypt. Even better, we learn the stories and teachings of Jesus, his healings, his parables, his sacrifice. And finally, we read how he conquered death itself by rising from the grave. No wonder we cling to this book! No wonder we love the Bible! 2 Timothy was right!

Until you read farther. Then, we begin to be troubled. Our scripture today from 2 Peter shows that even while the Bible was still being written, people were having problems with it. The author writes, "Paul says some great things, but be careful. Paul's hard, and a lot of people have twisted what he says. Well, in fact people have done that with all the scriptures. So you should definitely read it, but, you know, be careful." Hardly a glowing review.

Here's what happens when we read beyond the pre-selected bits. First, we notice that there's an awful lot of pointless stuff in there: genealogies of people we don't know, laws designed for semi-nomadic Bronze Age shepherding peoples, incredibly specific instructions for building a tent shrine and all its furniture, followed by equally specific instructions for building a permanent temple, and eventually – in the book of Ezekiel – the precise measurements of an entirely imaginary temple. All scripture is . . . useful?

But it gets worse. Beyond the useless passages are the horrifying ones. The book of Joshua, for instance, pictures God initiating genocide against the Canaanite peoples, calling for the Israelites to wipe out men, women, children, and livestock. Then there are the Philistines – Israel's always being told to go smite some Philistines – and if the Israelites aren't smiting anyone, they're *being* smitten as punishment for their own sins. God just seems really harsh and judgmental in a lot of the Hebrew Bible, not at all like the Jesus we had come to love in the greatest hits tracks. Finally, if we press on further, to deeper study, we find more problems. The Bible can also be scientifically and historically embarrassing. Its creation story describes the earth as a flat surface covered by a dome called the sky, for instance. That was standard science for Babylon in the 6th century before Christ, but today we're pretty sure it's wrong. Then there are stories of cities being destroyed that archeology has shown weren't around at that time, stories about kings that didn't exist, and other stories that appear to have been grafted into biblical history straight out of Aramaic folklore. This whole "divine scripture" thing starts to feel a little shaky.

As a result, some who encounter all this feel betrayed and may even go backwards. For all those who have come to Christianity because of those parts of scripture that glow with the love of God, there are others who have left Christianity on the later discovery that a great deal of scripture is distressingly human. I find these people sometimes in internet comment sections, sneering at Christians for still believing their book of fairy tales, and I wish I could help them, but I don't know how. People who heard the phrase "Word of God" and expected a clear, consistent, infallible communication from Eternal God that would answer every difficult

question and give us clear guidance through hard times were destined to be disappointed, because . . . well, they got this instead.

But remember again what I said about prayer, how it can start out great, then hit a wall of doubt and frustration? In that case, I said that to rediscover the life-giving power of prayer we have to redefine it. We have to learn that prayer is not *enlisting* God for our own purposes, but rather *encountering* God. A similar approach is necessary for scripture. We have to redefine it before we can rediscover it. This is not the infallible Word of God handed down in pristine verbal perfection from on high. This is a collection of books over the course of over a thousand years, in which people struggle with the same questions we do and seek meaning as we do. This is a record of their search for God – a travel journal, of sorts. Furthermore, it's a chronological record that builds on itself, so it shouldn't surprise us that some of the earliest parts have some of the sketchiest pictures of God – like the book of Joshua, which seems to picture God as a tribal deity eager to wipe out all the tribes who worship rival gods. By contrast, some of the later books, the ones that build on all that went before, like the Gospels, present what seems to be a completely different God.

Then, once you accept that definition of the Bible as a record of the search for God, it is possible to turn back to our Bible with appreciation bordering on awe. Given its history, it is incredible how often the light of God shows through in this book. I have spent my entire adult life studying this book, and I continue to be amazed by the glimmers of God that still surprise me when I read it. This book changes lives as no other book ever has.

So here are some suggestions for those who have hit the wall in their Bible reading and want to try again. First, if you're not reading at all, start. And maybe start with something like the Upper Room devotional guide, which can reintroduce you to those pre-selected passages of beauty and grace. Next, begin reading, maybe a chapter a day. Start with the Gospel of Mark. Then maybe the Gospel of Luke, and when you're done with Luke, move straight into the book of Acts, which is the sequel to Luke. These are books where the glimpses of God are brighter and more frequent, but that doesn't mean they are easy. The Bible doesn't do easy. After that, maybe read the Psalms. Again, one a day. Read them all, including the ones that are angry prayers directed at God. After that, get yourself a study Bible that can give you some historical context to the rest of the books and start reading. You will find useless parts: feel free to skip them. You will find horrifying parts; don't skip those, but do compare the picture of God you find in them to the picture of God you found in the Gospels. If the pictures vary, go with the Gospels.

And keep it up. It's worth it. And it gets more worth it the deeper you go. This book is not a verbatim dictated by God, but God is in here. Look. Those who seek will find.

I read that somewhere.