

Luke 1:1-4 (NIV)

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us,² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.³ With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

John 20:30-31 (NIV)

³⁰Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book.³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

1 Corinthians 15:1-8 (NIV)

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand.² By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

³For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve.⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles,⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

2 Timothy 3:14-17 (NIV)

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

Reading the Bible well is not always very straightforward. Yet, this is God's word for his people. How might we go about becoming better readers of the Bible.

For the past three weeks we've been talking about our doubts and beliefs. Inevitably, we end up talking about the Christian scriptures for they are the witness to God's work to redeem the world. But, often, when we come to this diverse library we call the Bible we get confused. Without some help, digging into the Bible can throw us into doubt and disarray. Rev. Arthur Jones recently received an email from a youth/young adult in the church who decided to really get into the Bible. I've taught enough thoughtful well-educated adults to know that this young person speaks for many. Here is the email:



The Bible

The depiction of the Holy Bible in the Rose Window incorporates the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. These letters signify that God's Word is complete and whole, it is a unity. Nothing need be added. Nothing can be taken away. As we proclaim in our Articles of Religion, the Bible "containeth all things necessary to salvation."

The symbol also points us to Jesus Christ, who is the "Word" (John 1:1), the "Alpha and Omega, the first and last, the beginning and the end" (Revelation 22:13; also Rev 1:8). "He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word" (Hebrews 1:3).

“I’m delving into Scripture pretty much for the first time in my walk with Christ, and I’m having serious issues with some of the Word. I’ve always criticized other people for picking and choosing parts of the Bible that fit their life, saying that they weren’t really taking on Christianity, just the lookalike Christian buffet of what and how much they want to believe. But now I’m not just struggling with, but now really sinking in, doubt pertaining to the Word. How can these rules be right? How do I know what rules were covered/fulfilled by the new covenant of Christ, and what is literal? How can I take God for his word in anything else, when he says crazy things – like in Deuteronomy, that a virgin who is raped must marry her attacker and her attacker must pay her father 50 shekels for property loss, or that a male soldier must kill every Midianite except for the virgin women who should be taken as new wives (prisoners of war?!). Or in Exodus, that slave owners should assign men and women slaves to marry and submit to each other. Or in Matthew, when Jesus tells the Pharisees to remember that you must honor your father and mother, but if you curse them you will die. It doesn’t feel right, and I know some of it is in historical context, hyperbolic, or in parable form, I just don’t know how to discern what Jesus means and doesn’t mean? And it’s taking a serious toll on my faith. Help?”

You can see the problem. Without some help, who could hope to make godly sense of Leviticus or Ezekiel or Revelation? Even the writings that we think we grasp, such as the gospels, are filled with numerous challenges and difficulties. The problem is that most of us have the education and smarts to see the difficulties for ourselves, but often don’t know what to do with them. All the writings in the Bible are ancient, coming from a time at least two millennia ago and a world far different from our own. Why do we think we could just pick it up and easily understand what the people of God from long ago are telling us about God, about his work in the world, and about ourselves?

Indeed, as N. T. Wright notes, we can pretty quickly fall into one of two basic mistakes:

First, we come to the Bible thinking it is some sort of rule book, a book of right behavior that can teach us all we need to know about how to make decisions in life that please God. Thus, Christians often emphasize the ten Commandment (a list of rules) or some portions of Paul’s letters. But the Bible is not principally a book of rules; it sure doesn’t look like any rule manual I’ve seen. If it were, God could have done a better job of organizing it for us!

Second, we often come to the Bible thinking that it is a book of right beliefs that lays out everything we are supposed to believe about God if we are going to be “good Christians.” But, here again, the Bible is anything but a systematic presentation of what we believe. If a systematic theology text is what God intended, then God did a lousy job.

But no, the Bible is the book God intended us to have. It is neither a book of right behavior nor a systematic theology nor a magic answer book for every problem that comes up in life. Indeed, the Bible is principally a book of stories, large and small, into which we can enter, often with some effort, and meet the God who made us and hear of his work to save us. Yes, the Bible is the Word of God for the people of God, but it is also the spiritual journal of God’s people in which they tell the story of their life with God.

Some of the basics¹

First, the Bible is not a book. It is a library of sixty-six books. Even those aren’t really all “books.” There are short stories, correspondence, essays, gospels, poetry, histories, prophecies², wisdom writings, apocalypses, and more.

The thirty-nine books of the Old Testament are often called the Hebrew Bible and were written in Hebrew. It is “the Bible Jesus read,” as Philip Yancey, the popular Christian

¹ This section is adapted from my book, *Restart: Getting Past Christian-ish*. Copies are available on-line and in the St. Andrew bookstore.

² By and large, the Bible’s prophetic writings are not focused on foretelling the future, but *forth-telling* God’s message for his people. The prophets are calling the people back to God and reminding them of the consequences of abandoning God.

author, puts it. These books were written, edited, and compiled over many centuries, but by Jesus' day the content was settled.

The twenty-seven "books" of the New Testament were, on the other hand, written over a period of about fifty years, from AD 50 to AD 100.³ Thirteen of the "books" are actually letters written by the apostle Paul in the course of his missionary work throughout the eastern Mediterranean. The New Testament was written in Greek.

As you begin to dig into your Bible, it is important to know that the division of the Bible into chapters and verses was done only about 800 years ago by a couple of Englishmen. Having numbered verses is helpful but dangerous, in that they encourage us to handle isolated verses while ignoring the context. Don't read verses in isolation – read the paragraph or, better, several paragraphs each side of the verse.

As with other writings, there are better and poorer ways to read the Bible. Some will get you closer the author's intent and, hence, God's. Some will take you further and further away from the truth of Scripture.

Richard Hays, a prominent New Testament scholar at Duke Divinity School, has suggested a simple method of getting to a sounder interpretation of Scripture.⁴ I've used the method for years. It will serve you well. There are four steps:

Read the text carefully: Don't read into it what you expect to find. Read outwardly from it. Try to read it as the first readers would have. After all, the books of the Bible were written with ancient readers in mind, not you and me.

Place the text in the context of all the rest of the Bible: If you arrive at a new angle based on a single piece of the Bible, chances are you are heading down the wrong path. The larger biblical context will help to keep you on track.

Relate the text to our situation: This is where you bring the passage forward to our day. This sometimes takes imagination, but our imagining must be grounded by and tethered to the biblical story.

Live it! This is really the hard one, isn't it?

Timothy

Timothy was a trusted co-worker of Paul's. Paul once wrote, "I have no one like him . . . like a son with a father he has served with me in the work of the gospel" (Philippians 2:20-22). Paul had sent Timothy to Ephesus to deal with false teaching in the churches there. Evidently, some Christians in Ephesus were occupying themselves with "myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations [and] meaningless talk" (1 Timothy 1:4-6).

In the letter from which today's passage is taken, we call it "2 Timothy," Paul urges Timothy to remember what he has learned and from whom he has learned it. Like most Jewish boys, Timothy had been steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures from a very early age. Paul reminds him that those sacred writings are able to instruct Timothy and make him wise for salvation in the faith that is in Jesus Christ. We need to remember that the Bible is not a history book nor a science text, nor a philosophical treatise. The Bible is given to us for the sake of our salvation and, in this, the Bible is utterly reliable and trustworthy.

We also need to remember that the writings Paul refers to in these verses is not the entire Bible, but only the Old Testament, for he is writing only 30-35 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Though some of Paul's letters were probably circulating among communities of believers, most of the New Testament writings did not exist at the time, though all would be written before AD 100.

Nonetheless, the message of salvation begun in the Old Testament had been fulfilled in the gospel, and that is what Timothy is to preach (2 Tim 4:2). Moreover, just as the Jews had a tradition of sacred and inspired writings, so would the Christians, who came to understand that the writings of the Old Testament and the New Testament were inspired by God in a way unlike any other literature. Paul puts this quite bluntly when, in v. 16, he refers to the

³ Jesus was crucified and resurrected in about AD 30.

⁴From Hays' book, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996).

sacred writings as *theopneustos*, literally “God-breathed.” Though the process of inspiration is a mystery,⁵ God is the source of the writings that God’s people came to embrace as Scripture.

The Usefulness of Scripture

Because the scriptures are “God-breathed,” Paul reminds Timothy that they are “useful” – teaching us, rebuking us, correcting us, and training us. In his paraphrase of the Bible, *The Message*, Eugene Peterson renders Paul’s words this way, “Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another – showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live in God’s way.” This is pretty much how we learn anything important. We have to be shown the path forward, we have to be shown when we have fallen off the path, we have to be shown how to get back on the path, and then we have to be trained so we can stay on the path. Truly, the Bible is the light to our path. And since the Bible is principally stories, we train by learning from the stories of those who came before us, all their hopes and frustrations and devotion and mistakes – and doubts.

But this is no intellectual exercise. We do not study the Bible so we can become biblical scholars, though such work is often invaluable to us. Instead, we read and study the Bible because, like Timothy, in its pages we learn of the salvation that comes through faith in Jesus Christ. The Bible also equips us for good works that serve God and neighbor, build up the body of Christ, and are a good witness to others. We study the Bible so that we might be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:1-2), enabling us to become true disciples of Jesus Christ.

Regrettably, sometimes we try to turn the Bible into the sort of book that we think God ought to have given us rather than the one he did. Sometimes, we try to turn it into some sort of rulebook, as if it is no more than a list of do’s and don’ts. Or, we try rearranging the Bible into a systematic book of right theology. But instead, in his wisdom, God has given us a book of stories about God’s relationship with his people. Even in the writings that don’t seem to be stories, like Paul’s letters to Timothy, we can probably hear God more truly when we listen for the underlying narrative. It is from these stories that we learn what it means to be God’s people. The writers, all of them, are the witnesses to God’s work to rescue us all. Indeed, these witnesses tell us that Christ is risen. Alleluia!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The Bible is a book of stories. We may not always know what to make of a particular story, but they are not just stories about people in biblical times. Rather, they are stories about what God did to and through these people. God could have given us a very different sort of book, so why do you think God gave us the book he did? How is the Bible different for us than it would be if it were a book of commands or philosophies? What does the narrative nature of the Bible reveal about God and about us? What might Christians mean when they refer to God as a God of history?
2. The Bible is a collection of ancient writings from times and places far different from our own. Most Christians acknowledge the importance of the Bible, but many fewer actually read it. Why do you think this is so? Is it the Bible’s strangeness? Or its silence? Or is it something else? How is the Bible actually relevant to our lives? Why do you think the Bible and its study were so long neglected in the United Methodist Church? How can we go about making the Bible an important part of our lives?
3. Our lives are composed of countless choices, some of which can be very difficult to make. Sometimes we’re not sure what is “right.” Other times, we know what we ought to do but we lack the strength to follow through. The church has always held that somehow the Bible must be the primary source and guide in our moral life – but how? Discuss how you’ve gone about applying the Bible to your own life. How do we find truth and guidance in these ancient stories? Can we? Simply put, how can the Bible shape us and guide the choices we make? More to the point, will we let it?

⁵Christians do not hold that God dictated the Bible in the same way that Muslims believe God dictated the Quran in Arabic. We believe the Bible is God’s word for his people, yet preserves the genuine collaboration of its human authors.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Deuteronomy 6 The commands to learn and to pass on God's Law, i.e.; his teachings.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Psalm 119:1-88 The longest psalm in the Bible. A witness to God's written word.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Psalm 119:89-176 The second half of the psalm: note esp. verses 105-112</p>	<p>Thursday, 2 Peter 1:19-21 "Prophecy" does not refer to merely predictions of the future, but is better understand to mean "telling forth" God's Word. Thus, Peter is talking about the entire testimony of Scripture.</p>
<p>Friday, 2 Peter 3:14-18 Peter acknowledges the difficulties in understanding some of what Paul writes. Peter's not the only one!</p>	<p>Prayer List</p>

