

**Text: 2 Timothy 3:14-17**  
**Date: September 18, 2022**  
**Title: “What Is the Bible” >**  
**The Holy Bible: Faith, Frustration & Fascination, Week 1**  
**Theme: The Bible is an inspired Word that moves the people of God to deeper faith in God and love for their neighbors.**

## 1

The Bible is the primary reason I became a Christian.  
I mean, I was raised in Christian home.  
My parents took me to church.

But when I started to read the Bible on my own, during college, that’s when things changed for me, when my faith began to amount to something. In it, I found a message that was clear and compelling about who I was and about why God had put me on this earth. I learned that when I set aside time to read and study the Bible, God would meet me there. Not every day, not every time I picked it up, but often enough that I kept coming back.

Sometimes I’d come back because that morning I got the exact message I needed to overcome fear and find hope. I was often surprised by how a random phrase seemed like a clear instruction on how to approach a situation I would encounter later. Over and over again, I felt God’s presence & was reminded of God’s love. And I’m not gonna lie, some days the words also felt sharp: like Jesus was giving me a clear warning about how I ought NOT to be in the world.

People will say that we don’t read the Bible – but that the Bible reads us. It definitely feels that way sometimes. Hebrews 4 talks about that feeling: “the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword” (Hebrews 4:12)

I was hooked.  
By the time I graduated college, I was absolutely fascinated with this book. And part of my fascination was all the questions it generated. I wanted to know the story behind the stories: who wrote them, why, and what they REALLY meant.

So in seminary, almost all my electives were spent in Bible courses – every chance I took, I studied Bible.

## 2

But far from answering the questions I had, in seminary I learned that it was more complicated than I imagined.

From the very first day of class, you come right out the gate learning that Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy – what we often call the five books of Moses – were NOT written by Moses, but instead came together during the Babylonian Exile thousands of years later

You learn that the earliest gospel, Mark, was probably written no earlier than 60-70 AD, about 30 years AFTER the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus

I found out that the earliest copies of New Testament books in Greek are mere fragments – sometimes just a few verses – scavenged from ancient garbage dumps

And that the first complete versions date to around 200 AD, and the first complete New Testaments to the 300s AD

Though the Bible is one of the best-attested ancient documents – in other words, with the most available copies –

many vary from each other in minor and not-so-minor ways

And to make it more complicated, because writing materials were so precious, many were written all upper-case with no punctuation, or even spacing between words, making interpretation a challenge

As I learned more, I came to appreciate that even HAVING an English-language version of the Bible to read was nothing short of a miracle  
Because after all, the first person to try and create one, William Tyndale, was convicted of heresy and executed for it in 1536

## 2A

Of course, the more I studied the more often I felt frustrated

Because I learned in my church history courses how disputes over biblical interpretation were the source of so much conflict

Though the Bible is many things: a source of wisdom and hope, a place to directly hear God's voice

It's NOT a book of systematic theology – it's vague on a lot of things  
It never clearly defines even basic Christian beliefs, like the Holy Trinity  
The Church had to define the Trinity because the Bible simply assumes it:  
“Baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the  
Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19)

So our theology is largely driven by us trying to make sense the Bible

And HOW we make sense of it matters

It matters because what we teach has a direct impact on people's lives

So we need to learn to use the Bible faithfully – that is, in service of  
equipping and building people up spiritually –

And also responsibly, so that we the Church serve both God and humanity  
well

That's why this series is important

I should pause here and say that if you want a book to read that helps  
understand these ideas, I'd recommend *Making Sense of the Bible* by  
Adam Hamilton

You may want to pick that up as a way to learn more

### 3

So, let's turn to the text for today

And in particular, verses 16 and 17, which are GUARANTEED to appear in  
any discussion about the nature of the Bible:

“Every scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for showing  
mistakes, for correcting, and for training character, so that the person  
who belongs to God can be equipped to do everything that is good.”

This is one of the clearest declarations in scripture ABOUT scripture

Again, the Bible is NOT a systematic theology,

But from these two verses we can learn (at least) two things:

Scripture is inspired by God

And that its purpose is to teach, correct, and train our character so that  
God's people can be equipped to do good

The Bible, then, is both INSPIRED and INSPIRING  
It's meant to move God's people to do something GOOD in the world

Now there's been a ton of debate about these verses through the years  
Literally what's said here is that scripture is "God-breathed" – that's another way to say "inspired" – breathed  
Look it up in the dictionary, and you find that one meaning of "inspiration" is "to inhale, to draw breath"

And how we understand inspiration has become a touchstone in the debate about whether the Bible is inerrant – that is, without error, entirely true and accurate in every respect  
Now, we're not going to dive into that debate today – that's a major part of next week's message

#### 4

But I do want us to think about the nature of inspiration  
Because we can use this word "inspired" to describe many things:  
Art, poetry, music, architecture, great speeches, groundbreaking discoveries, even new business ideas can move us

Is it going too far to say anything beautiful and true is inspired – breathed out into the world by God?

I mean, Paul says in Philippians 4:8 "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." (NRSV)

Neither Philippians nor 2 Timothy say ONLY scripture is inspired  
Clearly, Paul is pointing to the reality that there are a LOT of things that can usher us into God's presence

I certainly believe the scripture is one, but I don't believe it's the ONLY one I've had spiritual experiences, I've known truth and beauty in a movie, or a piece of music, or a sunrise

Here's another example: sometimes one of you will say to me after a sermon, "Pastor, I felt like that was for me."

And I'm thinking, "Oh, it definitely was."

Just kidding. That's not how I write a message.

But there are those moments when we hear the Spirit speaking.  
They happen for me too, when I'm listening to others preach.  
God takes a message, delivered by a human messenger, and says  
something clearly and directly TO me and FOR me.

And so I guess my question is: was that sermon inspired by God?  
I'd say yes.  
Was it inspired in the same way the scripture is?  
Well, that's more complicated.

## 5

I suppose if you can demonstrate to me that the sermon is still being read  
and studied 2000 years from now  
That people are still encountering God in it  
That lives are still being changed through it  
That it has been accepted across the Church as useful for shaping faith  
Then I'll grant it might be inspired on the same level as the Bible

That, to me, is the thing  
We say the Bible is inspired because it MOVES God's people to love and  
action

People wonder how the Bible came to be  
And we could talk about the details of the Hebrew scriptures and the New  
Testament scriptures,  
how we got to the final list of the 66 books we know as the Protestant Bible  
– Catholic & Orthodox Bibles are different  
But those details make for interesting reading, not interesting preaching.

Sometimes people have this image of a group of church elders sitting down  
to decide what was in and what was out  
That happened, yes, but not until the late 300s – and by then it seems like  
there wasn't much debate  
Because by that point, the Church had come to consensus about which 27  
books were going to be part of the Christian scriptures

Some books that were well known in the early church fell out of favor and  
gradually stopped being read in worship  
Over time, others gained broader acceptance

How did the Church decide what was in and out?  
Presumably, by applying something like the test described in today's  
reading: (slowing down)  
Is it inspired by God? I mean, does it move us?  
And can we demonstrate that it's inspired by pointing to the ways it teaches  
the church to do good?

Jesus says the measure of all faith is loving God and loving others  
(Matthew 22:36-40)

The Bible is the Church's book.  
God gave it to us for our instruction and our inspiration, that WE might be  
moved by it  
in love and service to the world, to give ourselves for others as Christ gave  
himself for us

In every age, I believe it's the Church's responsibility – guided by the Holy  
Spirit – to keep asking the question:  
In our preaching and teaching, are we handling the scripture in a way that  
moves people to deeper faith in God and deeper love for each other?  
If not, then it's time to listen for the Spirit again.

Amen.

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