

## How the Bible Should Be Understood?

### 2 Timothy 3: 10-17

Before we begin, I want us to try a little exercise. I would like everyone to please take out a pen/pencil and a piece of paper. I would like everyone to copy down the Scripture as I am reading it aloud for our text today. No cheating!

(Read the Text)

Now, how many of you got it all down, word for word, as I read it? Ok, how many of you missed a part because you couldn't hear it or let your mind wander a bit and either a) wrote down what you thought I said or b) left that part out all together?

Well, welcome to a quick how the Bible was written down 101. In 2019, it is easy for us to forget that in the earliest days of the church, there was not the technology we take for granted nowadays. Our technology has become so ingrained in what we do as a culture that our mind just can't comprehend life before Google.

So when we are talking about the days when the Bible was being written down, we are talking about no spell check. No fancy pens that can capture a lecture and then write it all down for us at a later time. No youtube videos with captioning. No IPADS, No Kindles, No MacBooks, NoWindows. The earliest church's

technology consisted of a quill and a piece of paper of some sort. This ancient technology was all the scribes had to use as they copied down what was read to them by one person standing in front of the group. And yes, the scribes made mistakes. The scribes made their own edits. The scribes added their own commentary in the margins and some of this commentary was later added into other copies because the next scribe thought it was supposed to be in there. As you can tell from your own copies, the process is full of human error.

I share all this because this is background for today's question: How is the Bible to be understood? Again, there are no black and white answers to this question. Because more often than not, when someone says to me, Well, the Bible says this...my response is usually which translation are you using? Because for Bible Study, some translations are better than others. For some translations, scholars have tried to go back to original manuscripts if possible and if not, to some of the earliest manuscripts we have, then using these early manuscripts, tried to translate passages as best as they could. Again, this was not a perfect process because as you have heard me say, for certain phrases and words that appear in either Greek or Hebrew, there are simply no words within our English language to capture the concepts or ideas. So the translators did the best that they could, getting as close as they possibly could but not always getting it correct.

And another complication to the process of understanding the Bible is that it is not only translations that trips us up. The Bible also contradicts itself. For example: We know that the bible talks about our enemies. But which part should we follow as people of faith? In “Matthew 5: 44, we are told to love them. Romans: 12:17-21 tells us to do good to them and never seek revenge against them. First Peter 3:13-17 tells us to suffer at their hands and set an example for them. Psalm 139: 9 says we should joyfully dash their infants against a rock. Psalm 139: 19 says we should hate our enemies. Deuteronomy 7: 1-6 says we should destroy them utterly and show them no mercy. If we want to call fire down on our enemies, we could reference 1 Kings 18:20-40 but before we do so, we’d better check Luke 9: 51-56 which condemns that kind of thinking. [And this is just what the Bible says about enemies.] We could find verses in the Bible to justify polygamy and celibacy as equal or better alternatives to monogamy, not to mention a wide array of rules governing dietary, sanitary, clothing, personal grooming and agricultural matters [that contradict what we know today to be the best practices for the health and safety of a wider society.]”

All of this is background for us as people of faith when it comes to exploring the question how the Bible should be understood. And for many people when they experience these complications which surround the Bible, they usually go for one of two options. First option: Take the Bible literally while ignoring the

contradictions. The problem with this is if anything ever makes you question the literal understanding, eventually it all falls apart because once you start pulling a thread, it all starts to unravel very quickly. Second option: Treat the Bible as a piece of literature, recognizing that it is a book which has influenced plays, books, movies but limiting it to just that...a book which has no larger meaning within our cultural context. The problem with this is that you deny the potential of this text to transform lives. It is simply another dry and dusty book like so many others.

But for us as people of faith, there is a third option which is where our text comes in. Paul is talking with Timothy, preparing him for ministry. He reminds Timothy of all that Timothy already knows because he has grown up in the faith. He has been shaped by mentors in the faith community, especially his mother and his aunt. These mentors have guided Timothy along the way and helped him grow in faith, and prepare him for the journey ahead.

Paul goes on to remind Timothy that it has not just been these mentors who have helped Timothy for the journey. Scripture, the Word of God, has done so as well. Paul describes all Scripture as inspired by God, that all Scripture contains the breath of God which brings for life and light. Paul tells us that all Scripture “bears witness to this on-going divine/human relationship in dialogue”. Let me say that again, all Scripture bears witness to this ongoing divine/human relationship in dialogue.

What Paul means by this is that our Scriptures were never meant to read as one sided conversations. They were meant to be read in community with one another and with God. They reflect the ongoing unfolding of God's plan to bring healing and wholeness for all of God's people.

We tend to forget that at the time when Paul was writing these words, he was referring to the sacred writings of the Old Testament. Paul did not know how his ministry would take shape nor did he know how the next two thousand years would unfold. When Paul was writing these words, the New Testament didn't exist in its current form. It came later when the early church fathers gathered up the letters and various gospels and put them together. Then still it wasn't complete. It still took years and years and much deliberation for the New Testament to come to its current form. It wasn't until the Council of Trent in the 1500's that the New Testament came into being in its current form.

Somehow, as people of faith, when we look at Scriptures, we tend to forget that these texts were written for a specific time, for a specific place, for a specific purpose and that we need to take all of that into consideration as we explore the question how the Bible should be understood.

Please hear me say none of this negates Paul's words of all Scripture being inspired by God. Instead, it does the opposite. It opens the doors for us as people of

faith. Because now we understand that our Scriptures are a living community library. They contain the stories, contain the poetry and prose, contain the prophetic words, contain the letters, which are all combined into one source to provide instruction in the life of faith. The Bible's purpose in the community of faith is, in the words of Paul, 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. That's it.

That's what makes our Scripture, the Bible the inspired Word of God for us. Because we find meaning and purpose within its verses. We find stories of imperfect people walking along their journeys of faith, growing in their relationship with God and yes, falling short a majority of the time. Within our sacred text, we hear about how God's grace turns our world upside down. We hear about a love so powerful that transformed death into the life. Within our sacred text, we hear the promises from our God who will never leave us alone. It is the inspired word of God for us as people of faith....

Because in the words of Rachel Held Evans: "The Bible was [never meant to be] a static work. [It was always meant to be] a living breathing captivating comforting book that is able to equip us to join God's loving and redemptive work in this world.

You see, “the Bible is a book that isn’t meant [just] to be read. It is meant to be heard. It is meant to be shared. It is meant to be discussed. It is meant to inspire. It is meant to confuse. It is meant to comfort. It is meant to wake us up to the injustices in our midst. It is meant to encourage us as we walk our journeys of faith. The Bible is meant to be understood as the ongoing, continuous unfolding of God’s work in this world as it invites us as people of faith to engage the Holy in our midst.

Or let me say it this way...I can remember when I received my first Bible as a child. My home church presented it to me as I was entering into third grade. The reason I remember this so distinctly is because on the first couple of pages, someone had placed a sweet honey like substance and wrote these words as a prayer: “How can young people keep their way pure? By guarding it according to your word. <sup>10</sup> With my whole heart I seek you; do not let me stray from your commandments. <sup>11</sup> I treasure your word in my heart, so that I may not sin against you. <sup>12</sup> Blessed are you, O LORD; teach me your statutes. <sup>13</sup> With my lips I declare all the ordinances of your mouth. <sup>14</sup> I delight in the way of your decrees as much as in all riches. <sup>15</sup> I will meditate on your precepts, and fix my eyes on your ways. <sup>16</sup> I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word. How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! <sup>104</sup> Through your precepts I get understanding”

I share this with everyone today because even now, years later, the sweetness of honey and its connection to God's word is ingrained in me. Because that sweetness, that goodness stands as a symbol, a sign for me and for all of us as people of faith that our Bible was never meant to be a weapon used to bludgeon or excluded others. It was always meant to remind us of the sweetness, the goodness that the Word of God brings to us, offering us life and light now and forevermore. Amen.