

Weird Passages in the Bible
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(2 Timothy 3:16-17 NRSV) All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, {17} so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

I don't know if you have ever wondered why after the reading of Scripture we say: "Hear what the Spirit says to the church" instead of the more traditional → "The Word of God for the People of God." Or "This is the Word of God."

I switched to the words we use, which come from Marcus Borg in one of his books, because of a conversation I had with someone who was struggling with their faith.

They questioned me about some of the difficult passages in the Bible, and if they too were "The Word of God."

What exactly do we mean when we would say: "This is the Word of God"?

That's a tough question!

This person was not an atheist, but many non-Christians have found in our Christian Bible many passages that seem to point to an angry God, to a capricious God, to a God who is xenophobic and hate filled.

Maybe you too have struggles with some of the difficult passages in the Bible.

- Passages that seem to be in contradiction with other passages.
- Passages where God seems to encourage killing.
- Passages where one group is put down at the expense of another – all with the blessing of God.

When I read in Deuteronomy

(Deuteronomy 13:12-15 NRSV) If you hear it said about one of the towns that the LORD your God is giving you to live in, {13} that scoundrels from among you have gone out and led the inhabitants of the town astray, saying, "Let us go and worship other gods," whom you have not known, {14} then you shall inquire and make a thorough investigation. If the charge is established that such an abhorrent thing has been done among

you, {15} you shall put the inhabitants of that town to the sword, utterly destroying it and everything in it--even putting its livestock to the sword.

Or in the book of Joshua where repeatedly the Israelites are told to capture a town and destroy everything → man, woman and child.

If that is the WORD OF GOD → I'll be honest with you, I am not sure that I want anything to do with that kind of God.

What was interesting was that I posed this question on Facebook this past week.

Are there passages in the Bible that disturb you?

And if you are on FB and not my "friend" or the friend of Ridge Church, be sure to friend us, and join in the conversation, it is a huge help to me each week.

When one person shared their issues, somebody else had to defend Christianity and tell her why she was wrong in having issues with some passages.

The truth is, there are many passages that are disturbing and we can ignore them, or better yet, we can do like Robin Williams suggested in *The Dead Poet Society* and just tear them out → but the rest of the world is not going to ignore them.

We must find some way of addressing them, a way that is not patronizing.

Next week, I am going to address the issue of: Why is there suffering if God loves us?

Over the last month we have looked at some of the issues that perplex our non-Christian friends. Issues such as:

- Science and religion
- How Christianity has been used for evil
- Killing in the name of God
- These disturbing passages
- And the question of suffering

Finally, I am going to share with you, why, despite these, I am a Christian, and why I think that there is value for you in following the way of Jesus.

So, as we begin this morning it seems to me that when you listen to all the arguments that get posed about these disturbing passages, I would suggest that they can get lumped into four basic categories.

- 1) People are often disturbed by the factual errors and the internal contradictions that seem to be present in the Bible.

It is difficult to open up the Bible, and read it with any intentionality and not recognize some of the problems in the text.

Sometimes the text seems to contradict itself
Other times it seems to make some factual errors.

And one of the things that I have found is that if you are a doubter of the Christian faith, you know where all these problems are found.

And if you really are curious all you need to do is GOOD SEARCH "Bible Contradictions" and you will find lists of them.

Let me give you a simple example.

What was Jesus' paternal grandfather named?

According to Matthew his name was Jacob

(Matthew 1:16 NRSV) and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

According to Luke his name was Heli

(Luke 3:23 NRSV) Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work. He was the son (as was thought) of Joseph son of Heli,

If you read the Bible literally, passages like this can be a problem. If you don't it probably isn't nearly the problem to you.

Now there is a lot of ways that we have come up with to explain contradictions like this.

Maybe Joseph's dad was known by two names: Jacob Heli?

Or maybe there was a scribal error that took place somewhere along the line. If we had the original text maybe we would find that there wasn't an error, but somewhere a scribe accidentally changed Joseph's dad's name.

But the reality is, for most of us → who cares? What difference does it make if we are confused about Joseph's dad's name.

But maybe this next example is a little more challenging

If you open up your bible to what is the most important story for Christians → the Resurrection story you find that:

In Luke's version a group of women come to the tomb, the stone is already rolled away, 2 men dressed in white

In Matthew: Mary & Mary come to tomb, an earthquake happens that rolls away the stone, one angel

In John: Mary goes by herself, runs back when she finds the stone missing and Peter is the first one to enter the tomb

So which is it?

One way we might reconcile it is if we understand that each one is telling the story from their own perspective, and so they each remember details differently.

But instead of focusing on what is different in each story, maybe we need to focus on what is common in them, or more importantly, what the story is trying to teach us.

- 2) A second issue that people often struggle with is really a question. Why does God allow oppressive cultural practices to take place.

Some would argue that God seems to not only allow, but condones some oppressive practices.

There are a number that we could talk about but I want to lift up only two.

- Slavery
 We talked about this last month
 God not only allows slavery but seems to provide guidelines for it
- Role of women
 Seen as property at best in the Hebrew Bible
 Take a look at Judges chpt 19

But also in New Testament, women are seen as subordinate (Ephesians 5:22-23 NIV) Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. {23} For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior.

(1 Timothy 2:11-12 NRSV) Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. {12} I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.

I have three daughters and I have a problem with that passage. Yet it is one that many churches continue to lift up to this day.

Why doesn't God condemn these oppressive practices that are found in our Bible?

3) A third issue are the immoral commands that God issues

We talked about some of these earlier.

Passages that don't sound like God is a God of Love

In Joshua 11:20 God tells the Israelites to kill all of the people they are conquering. Men, women & children

Psalms 137 God commands the Israelites to dash the children of their enemies against the rocks.

And through-out the Hebrew Bible the death penalty is proscribed for a number of offenses.

When a person was found guilty of a capital crime the method they used was to have the community throw rocks at them until they were dead, it is called stoning.

Not a pleasant way to die.

Some of the offenses that the Hebrews were told to apply the death penalty to include

- Adultery
- Children who are disobedient or rebellious
- Anyone who worked on the Sabbath
- Anyone who turned away from Yahweh worship

How many of us would still be here today?

Most of us have rebelled against our parents or worked on the Sabbath, and how well have we done in avoiding worshipping other God's?

4) The fourth critic is that throughout the Hebrew Bible God is vengeful or angry

Take a look at Exodus 32 when the Israelites created the golden calf to worship, while Moses was up on the mountain receiving the commandments. God slaughtered those who were disobedient

(Exodus 32:27-28 NRSV) "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Put your sword on your side, each of you! Go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill your brother, your friend, and your neighbor.'" {28} The sons of Levi did as Moses commanded, and about three thousand of the people fell on that day.

Just because they were disobedient.

The answer that we as Christians often give to that problem is we say → That was the Old Testament, God was full of wrath in the Old Testament, but in the New Testament God is a God of Love.

We weren't the first to come up with that solution.
A man by the name of Marcion claimed that the bible shows two distinct deities.

However, the church has decided that this is a heresy.
There isn't a bad God in the Old Testament and a good God in the New.

God cannot change. God is the same, yesterday, today and forever!

So how do we deal with these problems?

Most of us don't.

We stick our head in the sand and pretend that the problems are not there.

But if we study the Bible --- if we take the name Christian --- then we have to deal with it

Face it, the Bible is a difficult book.

But for us as Christians – It is essential that we wrestle with it.

It is hard for us to read the Bible without being influenced by all the bias and prejudices that we bring.

Rob Bell in his powerful little book called Velvet Elvis puts it this way:

But let's be honest. When you hear people say they are just going to tell you what the Bible means, it is not true. They are telling you what they *think* it means. They are giving their opinions about the Bible. It sounds nice to say, "I'm not giving you my opinion; I'm just telling you what it means."

The problem is, it is not true.

I'm actually giving you my opinion, my *interpretation* of what it says. And the more I insist that I am giving you the objective truth of what it really says, the less objective I am actually being.

Obviously we think *our* interpretations are the most correct; otherwise we'd change them.

Or as one of my favorite writers, Anne Lamott, put it, "Everybody thinks their opinion is the right one. If they didn't, they'd get a new one."

Maybe before we go any further we need to remember just what the Bible is.

The Bible is a collection of 66 individual books (at least from the protestant prospective). Written by a multitude of people over a 1000 year period.

Remember, we have no original copies of any of the books of the Bible

The oldest complete version of the Hebrew Bible is from about 900 CE.

The oldest complete version of the New Testament is from the 5th Century.

There are 39 books in the Hebrew Bible
27 in the Christian New Testament

There are 13 or so (depending on whose list you are looking at) books that are included in what is known as the Apocrypha. These are books that some traditions consider authoritative and others do not. The United Methodist Church considers these books significant but not authoritative.

On Wednesday nights right now we are looking at the scope of the biblical narrative. The material we are using suggests that there are eight core stories that run throughout the text.

Those eight stories are:

- God's Call
- The Exodus
- Sinai Covenant
- Promised land
- Davidic rule
- Jesus life
- The Cross
- Resurrection life

Certainly the Biblical narrative is filled with epic stories about us!

About our failure to follow and God's willingness to let us try again

That is the heart of the entire narrative.

The New Testament is composed of four distinct types of literature.

- Four Gospels → theological biographies of Jesus not histories
- Acts of the Apostles → concerning the formation of the early Christian community

- Letters to Christian Communities and Individuals
- Revelation

But, the question that is critical for us today is:

WHO WROTE THE BIBLE?

Are they God's words?

Or Are they human words?

How we understand the way the bible was written greatly effects how we understand the problems that we have identified.

It seems like there are three primary ways to understand the way the Bible was written

- Dictation
 - God fed the words to the writers who wrote exactly what God told them to write
 - This is a literal understanding of the Bible
 - THIS IS THE WORD OF GOD
- Inspiration
 - God inspired the authors in what they wrote
- Human words
 - The words are all a human construct

I don't know where you fit, but my hunch is most of you fit somewhere between inspiration and human words.

In second Timothy the author writes:

(2 Timothy 3:16-17 NRSV) All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, {17} so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

Remember, when that was written there was no New Testament only the Hebrew Bible.

But we still are left with exactly what "inspired" means.

One way that we might understand the bible is through what is often called PROGRESSIVE REVELATION

The best way to explain this is that as time goes on our understanding of God grows. We develop a new, more comprehensive way of understanding God.

Let me give a couple of examples

In the Hebrew Bible the Israelites are called to sacrifice animals to appease God.

As time goes on, God says that animal sacrifice is not what God wants but that God wants a sacrifice of the heart.

Our understanding of what God wants grows as time goes on.

Jesus in Matthew's gospel maybe best illustrates this.

Jesus says: You have heard it said . . . but I say to you
He says this repeatedly, offering us a new way of understanding what God desires.

(Matthew 5:43-44 NRSV) "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' {44} But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

Maybe another way to illustrate this is with something I imagine many of us have experienced.

You go to the eye doctor and he pulls this thing in front of your eyes and as you look through it he says:

Which is clearer – this one or this one?

That is done repeatedly until he gets you as close to 20/20 vision as possible.

The idea is that as time goes on, as we read and study the Bible our understanding, our vision gets clearer and clearer

I am not sure that I would completely agree with that idea. But it is one way to understand how things can change in the Bible.

I would argue that the Biblical stories are our (human) attempt to explain God, not God's attempt to explain God's self. Thus they always have to be examined in the light of the cultural context in which they were written.

But however you understand the Bible we need to strive to read it with integrity if we want to engage our neighbors in conversation about it.

The problem is → most of us don't read it.

We talk a lot about it.

We read snippets of it in devotional books, but to really sit down and study the text. That is another story.

Our atheist friends have found all of these difficult passages – we can never have a dialog with them about these passages if we don't take the time to learn the bible ourselves.