



How Do I Work This?

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2 Peter 3:14-18

The Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 26, 2014

Scripture Introduction

Our text today is from 2 Peter, which is the last part of Bible to be written, perhaps the very last. In 2 Peter, Paul's letters are referred to as "scripture"—that means that, by the time this is written, Paul's ad hoc pastoral responses to his churches have been elevated to the status of Genesis and Exodus. It's thought that that took a while to happen, maybe 100 years.

The sermon title today is a reference to song by Talking Heads called *Once in a Lifetime*. There is an unforgettable performance of this song in the film *Stop Making Sense* that informed this title. The song ruminates on the experience of "How did I get here? Is *this* my life?" There is a line and a gesture that pull together Reformation Sunday-Stewardship-Confirmation-2 Peter all at once. It is, "How do I work this?" with the rather odd hand movement. This whole book—the Bible—is now referred to as "scripture." How do I work this? 2 Peter tries to help.

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 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.¹

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A Life Given By God. We began this stewardship focus by pointing to Jesus as our model of how to steward a life. Then, we talked about our necessary investing in the meaning of life. Today, in this last of our stewardship sermons, our focus is on Scripture and Spirit. Thank goodness whoever wrote 2 Peter had some humility about our reading Scripture. *There are some things in them hard to understand.* No kidding! That is a great place to start.

We know it's true—there are some things in Scripture hard to understand.

I have written and rewritten this section on Scripture eight times this week. There is just too much to say. I've taught Scripture for decades. I love it. I am enthralled by it. My library is full of books about this book, the Bible. I could take all morning.

"How do I work this?" is a subtle, beautiful, challenging, all-consuming process. We are sophisticated in our reading of this book; we require historical and literary understanding. And that is good and holy, and I commend such Bible study to you, because *there are some things in scripture hard to understand.*

¹ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), 2 Peter 3:14-18.

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But Tony Campolo once said of his denomination, “We argue and argue about the inerrancy of Scripture but then forget to read it.” We have a similar temptation. We become enamored of our subtle and sophisticated approach to Scripture—and forget to read it.

John Dominic Crossan is a great biblical scholar, but one of his books begins with a dream he had. Jesus comes to him and says, “I’ve read your book and it’s very good. So now are you ready to join me and my vision?” Crossan demurs and replies, “I don’t think I have the courage, Jesus, but I did describe it well, didn’t I?” Jesus thanks him for his contribution to biblical scholarship and in a whisper says, “That’s not enough... Come and follow.” After writing hundreds of pages about Jesus, Crossan stands bewildered, knowing all too well that it will cost him everything he has and believes in, maybe even his very life.²

We know it’s true—*there are some things in scripture hard to understand*. But they are not *all* that hard to understand. And it’s those parts that bother us most: those all too *easy* to understand. The lawyer understands correctly that he is to love his neighbor. Jesus says, “Do this, and you will live.” “Come on, Jesus, define your terms better. Who’s my neighbor?” He says, “Do this.” We say, “Um. Um. Um.... Let’s talk.”

Ultimately the relationship between Scripture and Spirit is that Spirit gets the Word out here off that page. Spirit gets the Word out of the words and into our flesh. Stewardship is simply about making sure that happen, being affected enough by Scripture to make it real in our lives. When this thing works, that’s how it works.

We have AED training today. AED—Automated External Defibrillator. It defibrillates the heart; it interrupts the misfiring of the heart, so that it can reboot correctly. And it can help save a life. There’s a nice spiritual metaphor in that: interrupting the misfiring, the “um, um, um” of the heart to save a life—like when Jesus says, “Who proved to be the neighbor?” to reboot the heart of the lawyer. Maybe the lawyer’s life, maybe our lives get saved. Maybe we learn to lose our lives again, that they might be saved.

When we train you in using the AED, we will not teach you how the programming works or who developed the technology—or how many years came in between; we’ll show you how to save a life. The role of the AED is to save people. It’s the same with the Bible. If it’s about following Jesus—and it is, Jesus is not inside that book. Jesus is out here, or we’re not working the Bible correctly.

But there is a difference between the AED and the Bible. When we ask, “How do I work this?” the AED answers our question all on its own. The AED talks to you; it talks you through how to apply it, what button to push when. It’s automated. That’s the A in AED.

The Bible doesn’t work that way. It’s not going to tell you anything out loud, any more than the sunset has a signature. You need to invest in it, and steward it, and let the Spirit convict. It’s not as easy as applying an AED. But Scripture has and surely will save lives.

This book is important, but its importance is expressed out here among us, not in there or up here in our heads. We are making the stewardship commitment today for next year, for this community’s next year.

² As told by Shane Claiborne in *Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), p. 241.

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I have not yet been able to put a price tag on what this place means to me, what you mean to me. I'm going to tell you a story about another congregation, but I swear this also happens here all the time.

Scripture is enlivened by the Spirit and is out here like an AED. The beginning of Psalm 90 reads:

*Lord, you have been our dwelling place
in all generations. ... from everlasting to everlasting you are God.³*

Isaac Watts translated that thought into verse:

*Our God, our help in ages past,
our hope for years to come,
our shelter from the stormy blast,
and our eternal home:*

I've seen that text jump off the page.

Back in the church I pastored in San Anselmo, California, in 1997, we were celebrating our centennial. We had a ten-week celebration of the church's life: one Sunday for the people who'd led the building committees, one for the generations of elders, one for the outreach, one for the music—all building up to the final Sunday.

The church had a motto—*Together We Serve*. I told you about the hymn by that name before; it's in the new Presbyterian hymnal. One of the well-known members of First Church, Johnnie Holm, had given us that motto and thus the title of the hymn that was commissioned that year, and Johnnie had just been diagnosed with cancer, half-way through this celebration. So, as the centennial reached its climactic tenth Sunday, we were praying for Johnnie while preparing for the big day. Wil Russell had been the organist at First Church for some forty years. The longest any *pastor* had been there was a dozen years. Wil was gracious, generous, humorous, and rightly beloved. On the penultimate Sunday, the ninth Sunday, we celebrated the music of the church, and Wil closed with service with the St. Anne fugue, a Bach piece that sounds very much like *Our God, Our Help*. Though saving a Catherine Marshall-commissioned anthem for the tenth Sunday, we were on a roll.

So, on Thursday the choir rehearsal came—to work on that piece. And Wil didn't show up for the rehearsal. We went to his home, only to discover that he died. That set us reeling. Wil had no living family members. So over the next day, we saw to the arrangements and set a day for his memorial, and then realized we had this big Sunday and no organist. Then Sally Johnson, our choir director, made an inspired suggestion. She said that no one could really fill in for Wil—and she was right. She said, "Let's not have anyone at the organ bench." So, Sunday came, and we kept the organ silent.

At the start of the centennial service, we announced Wil's death, we collected our prayers, including those for Johnnie, and started the service with an a capella singing of our commissioned hymn, *Together We Serve* that Wil had taught us and that Johnnie had given us the title for. There was sadness; we were

³ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), Psalm 90:1–2.

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just coming to grips with Wil's death and were mindful of his absence with no organ and only our voices.

The children were just going out from the service and I was heading to the pulpit when Bob Gillespie, one of our members, came up to me, and said, "I just called the Holms' to check on Johnnie. Jean said he died about five minutes ago." He hadn't been sick very long. I was shocked. So, with my own mind reeling anew—um, um, um..., I walked into the pulpit and announced that Johnnie had died. There was an audible gasp; everybody knew Johnnie. I looked to the organ bench, where ordinarily I'd have asked Wil to play, to pray with the organ, while we gathered ourselves. But the organ bench was empty.

After Wil's death three days before, I'd rewritten the sermon to start by singing the first verse of "Our God, Our Help," and then interspersing the hymn stanzas throughout the sermon. So, I began to sing the scripture of Psalm 90: "Our God, our help in ages past..." Spontaneously, without any prompting, the entire congregation stood and sang with me until we sang that Scripture into fullness.

We were reeling. We were staggering, um, um, um... our hearts fibrillating. And then we weren't. Reboot. The congregation wavered for a moment, but then we stood firm, our heart beating strongly again.

That's how you work this—Bible.

In the struggle, loss, confusion, and weariness, I swear my heart gets rebooted every time we worship together here. The welcome. The music, the singing. The claim this Bible goes out the doors to Camp Henry, the Westminster Child Development Center, and the Downtown Food Pantry. The knowledge that the children are learning to sing this Scripture, sing this hope. Who knows what will reboot their lives some day?

It's so hard to put a price on what happens here.

It's rebooting hearts. Do this, and you will live. Sometimes it's all about saving lives. I have yet to figure out how to put a price on it. But where my heart is, there my treasure must be. It's not hard to understand; and sometimes, it's not even that hard to do.

Let the people say, Amen!