

BURY THE BIBLE

Is the Good Book Bad?

Texts: Psalm 119:97-105; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Luke 13:19

Introduction to the Scripture

For the past several weeks we've been thinking together on how followers of Jesus are to respond to the articulate and aggressive form of anti-theism expressing itself from the shelves of bookstores to the lecture halls of universities to the screens of popular blogs and sitcoms. If you're just joining us today, you can get copies of our past reflections through our church website or by stopping by the media table in our narthex.

You might also find it helpful to pick up one of these excellent books. As good a primer as I hope the sermon messages have been, I'm painfully conscious that to do full justice to the questions being posed or the strength of the Christian worldview requires a length of discourse that we don't have time for in worship. If this series inspires you to do nothing more than to pick up and read a copy of Tim Keller's terrific new book – *The Reason for God*, or Dinesh D'Souza's – *What's So Great About Christianity*, or Chuck Colson's – *The Faith*, I'll have considered my investment here very worthwhile. If you've got a skeptical friend or family member, get a copy of one of these books, ask him or her to read it, and then invite them to come talk with you about what the book kicked up for him or her.

We begin this morning's reflections by reading a small portion of one of the most famous Psalms of the Old Testament. Psalm 119 is an acrostic Psalm – that is, it is organized into separate stanzas, each beginning with one of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. It is an ode to the beauty and goodness of God's Word. Let's read it responsively, beginning at verse 97...

⁹⁷ Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long. ⁹⁸ Your commands make me wiser than my enemies, for they are ever with me. ⁹⁹ I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes. ¹⁰⁰ I have more understanding than the elders, for I obey your precepts. ¹⁰¹ I have kept my feet from every evil path so that I might obey your word. ¹⁰² I have not departed from your laws, for you yourself have taught me. ¹⁰³ How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! ¹⁰⁴ I gain understanding from your precepts; therefore I hate every wrong path. ¹⁰⁵ Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.

One of the ardent questions posed by atheists to Christians today is: "How can you be so committed to that Book? Don't you see how much better off all of us would be if someone would just bury the Bible?" Behind this query, I think, there are at least *two basic convictions* that are worth our consideration if we're going to contend helpfully for our faith in this time or maybe even find answers for some of the doubts that we may have.

Is the Bible's God a Cruel Tyrant?

The first assertion of the atheists is that the Bible presents a picture of a God who is at heart a cruel tyrant. Why the God of the Bible, writes Richard Dawkins, is "arguably the most

unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it... petty... unjust, [an] unforgiving control-freak... misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, and genocidal." In his book, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, Sam Harris goes on to quote extensive passages from the Bible that, taken in one light, seem to suggest that God is a being who delights in dashing Babylonian baby heads on rocks, in putting whole Canaanite villages to the torch and slaughtering innocents for the sake of his prideful tribe. This depiction leads Victor Stenger to admit that he does not simply disbelieve in God; he actively dislikes the biblical God. "If he exists, I want nothing to do with him."¹

So, what do you say to this? It seems to me that we have to grant that there are passages in the Bible that strike the contemporary mind, in Dawkins' own words, as "just plain weird." I've sometimes struggled personally with that period during Israel's conquest of the Land of Canaan when God, speaking through Moses in Deuteronomy 7, apparently gave the Israelites the command to put the Canaanites "**to the ban,**" a euphemism for destroying them totally. It is difficult for me to imagine a people so utterly wicked that they merited this kind of treatment, but apparently that was indeed the case.

As Deuteronomy 12:31 reports, it was routine practice for the Canaanites to "**burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods**" over interests as commonplace as the dedication of a new building. There are moments in biblical history when God takes harsh and costly action to spare the world the expansion of a much harsher and more insidious evil. I'm sure none of the New Atheists would have thought that wiping out the Nazi scourge was a pretty affair. I doubt too many who walked through Dachau, however, would question that extreme force was necessary to prevent that particular tribe from spreading like a cancer on the world.

It must be said too that the New Atheists somehow consistently ignore all those balancing passages of Scripture which show that the God of the Bible is, above all, an enormously patient and merciful being. reads: **⁶ With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷ Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? ⁸ He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."**

The New Atheists say that the God of the Bible is jealous, vindictive and mean; then why does he both spare and clothe Adam and Eve even after they wantonly stole the one thing amidst a veritable Eden of plenty that God had said: "Don't take that." Why does the Bible picture him as the one who continues to send the nourishing rains and the warming sun on the just and the unjust alike? The New Atheists say that the God of the Bible is just another xenophobic tribal deity; why then does he establish Israel to be a light and blessing to all the nations? Why does he send the reluctant prophet Jonah to save the barbarous nation of Assyria? Why has Christianity found a home among more tribes on more continents than any other world religion? The New Atheists say that the story of Abraham and Isaac illustrates that the God of the Bible demands that we give our own precious sons to Him; then why is the central message of Christianity that God has in fact, given his own Son for our sakes?

It is hard to really read the scriptures in their entirety, or understand passages in their cultural context, and conclude that the God of the Bible is a cruel tyrant. You will see that He is not a push over. He is holy. He is committed to the progress of his kingdom. He cares deeply for justice. He is no indulgent Santa Claus. But if there is a greater example of patience, kindness, forgiveness, perseverance, generosity, and compassion than the God we meet in the Bible, I've just not been privileged to meet that being yet.

One of the errors that the New Atheists regularly make as they interpret Scripture is to assume that because a behavior is ascribed to a character in the Bible, then God or Christianity endorses it. In the Book of Judges, for example – the book from which critics take some of their most colorful illustrations -- the actual attitude of God toward many of the atrocities described there can be summed up in the book's final verse: **"In those days, there was no king in Israel and everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25)**. Yes, the Bible is weird and cruel in places, because life and people are weird and cruel in places. The Bible gives us a window into the dysfunction of families and the corruptions of the powerful. It shows us the selfishness of the rich, the superficiality of the religious, and the shallowness of the mob. But God is not responsible for or endorsing this behavior. When a journalist, novelist, or historian in our day accurately depicts the atrocities of war or the abuse of children, or the rape of the environment, we don't say what a cruel, tyrannical person that AUTHOR is. No, we give such people prizes for telling it like it is. In the Bible, God tells it like it is. The Bible shows us a world in need of saving and a God qualified to do the job.

Does the Bible Have Nothing to Teach About Ethics?

There is a SECOND reason why the New Atheists feel it would be fine to bury the Bible. It is because, they contend, the Bible has nothing significant to teach us about ethics. Dawkins admits that there are parts of the Bible that are reasonably positive pieces of work, but maintains that since Bible readers naturally pick the good parts to major on, it is sign of an innate evolved capacity to recognize good. Therefore, he asks, why do we need the Bible? Amazingly, what Dawkins seems to be only just discovering is what Christian theologians have called for centuries Natural Law, or as Saint Paul put it in Romans 2:15, **"the law written upon [humanity's] heart."**

Anthropologists have long observed that there appears to be a fairly common sense of "conscience" written into human life. As John Cooper puts it: "The peoples of the world, however much they differ as to details of morality; hold universally, or with practical universality, to at least the following precepts. Respect the Supreme Beings(s)... Do not 'blaspheme.' Care for your children. Malicious murder or maiming, stealing, deliberate slander or... lying, when committed against friend or unoffending fellow clansman... are reprehensible. Adultery proper is wrong, even though there be exceptional circumstances that permit or enjoin it and even though sexual relations among the unmarried may be viewed leniently. Incest is a heinous offense."² Does any of this sound familiar? If you know the Bible at all, you can't help but notice how this universal moral code agrees rather closely with the Ten Commandments.

Throughout history, the Bible has served to remind us of the deepest moral truths. Some atheists will immediately rejoin that we've just made up this God. He's a projection of our ideals. This God is made in our own image. Such an atheist obviously has a better self-image than I do. Personally, if I were inventing a God for my own aggrandizement or comfort, my

God would have commandments like these: Feel good about yourself, you are evolving into godhood. Be sure to watch American Idol. Drop God's name casually; it makes you sound cool. Remember the Sabbath, it's a good day to get the shopping done. Honor your father and mother, except when they're a pain. Don't murder or steal, except if it helps the fittest survive. Have sex with a lot of partners; it's the way you remain a player in the gene pool. Don't bear false witness, unless you need to. Covet whatever you want; it keeps the economy strong.

Does it strike any of you that maybe we've already fashioned this God? I don't need more of that Deity. What I need is the God who meets us through the Bible. I will confess to you that I don't like everything He says to me in the Bible. I feel about God sometimes the way I felt about a writing teacher I had in the eighth grade and a crew team coach I had my freshman year in college. You are too hard. You are too challenging. But I'm a much better writer today than I was in the eighth grade and by the end of freshman year, we were the best crew team in the country. The Apostle Paul put it like this in ¹⁶**All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,** ¹⁷**so that the man [or woman] of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.**

You know, as good as it is, Natural Law – that universal sense of conscience I was talking about earlier – only equips us so far. It doesn't tell us that the way of hope and healing for our world is to love our enemies and do good to those who persecute us. It doesn't tell us that life in itself is sacred and that we ought to protect the weak, even if they are not part of our tribe. Natural law doesn't tell us that male and female are of equal standing, nor that freedom is not America's gift to the world, but God's intention for all humanity. Neither natural law nor evolutionary principles will tell us this. But, if we listen carefully and look closely the God of the Bible will. More than that, the Bible will tell us that these aren't just ideas to be entertained but commitments of life for which we will one day be accountable before the God who is.

To what shall I compare the Word and Kingdom of God, asked Jesus one day as records. It is like something small but immensely powerful which someone chose to bury: ¹⁹**It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air perched in its branches.**" If we're going to bury the Bible... if we want to see a better world brought forth... then the place to bury the Bible is deep within our hearts.

¹ Victor Stenger, *God: The Failed Hypothesis* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007), 240.

² David Marshall, *The Truth About the New Atheism* (Eugene: Harvest House, 2007), 104.

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Discussion Guide

1. How would you describe your relationship with or attitude toward the Bible?
(check all that apply)
 - I have honestly never read more than a few verses of it
 - I pick it up or hear about it occasionally but don't really know it too well
 - I have read enough to have serious struggles with parts of it
 - I go to the Bible frequently as a portal into an encounter with God
 - I am right there with most all the feelings described in Psalm 119
 - Other...
2. What stories or teachings in the Bible make it hardest for you to have unwavering faith in the character of God?
3. What stories or teachings in the Bible make it easiest for you to trust in the good character of God?
4. What are some examples of the Bible accurately depicting life "as it is," even if it's hard to look at? Do you find it bad or good to look into these images? Say more about that.
5. What are the principal differences between "Natural Law" (universal conscience) and "God's Revealed Will"?
6. Describe any ways in which the Bible has been useful in your life for...
 - Teaching...
 - Rebuking...
 - Correcting...
 - Training in righteousness...

Psalm 119:97-105

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not departed from your laws, for you yourself have taught me. ¹⁰³ How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! ¹⁰⁴ I gain understanding from your precepts; therefore I hate every wrong path. ¹⁰⁵ Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.

2 Timothy 3:16-17

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Luke 13:19

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