

The Bible continues to be the best selling book of all time. Throughout the ages, the Bible has provided inspiration, comfort and guidance to those who have read it. But is the Bible merely an inspirational book? It is this, but so much more! Let's spend a few moments reviewing some important truths about the Bible.

What is the Bible?

The word "Bible" is from a Greek word that means "book." What is this "good book"? That question has a two-part answer.

First, the Bible is actually a collection of books—66 of them to be exact—from the first book, Genesis, to the last, Revelation. These books cover thousands of years and were written in either Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek. There are many different kinds of writing in the Bible: historical narrative, prophecy, poetry, speeches, letters and so on. From a merely human perspective, there is no question that the Bible is a masterpiece of literature.

Second, the much more important answer to the question, "What is the Bible?" is this: The Bible is the Word of God. The Bible is the collection of the thoughts—even the very words—that God gave to the authors of the Biblical books. The Bible is a gift God has given to His church. It is not a collection of ancient fables and myths. The Bible is the sure and certain means that God the Holy Spirit uses to communicate God's Word to us today.

How did we receive the Bible?

The Bible itself explains how we received it. *"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness"* (2 Timothy 3:16). We read elsewhere that, *"Prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit"* (2 Peter 1:21).

Because people knew that the Bible was the actual Word of God, it was copied and re-copied with painstaking care and attention to detail, letter by letter, word by word. Though today we no longer possess the actual, original text of the Bible, we can be certain that the Holy Spirit has preserved the Word of God for us. Careful study of the many thousands of copies of the New Testament reveals that though there are minor differences between the various copies, there is no place where any key teaching of the Bible is contradicted.

Our English Bibles are translations from the original languages. When we use reliable translations, we can be sure that we have the true Word of God. Whatever the Word of God is in Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek, it is also the Word of God in English, or in any other language, as long as the translation is faithful to the original languages. *Reliable translations include the King James Version (KJV), the New King James Version (NKJ), the old Revised Standard Version (RSV), the English Standard Version (ESV), the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB) and the New American Standard Bible (NASB).*

Why is the Bible so important?

Someone may say, "The Bible is important to me because it tells me what to do" and another person might say, "The old stories remind me of my childhood" or "The Bible is a guidebook for daily living." These answers all have a grain of truth, but they miss the real reason why the Bible is so important: It is the sure and certain source for knowing who Jesus Christ is and what He has done for us.

Jesus said, *"The Scriptures testify about me"* (John 5:39). The main message of the Bible is the good news of God's work to reconcile the world to Himself through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Throughout Old and New Testaments, the central message of the Scripture is the account of how God was in the world preparing it to receive His Son and then what His Son did when He was here. It also tells how the church received this glorious message of salvation, and how it grew and spread throughout the known world. Martin Luther, a 16th century priest once compared the Bible to the swaddling clothes the baby Jesus was wrapped in. Thus the Bible is Christ-centered.

Our Lord Jesus said, *"If you remain in my Word, truly you are my disciples"* (John 8:31). The divine authority and reliability of the Bible does not rest on the persons God used to write the Bible, nor on the endorsement of the Bible by the church, but rests entirely on the fact that it is the Word of the Lord. How do we know this? This confession of the Bible's complete authority is part of the certainty of the faith God gives to us as a gift.

Real human beings were given real words from God to write down. As our Lord Jesus Christ was both true God and true man, so the Bible is truly the Word of God and also the writing of human beings. Even as our Lord Jesus took on human flesh free from sin and error, so

God used human beings to provide a written revelation of Himself that is free from error. Thus, we believe that the Bible is both incapable of error (infallible) and free from error (inerrant).

The Bible has a very important distinction one needs to keep in mind in order to understand the Bible correctly: the difference between Law and Gospel. The Bible reveals God's perfect holiness and righteousness, and His expectation of perfection. His Law, summarized best in the Ten Commandments, reveals our sinful rebellion and our inability to save ourselves (Deuteronomy 5:6-21). The Gospel is the joyful news that our Lord Jesus Christ has given us complete forgiveness from our sins through His life, death and resurrection for us. The proper distinction between Law and Gospel is the key to understanding the Bible correctly.

The most important message of the Bible is not the Law of God. The Bible is not merely a collection of principles for daily living. The Bible is not a textbook that answers every possible question we may have. Nor for that matter is the Bible a book that predicts every last detail about the future. The central and most important teaching in the Bible is the Gospel, the good news of God's gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. The Gospel is the message that predominates throughout the Bible, from Old Testament to New Testament. Thus the Bible is Gospel-centered.

We know that the Bible was not given merely for the sake of itself. We are not saved because we own a Bible. We are saved by our Lord Jesus Christ, who is revealed in the Bible. We believe the Bible because it is the Lord's Word. We believe in Him, thus we believe His Word to be true. We receive what He has given. He has given us the Scriptures. Thus, the Bible is the foundation and touchstone for everything that the church believes, teaches, confesses and practices. Why? Because the Bible is the inspired, Christ-centered and Gospel-centered Word of the Lord.

How Do We Use the Bible?

The Bible is foundational for the church's ministry. The Bible was never intended to stand alone or apart from the community of faith we call the Christian church. It is sad when some people think that, if they just read the Bible, they can stay away from church. We receive our Lord's gifts with joy and do not say, "We want this, but not that." It would be misleading if our high respect for the Scriptures was used to drive a wedge between the Bible and the church. The church is the gathering of God's people around the Lord's Word and Sacraments. The Scriptures are the sure and certain revelation of God's Word and thus are to be read, studied and meditated on by Christians at church and at home.

We Lutherans realize that Scripture must be interpreted according to the central truth of the Bible, the

Gospel, not picked apart and made to teach things that actually conflict with the Gospel. Therefore, we pay close attention to the grammar and words of the Bible, seeking out the intended meaning, which is the plain sense of the text. We recognize that God the Holy Spirit works through the Scriptures to create and sustain the church as it comes together around the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments.

Whenever the Word of God is preached, taught, studied, read, learned or meditated on, the Holy Spirit is actively turning people from their sin and drawing them to Christ for their salvation. Thus, we will want to be in the Word daily. At home we read and meditate on the Word through our private and family devotions. In worship, our songs and order of service are anchored in the Word of God. Our pastors preach to us on the basis of the Scripture lessons appointed for each Sunday in the church year. Our gatherings lead people of all ages into a deeper knowledge of the Word of God, where the Scriptures are studied in a variety of ways so they can inform and enlighten us and help us understand how we live out our lives as God's people.

What a blessed gift the Holy Scriptures are to us and to all people! Everything God wants us to know about Himself is contained in His Word. Through the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit reveals the truth about our sinful condition and the joyful news of God's saving work for us through His Son, Jesus Christ. Truly, *"God's Word is a lamp to our feet and a light for our path"* (Ps. 119:105). For that reason we pray, "Lord, keep us steadfast in your Word."

— Dr. A.L. Barry
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