

Today we begin our second sermon series for the summer. We’re calling it “Reconsidered” – and each week, the preacher will be reflecting about how we have come to more deeply understand and appreciate a particular aspect of our faith.

Today we’re going to talk about the Bible. Specifically, about the authority of the Bible relative to the other thing in our world that claim to have authority.

Before we read our Scripture that will help us access this reflection, please go to God with me in prayer:

You spoke creation into existence with a word; when the time was right, you revealed yourself in the Word we know as Jesus; you gift us with your word that is reflected in the books we call the Bible...and so, now, O God – by your Spirit – we pray that you would open us to listen...and, more than listen...trust...and allow that word to shape us...so that we might be instruments of your grace and truth. We ask it in Jesus’s name. Amen.

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I am reading from various verses from the very lengthy 119th Psalm. Listen with me for a word from God...

¹ Happy are those whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law of the Lord.

² Happy are those who keep his decrees,
who seek him with their whole heart,

³ who also do no wrong,
but walk in his ways.

³³ Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes,
and I will observe it to the end.

³⁴ Give me understanding, that I may keep your law
and observe it with my whole heart.

³⁵ Lead me in the path of your commandments,
for I delight in it.

³⁶ Turn my heart to your decrees,
and not to selfish gain.

³⁷ Turn my eyes from looking at vanities;
give me life in your ways.

⁵⁷ The Lord is my portion;
I promise to keep your words.

⁵⁸ I implore your favor with all my heart;
be gracious to me according to your promise.

⁵⁹ When I think of your ways,
I turn my feet to your decrees;

⁶⁰ I hurry and do not delay
to keep your commandments.

¹⁰⁵ Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path.

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There are lots of ways to preach a sermon. Sometimes pastors fall into the trap of wanting their sermons to prove how well-read and intelligent we are (ask me how I know...). With a sermon titled “The Authority of Scripture” you might think it’s a set up for a chance to show off the preacher’s smarts. Rather, what I want to do is get a little more personal. I want to share the ways I have come to understand and appreciate the place of Scripture in my own life and work.

I went to seminary – which is graduate school for pastors – when I was 23 years old. Here’s a confession: when I started in seminary I didn’t know a whole lot about the Bible. I remember feeling guilty about that – like I was living the nightmare we’ve probably all had on occasion...where you show up for a math test and realize that you never did any of the homework or studied. I mean, how can someone who is going to be a pastor know so little about the book that is the cornerstone to what happens in the life of the church?

One of the tests every Presbyterian pastor has to take in seminary is called the Bible Content Exam. It’s 100 questions that tests a student’s knowledge of some of the nitty gritty parts of the Bible. I took the test after my first of three years in seminary and scored a 68. You had to get a 70 to pass. Yes...on his first attempt, your Senior Pastor failed his Bible Content Exam.

But going to seminary did what it was supposed to. It was like Bible Boot Camp. I began to build knowledge of what was in the Bible, and what was going on in the life of God’s people when the books were written, and how important it was to remember that the context in which the stories were written and heard matters to how we interpret what the Bible means. Yes – I did eventually pass the Bible Content Exam (on my second attempt).

In seminary, beyond learning what was in the Bible, I also learned what the Bible itself was intended to be.

One thing that the Bible is supposed to be is accessible. That’s one reason there is a Bible in front of you in your pew this morning. And why that Bible is in English (and not in Latin). More than 500 years removed from the Protestant Reformation, these are things we take for granted, but for Presbyterians, it was historically really important that the Bible be accessed by the people – not just mediated through a priest or the clergy who hold all the cards to what the Bible might mean.

Another thing the Bible is supposed to be is dynamic. It’s not a history book to be kept under lock and key that holds the mysteries of a bygone era. Scripture is intended to live – and to inform our living. I’m sure you’ve heard this from our pulpit or another, but John Calvin famously called the Bible “the spectacles through which we view the world.” One of the gifts of Scripture is that – by the power of Holy Spirit – the Bible helps us make sense out of the days in which we live. It has the power to inform and guide our life – and shape our approach to the future.

Relative to today’s sermon, another thing the Bible is...or, has, actually – is authority. The Bible isn’t just one book among many that sheds light on the nature of life, the will of God, and gives us guidance for how to faithfully navigate our days. There are lots of books, lots of sources, lots of philosophies and ideas that might help with those very things – and that’s great...that can be interesting. But the Bible is different. It is the most important voice in the room because we believe it reveals God’s voice – God’s intention – God’s hopes – God’s heart.

Does that mean the Bible is always simple to understand? No.

Does it mean it is always easy to accept the Bible’s authority – especially when we find it sometimes runs counter to what other voices encourage us to believe and do? No.

Does it mean the Bible can be trusted as a lamp to our feet and a light unto our path? Yes.

By the time I finished seminary – besides knowing a whole lot more about what was in the Bible – these are the things I learned about the Bible.

And then, all of a sudden, I became a pastor and things moved from theory to practice.

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When it became my job to stand in the pulpit, or teach in a classroom, or sit by the bedside, or show up in the wake of a diagnosis or a tragedy – the first lesson I learned about the Bible’s authority is that that authority didn’t depend on me.

There’s a reason that pastors sometimes develop larger than life egos. It’s because we are often the ones to speak God’s word in Scripture aloud and into situations where that word is needed. What happens when you

do that is that people respond. When you are a pastor, it is easy to think that people are responding to you. They're not. They are responding to the way the word of God resonates with the yearning of their hearts and brings to comfort to the

Then they send you loose into the church and you are supposed to be the authority on the authority of Scripture.

Began to see how Scripture HAD authority – preaching, words of comfort, challenge, Bible studies, children, youth

Began to connect the narratives I learned about life, struggle, family, brokenness – with the narratives I had come to know in Scripture. See the benefit of the Bible being a lamp to the pathway of our lives.

Found Scripture to be a lifeline when there were no other words to say (tragedy – pain)

Authority of Scripture isn't an intellectual idea.
It is a practical and emotional reality.

And here is what else I know:

People use the Bible to fight with one another

And to exclude and intimidate

People are insecure because they don't know much about the Bible – which makes believing that the Bible has authority difficult

People use the Bible to validate their agendas and ideologies – the Bible doesn't endorse a party or a nation.

You may have made the Bible into an idol if it turns out it hates the same people you do.

The inverse is also true: you may have made the Bible into an idol if it affirms all the same things you do.

That is the check to whether the Bible has authority or not.

The irony is that letting the Bible have authority past the place you feel in control is the definition of freedom.