

The Nature of Things

Part 2 – The Nature of God’s Word

II Timothy 3:10-17

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ September 25, 2016 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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¹⁰ Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, ¹¹ my persecutions, and my suffering the things that happened to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. What persecutions I endured! Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. ¹² Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. ¹³ But wicked people and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving others and being deceived. ¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ 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. (II Timothy 3:10-17, NRSV)

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The letter of II Timothy is a very personal letter written by a wise, seasoned leader in the early church named Paul to his young apprentice, Timothy, at a time when Timothy was responsible for overseeing a group of churches. Accordingly, it is a letter full of guidance on how to navigate through the real challenges of life and leadership in the Christian faith.

In the section that we just read, Paul reminds Timothy that he has given him an up-close model of this life. If Timothy looks at Paul, his teaching, his conduct, his direction, his faith, his love, his perseverance, even his sufferings, he will not see in Paul a perfect example but a living example of what it looks like to follow Jesus. Timothy will need this example because, as Paul also points out, there are all sorts of “wicked people and imposters” who are out to deceive as many people as they can, even twisting the Gospel message for their own selfish purposes. In other words, Timothy has been shown what is right but others will try to convince him otherwise.

It’s like the little kid who eats his lunch at school every day and always makes sure he follows his mom’s example and eats his sandwich and fruit before he eats the cookies she also packed in his lunchbox. But then the other kids at the table start to press him, “Hey, what do you do that for? Why don’t you eat your cookies first, like the rest of us?” And the kid says, “But my mom showed me that it’s better for me if I eat the healthy things first.” His friends don’t buy it, and day after day they nag him, “Come on. Don’t listen to your mom. What does *she* know anyway?” Before long, the kid starts to wonder to himself, “You know, why should I listen to mom? What kind of cookie expert does she think she is anyway?” Seems like a fair question. Most of us, at one time or another, have questioned the cookie knowledge of our mothers. I still do.

You see, the counsel Paul gives to Timothy is just as valuable today as it was back then, because we still live in a world that is constantly challenging, even mocking, the truths put forward by the Christian faith, and often doing so in rather convincing fashion. In the face of such challenges to our faith, how can we make sure we hold on to what is true? The answer Paul gives to Timothy is also meant for us: **“But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.”**

The truth about God, ourselves, life, salvation, and so much more has been reliably revealed to us through the “sacred writings” known to us as the Old and New Testaments of the Bible.¹ Their message, Paul affirms, can be thoroughly

¹ By the way, Paul was referring here to the Old Testament scriptures, which Timothy would have been raised on. The New Testament didn’t yet exist. Don’t miss the implication. Paul is saying that the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is evident *even in the Old Testament!*

trusted even when not thoroughly understood. God's Word is the North Star in the sky. We can always count on it to show us the right way.

In fact, Paul goes on to say this famous phrase: **“All scripture is inspired by God...”** The word for inspired here is the Greek word ‘theopneustos’, a word which some scholars think Paul actually coined himself for this purpose, literally means ‘God-breathed.’ In some mysterious way, all scripture is God-breathed, from the mouth of God, God's Word. In other words, even though the words of scripture were written down by real and specific men at real and specific points in history, they were ultimately inspired by God himself.

But what does that mean? Well, some people think it means this: “The Bible said it. I believe it. That settles it.” It's God's Word. No question. End of story. Black and white. And yet, while it's a slogan that fits really well on a bumper sticker, can it really be that easy? No, it's not. In fact, I want to suggest to you that this sort of literalism is not only unhelpful but even potentially dangerous to our faith. As one Christian leader recently put it, this sort of simple literalism strives to suppress ambiguity, is threatened by uncertainty, insists on one reading for all time, resists contextual exploration, and appears to suggest that God himself speaks King James' English!²

Any one of you who has ever honestly wrestled with the complex and mysterious texts of the Old and New Testaments knows exactly what she means. We can believe the Bible is indeed God's Word but that doesn't mean that when we read it all God's intentions necessarily become crystal clear and easy to conform our lives to. Far from it! The scriptures, though clear at points, are also full of much ambiguity. It is dangerously easy to pluck one verse out of the text and make it say something it was never meant to say in its larger context. Sometimes even there are apparent contradictions, times where one part of the Bible seems to say the very opposite of what is said in another part. And frankly, most of us can point to at least a few passages of scripture we wish had been left out in the first place. Right?

So what does it mean when we hear that the Bible is God-breathed? What is the true nature of God's Word and how are we to relate to it in life and faith so that it can be the guide to us it was meant to be?

Well, when we speak about the Bible as being inspired we are suggesting that, in some way, it has authority outside itself. When we are inspired it means that something outside of us – could be a song or poem, a sunset, a political speech, the life of another well lived – something has led us to another place or given us a vision of another place, a better place. Now, the actual words of the Bible were, in fact, written down by men. The book didn't just parachute down from heaven. But the words which emerged when these men put pen to paper came from beyond themselves and point beyond themselves.

The Church believes they came from God, the Creator of all there is, the highest authority of all. For this reason, we don't worship the Bible itself, or even follow the Bible in the strict sense of the word. We worship and follow God who, for his own reasons and purposes, chooses to communicate with us through the writings of the scriptures. This means that the Bible only has inspired authority because it is through this vessel which God, the one who does have authority, speaks.

This is why the Bible speaks of itself as ‘living’. Hebrews 4:12 proclaims, **“The word of God is alive and active.”** The words of scripture are not dead words on a page, set in stone for all time. Now, if I write a book that's what happens. I put down my thoughts at one point in time and, unless I come back and do a revision, their intent does not change. I don't continue to speak through them in different ways down through the years. This is not the same with God, however, and many of you know just what I'm talking about. You can read a passage of scripture at one point and sense that God is speaking to you a very personal and specific message through that text, and then a year later you come back and reflect on the very same passage and God, who is alive and active in and through the Bible, speaks to you a totally different personal and specific message because you are at different point in life and need to hear a different message. This happen to anybody here besides me?

We must be careful here, however. This does not mean that any and every interpretation people derive from the scriptures are equally true and faithful to the message and intentions of the God behind the scriptures. I'm certain that each of us at times, and certainly whole cultures and nations down through history, have twisted the words of scripture

² Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, “Let Us Proclaim the Mystery of Faith”, *Weavings*, issue unknown.

for selfish purposes. So how can we know when we are truly hearing God through the Bible and when we are hearing some imposter message? Again, it's just not always as easy as "The Bible said it. I believe it. That settles it."

Let me suggest that one way of understanding how and why the Bible is authoritative is to examine what the Bible itself actually is. Not surprisingly, this is a difficult question to answer definitively for, in some ways, the Bible is many things. It contains law, and prophesy, and history, and metaphor, and letters, and eye-witness accounts, and wisdom literature, and more. In the end, however, I would suggest to you that the Bible, as a whole, is not any of these parts or even just a sum of these parts. Mostly, the Bible is story. Not the fairy tale sort of story, mind you, the sort of story we find amusing but don't believe ever actually happened. Lots of stories, after all, are true stories, accounts of things which took place, are taking place, or will some day take place. In fact, in one way or another, all these other parts of the Bible – law, prophesy, metaphor, and so on – are best understood in the context of the larger story of scripture.

When we come to see that the Bible is ultimately story, this helps us begin to understand how the Bible is full of authority. There are three ways this happens.

First, unlike most other sacred writings, the Bible itself emerges *from within* a story.

Do you know how the Book of Mormon came to be? Joseph Smith claims that one day an angel led him into the forest near his home in upstate New York to show him a sacred, hidden text which had been inscribed on gold plates, which he took home and translated using a special seer stone so that the world could receive this new revelation from God. You might say, then, that the inspiration of the Book of Mormon, like many other sacred writings of its kind, came from *outside the world*, neatly prepackaged and wholly complete.

The inspiration for other sacred writings comes from *within the world*. Buddhists, for example, claim that Buddha, after one long night engaged in an inner spiritual battle, arose in the morning having had a great awakening from within. Suddenly, the truth about life was clear to him and he wrote down what he had learned and those writings became the sacred texts for Buddhists ever since. God, however, wasn't involved at all in that inspiration. In fact, Buddhists don't believe in any absolute god whatsoever. Their writings, therefore, originated from *within the world*, specifically from within Buddha himself.

In contrast, the Bible claims neither to have been inspired completely from within or completely from without. Instead, the Bible is unique among sacred writings because it was mysteriously inspired by God from the *outside through the inside*. As you may know, in fact, the Bible was written over a period of 1,400 years. It's 66 books were written by at least 40 different authors from all different walks of life – kings and peasants, philosophers and poets, fisherman, doctors, businessmen, even prisoners. Its writings emerged from three different continents in everyday places like dungeons, palaces, highways, and mountaintops.³

For some reason, God didn't choose to speak to us exclusively through the private revelation of one select individual but rather through many ordinary people in real-life circumstances who over time and out of their own context wrote down what they and others saw and heard. If I go into a cave and emerge three days later claiming to have received divine revelation which then should be heeded by all, you have to take my word for it or not take my word for it. However, if dozens of people over the course of centuries record in scripture events that they claim actually happened in the public eye and could, thus, be easily disputed by those who themselves were there, then there exists an inherent authority in the story. It's a messy way for God to do things, of course, but not surprising as we come to realize that God, for some reason, has a tendency to accomplish his will and communicate his message *through* his people, from the outside *through* the inside.

Second, we come to understand the Bible's authority as we recognize that it doesn't only emerge from story but, itself, *proclaims a story* which ultimately is shown to be *the true story*.⁴

³ I Peter 1:21 puts it this way: "For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." NIV

⁴ This second point here is heavily informed by a most excellent article by N.T. Wright entitled "How Can the Bible be Authoritative?" (The Laing Lecture 1989, and the Griffith Thomas Lecture 1989. Originally published in *Vox Evangelica*, 1991, 21, 7–32.). I highly encourage a complete reading at <http://individual.utoronto.ca/stephentu/resources/articles/ntw02.pdf>

What is that story? Put simply, the story the Bible proclaims, from Genesis to Revelation, is the story of God judging but then remaking the world. Motivated by an unconditional love for creation, and especially humanity as the crown jewel of creation, God came into the world through Christ, and then by the Holy Spirit, to fulfill his eternal plan by judging and condemning all evil and sin and then setting creation free to be fully creation, and people free to be fully human.

In a nutshell, that is the story of salvation proclaimed by the Bible, which means at least this much. If we are going to pass on that story and do so *without losing its authority*, we must make sure that as we retell the story our retelling always remains faithful to the original story. This means that whenever the Bible is used to control people, or to crush people, or to keep people in little boxes, or used by people for their own selfish ends, then we have deviated from the original story and our message, therefore, has been drained of all authority.

This leads us to the third way the Bible as story helps us understand its authority. Not only does the Bible emerge from story, and proclaim a story, but it ultimately *invites us into that story*.

Writer and scholar N.T. Wright puts this better than I ever could. He writes:

[The Bible] is, after all, a love story, albeit with a difference. And the authority of the Bible is the authority of a love story in which we are invited to take part. It is, in that sense, more like the “authority” of a dance in which we are invited to join; or of a novel in which, though the scene is set, the plot well developed, and the ending planned and in sight, there is still some way to go, and we are invited to become living, participating, intelligent, and decision-making characters within the story as it moves towards its destination.⁵

In some ways, this is what Paul is getting at when he tells Timothy that these God-breathed scriptures are useful for **“for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”** Some stories are meant to simply inform us, or even just amuse or entertain us. This story, however, because it is still unfolding, is meant to transform us so that we can participate fully in it. And the story itself, or rather the Divine Author behind the story, has the power to use the story to reveal the truth to our minds, and expose the way we rebel against his ways, and restore us to an upright position in life, and then empower us to live God’s way so that we can become his partners in the restoration of all creation!

In all this we begin to see why the God-breathed story of the Old and New Testaments is full of authority. The scriptures emerge from story, true story. They proclaim that same true story. And then they even have the power to weave us into that story as it moves towards its promised and grand finale. For these reasons we must always approach scripture with the highest possible regard, always remembering that because it is God-breathed in these ways we must always come at it from below rather than from above. This needs to be said because, frankly, too many people these days, perhaps even some of us, are in the habit of coming at scripture from above.

Here’s what I mean by that. Lots of people these days approach the Bible like they would a panel of self-proclaimed authorities. You listen to what each one has to say but then you accept only the parts that you agree with and reject the rest. In that scenario, who is the real authority? You are. You have your mind made up as to what is true and what is not true and so the only panelists you classify as authoritative are the ones who assert things that align with the way you already see things.

Let’s be honest. We’ve all done this to some extent with the Bible. You are reading through scripture and you come around a corner and come to something you don’t agree with. Maybe you think this part of scripture was written so long ago it doesn’t apply, or by people who know far less than we now know, or simply by a person who, when they wrote this particular part, failed to speak for God. And so automatically you reject that part of the Bible. But when we do so we have to at least be honest enough to admit that what we are doing is approaching the Bible from above, from the presupposition that the Bible will be judged by our truth instead of letting the Bible judge us by its truth. And the problem, of course, is that if *all scripture* is God-breathed, as Paul states that it is, then none of it can ever be so easily dismissed.

⁵ N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian* (San Francisco: Harper Publishers, c. 2006), p. 186.

The person, however, who comes at scripture from below is the person that comes around that same corner and encounters something in the Bible that, for whatever reason, is hard to swallow, but whose reflex reaction is to wonder what wrong turn I may have made along the way that led me here. In other words, when we come to have a high regard for all the Bible as full of God's authority, then we are willing to live in the tension that comes when we can't resolve parts of the Bible which are problematic. In some instances, in fact, we may have to live with the tension for years, sometimes our whole lives.

Truth is, we shouldn't be surprised when there are points at which the scriptures annoy us, or challenge our will, or contradict our beliefs, or even offend our sensibilities. After all, if the scriptures are truly God-breathed, then it is a living person speaking to us through them, specifically the living God of Creation, and so in that relationship, like in all relationships, there are going to be points where we can expect to get bent out of shape. As writer Tim Keller puts it, "Only if your God can say things that outrage you and make you struggle (as in a real friendship or marriage!) will you know that you have gotten hold of a real God and not a figment of your imagination."⁶

In all this, of course, great humility is needed, as it is always needed in the face of great mystery. For in the end, whatever we say about the Bible, I hope we can at least agree that it is the most mysterious, challenging, and complex book in the world. It really does not always offer us absolute propositional certainty and clarity. It does give us answers, of course, often eternal and profound answers, but it also sometimes brings up as many questions as does answers.

In Scripture, God is both revealed and concealed, both present and hidden. The narrative of scripture can, at times, leave serious gaps. As we engage it cross-culturally thousands of years later, there are often ancient laws, and codes, and customs that are difficult to imagine ever made sense, much less so in our day and age. Sometimes the biblical writers are writing history and eye-witness accounts and sometimes they are writing poetry and allegory and sometimes it's not entirely clear when they shift from one to the other. Sometimes different authors describe the same event in different or seemingly contradictory ways. And on top of it all, much of the Bible is written in Hebrew, a language which might possibly be the most ambiguous language in all of human history.⁷

Still, at the end of the day the Bible is God-breathed and thus, filled, even overflowing, with the authority of God. It was inspired from the outside through the lives of real people in real circumstances thousands of years ago. Its texts have since been carefully and prayerfully arranged and guarded by our forbearers in the church so that it might be passed down to us just as it was first written down.

Now preachers like me are called by the church to set aside time many of us don't have to humbly study the scriptures so that we might proclaim their message boldly. But preachers like me never have the last word on the Bible. Not at all. In this congregation Jim, Brett and I may get the first word, but ultimately the scriptures are interpreted here in community as together we wrestle, guided by the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit, to understand how God is breathing his message to us in our day and our place.

All along we must remain mindful that any proclamation or action that comes to us out of God's Word is only authoritative in so much as it aligns itself to the mission of the true and resurrected Word in this world which is, again, to judge and remake this world for his glory. We do not worship the Bible, but the One who continues to speak faithfully to us through it. When it's message is not clearly understood or easy to accept, we must be willing to remain in the tension, always coming to God's Word from below rather than from above, remembering that there is far more about God, ourselves and this life that we may not yet understand than that which we already do.

All glory to God, that by his grace he would give us such a gift for, as Jesus reminded us, none of us live by bread alone, but by every Word that comes from the very mouth of God.

Amen.

⁶ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 114.

⁷ The ideas and words in this paragraph are inspired by and even, at points, borrowed from Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, "Let Us Proclaim the Mystery of Faith".



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

- Which one of these words or phrases do you think best describes the Bible? Why?
Holy Without error Inspired Instruction manual Timeless Of human origin
- Read II Timothy 3:10-17. What stands out to you here from Paul's words to Timothy?
- When Paul claims that all scripture is '*God-breathed*', what do you think he means by this?
- Do you believe that *all* scripture is inspired by God? If not, how do you tell which parts of scripture are inspired and which are not?
- What do you think about the claim that ultimately the Bible is story?
- Does the Bible have authority in your life? If so, how so? If not, why not?
- What do you do when you come to parts of the Bible that you have a hard time believing actually reflect God's will and purposes?
- Theologian N.T. Wright asserts, "The Bible is, after all, a love story, albeit with a difference. And the authority of the Bible is the authority of a love story in which we are invited to take part." How has this been true in your own life?



Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

When we say that the Bible is God's Word, what do you think that means? How do you think God wrote the Bible?