

August 13

The Bible

2 Timothy 3:16-17

¹⁶ All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the person of God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

Please pray with me:

God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking.

Have you ever tried to tell the story of Noah's Ark to young children? With wide eyes, they imagine this giant boat being built on dry land. Then come the animals. Who doesn't love animals? Two of every living creature are loaded into the ark. "What about the lions, don't they eat other animals?" one will surely ask. And how did all those creatures fit in one boat? It must have been a very big boat! And smelly with all those animals! Then Noah closes the door, and it starts to rain and rain and rain. For forty days and night it rains until all the earth is covered with water.

"But what about all the other animals – the ones who can't swim?" Ummm "What about all the other people?" Ummm

But then God dries out the land and puts a rainbow in the sky as a promise. So, every time you see a rainbow you can remember the promise. "What's the promise?" Ummm The promise is that God will never again destroy the earth with a flood. Yay God!

Or how about the story of the battle of Jericho? Joshua leads his troops in a circle around the city walls of Jericho for seven days. On the seventh day they circle seven times, and then they blow the trumpets and shout. The wall around Jericho collapses. Then do you know what happens. Joshua 6:21 says "Without mercy, they wiped out everything in the city as something reserved for God—man and woman, young and old, cattle, sheep, and donkeys." (CEB)

If you want a story that will really mess you up, read Judges 19. It's about a man and his wives who receives the hospitality of another man. To avoid being assaulted by the men in the city, this visitor throws his secondary wife outside to be assaulted all night by the men of the city and when he gets her home, he chops her into twelve pieces and sends the pieces throughout the land to make some kind of statement.

Stories like these make me think the Bible should come with a warning label – like cigarettes. Warning: May cause you to seriously doubt your faith! Or how about this one: Warning: May contain nuts.

Rachel Held Evans was a popular, young, author who died tragically a few years ago. She wrote not as a scholar, though she was one, but as a friend. Born and raised in a conservative

Christian home, she grew up in Dayton, Tennessee, where the famous Scopes trial was held. She grew up with the Bible and went to a conservative Christian college. Then 911 happened and something shifted. She started to ask the hard and uncomfortable questions about the Bible. And she was given answers and reasons that suggested she should be fine with things like genocide and chopping a woman up to make a statement. She was told to check her heart and her emotions and her questions at the door and accept the unacceptable. And she began to rethink her understanding of scripture. Her book "Inspired" is a gift for those who struggle to make sense of the Bible.

Evans said, "I have come to regard with some suspicion those who claim that the Bible never troubles them. I can only assume this means they haven't actually read it."

Frequently, I use the word "wrestle" to describe my engagement with the Bible. There is a story in the Book of Genesis in which Jacob is returning to his homeland and preparing to encounter the brother he deceived out of his birthright. He sends his entourage on ahead and he remains alone. All night long, Jacob wrestles with a mysterious "man" and even though the man dislocates Jacob's hip, Jacob refuses to let the man go until he receives a blessing. The man says, "Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but [Israel](#), for you have striven with [God](#) and with men, and have prevailed." And then he blesses Jacob. And Jacob calls that place [Peniel](#), saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." (Gen 32:22-32)

Jacob wrestled all night with God, and he got his blessing, but forever limped. There are blessings to be found in the Bible when we are willing to wrestle with it and be altered by it.

My father-in-law, who is unabashed to share his opinions, thinks the Bible is total BS. He doesn't have to read any further than Cain and Abel. Allegedly they are the only two kids of Adam and Eve – the only two kids on the planet – but suddenly there is a city where they can go find wives to marry. That's all my father-in-law needs to say the whole book is BS. He doesn't seem to recognize that his rejection is based on a faulty understanding of scripture.

I think that is true for many people. They dismiss the Bible because they have preconceived, and often misguided, ideas about what the Bible is and how it is to be understood.

So I want to take a few minutes today to address some of ideas people have about the Bible by talking about what the Bible is NOT.

What the Bible is not...

The Bible is not a textbook or history book. When I lived in Crested Butte, Colorado, there was a man named Bob Stuplich that participated in numerous expeditions searching for the ruins of Noah's Ark on Mt. Ararat, in Turkey. He was a very smart man and an excellent mountain climber, and he gave convincing talks about proving that the story of the ark happened just like it says in the Bible. In 20+ years of searching, they never found it. I can also remember him telling stories about the discovery of ancient chariot wheels in the Red Sea.

Does it matter if there was an actual ark, or real chariots chasing Moses through a parted sea? The Biblical writers were not recording history, they were telling stories. More important than asking “Did these things really happen,” are the questions, “Why these stories?” and “What do they mean?” There is no reason to suspend reason and science to engage them.

The Bible is not divine dictation. The Bible is a human product, reflecting how early Israelites and Christians saw things. The verse from Timothy says all scripture is inspired – which means God-breathed which is much different from God saying, “Hey, write this down.” This verse was also written before there was a New Testament.

The Biblical authors didn’t know they were writing scripture. They were addressing their communities, using the resources they had, using the stories they knew, to speak into their specific context. They used metaphor and literary devices to write their sermons. Paul was writing letters to specific congregations. To wrestle with scripture is to try to figure out what these passages meant to the people for whom they were written. Once that is discerned, if it can be, then we can find the message that preaches to us.

A great example is the Book of Revelation. Every generation has had its share of preachers making future predictions from Revelation. Does anyone ever pause to ask – what did this book mean to the people for whom it was written?

The Bible is not consistent. The crazy-making and beautiful thing about scripture is that it is a collection of different voices and genres. We don’t have to do spiritual gymnastics to reconcile everything – nor do we have to check our brains to explain the inconsistencies or troubling parts. Like our children in Worship and Wonder, we can ask questions, we can wonder, we can discuss without the need to arrive at one truth, one teaching, or one answer.

The Bible is not a conversation ender. People who don’t want to wrestle with scripture might say something like, “God said it, I believe it, that settles it.” The Bible gets used to end conversations and defend positions. It gets weaponized.

Rachel Held Evans shared in an interview that when she started to challenge the Bible and really wrestle with it – it became a slippery slope. Suddenly, everything she had been taught with such certitude was subject to debate. The person interviewing her said it may have been a slippery slope, but it is a hill no one should be on in the first place. People who are taught to read scripture literally, and that it is without error, and factually true, are on a hill of slippery slopes. To question anything is to invalidate everything. It’s either all true or all BS. We don’t have to be on that hill.

The Bible wasn’t written to settle disputes and give right answers – it was written to begin conversation and create community.

I saw this quote by author Steve Mattson. He writes, “Christians often declare, “This is what the Bible clearly says!” instead of, “This is my interpretation of what the Bible says.” If we're

being honest, we should probably be saying, "This is my fallible interpretation—influenced by my religious upbringing, biases, unique experiences, culture, personal worldview, and limited knowledge—of what I think the Bible might be saying." <end quote>

The more voices we bring to the conversation, the richer our understanding becomes. When we read the Bible, it is important to hear the voices of those from marginalized groups, from those who have differing experiences, from different cultures, to enrich our understanding and to avoid the arrogance that so often accompanies Biblical interpretation.

Finally, **All parts of the Bible are not equally authoritative.** As Christians we read scripture using Jesus as our norm. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is the Word. As Christians, we believe Jesus is the decisive word of God. And as we read scripture, we hold the teachings of Jesus as more authoritative than other parts of the Bible. When there is a conflict, Jesus, what he taught and how he modeled his life, is more authoritative than other parts of the Bible.

So why bother? Why bother to wrestle with this sometimes confounding book? Here are my reasons. For one, it gives me Jesus and Jesus is for me a way of life that gives my life meaning and purpose that serves a greater good. Two, it invites conversation and community around the redemptive work of God; conversation and community that inspires me to be compassionate, generous, forgiving, and kind. Three, it challenges me and convicts me to be mindful of others, especially those who are oppressed and marginalized. Four, it is rich with wisdom. Five, it is a source of hope and comfort and reminds me that God is bigger – bigger than my problems, bigger than my perceptions, bigger than this life.

When we refuse to let it go – when we keep wrestling with it – the blessings come, and we are changed.

Rachel Held Evans said this, "The most instructive question to bring to the Biblical text is not "what does it say?" but "what am I looking for?" If you are looking for an out-dated, irrelevant ancient text, you will find it. If you are looking for truth, you will find it. If you want to do violence in this world, you will always find the weapons. If you want to heal, you will always find the balm."

I would add to her quote, when you are looking for the blessings, you will find them – in abundance. May we be a community that looks for the blessings, not just for ourselves, but for all.

Amen.