

The Invisibles: Bible Characters Christians Never Discuss, But Should

One of the most popular articles in the history of REO is our [“Top Ten Favorite Bible Characters”](#). On that list, you find some of the most amazing humans that ever lived and we are blessed to get to read about them in our Bibles.

But that list was quite predictable, on purpose. The most well known Bible characters are so for a reason. They did incredible things and lived exemplary lives. Today, however, I want to go beyond the obvious and talk about a few Bible characters that deserve accolades but almost never get them. These people also did incredible things but because they weren't as prominent as Moses or Paul, they rarely get taught about in Bible studies or discussed among the great people of the faith.

Today I want to give them their due. Here are a few people in the Bible that rarely get discussed but deserve full sermons dedicated to them.

Bezalel and Oholiab

Listen to what Exodus says about these men:

Then Moses said to the Israelites, “See, the Lord has chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and he has filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills...

Now let me pause here and wonder if a person doesn't know the rest of the chapter, what kind of call would you think Bezalel

had on his life? I mean, he is filled with the Spirit and wisdom and understanding. Is he a priest? A Levite? A prophet?

None of the above. Here is what he and his chosen assistant Oholiab were filled with the Spirit and with wisdom to do...

–to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood and to engage in all kinds of artistic crafts. And he has given both him and Oholiab son of Ahisamak, of the tribe of Dan⁰, the ability to teach others. He has filled them with skill to do all kinds of work as engravers, designers, embroiderers in blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen, and weavers—all of them skilled workers and designers.”

They were filled with the Spirit and wisdom to work with their hands! Christians need to understand and teach the biblical significance of men and women laity who do blue collar jobs (and any non-pastoring jobs). In the Old Testament, they were spiritually qualified by God to the highest level, using phrases we'd use for the most significant spiritual offices. And since the New Testament teaches the priesthood of all believers, I'd say all Christian accountants, janitors, teachers, and electricians are today as well.

We need to teach jobs as ministries. These men help us do that.

Onesiphorus

I owe Tim Campbell the credit for teaching about this man to a chapel full of students at Welch College 20 years ago. Other than a greeting in 2nd Timothy, the extent of what Paul writes about Onesiphorus can be found in two verses in 1 Timothy:

“May the Lord show mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, because he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my

chains. On the contrary, when he was in Rome, he searched hard for me until he found me.”

What a short, but significant tribute! Not everyone gets to be Paul, but to be the person that loves and encourages Paul like this? That’s someone worth teaching Christians about. May we all be the kind of person who refreshes others, who isn’t ashamed of them even when they are rejected by others, and who seeks them out. I long for that kind of testimony.

Asaph and the Sons of Korah

It is important to note that just because a Psalm is “of” someone, it does not mean that the person or group wrote it. It could be dedicated to that person or something similar. Yet I think it is very likely that Asaph and the sons of Korah wrote the psalms that bear their names in our Bibles.

Considering how deeply music speaks to our souls, confirmed by God by inspiring our biggest Bible book to be a hymnbook, we should know who wrote the greatest songs of the faith that Israel praised God with. Between Asaph and the sons of Korah you find many of the Psalms that have inspired some of the great modern Christian worship songs, like Psalm 42 (“As The Deer”) and Psalm 84 (“Better Is One Day In Your Courts”) and even the less well known but profoundly lyrical Psalm 73, which is found by that name in [Indelible Grace Music](#). I give a shout out to Dr. Matthew McAfee for introducing that song to my church years ago. Few Bible passages wrestle with the unfairness of the world and the justice of God as this one does. What a privilege to sing it.

But even more important to me, Asaph and the sons of Korah penned several heart-wrenching lament psalms, like Psalms 44, 80 and 88. Psalm 80 contains the refrain, “O Lord God of hosts, cause your face to shine on us, that we may be saved”

three times, which [Michael W. Smith turned into a modern hymn as well](#). As far as I know, Psalm 88 has not been turned into a popular modern song, but perhaps that is because it is one of the few psalms that doesn't end on an up note but remains in the darkness. For that reason, it may be my favorite psalm of all.

Both Asaph and the sons of Korah played a huge part not only in writing but leading Israel in musical worship (1 Chronicles 15, 2 Chronicles 20). These are men who should be known.

Micaiah

No, not Malachi or Micah. Micaiah, a prophet so unknown that my computer is giving me the red squiggly line under his name right now. He prophesied during the time of King Ahab and what a thankless, demeaning job that must have been. We get a taste of what his life was like in 1 Kings 22 (and its parallel, 2 Chronicles 18) when Ahab calls him in to advise him about going to war with Ramoth Gilead. It is obvious that Micaiah never prophesies anything good for Ahab because the wicked king says so plainly. It appears that this is the case because Micaiah intends only to speak the truth. And this obviously happens over and over and this has to weigh on his psyche.

It's possible we even get a bit of sarcasm here from the noble prophet because at first he tells Ahab to go to war and Ahab knows he's not being serious. But Micaiah then speaks the harsh predictive reality to him and instead of receiving thanks for the warning, he ends up with a smack to the face. A mere four chapters after Elijah calls down fire from Heaven, another similar prophet is taking inglorious shots to the face in a rather mundane existence. For this, he deserves our respect.

Zelophehad's Daughters

Because the cultures of the Bible were so demeaning to women by our modern standards, we very much need to preach stories like these women standing up to Moses on behalf of giving them their father's inheritance. Zelophehad was a righteous man but had no son. So they boldly stood before one of the most significant leaders in the history of the world and asked for justice. And God took their side. There was no doubt about that because he spoke directly in the passage to affirm their position.

Justice gets thrown around so much in American Christian vernacular I hope we don't miss what it really is. It has been and always will be doing right by those who are denied things they deserve. That is the heart of these few verses in Numbers. So here's to Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milkah and Tirzah—women of great character that we should honor.

So, at least for today, that is my list. What are some under-appreciated Bible characters you wish we talked more about?

Five Popular Bible Passages We May Be Misinterpreting (Part 2)

Not long after REO was created, while it was still cooling on the window sill, I wrote an article on [Five Popular Bible Passages We May Be Misinterpreting](#). It created quite a bit of response. In the vein of much of modern Hollywood, I have written this sequel years later.

The point of it, I will repeat from last time, is to challenge how we think about the Bible. I want to push against our preconceived interpretations that perhaps we have never thought much about, the popular ones that do not often get challenged.

I give two disclaimers, though: First, I am not saying that I am positive that the alternative interpretations below are correct. Just that, according to some students of Scripture, they may be. And we should think through them in humility and wisdom, aiming to rightly divide the word of truth. Even if it means saying, "I was wrong." Secondly, I am purposely avoiding passages like Philippians 4:13, Jeremiah 29:11 and the "Where two or three are gathered" verse because they are commonly picked on. These, in my experience, are not. Let's look at them.

Exodus 14:14

Moses answered the people, "The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still."

Traditional Interpretation: When faced with daunting circumstances, we need to be still and let God fight for us.

Alternative Interpretation: God may want us to move instead of crying out to him.

The next verse is absolutely why I believe this:

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on.”

I hasten to add that I have heard wise, biblically sound Christian pastors and teachers cite this verse on social media. So maybe I am overthinking it. But at this point, Exodus 14:14 is not a verse I would use to teach people to be still. Psalm 46:10, yes. Instead, I use this pair of verses and their greater context to teach that there is a time to pray but there is also a time to get moving. Prayer is not a substitute for action.

Matthew 27:46

About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” that is, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”

Traditional Interpretation: God turned his back on Jesus (or abandoned him, or some verb of relational separation) to judge him for the sin of mankind since God cannot look upon sin.

Alternative Interpretation: Jesus, using a rabbinic practice of quoting only the first verse of a Psalm to communicate the entire psalm, is telling the audience that God will save him from this horrific circumstance. As Psalm 22 teaches.

I think “How Deep the Father’s Love For Us” has contributed to the understanding of this verse, as it says, “The Father turned his face away.” But even without the hymn, I have heard the traditional interpretation over and over in my life. I have always assumed it to be true. Yet read the words of Jeffrey Crabtree in the Randall House Commentary on Matthew:

Was Jesus actually abandoned and calling on God from His sense of that? Or was He primarily saying this for the benefit of His human audience? Some interpreters understand Jesus' question to mean that the Father did in some sense forsake His Son as He hung on the cross as the atonement for the sin of the world (Hendriksen 971; Hagner 33B:844). Others understand Jesus to have been implying, "Read the twenty-second Psalm. It tells you what this crucifixion is about. I may look forsaken (Mt. 27:43) but I am not" (Ps. 22:24). This makes Jesus' quote and question mainly rhetorical...

...It seems probable that Jesus was not forsaken (Ps. 22:24) even though it appeared to those on the ground that He was and even though He Himself felt forsaken (Evans, Matthew 514). He had suffered forty days in the wilderness at the beginning of His ministry and endured extreme loneliness in the Garden the previous night in prayer. In like manner, on the cross at the time of His greatest suffering Jesus again felt isolation, only this time the sense of isolation was the most intense of His entire human experience—because He bore the wrath of God for the sins of the entire world.

The interpreter will want to consider the implications of the position he determines to be Scripture's intent. Can the Father and Son really separate in their beings (Jn. 10:30)? Would such a real

[separation agree with Psalm 22:24?](#)[1. Jeffrey Cabtree, *The Randall House Bible Commentary: Matthew*, 466-67]

I find Mr. Crabtree's explanation nuanced and balanced and it causes me to consider it. Yet I add that I am still struggling through this one. And I have not bought the alternative interpretation completely yet. This is not a major doctrinal issue to me but it's still something worth thinking through and wrestling with. Verses like 2 Corinthians 5:21 and Romans 8:3 give me pause in abandoning the traditional interpretation.

John 3:30

"[Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease."

Traditional Interpretation: We must increase Christ with our lives and be humble.

Alternative Interpretation: Christ must increase by the very nature of things no matter what we do or don't do.

The word "must" works one of two ways, illustrated by the two interpretations above. We can say, "If you want to take English classes, you must register." You control that. But we also say, "What goes up, must come down." You don't control that. You cannot do anything to affect it, start it, stop it or alter it. It's something that happens *by the very nature of things*. The latter definition is what I think John means.

There are several reasons I believe this but here are three: First, it fits with how John the Gospel author used the Greek word "must" (δεῖ) earlier in the same chapter when he said, **"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up."** Based on verses like Acts 2:23 and 4:28, we know that the death of Christ was something God determined should happen and that humans could not prevent it or cause it. It is God's—and Jesus's—nature to save, just as

it is gravity's nature to bring objects to the earth.

Secondly, this fits with Jesus in Luke when he said, **"If [my disciples] keep quiet the stones will cry out."** Christ will be worshipped because His nature as God demands it and not because we must do it.

And lastly, the context before John 3:30 leaves the interpretation up in the air, but in the verses after he says, **"The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all."** This speaks to Christ nature as above us, which leads me to believe John is explaining why Christ must increase by the very nature of things more than Christ must increase because we must do it.

All of this matters because it helps me understand how Christ as God is bigger than my worship. He must increase as God in the sense that he must be exalted, praised and magnified. And even if free will beings refuse to do so, there are still billions of created voices doing it around the clock.

John 11:33-35

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. Jesus wept.

Traditional Interpretation: Jesus was saddened by the death of his friend and cried as a result.

Alternative Interpretation: Jesus was angry because of the reaction of the people and was overcome with emotional distress.

I suppose it's possible both are true but at the very least I

think this passage needs to be taught as Jesus was angry as much as sad. "Deeply moved" in the verse above is open to interpretation over a range of stressful emotion but it definitely bends to anger in my opinion. And this can be seen in how some prominent translations render it (NLT, HCSB). The people doubted him (vs. 37) and lack of faith often made Jesus angry (Mark 16:14).

Revelation 3:16

So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth.

Traditional Interpretation: God wants you to be for him or against him, but not on the fence.

Alternative Interpretation: God wants you to be for him and hates lukewarmness.

This doesn't change the main meaning of the passage, but it is possible that when God refers to hot and cold water he means that both hot and cold have a purpose. Cold water is good to drink and hot water is good for cooking, among other uses for both. So God wants us to be useful. Lukewarm water is good for nothing. It's nasty and worth only spitting out.

Let me conclude by saying that when I did the last article, the discussion in the comment section below was very edifying and I actually adapted my opinion of Proverbs 22:6 as a result. So we strongly encourage feedback and interaction, even respectful disagreement.

500 Words or Less Reviews: “Tyndale, The Man Who Gave God An English Voice”

“And the Lyght shyneth in the darkness, but the darkness comprehended it not.” (*John 4:5, William Tyndale New Testament*)

I’m coming up on 40 years of life this Summer and it has me all self-reflective and evaluative. One thing I absolutely need to change is that I need to read more biographies. As someone who has championed fantasy-fiction as reading that captures the imagination, I have woefully underestimated how real flesh and blood human beings with real lives can accomplish the same thing. And in some ways, in a deeper sense, since they are actual history.

Enter this book, written in 2012 by David Teems. It is cleverly written, packed with history down to the small players in Tyndale’s life and absolutely edifies the English-speaking Christian reader with a life worth dissecting.

I confess that Tyndale’s life is fascinating to me on the big story arcs because I am a pastor of a bilingual ministry, an ESL teacher and a subscriber to *Voice of the Martyrs*. Translation is my life’s work, though not nearly to the significance that his was and to the cost that his gave. Persecution and martyrdom are horrific in a human sense, yet biblically we can see how God exalts it. William Tyndale literally gave his life to give people of my native tongue one of the most precious gifts there is, the readable Word of God.

Christian history is indebted to countless people for the Bibles we have today, many of them nameless and faceless, like the Masoretics of the Old Testament and the often maligned scribes and copyists of the New Testament. Tyndale thankfully is a name we can know and celebrate. He wasn't just a translator. He was a noble man, an educated yet humble man, and a great man. He is a hero. All of us who hold a KJV, or NASB, or NIV in our hands should know his name and his story.

Beyond the major and more well-known plot lines of his life, Teems gives other details that are equally as important. Like how much of the KJV was influenced by Tyndale and how many phrases we find in our Bible, and hence our popular culture, that can be traced back to Tyndale. Like "Am I my brother's keeper?". Tyndale used beautiful, easy-to-memorize, poetic English. And we owe our ability to recall many verses so easily to him.

Teems also speaks over several pages to how much Erasmus and Luther affected Tyndale and how much he affected them. These men were not friends, yet God used them all in their own way to greatly affect how we do church and bible study today. It is a testimony to how no one can do anything on their own. Not just without God's grace, but without Christian community. Even from a distance.

I recommend this book to all Christian teenagers and adults. It's not just an inspiring story, but an illuminating one. In 500 years, this story will still matter. Yet let us read it today.

A Path of Truth: How the Doctrine of Biblical Authority Has Come Down to the American Church

The authority of Scripture. It is a subject rightly viewed as a fundamental truth by a large percentage of today's Christian world since its origin. The official doctrine might not have been formed until much later in history, but it is very clear in Scripture that God's Word is the final and supreme authority. Among many other things it tells us that God's Word is true (John 17:17), that it is complete and that we are forbidden to add to it (Proverbs 30:5-6), and that it is more than just a good book with good advice; it is God-breathed and sufficient for teaching, correction, rebuke, and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16). And those are just examples. If I were to list and adequately discuss everything the Bible says on the subject, the end result would be much longer than this article. The ecclesiastical discussion of biblical authority has appeared with several different faces throughout the centuries. It is a discussion that has seen many faces all over the world. There are many. For space reasons, I will just be looking at the line leading up to the American church.

No matter where you go with this the discussion starts in the Mediterranean area. For a long time after the start of Christianity, the exact doctrine wasn't truly set in stone. A more concentrated definition was found to be needed by the third to early fourth centuries to combat the increasing gross misinterpretations and false teachings of God's Word that were infesting the church. In A.D. 325 the First Ecumenical Council of Nicea met and began the practice of condemning heretics who went beyond the accepted teaching of Scripture. In many ways, such meetings were a good thing because they fostered

communication among church leaders and the formation of accepted biblical doctrine. However, these councils, while they met to defend biblical authority, were ironically devaluing it by placing more value on what the human church leadership thought than what the Bible itself thought. The Protestant Reformation would put a stop to the Catholic Church's growing pride and corruption. It put complete authority back in its proper place: The Word of God.

By the 1700s God's written Word was beginning to become subordinate to science and human intelligence. And by the 20th century, fundamental-minded Christians recognized that they desperately needed to band together against the growing modernism to defend the authority of the Scriptures. The battle over biblical authority revealed itself on several important stages inside the fundamentalist movement from 1900 to the present.

The Battle of Biblical Authority in America in the Modern Era

In 1889 Charles Briggs wrote *Whither? A Theological Question* for the *Times* in which he launched a particularly vicious attack against the doctrine of inerrancy. Briggs' well worded but misled criticisms caught on and would give rise to liberal Christianity. This, in turn, led to the birth of neo-orthodoxy with its emphasis on individual connection and interpretation of Scripture. Neo-orthodoxy was actually a negative reaction against liberal theology. It was formed by the German theologian Karl Barth. Neo-orthodoxy held to traditional orthodoxy but was new (neo) in that it was adapted modern thought to the orthodoxy. It also held that the Bible only became the revealed Word of God to individual readers.

The ever-rising popularity of liberal theology and neo-orthodoxy alarmed traditional, conservative Christians. Some leading scholarly Christians took steps to sound the alarm. The most influential was a book series published between 1910 and 1915 called "The Fundamentals." It was so influential that

it played a pivotal role in giving rise to the fundamentalist movement.

Fundamentalists and the Specter of Anti-Intellectualism

There was much genuine sincerity and passion in the fundamentalist camp when it came to defending biblical authority, but unfortunately early on many people in the fundamentalist movement started becoming increasingly anti-intellectual. This de-emphasis on the intellect backfired on them, particularly at a very important time. This was in March 1925 just after the Tennessee legislature had passed the Butler Act, which banned the teaching of evolution in Tennessee schools. Hoping to make their small town more known, the citizens of Dayton asked a volunteer named John Scopes to be willingly arrested and put on trial for supposedly teaching evolution in class.

Although he was not learned in theology or science, a fundamentalist leader named William Jennings Bryan was called to the stand as a defense witness. Clarence Darrow, the lawyer for the evolutionists, succeeded in making a fool of both Bryan and fundamentalists.

But not all early fundamentalists were so anti-intellectual. There were fundamentalist scholars who pushed against this ethic. Probably the leading of these scholars was J. Gresham Machen. Although Machen considered himself a fundamentalist, he harshly disapproved of the fundamentalist movement, mainly because of the anti-intellectualism. His thoughts concerning fundamentalism as a whole as expressed in his famous book, *Christianity & Liberalism*.

Machen also worried that fundamentalists were allowing the liberals to associate with and therefore influence them too much. In this book, Machen gave a logical, biblical defense of fundamentalism and called for a complete separation from liberal theology. At the time, he was teaching at Princeton

Theological Seminary. An important turning point in the seminary toward a more liberal theology came in 1914 when they hired the liberal-minded J. Ross Stevenson as president. This did not sit at all well with Machen. He left and founded Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. At the same time, he started the hyper-fundamentalist mindset.

The Birth of New Evangelicalism

The fundamentalists had a very good founding intention which was to defend the inerrancy and authority of Scripture against encroaching liberalism. Unfortunately, anti-intellectualism wasn't there only big problem. From the 1920s onward there continued to be increasing intolerance coupled with argumentation within denominations and between denominations. Denominations split, and then those groups split, and on and on.

Some fundamentalists got fed up with the fundamentalist movement for what they saw as totally unchristian rigid intolerance. So Harold Ockenga, Carl Henry, and Billy Graham led the charge to begin a complete separation from fundamentalism. In 1942 a number of discontented fundamentalists began the National Association of Evangelicals.

The most influential of these three in instigating this new movement was Graham. Graham said the turning point for him came in 1955 when he came to New York to hold a revival. The fundamentalists there required each Christian in attendance sign a paper saying they agreed with the fundamentals. While Graham certainly agreed with them, he harshly objected to this and refused to sign.

The evangelicals were clear that they were still fundamentalist in belief. In fact, several leading characters in this new movement started Fuller Theological Seminary based on fundamental doctrine. But they were also very clear that

they were no longer affiliated with the fundamentalist movement.

During the 70s Fuller began to get lax on biblical authority. In 1976, Harold Lindsell, one of its original founders, verbally criticized Fuller and many other Christian institutions across the country for minimizing biblical inerrancy and authority. During that year he published the very influential book, *The Battle for the Bible*. In its pages, he loudly proclaimed that both of these things were the most important theological subject of all. The book that was so influential in the Christian world that it started a movement that took its name.

From that point until about the mid-1990s there was something of a revival of biblical inerrancy and authority thought among evangelical churches. Throughout much of the 80s, the climate of the American the evangelical world was relatively confused on this issue with many of them not entirely sure where they stood. By the 1990s, most of the evangelical world was kind of lost and unsure of its own beliefs on such matters. Carl Henry, who was still active in the evangelic movement at this time, urged evangelicals to take a stand on the authority of the Bible. Many evangelical churches listened and heeded, taking a firm stand once again on biblical inerrancy and authority.

As for fundamentalists, since the 1960s one biggest debate has been how much they should embrace separatism. Doctrinal debates have continued to rage between various fundamentalist denominations. However, the clear majority of fundamentalist believers still fully embrace the complete authority of Scripture.

The Many Paths of the Truth

The Bible is abundantly clear that there is only one God and that there is only one way to Him. But history has seen many

paths of the truth throughout the world as Scripture has traveled through history. Each area of the world touched by the biblical message has its own stories concerning the passage of the doctrine of biblical authority. The story I have summarized here is one of the paths in America. It is not the only one. There have been many paths. And these paths, wherever they may be, continue on. Isaiah 40:6-8 says humans are like grass and our faith like flowers. It says that grass may wither, and its flowers may fall, but it says the Word of God endures forever. The battle over biblical authority continues. People may fail. Human faith may wane. But no matter what the Word of God and its authority will endure forever.

Grace Is

Grace is, according to the Sunday School answer, “unmerited favor.”

The problem with this comes with a misunderstanding of “favor.” We would probably agree that grace is unmerited: undeserved, not earned, etc. But favor causes problems.

Favor would be getting a promotion and salary increase at work. Favor would be avoiding the car accident by inches. Favor would be having a healthy baby.

And, while I think these are blessings that God allows because He is gracious, I believe God does not lay aside His graciousness if I’m overlooked for the promotion, if I am involved in a devastating car wreck, or if my son is born with a disability.

I misunderstand God’s favor as “what I want” rather than what

He wants. I would never choose the hard road. Ever. Not even once. God chooses it for me because it's what is best. And the hard road in His will is also His favor.

Think about it in terms of our heroes in the Bible. Was God NOT gracious when Joseph was sold into slavery? Was He NOT gracious when Joseph was wrongly imprisoned? Knowing what God does through these misfortunes of Joseph, I can clearly see His grace; by allowing Joseph to endure these difficulties, God promotes him and saves the Hebrews.

But it's not as easy for me to proclaim Him as gracious in the midst of one of life's messy chapters when I don't know the whole story.

Another problem with how we discuss and define grace is when we contrast it with judgment. God is a God of both. One is not laid aside while He picks up the other. Jesus demonstrates this for us perfectly.

Was it gracious of Jesus to cleanse the temple and throw out the money changers? Would we call it grace when Jesus called the Pharisees "brood of vipers" or "white-washed tombs" (Matthew 23)? Jesus did not take off His attribute of grace so He could wear His judge's robe. Grace involves truth, or it's not grace. If Jesus would have ignored the religious leaders' Jewish elitism and religious hypocrisy, He would not have shown them grace.

As a parent, this makes sense to me. The Bible tells me that God disciplines those He loves as a father disciplines his child (see Proverbs 3:12 and Hebrews 12:6). Disciplining my child is an act of grace. Further, to NOT discipline my child is to "hate" him (Proverbs 13:24). If I only show what my kids would call "favor" towards them, the results would be disastrous. Kids' ideas of what is favorable are not always what is best. So my "unfavorable" discipline, food choice, rules, conversations, etc. is for their overall good. It's

ungracious to make every choice based on what they would consider favorable.

I have seen a trend in statements such as, "If I am wrong (about this issue), I want to err on the side of grace." Grace is never on the same side as falsehood. Grace is always connected to truth. If it's true that child abuse is wrong, then it's not gracious to ignore it or accept it just in case it's okay. (Of course it's not okay.) If it's true that having sex with someone who is not my spouse is wrong, then it's not correct to ignore or accept it in the name of grace. Having laws against child abuse and punishment for abusers are gracious acts in that these are correct. Showing grace to an unfaithful spouse could include civil agreements in the dividing of assets in divorce, custodial arrangements, and forgiveness—but not acceptance and tolerance of the behavior. It would be ungracious to say, "Just sleep with whomever you heart tells you to. Because if I'm wrong about wanting you to be faithful to me, then I would rather err on the side of grace." Ludicrous!

By His grace I am saved through faith, and not by things I do, or I would certainly boast about how good I am (Ephesians 2:8-9). Grace is about what He has done, what He does, and what He will do. Grace is unmerited favor, as long as I don't misunderstand or limit what "favor" actually means.

No, The Greek Doesn't Reveal Secret Bible Meaning, But It

Helps

“Well, I Use the Greek”

One of my favorite things I’ve heard Dr. Robert Picirilli say is that when talking about Bible interpretation in small groups or informal conversation, people always want to know, “Well, what does the Greek say?” It’s a fair question if you understand how God gave us the Bible, and specifically the New Testament.

I didn’t take Greek as an undergrad at Welch College because I was a youth ministry major and it wasn’t required. And when I started grad school several years ago at Moody Theological Seminary, it still wasn’t required for my degree. Yet being older and wiser, I delayed graduation to take all of the classes they had on the subject.

The first two courses were great, and it was a lot of vocabulary and translation. The third, with perhaps my favorite professor ever, Dr. Julius Wong Loi Sing, was the most beneficial for several reasons.

First, and most importantly, he taught us that if you learn to read the New Testament in Greek and it makes you proud instead of humble, then you are reading but not understanding. Which is utterly useless to the Kingdom of God. I’ll never forget this quote: “You are not supposed to dominate the Bible; it is supposed to dominate you.”

Second, he told us that Greek should be like your underwear; you should use it but people should not be aware of it. In other words, do not constantly and haughtily make everything about, “Well the original Greek says…” and “Now if you understand the Greek syntax Paul uses here…” And lastly, and the point of this article, he taught us that Greek does not contain some kind of hidden, secret meaning to Bible texts. But it does help.

Last year for Rambling Ever On, I wrote an article called *#Blessed: The Beatitudes As Modern Day Facebook Statuses*, which if you would like you can read [here](#). In that article I tried to practice Dr. Wong Loi Sing's advice about the underwear. Yet I think it could be interesting for the readers of REO to see how things go behind the scenes of an article like that, because it says something about the way God communicated the Bible to us.

First, I want to look at Matthew 5:3-16 in English. You don't have to read this to get what I am wanting you to see. Just survey it quickly:

3 *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

4 *"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*

5 *"Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.*

6 *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*

7 *"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.*

8 *"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*

9 *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.*

10 *"Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

11 *"Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.*

12 *Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

13 "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men.

14 "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; **15** nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. **16** Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

First, note a couple of things. One, the translation I used (the NASB) separates vs. 13-16 from vs. 3-12. Two, there is little about vs. 3-12 that gives any sense of separation within these verses.

Now, I want to show you these verses in Greek. I just want you to look at them. You do not have to understand one iota of Greek to get what I am trying to communicate here. In fact, to save time and space I'm going to go ahead and highlight some things that stand out to me:

3 Μακάριοι οἱ πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι, ὅτι αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν.

4 μακάριοι οἱ πενθοῦντες, ὅτι αὐτοὶ παρακληθήσονται.

5 μακάριοι οἱ πραεῖς, ὅτι αὐτοὶ κληρονομήσουσι τὴν γῆν.

6 μακάριοι οἱ πεινῶντες καὶ διψῶντες τὴν δικαιοσύνην, ὅτι αὐτοὶ χορτασθήσονται.

7 μακάριοι οἱ ἐλεήμονες, ὅτι αὐτοὶ ἐλεηθήσονται.

8 μακάριοι οἱ καθαροὶ τῆ καρδία, ὅτι αὐτοὶ τὸν θεὸν ὄψονται.

9 μακάριοι οἱ εἰρηνοποιοί, ὅτι αὐτοὶ υἱοὶ θεοῦ κληθήσονται.

10 μακάριοι οἱ δεδιωγμένοι ἕνεκεν δικαιοσύνης, ὅτι αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν.

11 μακάριοί ἐστε ὅταν ὀνειδίσωσιν ὑμᾶς καὶ διώξωσιν καὶ εἴπωσιν πᾶν πονηρὸν καθ' ὑμῶν ψευδόμενοι ἕνεκεν ἐμοῦ. **12** χαίrete καὶ ἀγαλλιᾶσθε, ὅτι ὁ μισθὸς ὑμῶν πολὺς ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς· οὕτως γὰρ ἐδίωξαν τοὺς προφῆτας τοὺς πρὸ ὑμῶν.

13 Ὑμεῖς **ἐστε** τὸ ἄλας τῆς γῆς· ἐὰν δὲ τὸ ἄλας μωρανθῇ, ἐν τίνι ἀλισθήσεται; εἰς οὐδὲν ἰσχύει ἔτι εἰ μὴ βληθὲν ἔξω καταπατεῖσθαι ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων.

14 Ὑμεῖς **ἐστε** τὸ φῶς τοῦ κόσμου. οὐ δύναται πόλις κρυβῆναι ἐπάνω ὄρους κειμένη· **15** οὐδὲ καίουσιν λύχνον καὶ τιθέασιν αὐτὸν ὑπὸ τὸν μόδιον ἀλλ' ἐπὶ τὴν λυχνίαν, καὶ λάμπει πᾶσιν τοῖς ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ. **16** οὕτως λαμψάτω τὸ φῶς ὑμῶν ἔμπροσθεν τῶν ἀνθρώπων, ὅπως ἴδωσιν ὑμῶν τὰ καλὰ ἔργα καὶ δοξάσωσιν τὸν πατέρα ὑμῶν τὸν ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.

A couple of things to notice, which are made easy by my highlights. First, there is a contrast in verses 10 and 11. You can see it in English as it changes from “Blessed are the/those” to “Blessed are you”. But for some reason I never saw it until the first time I read it in Greek. Perhaps because the English obscures the consistency of verses 3-10 by switching between “the” and “those”. In Greek the form is exactly the same every time.

I think the change from vs. 10 to 11 is significant. If I wear khaki pants and a blue shirt eight days in a row and then on the ninth day I wear blue jeans and a blue shirt you will wonder why I changed. The same is true for understanding biblical authors in how they write.

I personally think the change is there because Jesus gives eight beatitudes (vs. 3-10) and vs. 11 begins a commentary on the last one about being persecuted. This sharp change in the passage can also be seen without any hindrance in English by the use of "for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven" in verses 3 and 10. This creates a bun type affect of the passage.

The commentary on persecution, in my opinion, continues through vs. 16 and this can also be seen in my highlights by use of "You are" and other forms of "you" from vs. 11 to vs. 16. In fact, if I play around with the English a little, you can see it even more clearly in English than Greek:

3 *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

4 *"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*

5 *"Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.*

6 *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*

7 *"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.*

8 *"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*

9 *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.*

10 *"Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

11 *"Blessed you are when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.*

12 *Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

13 “**You are** the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men.

14 “**You are** the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; **15** nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. **16** Let **your** light shine before men in such a way that they may see **your** good works, and glorify **your** Father who is in heaven.

Now you may ask, “What difference does it make?” Well maybe not much. But as a preacher I have to confess, knowing that verses 13-16 should not be separated from vs. 11-12 (or from vs. 1-10) then it affects my interpretation of verses 13-16. How often do you see a new subheading in Bibles over vs. 13? What if I told you that shining your light before men, in context, was directly linked to being persecuted? Does it change your understanding of the verse? Or its application?

One more thing I want you see this, this time only in verses 3-6:

3 Μακάριοι οἱ **πτωχοὶ** τῷ πνεύματι, ὅτι αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν.

4 μακάριοι οἱ **πενθοῦντες**, ὅτι αὐτοὶ παρακληθήσονται.

5 μακάριοι οἱ **πραεῖς**, ὅτι αὐτοὶ κληρονομήσουσι τὴν γῆν.

6 μακάριοι οἱ **πεινῶντες** καὶ διψῶντες τὴν δικαιοσύνην, ὅτι αὐτοὶ χορτασθήσονται.

Notice that the four words are alliterated, beginning with the same Greek letter you may recognize from math class as Pi (though I was taught to pronounce it with a long 'e' instead of a long 'i'). I know some people find outline alliteration annoying in modern preaching but it's used here. What does that mean? Perhaps nothing. After all, vs. 7-10 are not alliterated. Yet, I think it probably means that vs. 3-6 are one subgroup of the Beatitudes and vs. 7-10 are a second group. Even further, I think if you study them you will see that it could be that vs. 3-6 deal with man's relationship to God and vs. 7-10 deal with man's relationship to other men. This follows the pattern of both the Ten Commandments and The Great Commandment given by Jesus.

And this absolutely changes how I interpret the Beatitudes, especially vs. 8 which I interpret differently than you probably have ever heard. If you want to read more about that interpretation you can read the article the I linked at the beginning of this article or you can go [here](#). Note that I don't think that my interpretation is undoubtedly correct or beyond reproach, but that I got there by study and not some crazy, baseless theory.

Again, it has been my aim to be informative without being pedantic and helpful without being condescending. I am no Greek expert and never will be. But I have benefited from it and I hope that I can help others see its benefit. God did, after all, reduce himself to human language to give us the main source of truth we have.

Questions? Comments? Let us know below!

Five Petra Songs That Taught Me the Truth

To be perfectly clear up front – this is not a joke. This is not some sarcastic, ironic, wink-at-the-audience type of article. This is real. I am sure there are many out there that either do not know who *Petra* was or many that do know and wish they did not. For any number of reasons, though *Petra* was one of the most popular and well-loved rock bands in the Christian music scene, there is a level of indifference, or worse, disdain directed towards them and towards that entire era of “Christian rock.” Someday, I hope to further explore the peculiar myopia of the Christian music world. In no other genre of music are the historical roots ignored like Christian music. It is as if any artist, band, or song that did not come out in the past few years does not even exist. However, as I said, that is an article for another day.[1. That day is here! Part One is available [here](#).] Today, I do want to shine a light on a band that paved the way for so many others. A band that sold millions of records, won dozens of Dove and Grammy Awards, and most importantly, gave kids like me some absolutely great music to listen to. Music that was not only cool but that imparted great truth to a young, impressionable mind. So here are five, of the many, truths in *Petra* songs that spoke to me in my youth and helped me see God, the church, and spirituality in a much clearer way. I have included a Spotify playlist with the Five songs at the end of the article.

Petra taught me to be more outwardly focused.

Song: Rose Colored Stained Glass Windows

Album: More Power to Ya (1982)

Scriptural Support: Matthew 25:35-48, John 13:34-35, Luke 6:27-36.



Key Lyric:

Out on the doorstep lay the masses in decay

Ignore them long enough, maybe they'll go away

When you have so much you think, you have so much to lose

You think you have no lack, when you're really destitute

This album came out when I was four years old, so it took me some time to discover it and truly appreciate what I was hearing. This song in particular worked slowly on me. I responded immediately to the opening of the song – with an organ churning out “Showers of Blessing” and then transitioning to the acoustic guitar melody. When the truth behind the song finally broke through for me, it was a lightning bolt type moment. So many times our churches are insulated things. We build walls in so many ways to keep out the ugliness and messiness of the world. As believers, we are no different. This song challenges me every time I hear it. It pushes and prods me to reach out more, to care more, and to love more.

Petra taught me that prayer is a vital part of the Christian life.

Song: Stand In the Gap

Album: On Fire (1988)

Scriptural Support: 1 Chronicles 16:11,
James 5:16, Ezekiel 22:30, 2 Corinthians
1:11, 1 Timothy 2:1.



Key lyric:

Stand in the gap

Coming boldly to His throne of grace

Stand in the gap

He will hear you when you seek His face

Too often, prayer can feel like a last resort. When someone we love is hurting, we look for any numbers of ways to help. We exhaust ourselves trying to “fix” the problem, usually to poor result. Scripture makes it clear that we should seek the face of God first and often. While this was a truth taught to me at home and in church, this song brought the truth home in a way I had not understood before. Our lives are a battlefield and when one of us is wounded, our job is to stand in the gap, defending and upholding them with our powerful and effective prayers.

Petra taught me that my eyes are closed to the suffering in the world.

Song: Hollow Eyes

Album: Beat the System (1984)

Scriptural Support: Matthew 25:35-48,
Psalm 9:9; 10:14; 12:5, 7; 34:18;
37:18-19.



Key Lyric:

The least of these is hungry.

The least of these is sick.

The least of these needs clothing.

The least of these needs drink.

The least of these knows sorrow.

The least of these knows grief.

The least of these has suffered pain, and Jesus is His name.

I am not sure how old I was when I first heard this song. I do remember being very young. I also remember a long drive from the interior of Panama, back to our home in Panama City, when I listened to this song. This might have been around the same time I first heard it, or it could have been a short time later. I was one of those kids that would latch on to new music like it was essential to my continued existence. I soaked it in completely. I have a distinct memory of hearing this song at night while on the road. I remember hearing the haunting words and melody. I remember being shaken by it, down to my very bones. All at once, this song widened my perspective of the world, showed me the truth of worldwide suffering, and made it perfectly clear that to ignore all of it, was to ignore Jesus Himself.

Petra taught me that God is my Rock.

Song: You Are My Rock

Album: This Means War (1987)

Scriptural Support: Psalm 18:1-6, Psalm 31



Key Lyric:

You are my rock, my fortress, my shield

You are my rock, let Your strength be revealed

*My rock, my comfort, my peace
My salvation, my refuge, my God
You are my Rock*

While this album came out when I was 9 or 10 years old, I truly hit my music obsession stride around my early teens. This Means War! was a landmark moment. It hit me at a time when I was struggling with assurance of my faith. With the gentle wisdom and patience of my parents and albums like this, I was able to nail things down in a permanent way. This song in particular was a huge help. There were times, in my head, when things felt out of control. My spirit felt like it was being tossed and turned, this way and that, with fear and doubt. This song became an anchor point, a rallying cry to me. When I felt surrounded by the darkness, God's inescapable light would break through. I was never standing alone.

Petra taught me that God has conquered death forever.

Song: Grave Robber

Album: Not of This World (1983)

Scriptural Support: Hebrews 9:27, John 4:14, 1 Peter 1:24, Romans 8:11, 1 Corinthians 15:26, 51-55, Revelation 7:17



Key Lyric:

*Where is the sting, tell me where is the bite
When the grave robber comes like a thief in the night
Where is the victory, where is the prize
When the grave robber comes
And death finally dies*

This is a song that has encouraged me for the majority of my life. For one, it is full of Scripture, with verses and

passages woven in and out of the lyrics. It is a bold and full statement of faith that our God is stronger than death. He is the grave robber and the killer of death. Secondly, the song itself is upbeat; building to a powerful bridge and final restatement of the chorus. The band chose to make the song triumphant and victorious, instead of contemplative and reserved. The melody and style do much in imparting the true power behind the lyrics. Our hearts might still ache for those who have gone before, but we are promised a reunion of joy where we will witness death being swallowed by the giver of life.

I could probably write about another dozen songs by *Petra* that spoke to me just as powerfully. I could talk about *Godpleaser* or *Adonai*. I could go on and on about *Creed*, *He Came, He Saw, He Conquered*, or *Hey World*. I could spend hours discussing the songs, the words, and the integral role music has played in my life. I won't. This is enough for now. I am eternally grateful for the way God has used music to teach me, mold me, and help me see Him more clearly. *Petra* was a big part of that.

“Reclaiming the Lost Art of Biblical Meditation”: A

Review

"I wish I could single-handedly revive the art of Scripture memorization in our homes and our churches. There's no greater legacy to bequeath to our children than a storehouse of memory verses to draw upon their whole lives through." (Robert J. Morgan)

The Title Made Me Feel Bad (In a Good Way)

I can't recall a time in my life when a book title convicted me like this one did. If there is one thing I know I should do but don't do often enough, it's biblical meditation. So I got this book as quickly as I could and read it carefully.

I'll go ahead and abandon any pretense that this "review" will offer any substantial critique of what Dr. Morgan writes here. I think it is dangerous to put people on pedestals where they cannot be critiqued, but my main goal here is to try to influence people to read this book because the content is so important. Any criticisms I have are extremely superficial and will succumb to the weight of the Dr. Morgan's central message.

Evangelical Crusades and Hannibal Lector Bring it Home

The content portion of the book is a tidy 123 pages and I knocked it out in a couple of days in probably less than three hours total. It reads simply enough that I would think an average 9-year old could understand it. But that is not an insult because it's chock full of extremely helpful advice, Scripture references and practical illustrations that I hope not only inspire me but also guide me at 39 years old to make Scripture meditation a bigger part of my life. I've been a

pastor for 15 years. I have attended two exceptional Bible Colleges. I have memorized and meditated on Scripture before. But as I alluded to above, I have never made it a habit and such an integral part of my life as you can tell Dr. Morgan has.

Anyone who knows Dr. Morgan or has sat under his preaching knows that you can count on two things with everything he teaches: First, he will incorporate a ton of Bible. I remember once when I was at a service at Donelson, Dr. Morgan's church in Nashville, his ministry cohort Jeff Nichols joked from the stage that when he takes notes on Rob's sermons he can count on there being like 17 well thought-out Scripture references in support of each point. Secondly, he will show you how diversely read he is by citing an insane amount of biographical information and quotes from people from centuries ago and people from today. Just look at the footnotes in the back of this book and marvel not only of his use of Billy Graham and J.I. Packer, but also Anthony Hopkins and Stephen King. And also his use of people I do not know but that he knows personally and had invaluable wisdom to offer for this book.

And what he does by quoting the sacred and the secular is build a very simple yet very powerful case for how valuable meditation is for learning and behavior. The amount of times the Bible refers to meditation, even if it doesn't use that word, is legion. Old Testament, New Testament, historical books, psalms, prophets, gospels, letters...every section has significant contributions here and that makes this material impossible to ignore.

We Don't Meditate Because We Are Good; We Meditate Because We're Not

I confess I appreciate as well how Dr. Morgan weaves in at

times his own personal weaknesses and struggles that have led him to be a better meditator. It is easy for someone like me to look at his lengthy pastoral and preaching ministry and to idealize it. But he does not allow for that. He no doubt practices biblical meditation as well as anyone I know and has earned the right to write this book, but he allows us to see that meditation exists in large part because we are so flawed and weak. We must meditate because we know God so poorly on our own. Our minds are so bent to evil and darkness, worry and anxiety, that meditation is as much like medicine for the sinful soul as it is exercise for the mind. I daresay that is what separates Christian meditation from things like Zen Buddhism. The book is definitely written humbly and not haughtily and I am positive that when a person meditates constantly on the Bible, teaching others to do well will likely be from a place of humility. That's how the Bible works in teaching us about how we relate to God.

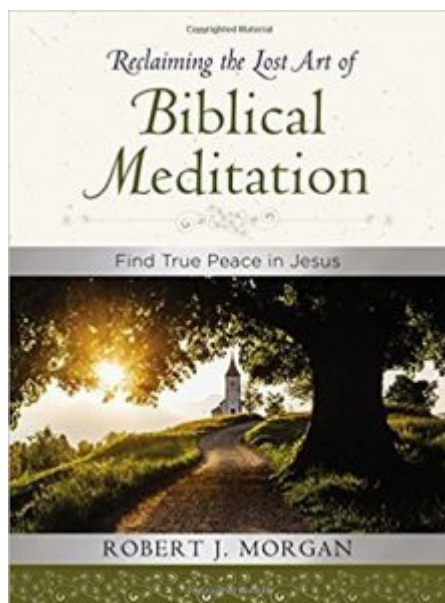
The 'tips' interspersed are so practical, yet not often practiced. At least by me. I am praying that will change. Sticky notes will be easy. Sharing my meditation with people I come across during the day will be hard. But I will try both, and many other things he advises.

Dr. Morgan lists several times we should meditate—when we wake up in the morning, when we wake up in the middle of the night, when we are lonely, when we are on a plane, when we drive, etc. Basically, we can mediate constantly. At that point the conviction of the book title came and hit me full in the face. I meditate so infrequently. I am too easily distracted. I have little doubt the content of the book, notably the Scriptures within, will change my course on this. I pray that it lasts til I die and is not a short lived emotional response.

Buy It. Read It. Do It.

I hope this book helps millions as it has helped my thinking (and, in theory, my behavior). I am challenged to put the phone down more and to focus my thoughts on Scripture and the nature of God more often. I know that Biblical meditation is not a quick fix to all anxiety and depression and crises. But it is a way to know God better and to allow him to change us even if he does not change our circumstances. These things will always be better for us than having everything “fixed”. If we are to know him in the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his suffering and if we are to take every thought captive, we must meditate. Dr. Morgan’s book is an extremely beneficial resource to challenge and guide even older Christians in this discipline.

Buy the book by clicking the picture below:



The Bible: After all the Canon Debating, Copyist Errors, Translation Issues and Subjective Interpreting, Is It Still The Book For Me? (Part 1)

"In both the domains of nature and faith, you will find the most excellent things are the deepest hidden." [Desiderius Erasmus, "The Sage"]

I STAND ALONE, ON THE WORD OF GOD...

Is there anything more controversial in our culture than the Bible?

Maybe, but this book is up there for most arguments started and longest spectrum of views one can hold about it. Is it entirely "God's Word"? Is it inerrant? Does it have some value but parts that must be discarded due to how they conflict with things like science and modern morality? Is it a series of disjointed fables to be ignored entirely? None of the above? Which parts are history? Which are literal? Which are figurative? The range of answers to these and other questions is innumerable in the present world.

The version of Christianity that I adhere to does not treat the Bible as if it were God. But make no mistake, I unashamedly believe that the Bible is historically reliable. I believe that it contains the words God wants us to have. I believe that it is the unique source for knowing God through

Jesus Christ. I believe it alone is authoritative in the area of morality. The basis of my faith is in the resurrection of Christ. But there is no resurrection to be truly known outside of the Holy Bible.

There are so many angles in which the Bible nearly always has been, is and always will be attacked. I cannot imagine trying to cover them all, but in this short series of essays I will try to cover what I consider to be the main ones, and the ones that are most important for Christians to defend.

I unashamedly believe that the Bible is historically reliable. I believe that it contains the words God wants us to have. I believe that it is the unique source for knowing God through Jesus Christ. I believe it alone is authoritative in the area of morality.

“WHAT IS TRUTH?” (PILATE, TO JESUS)

I have researched this topic for decades now because like many people, *I have to know*. I have to know if I believe the truth. If what I've been taught is correct. If I'm leading others to the same lie. I hope my Christians readers feel the same. I regularly see Christians—often on the internet—have their faith attacked and seem unprepared. Especially in this area.

So my goal is to get your interest piqued. I do not presume to be able to write a full length, scholarly type work on this topic. While I will cite numerous scholars who are experts in the areas I will cover, I aim to keep this at seven parts with each essay under 2,000 words. This is for social media, after all, and I know people are not on websites like ours to read a full length book. I hope that you will check out some of the books I cite and learn more. One of my goals as a pastor in my sermons and writings is to be the bridge between the deep scholarship and the people who are new to the Bible, or just want to learn more.

So what is the plan? Well here is what I want to do over the next six articles:

[In Part Two of this series](#), I will talk about why my Old Testament has 39 books, and why I believe this is the right number. I will speak to why I do not think our Bibles should contain the Apocrypha or the Pseudepigrapha or anything some branches of Christianity consider to be deuterocanonical (if you don't know what any of these words mean, please come back next week!) We will also talk about certain books that are in my Old Testament, but were put in despite great controversy.

[In Part Three](#), we will examine the 27 books that make up the New Testament. We will talk about its formation over time, why Christianity needed a canon of Jesus' and the apostles' teachings and which criteria for acceptance rose to the top. We will talk about why we only have four Gospels instead of more, since there are popular works that have tried to convince us that there were way more than four Gospels, and why I don't believe the alleged "Lost Christianities" are writings the early church should have considered Scripture.

One of my goals as a pastor in my sermons and writings is to be the bridge between the deep scholarship and the people who are new to the Bible, or just want to learn more

[In Part Four](#), we will examine why I think our Bibles today have the same content as the original copies of the Bible had in spite of the fact we do not have the original autographs (the original writings, i.e., Paul's original letters to Timothy) and that copyists did make errors when copying the manuscripts we do have. We will talk about how far removed from the originals copies are our present copies, examine the area of textual criticism and why I am firmly convinced not having the originals of any Bible books is not a problem for my faith.

[In Part Five](#), we will talk about translation. Since the Christian Bible was written entirely in Hebrew, Greek, and a few passages in Aramaic, to read it in English or any of the thousands of languages in the world that are not those three, we have to translate. And make no mistake, translation of Scripture has been an issue in Christianity for millennia, and especially for the last 400-500 years. We will answer questions about things like translation theory and which versions of the Bible Christians can trust.

[In Part Six](#), we will talk about Biblical Interpretation. What does the Bible mean? No doubt this has confused legions of people down through the centuries and caused many to bristle at Christianity, because they see the Bible as misogynist and racist and God as a cosmic bully and bloodthirsty for vengeance. We will look at what I believe to be reasonable ways for interpreting a book written to a different language, culture and time period than my own. We will learn how to read it the way it was meant to be read and why I do not abandon the Bible even when its stories and teachings come across as offensive.

[Finally, in Part Seven](#), we will look at the issue of applying the Bible and why, according to some, preachers commit more heresies applying it than they do interpreting it. We will talk about which parts of the Bible were meant only for the original audience it was written to and which parts are applicable for us today. Why do I believe sex outside of marriage is always a sin but I don't always kiss people as a greeting?

So, it is my hope that you will join me for every step of this venture. We will be hearing from a lot of different historians and teachers and a lot of different resources, all from different Christian denominations, time periods, countries and cultures. It is my hope to utilize a broad scope of evidence sources, so that we can see clearly how Christianity is true for all people everywhere and not limited by culture or time.

Read Part Two [Here](#).

Read Part Three [Here](#).

Read Part Four [Here](#).

Read Part Five [Here](#).

Read Part Six [Here](#).

Read Part Seven [Here](#).

The Bible: After All The Canon Debating, Copyist Errors, Translation Issues and Subjective Interpreting, Is It Still The Book For Me? (Part 2)

“Finding out how the Bible was formed is like watching a hot dog being made. You may like the result but the process is disturbing.” (Anonymous)

Read Part 1 [Here](#).

PART TWO: THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON

It's Not Quite My Last Name

How did the books of the Bible get to be in the Bible? The scholarly word is “canon,” used to describe the standard to decide which books should be in our Bible and which should not[1. For an etymology and more detailed definition, see F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 17-18]. For a book to be “canon,” it means that God wants us to have it as an authoritative source of the truth He communicated to us.

First, I will say that while we can know God through nature and creation as well as through our own morality and human reason, the most essential knowledge of God comes through how he has revealed himself to men through stories, prophecies and other writings, even poetry and prose. Much of the Bible claims explicitly to be from God and is recorded so his people could know Him, how to relate to Him and how to live in response to that.

Additionally, I think it is rational to conclude that if there are genuine writings that God used to communicate to his followers, then there are also writings that could be considered as inspired by God when they really are not. Any time you have a ‘right’ group of anything, there will often be a competing ‘wrong’ group. As with currency, there are true valuable paper bills and coins and there are counterfeits.

How do we know the difference?

The Old Testament’s 39 books

The traditional reckoning of the Jewish Hebrew Bible, which corresponds to the Protestant Old Testament, is 24 books, or by some counts 22 books[2. Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church*, 235-241]. The difference in numbering between the Protestant Bible and the Hebrew Bible lies in the fact that the Hebrew Bible combined books that our Old Testament separates: the 12 minor prophets are one book, Samuel and Kings were each one book, etc.[3. Paul D. Wegner, *Journey from Text to Translations*, see chart on pg. 44-45].

The 1st Century A.D. Jewish historian Josephus wrote around 90 A.D. that the Jewish canon included 24 books, that they were universally accepted by the Hebrews and that the canon (although he would not have understood that word as we use it) had been closed for a long time[4. Beckwith, 235]. The appeal to the Jewish tradition matters because the first Christians were Jews and Jewish history is Christian history until Christ divided it. Which was after the Old Testament was completed as far as writing and mostly confirmed as far as canon (not everyone agrees that the Old Testament canon was settled by 90 A.D. as Josephus asserts[4. Ibid, 274-77]).

Jerome in the 4th century A.D. mentions an alternative 22 book count where Lamentations is added to Jeremiah and Ruth added to Judges[5. Ibid, 240-41]. Other sources, such as 2 Esdras in the first century, agree with him[6. Ibid, 240].

Additional early Christian sources that endorse, either certainly or probably, the traditional Protestant books as canonical include: the prologue to Sirach (132 B.C.), Philo of Alexandria (20 B.C. – A.D. 50), 2 Esdras 14:45 (1st Century A.D.), Melito (A.D. 170), a Jerusalem list (A.D. 170), Origen (A.D. 185-203), the Babylonian Talmud (3rd to 6th centuries A.D.), Rufinus (345-411 A.D.), and others[7. *In Defense of the Bible*, Cowan and Wilder, eds, 396-400; see also Wegner, 108-113]. These sources have weight to their authority and add credibility to the (now) 39 book list. To be noted is that a couple of these sources are missing Esther.

But one source trumps all the rest...

Jesus himself is the crucial voice on this matter to me. Being God himself by my understanding of the New Testament writings, he has the supreme authority to determine what is from God and what is not. And while I cannot prove beyond any doubt that Jesus considered Esther to be Scripture and not the Wisdom of Solomon (an Apocryphal book), I think it is extremely reasonable to conclude his references to Scripture were the

same 39 books I call the Old Testament today.

First, Jesus seemed to consider Scripture what he referred to as “The Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:12) but most specifically on at least one occasion referred to Scripture as “the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44)[8. Bruce, 31-32]. This corresponds to the typical threefold division of the Jewish Scriptures (our Old Testament), possibly mentioned as early in the prologue of the 2nd century B.C. work Ecclesiasticus: the Law, the Prophets and the Writings (sometimes known as the Hagiographa)[9. Ibid, 31]. By any book count you can see the traditional Protestant Old Testament divided into these three groups:

- “The Law” included the first five books, the Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.
- “The Prophets” included Joshua, Judges/Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah/Lamentations, Ezekiel and the 12 minor prophets.
- “The Writings” included Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Daniel, Chronicles, Ezra/Nehemiah and Esther[10. Ibid, 29].

Now, we must note that Jesus said “Psalms” and not “Writings” but it is safe, I think, to assume that he meant all of the books listed above in the “Writings” by referring to that group’s longest, most prominent, and in some cases first chronologically book—Psalms—as a representation of all the books in the grouping[10. *In Defense of the Bible*, 399]. He certainly considered Daniel, another book in the “Writings,” to be Scripture (Matthew 27:9) and indirectly referenced Chronicles as a bookend to Scripture (see below).

Additionally, Jesus once said in condemnation of the Pharisees, “And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel

to the blood of Zechariah..." (Matthew 23:35; Luke 11:51). By doing so, he seemingly is making reference to the beginning of his Scripture (Abel murdered in Genesis) and the end (Zechariah murdered in Chronicles, which is probably the last book in the Hebrew Bible by order)[11. Bruce 31]. While not absolutely clear, I think it is reasonable to conclude Jesus is endorsing the typical Jewish canon, which is my Old Testament.

The Controversial Five: You mean Song of Solomon in on this List? No way!

Even though Jewish history seems to have a firm grasp on which books belong to their canon, it is true that throughout Jewish history and into Christian beginnings in the first century, the issue of the canon being closed was not unanimous and was not even settled with finality by the Council of Jamnia in A.D. 90. Five of the 39 Old Testament books were long considered controversial to varying degrees. Criteria for Old Testament canon were likely answering questions like "Does the book have contradictions?" and "Is it clearly in harmony with what we know about God from undisputed messages from God, as in the Law of Moses?" and "Was it written by a prophet or someone who could speak for God?"[12. Wegner, 117, taken from Josephus's *Contra Apion*] And so historically these five books were debated by rabbis and not settled for good until well into Christian history in the first few centuries A.D.

Proverbs

It seems to have a contradiction in Proverbs 26:4-5. The harmonizing of these two verses became to be seen as rather simple in that you sometimes answer a fool and sometimes you do not. It also has Solomon as its author, who is confirmed in canonical books as authoritative[13. Beckwith 318-19].

Ecclesiastes

It seems secular in parts, contradicting God's clear message

of hope and also seems to contradict itself in places like 2:2 and 7:3. But it may have been written by a man with God's authority, Solomon, and if understood as a man who messed up his life the way Solomon did, then his conflicting and anti-hope messages make sense. It is not a doctrinal book as much as a "Here is what happens if you do not follow God's plan" testimonial[14. Wegner, 116].

Esther

Does not mention God by name. But was eventually unanimously accepted as canon due to the faith of Esther and Mordecai and how the providence of God clearly rescues his people[15. Ibid, 116].

Song of Solomon

Possibly no mention of God (8:6 may be the one place it does), definitely does not have a message that is similar to any other Bible book, Old or New Testament. Could be interpreted as an allegory of God's love for Israel and is mentioned in Revelation in the New Testament[15. Beckwith 318].

Ezekiel

Chapters 40-48 seem to contradict the books of Moses in regards to the temple and the Law. A man named Hananiah is generally given credit for spending a great amount of time trying to harmonize Moses and Ezekiel and did so successfully[16. Wegner, 115].

Let me be clear that for all five of these books (Esther excepted in a couple of instances), they were accepted by all the sources I listed above. They had significant backing as far as canon from a variety of sources and from very early in Christian history.

What about the Apocrypha and other Deuterocanonical writings?

Some Christian sects have historically had more books in the Old Testament than Protestants. From Augustine in the 4th century to Martin Luther's opponents 1200 years later, leaders throughout church history have argued that the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha should be canon. While they were not canonized at the same time as the 39 Protestant OT books, they were canonized after, hence the name "deuterocanonical" (meaning "second canon" similar to how Deuteronomy means "second law"). There are several reasons why Protestants have in response not accepted these books:

1. Jesus and the other New Testament authors almost certainly never cite the Apocrypha and Deuterocanonical as Scripture or authoritative. Jesus, as mentioned above, seems to be clear on the content and parameters of his canon. I would have an easier time believing that Jesus did *not* consider Song of Songs to be canon than to believe that he *did* accept any of the Apocrypha. There are likely allusions to the Deuterocanonical books in Jesus' words and the NT on the whole, and we will deal with that below[17. *In Defense of the Bible*, 403].

2. None of these books claim to be from God, as do many of the Protestant OT books[18. *Ibid.*].

3. There are historical and theological inconsistencies in these books[19. *Ibid.* For a detailed list of examples, see Wegner, 125].

4. Jewish tradition only accepts the canon mentioned above and states that prophetic messages from God ceased around 400 B.C. All of the Deuterocanonical books were written after that time[20. Beckwith, 370].

Didn't the Septuagint (LXX) contain the Apocrypha?

Greek speaking Jews needed a Bible in their language and thus, the LXX (written between 250 and 100 B.C.), was born. This translation was not used by Christ, who would have used the

Hebrew Scriptures, but was used by the early church after him, including the writers of the New Testament.

The earliest extant manuscripts we have of it are from the 4th century A.D. and they do contain the Apocrypha, but there is no real way to know for sure what the LXX contained when it first started, as these manuscripts are late[21. Wegner, 109]. The New Testament writers when using the LXX do not refer to its parameters so it is probable that they followed their Lord, Jesus, in adhering to the Jewish canon[22. Bruce, 50].

First century B.C. Greek-speaking Jews likely wanted the Apocrypha with the LXX because they wanted access to all important Jewish writings. *But they did not consider these additional writings to be canon.* It is also possible that some first century A.D. Christians who used the LXX, and were therefore unfamiliar with the Jewish canon as found in the Hebrew Bible, became confused over time about which books were canon and which were not and included the Apocrypha as canon. If so, they were mistaken to do so[23. Jeremy Royal Howard, *The Origin, Transmission and Canonization of The Old Testament Books*, taken from the HCSB Study Bible, x-xii].

But what about the Jesus and the New Testament citing the Apocrypha?

I have seen lists of supposed times where the New Testament authors and Jesus reference the Apocrypha[24. Like this one: [Did Jesus Quote From the Apocrypha?](#)] as proof that they found it authoritative.

I do not deny there are a few places where it seems the deuterocanonical books are alluded to, Jude 9 as the most notable example, but this in no way makes them Scripture. Paul quoted secular poets to make a point in Acts. I see no clear reference where any book outside of the Hebrew Bible is referenced as Scripture. I do not deny the Apocrypha was important to Jews and Christians early in church history. They

read it. But they did not quote it as their Bible.

Additionally, the evidence of these references is exaggerated in lists I have seen. For example, it is alleged that when Jesus says “sheep without a shepherd” in Matthew 9:36, he is quoting Judith 11:19. But that exact phrase is also found in Numbers, 1 Kings, 1 Chronicles and Isaiah—books we know for sure Jesus considered Scripture. He is likely citing those passages. Similarly, “Lord of Heaven and earth” is alleged to be a quote from Tobit 7:18, but that phrase (or similar forms) is used repeatedly in the canonical OT books. And I could go and on, breaking each example down, and showing how most are more likely the Apocryphal books using Hebrew Bible phrases and NOT examples of how Jesus “cited the Apocrypha.”

God's Canon

In closing, I will say I find it fascinating and comforting that for both the Old and New Testaments, there is no one point in time where you can say, “This person or group of people decided which books to put in.” I think that is important and by no means discouraging. It shows that God used many men and a process to get it done, so that no one could take credit. The credit for the Bible's canon goes to God and God alone.

Read Part Three [HERE](#).

Read Part Four [HERE](#).