

QUESTIONS OF FAITH
How to Understand the Bible
1 Timothy
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If you were swept away to a deserted island and you could only take one book with you, what book would that be? There are many people of faith that would choose the bible. This book, or more specifically the words within this book are cherished by so many.

What's ironic is that this same book that is so meaningful for some is confusing, unrealistic and threatening to others. There are even some that choose not to believe in God because of the bible.

As we continue with my "Questions of Faith" sermon series, I thought it would be helpful to look at this book. How are we supposed to understand the bible?

To start our exploration of the bible I think it would be helpful to point out three things the bible is not supposed to be. We get confused as to the function of scripture. When we figure out what it's not, then we will better see what it is.

First off, the bible is not a science textbook. Though the book of Genesis talks about creation, the purpose was not to give a scientific account of every thing that took place in creation.

Last week I talked about evolution. There are some that believe faith and science are in opposition to each other. I do not believe that is the case. If we can understand what the bible is trying to do, then we can see how science supports our faith.

For example, some ask where are the dinosaurs?

We have found all kinds of dinosaur bones yet there is not one mention of them in the bible. The bible was not written to give an exact account of how things can be. Rather than focusing on the How question – which is the purpose of science, the bible addresses the Who and Why questions.

The dinosaurs are not mentioned because there is no reason to mention them. They like all other creatures came to be as the result of God's initiation.

The bible is not a science book. The bible is also not a history book.

Though there are historical figures mentioned in the bible, the intent of the bible is not to present a chronicle of human history. Thus when there's a disconnect between what the bible says and what is known to have happened in recorded history, it should not discount what the bible is teaching.

The last thing to remember about the bible is that it is not a monolithic book. The bible is a compilation of sixty-six individual books. There are 1,500 years between when the first books were composed and when the last was written. The original books of the bible were written in three (3) different languages by a multitude of men.

We believe God directed, God inspired the authors of the bible, but they each had their own purpose, their own agenda for writing what they wrote. Given all those variables, you can see why there would be a variety of themes, maybe even some contradictions.

An example of this would be the activity of God. How can God be so judgmental in the Old Testament and forgiving in the New Testament, and what about all the killing in the Old Testament? God appears to initiate the destruction of whole nations?

To help answer those questions we need to look at what the bible is. The bible is a theological book. In other words, it's a book about God. What has been God's involvement with humankind? What is supposed to be the relationship between God and humanity?

The bible begins with the creation story. The focus is not **how** God created, but that it's God who created.

The story of Adam and Eve presents the original intent God had for humanity and how that relationship was impacted by man's desire to be like God.

We also can find in the story an example of how we tend to pass blame unto others. Adam blamed Eve, and Eve blamed the snake.

If you were investigating the story like a detective, you would want to know what kind of apple they ate and what kind of snake it was. But that really is not what is important here, is it?

I had a seminary professor say the bible is a story of a covenant making and a covenant breaking, and the consequences that results.

A covenant involves two parties. One party promises certain things in exchange for certain conditions being met by the second party.

One covenant God made with Abraham was that he was going to be the father of a great nation and that they would occupy the Promised Land.

The depiction of how that promise was lived out was written down hundreds of years after it took place. The violence that was described would not have shocked anyone at the time. If you look at the events of the world during this time, you would find wars and conflict the norm. Everybody fought against each other for land and wealth. Having survived through this period was proof that God had a plan, that God was keeping the covenant.

I admit I am uneasy with all the judgment you find in the Old Testament. Though harsh, I believe it shows there are consequences to every action. I also believe we can find numerous examples of forgiveness and grace in the Old Testament.

As I said there are two parties in a covenant. The bible is a book about God, but it is also a book about us - about human beings. As we look at the stories in the bible we can often identify with what is going on. When we can identify, then we can learn.

One story we are taught in Sunday school is Jonah and the Whale. Jonah is a prophet, someone who has spoken on behalf of God. God tells him he is unhappy with those in Nineveh. He is supposed to go there and warn them.

Jonah does not like the Ninevites. He would prefer God to just destroy the city and save him the effort. Do we have people we don't like? Are there enemies we would prefer to have eliminated?

Instead of going to Nineveh Jonah ends up on a ship headed to Spain. As we know there is a storm, Jonah gets thrown overboard is swallowed by the big fish. For the next three days Jonah is in the belly of a whale.

It is this part of the story that gets most of the attention. It is also this part of the story that often brings out the cynics. “How can anyone stay alive that long in a belly of a whale?”

When we disobey, whether it’s God, or our parents, or a rule, don’t we often find ourselves in a big mess? We often have to stew in our situation for a while before we get ourselves out.

Last time I talked about Jonah I mentioned a Veggie Tale movie about Jonah. In that movie there is a song titled “Our God is a God of Second Chances”. Jonah got a second chance. And even though Jonah didn’t like it, the people of Nineveh were also given a second chance.

Just as we can associate with Jonah in the disobedience, we can also find ourselves on the receiving end of a second chance.

In the end Jonah is pouting, the people of Nineveh were saved and his plant that was giving him shelter has died. Do you pout when things don’t turn out as you wish?

God reminds Jonah that all people matter. Jonah was upset when a little plant that he had nothing to do with died. How would God feel if all the people of Nineveh, people he helped create would perish?

So there you have one book in the bible teaching us something about God and a lot about us.

To help us think about a third function of the bible, I would like you to pick up your hymnal and turn to page 601.

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.

The journey of life has many possible paths. The bible offers us direction as to which path to choose. As we read through our bible we can find instructions on how to honor God and relate to one another.

To find these words of wisdom it's important to do several things. First, find a translation that is easy for you to read. There are many translations. If you are struggling with the King James Version you got in Sunday school, maybe you need another translation.

Next, read parts of the bible that are easier to understand. The Gospels, the Book of Acts, the Psalms, Genesis, are all books that we can figure out.

As you read the text ask what is going on? Why was this recorded? What truth can be found in the text? Once we discern what lesson is being conveyed, we then decide how we can apply that lesson to our own life.

This is a wonderful book. It can inspire us, challenge us, encourage us, and teach us. When we figure out what it is versus what it is not, it will become the lamp to our path, not an obstacle to our faith.