

Welcome

Back in 2011, I had the chance to go to Israel with my friend Thomas, who is a Catholic priest. Neither of us had ever been, so we took *The Oxford Guide to the Holy Land*, written by Jerome Murphy O'Connor. I was excited about the book because is O'Connor was a brilliant biblical scholar - I had cited him in quite a few papers in college and grad school. I knew he knew his stuff, and I was looking forward to having his words guide us as we explored the various sacred sites from Biblical history.

We stayed in Jerusalem at the Eccol Biblique, a French archeological school - it's actually the place they brought the Dead Sea Scrolls when they found them, to see if they were anything important. It's a Dominican school, so every morning, we had breakfast with all the Dominican priests who lived in the school. Most of them didn't speak great English, so we ended up hanging out with this one priest named Jerry - he was a crusty old Irish guy, hilarious and grumpy. He teased us for our American mannerisms, made us laugh. It was always a great way to start the day.

About a week into our trip, we were finishing up breakfast when Thomas pulled out our guidebook and Jerry said, "Oh, I see you're using my book!"

Um. WHAT?

"Jerry the crusty old Irish priest" is JEROME MURPHY O'CONNOR?!?! I instantly went into fanboy mode, hyperventilating and stammering. Jerry and Thomas both laughed at me as I composed myself, and then Jerry asked what we had on our itinerary that day.

He spent the next ten minutes or so giving us advice on our plans, sharing his stories of archaeological digs at the places we were visiting and speculating on the authenticity of the various sites. It was amazing. When anyone travels to Israel, I recommend they take Jerry's book. But actually sitting with Jerry, getting to ask questions and hear stories, brought that guidebook to life in a way I'll always treasure.

We're going to talk about the Bible today, and I share that story of meeting Jerry with you because too often, we treat the Bible like that guidebook - it's there to help us navigate life, watch out for pitfalls, maybe find some interesting stuff along the way that we would otherwise have missed.

Those things are all true, but if that's all the Bible is, then we're just like me, sitting at that breakfast table with Jerry, not realizing Jerry is Jerome Murphy O'Connor. The Bible is an invitation for us to become one of God's adopted children, to have a relationship with the one who authored our lives.

Today, we're going to talk about how we can read Scripture with the one to whom the Scriptures point us. How does the Bible help us know God better?

Message

This summer, we're putting *your* questions front and center. All spring, we collected your questions and we got dozens. We've grouped them all together and are working through them together this summer.

A couple of principles are guiding our series:

Here at Catalyst, doubts and questions aren't enemies of faith; quite the opposite. We think it matters that Jesus asked way more questions than he gave answers.

Secondly, we're not trying to settle questions here. The goal of this series is to create conversation, not consensus. These messages are the beginning of conversations. Not the end. Our goal is to ask better questions together.

We began last week by looking at how we know God. Today, we're turning to what I think a lot of us would consider our primary source of knowing God, the Bible. Let's look at the questions guiding us today:

*"If the Bible was written by man, surely there are some mistakes, or things written with ego. I struggle to believe every single thing in the Bible. I feel ppl take the Bible so literal. Like did someone *really turn to salt? Or could these be stories simply to help us learn morals?"*

The second is less obviously about Scripture, but I promise it connects:

"Can you expand on the fact that we have taken so much of the mystery out of Christianity, possibly westernized it to the point of being able to explain every aspect of it, instead of embracing the mystery things that are somewhat unexplainable or unknown (like God, Hell, Angels, creation, sin. How do we embrace the mystery and lean into the unexplainable aspects of the faith."

What is the Bible? The Bible is both the most obvious source of knowing God and maybe the most intimidating for a lot of us. I grew up in a church where we were always told the Bible is the "inerrant, infallible Word of God!" I have a love-hate relationship with a lot of the clever, quippy ways Christians talk about the Bible - one of my favorite/least-favorites is that the Bible is Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth (it's an acronym, get it?!).

In fact, if I were to sum up how a lot of us treat the Bible, it's that BIBLE acronym - the Bible is a guide to how we can get saved, how we can be forgiven of our sins and not face God's judgment.

And here's the thing: that's not wrong, exactly. In fact, our denominational statement restricts itself to saying essentially that:

We believe in the plenary inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, by which we understand the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments, given by divine inspiration, inerrantly revealing the will of God concerning us in all things necessary to our salvation, so that whatever is not contained therein is not to be enjoined as an article of faith. -- Church of the Nazarene Article IV of Faith

I know that's a lot of theological jargon, but focus on that phrase right in the middle: 'inerrantly revealing the will of God concerning us in all things necessary to our salvation.' That's an important bit: the Bible has everything we need to find a relationship with God, and we can trust those bits 100%.

Turn with us to 2 Timothy 3

We can't talk about the Bible without talking about what it means to say the Bible is "inspired". Turn with me to 2 Timothy 3. This letter toward the end of the New Testament is written as a letter from a mentor to his mentee, who is a pastor himself. It's personal and filled with instructions and guidance. In the middle of the letter, the author takes a moment to reflect on Scripture.

(And we should note that, at the time this letter was written, we didn't have a New Testament - and wouldn't for another couple hundred years. But as the writings of the New Testament were gathered into Scripture, the church understood these verses to apply to them as well.)

You have been taught the holy Scriptures from childhood, and they have given you the wisdom to receive the salvation that comes by trusting in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work." -- 2 Timothy 3:15-17

There's that same phrase - 'all Scripture is inspired by God'. There're a number of ways to understand this word. On one end, you have what theologians call "verbal inspiration" or "divine dictation". Essentially, it means that the Bible is 100% the work of God, that God decided each and every word that's in the Bible. The human authors had no agency beyond writing down whatever God wanted. Folks who follow this view say the Bible is God's word, and we have to follow it to the letter, no questions asked. Because, after all God said it, so that settles it.

At the other end of the spectrum is what we could call "theological insight". This view is that the Bible is 100% a human book. It's written by people, with all of our prejudices, insights, failures

and successes. The authors of the Bible are particularly insightful, spiritual people, but they're still people, reaching for the divine and putting in language that made sense to them. These folks will warn that the Bible should be read with a grain of salt. After all, we're in a different culture, a different world, than the Biblical authors, and we can't expect what they wrote to be applicable to our context today.

Obviously, these two perspectives are the ends of a spectrum, and most of us are going to want to figure out where between them we fall. Is the bible 90/10 God and human? 50/50? 30/60? But one of my favorite Biblical scholars, Peter Enns, suggests that trying to find where we fall on the spectrum is the wrong approach.

Go back to 2 Timothy - that phrase "inspired by God". The Greek there is literally "God-breathed", and it's the same phrase used in Genesis when God creates humanity by breathing into our nostrils. Enns suggest we fold that spectrum over on itself. Is the Bible inspired by God? Yes, 100%. Is the Bible a product of humans and human culture? Yes, 100%. Enns looks to the Incarnation, when God became human, for our model for the Bible. Jesus wasn't half-god, half-human like Hercules or one of the other Greek demigods. Jesus is fully human and fully God. 100% of both. So too, Enns insists, is Scripture.

When we read Scripture, we're reading a library of books written by humans who lived in a wholly different time and place. They spoke different languages, saw the world different from us. And yet God was present in their lives. God moved in and among them, bringing them into a relationship with their creator. God swept them up into the grand story of redemption and they passed that story on, generation after generation. Some of that story was recorded, and God was in the midst of that recording, fully present with the authors. Those records were passed down, too, generation after generation. Copied and recopied and recopied. Used when God gathered God's people to worship so that those gathered weren't just gathered with the others in the room - they were gathered into the whole people of God. They became part of God's story, part of God's family.

The Bible is fully God's book. And it's a fully human book. Both. Together. That's what Christians call good news!

Song

Let's go back to that second question:

Can you expand on the fact that we have taken so much of the mystery out of Christianity, possibly westernized it to the point of being able to explain every aspect of it, instead of embracing the mystery things that are somewhat unexplainable or unknown?

Our friend Tim Basselin, who used to be part of our preaching team, invited us once to distinguish between a mystery and a puzzle. Detective novels are puzzles -we find the clues, put them together and get an answer. But mysteries are deep, fundamentally unknowable truths. Like love. Beauty. Divinity. They're not a puzzle to be solved. In fact, the deeper you go into a mystery, the less you grasp.

The Bible introduces us to God the mystery, not God the puzzle. The goal of reading Scripture is not to get a theology degree and finally understand God. It's to encounter God, to be swept up in the divine mystery at the heart of creation.

When we understand the Bible this way, it challenges that tendency we have to read the Bible as a textbook or a manual. Some parts of the Bible are sort of like that - the legal code in the Torah, for instance, or parts of Paul's letters that are instructions. But there's so much more to the Bible than that. There's poetry and mythology and history and apocalypse (which is sort of an ancient fantasy genre) and letters and biographies and songs. We encounter the people of God in good times and awful times. In joy and in pain and sorrow. In power and in weakness.

And all of this invites us to join in the ever expanding story of God's people. Are you an engineering type whose eyes cross at an art gallery or a poetry slam? Don't worry - there's lots of stuff in the Scriptures that appeal to methodical, organized nature like yours. Are you an artist who needs spontaneity and imagery and emotion to really come alive? There's so much in Scripture produced by siblings like you. Are you grieving? Meet the God who grieves with you in the Bible. Are you rejoicing? Find the God who rejoices with you there, too.

No matter who we are, we can find in the Scriptures God's invitation to life, to salvation. We find the God who is eternally faithful to God's people, and we find story after story of what that faithfulness looks like.

A quote attributed to St. Jerome, who translated the Bible into Latin, claims, "**The Scriptures are shallow enough for a babe to come and drink without fear of drowning and deep enough for a theologians to swim in without ever touching the bottom. -- St. Jerome**"

Friends, the Bible is God's gift to us not that we know more about God, but that we know God. It can get complicated and intimidating and scary, so beneath all that, hold onto this: Scripture is

an invitation to know God better. No matter where you are in your faith journey, God wants to meet you in the Scripture.

Communion + Examen

The Bible points us to encounter with Jesus. Scripture is an invitation to this table.

When in the last week has Scripture helped me to know God better?

When in the last week have I ignored, hid from or avoided God?

What might keep me from God in the next week?

How can I make time for Scripture to lead me to God this week?

Assignment + Blessing

Instructions for Sacred Reading