

Disturbing Passages in the Bible *Why I Believe, Part 4*

Last week in part 3 of our summer series we turned the spotlight on the ‘center’ of the Bible - the life of Jesus, and specifically to the evidence for Jesus’ Resurrection. The credibility of the message of the entire Bible – Old Testament and New Testament alike – hinges on the reliability of what it tells us about Jesus, and particularly about his death and Resurrection. As I said in both the last two weeks: “Everything before Jesus, in a sense, points to him; and everything after him is built on the foundation of his life, death, and Resurrection.”

My conclusion is that while there (again) is no ‘ultimate’ (rational) proof that Jesus rose, there also is no compelling argument that he did not. We have good reason to be able to trust the Scriptures in this regard, and in fact, the most vehement arguments against the Resurrection do not come from textual or even historical analysis, they come more so from a person’s basic belief that *such a thing simply could not happen*.

The main argument against the Resurrection then goes something like this: “No one rises from the dead, therefore Jesus did not.” This anti-supernatural presupposition is pretty common, and we’ll talk about that a little more next week (Science and Religion).

But today we’re going to take a slight ‘detour’, following up on some logical questions that may have grown out of the last two week’s messages. If the Bible is the Word of God – if God has spoken and still speaks through the words in this Book, what do we do with some of the passages in here that are so very difficult to understand?

And I’m going to borrow once again from Adam Hamilton, a UM pastor from a pretty amazing church in Kansas City, KS, in listing for you two basic categories of questions for which we need to have some answers.

1. Accepted oppressive cultural practices...

What does it mean to say that the Bible is the Word of God when we see things in it where we just expect God to say, “This is wrong, stop doing it!” but instead we find nothing like that. In fact it seems that that the practice is accepted, although often tempered in some ways.

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Two specific examples of this would be the practice of Slavery and place of Women in society.

In the Old Testament (particularly in the first few books) women are expendable. They were, in many ways, commodities. Now, women are treasured and valued, generally speaking in the Old Testament – there are important teachings that, in retrospect, lay the groundwork for a different understanding than their contemporary culture. For example, we read in the Creation accounts that women are created in the image of God just like men, and there are some New Testament passages that certainly cast an interesting light on other New Testament teachings, but there are also places where we read what is there and we just cringe.

There are some stories that I would never be comfortable telling in church, like in Judges 19. (Read that when you get home and you'll know what I mean.) It's disturbing. Now, of course, just because a story is reported, doesn't mean that God condones it, but the fact that it is not specifically condemned is troubling. And we see that with regard to women in a number of places: when Abraham tries to pass his wife off as his sister to the Pharaoh, in order to save his own neck, (not the only time that happened in Genesis) we just don't read of God saying: "Hey, you knucklehead, this is wrong!" And people wonder why.

Slavery is another one of these practices: in the Old Testament, slavery exists along with certain rules by which people should practice slavery.

Even in New Testament, the authors couldn't conceive of a world in which slavery didn't exist. It was all they knew. Many early Christians were slaves. There were special provisions and teachings given to Christians who were slaves – in the New Testament. This was their world.

We look back and, again, we cringe – the bloodiest war in our country's history was over the issue of slavery as we as a nation began to unpack the meaning of the first line of the preamble of our Declaration of Independence -

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“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

We all believe today that it is reprehensible for one human being to own another, and so there are those who – understandably – ask, “Why do we not read a specific command in either the Old or New Testament condemning slavery?” (I’m going to come back to this in a minute, but let me remind you of this: while many of the slave owners – in colonial America - attempted to utilize Scripture to support what they were doing, virtually *all* of the leaders of the abolitionists were motivated by Scripture to put a permanent *end* to the practice! Their motivation came from the Bible. I think a key to our understanding of this matter is right there!)

One reason that the slave owners in early America didn’t want their slaves reading the Bible is because they saw the Bible as a story of the liberation of slaves and were afraid that it would entice their slaves to *want* freedom. (Which it did – the slave owners were absolutely correct there!)

And yet slavery is never *specifically* condemned and we read such things as in Deuteronomy - specific instructions given for a man who would sell his daughter into slavery. What do we do with passages such as Exodus 21:20ff where we read that if a slave owner beats his slave and the slave dies, the slave was to be avenged (i.e., their owner put to death as well). But if the slave *didn’t* die, then there were no consequences.

A second category of difficult Bible passages comes from what Hamilton terms: **Immoral and unthinkable commands**

Something I have often heard from people who are reading the Bible – particularly some Old Testament passages for the first time – are heartfelt questions raised regarding some commands that are attributed to God. And I’ve heard people say to *me*, ‘If this is the real character of God, I don’t want any part of him.’ Or, they’ll assume that the Old Testament ‘God’ is different from the New Testament ‘God’. That there is a very basic conflict between the Old Testament and New.

Just one example here will be enough: **Joshua 11: 18 – 20**

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Joshua waged war against all these kings for a long time. Except for the Hivites living in Gibeon, not one city made a treaty of peace with the Israelites, who took them all in battle. For it was the LORD himself who hardened their hearts to wage war against Israel, so that he might destroy them totally, exterminating them without mercy, as the LORD had commanded Moses.

Book of Joshua is the account of the conquering of the land of Canaan. The Hebrew people were commanded to take over the city/ states that existed there *without mercy*. The word in Joshua 11: 20 is literally “exterminate”. Which, when applied to human beings is very difficult to understand today. It is genocide. If this were to take place today in Iraq or Afghanistan, or somewhere else, there would be a war crimes tribunal convened, and governments would be called to account, and yet in the Old Testament that behavior was attributed *to God*.

In the first week of this series I mentioned a few of the many crimes warranting the death penalty by stoning in the Old Testament ... offenses such as adultery, children who were disobedient and rebellious (*the child* would be stoned to death), working on the Sabbath, and turning away from the religion of Yahweh. If *we* practiced the death penalty for these things today, my congregation would be on the small side, not to mention that there would be no one here in the pulpit!

But we have to wonder how passages like this fit in with the New Testament picture, say, from John 8, where a group of Pharisees come before Jesus and throw down a woman “caught *in the act* of adultery” stones in hand. (By the way, you see the place of women here as well, as logic tells you that (not to get too graphic) “caught in the act” would require more than just her – but the man is not there.

And Jesus waits a bit... Then he says, “Let the one without sin cast the first stone”.

And one by one they drop the stones and walk away. And Jesus comes over to the woman, lifts her up and asks “Woman, where are your accusers? Neither do I condemn you! Go and sin no more.”

You might remember last week as we were talking about the New Testament manuscripts and how they are examined and variants are rated by textual scholars. This whole story is listed as a

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variant reading, but it is only rated an “A”, meaning, that it is really not in dispute. We know it is an authentic and ancient story.

Scholars have concluded that it was left out of a few otherwise very trustworthy manuscripts, not because it was in doubt as being authentic, but it was *intentionally* left out because the scribes just couldn't handle its teaching. It stood in such opposition to the Old Testament teachings, in opposition to their understanding of the Law itself, that they were afraid of where it would lead if people read it. So some of them simply *left it out*.

Later on, Paul took this teaching and ran with it, as he drove home his main point: that we all come to God by grace, and not by works. And that's how it is for all of us. Thank God for that!

But again, how does one reconcile these difficult Old Testament passages, commands, and teachings, with the New Testament portrayal of God as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, who, the Scriptures tell us, is the ‘final word’ of God's self-revelation? How can they be the same?

Let me share with you something that Adam Hamilton pointed out, not an answer to this question but as a perspective. There are about 22,800 verses in the Old Testament and of those, the ones that talk about things like we've been bringing up this morning – amount to about 200 of those verses. So, almost 23,000 verses in Old Testament that describe God as merciful, as just, one who loves and cares for his sheep, one who casts our sin away from us as far as the East is from the West, as a father who loves his children even though they ignore him, and dishonor him time and time again. And 200 that say some things that are very hard to grasp. Well less than one in a hundred.

But we do have the other kind of passages, and we have to figure out what do we do with them. Most Christians simply ignore them, frankly. And that's ok, if it works for you. But I have to tell you: there are who people struggle with this, and the point of this series of messages is in response to Peter's admonition “to give a reason for the hope that is in us”.

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So let's acknowledge this: we may not like to talk about them, but these things *are* a stumbling block for many people, and if someone asks you how it is that you can have hope in a Sacred book that contains such things, we need to have some understanding of what we mean when we call this entire book the "Word of God".

There are some in the Christian community who understand the inspiration of Scripture to mean that God kind of 'whispered in the ear' of certain men (and they were all men) and they simply wrote down what they were hearing. The personalities of the various authors, the historical context of the day, and so forth, really were irrelevant, God dictated the Bible word for word. On the other end of the spectrum would be people who say that this book is nothing but a collection of human words, wisdom, legend and folk tales. God had little or nothing to do with it, and so we should simply read it as we would read poetry, or Homer, or Shakespeare.

But there are many others who have a view somewhere in between the two (including myself). We believe that this is both the words of God and the words of man. God spoke through people and revealed a picture of himself (and ourselves) in ways that at times transcended the thought patterns and the cultures of the day – bringing the people of Israel and the New Testament church to new places; places that we would not have gotten to on our own. Revealed truth..

But at the same time, God spoke through *people* who wrote in the light of their cultural understandings. They were products in many ways, of their day. They were not expected to have scientific knowledge that they couldn't have back then, and at times they wrote according to their biases based on their cultures and societies, and yet in some way, God spoke through them, and their words transcend the ages and God still speaks through them today.

Paul says in 2 Timothy 3: 16 – 17

All Scripture is inspired and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that all God's people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work

Paul is likely thinking here of the Old Testament – which was *his* Bible at the time. And he is recognizing that God has *breathed* on these books. Yes, there were human authors, yet somehow God was part of that, he was in it. Paul doesn't go into any detail explaining exactly what he means by that statement and perhaps it would be good for the church in general, if we would take

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a cue from him on that account. We so often fight about things that we don't completely understand.

I share this illustration guardedly, but hopefully, you will get my drift: in my own Sermon preparation, (and I've share this with you before) I am constantly praying. And my prayers are asking God to speak to you through me. And, in a way that never ceases to amaze me, I hear from you time and time again that this is, in fact, what happens! And yet as carefully as I try to avoid this, I know that I have said some things in messages that are ... wrong!

I've quoted Scriptures and cited the wrong passage, I've mispronounced words, I've said things that were unintentionally offensive to some people ; I've been corrected by my wife... occasionally... that this or that story that I just shared with such enthusiasm is not exactly the way she remembered it. I am without a doubt, fallible. But in spite of that, God uses me for his message to 'go forth'. Now, I'm not comparing myself to Paul or Isaiah, or my sermons to the Biblical books. But, I think that difference may be one of *degree* and not *kind*.

God speaks through the Scriptures – via the words of flawed humans, but through the gentle guidance of the Holy Spirit, the message of God's love and grace has been preserved so that we can know it, and so that we have everything we need *for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness*.

One way to see God's 'hand' in this process, even in these difficult passages, is to understand a theological concept that I've talked about before here, called "Progressive Revelation". There are other scholars today who prefer the term "Redemptive Movement Hermeneutics ", but as I read about that, I think they're pretty much the same thing.

Redemptive movement hermeneutic is where you interpret the Bible not only on the basis of what it says, but seeing where the general movement of the topic is heading - historically. This is eye-opening when you apply it to, let's say again, the concept of Slavery.

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Even the passages that I read to you earlier – having *any kind of penalty* for killing a slave, or having a law that limited the kind of punishment you could inflict on a slave, that represented a huge departure from the culture of the day. This was new stuff. *It's not the end of the story* – it's not where God would eventually lead his people, but it was movement in that direction. We find a passage that required slaves to be set free after six years of service – unheard of elsewhere in the ancient world.

We see this continuing in the New Testament where Paul talks to the slave about securing his freedom if he can do so (1 Corinthians 7), and in fact, the book of Philemon is a letter that Paul wrote for an escaped slave who is now a Christian believer, to take back to his 'master', with the plea (not a command but a strong request) that he be accepted back, not as a slave, but as a brother in Christ." Big change!

Paul was the author of Galatians 3:28 where we read that in Christ, there is neither slave or free - that in Christ we are all the same. And there are others. So the movement in the New Testament is toward the eventual liberation of all slaves and the abolishment of the institution of slavery. It didn't happen until after the New Testament was finished, but it did happen.

We see a very similar thing with regard to the role of women.

That same passage in Galatians goes on to say not only that are there no longer 'slave or free' but no longer 'male or female' in Christ. Now, Paul was obviously not referring to physical bodies, he was talking about status in Christ. And there was equality.

And while Paul (just as Peter) in some places prohibits women to have leadership positions in the church, in *other* places he *recognized women in leadership* (Phoebe, Lydia, Pricilla and others). We read of even Peter in the book of Acts preaching at Pentecost and quoting the prophecy of Joel, of how in the last days God would "pour out his Spirit on *all people*". And how in that day men *and* women (your 'sons *and* daughters') would prophesy.

That word 'prophesy' is the same word that Paul uses to talk about preaching. Paul and Peter said *some* things that showed that in some ways they were the products of their culture – but they

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themselves are the ones who laid the groundwork for our understanding of the equal place that women hold in the church today. (At least, in *some* churches! In ours, certainly.)

God was content to allow his people to discover ‘stuff’ about him over time. Doesn’t expect us to understand everything perfectly in the beginning – he doesn’t expect that of us today, and he didn’t expect it of the Hebrews, or the early church, either. In the Bible, some things get clearer and clearer *over time*.

Old Testament passages about God being a violent warrior were written in a time when *everyone* viewed their gods as warriors. “My God is more powerful than yours” was an important statement. That is the only way people could think of God. *We have to allow the Biblical people to live in their own time*. But then we ask ourselves, “What do these passages have to say to us today, in light of what we know about Jesus?”

And from the polytheism of Abraham’s background, through the giving of the Law, to the painstaking teachings as to what it means that God is Holy, and teachings about the terrible consequences of sin, to the prophets’ clarification of what God really expects from us (mercy and justice, not sacrifice), we end up in the New Testament with Jesus: God’s Word in the form of human flesh.

As we look at some of the older statements and writings through the lens of Jesus - who give us such a clear picture of God who loves lost and broken people, we have to come to conclusion that maybe they didn’t always have the clearest picture of how God views things as they could have. But now we know more.

A seminary prof shared this wisdom with his class: everything in the Old Testament is to be viewed in the ‘light’ of the Cross. Those things that are enlightened – ‘lit up’ – teach us about the nature of God. And those things that recede to the shadows, show us the nature of humanity and the consequences of sin.”

But in that sense, it is all the Word of God...

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My challenge to you this morning is to open up your Bibles, and read them. Give the Holy Spirit the opportunity to touch your heart as you read of the struggles of Israel, the majesty of God, the raw emotions of a people who are trying to understand who they are. Let the Bible read *you* – and fill you with hope as you hear once again the stories of grace, forgiveness, and mercy.

Be challenged as you picture the Word made flesh, washing the feet of people who would soon deny even knowing him. Let your vision increase as you read the account of the fledgling church taking root in a hostile world in the Book of Acts. Allow your mind to dwell on what is to come as the words of the Apocalypse bring you comfort – as they have for generations long past. God dwelling among us, wiping away every tear from every eye...

Last week we included an insert in your bulletins: “How to Read the Bible”. If you’re not sure how or where to start, this can help you. There are more on the Welcome Table, and it will also be printed in this month’s Messenger. But let us once again become what Christians were mockingly called in years past: people of the Book. God still speaks through his Word.

Amen!