

August 29, 2010

**THE BIBLE: More than just a Good Book**

Speaker: Nancy Vamvakas

I want to begin this morning by having us consider - How do we feel about reading the Bible?

Listen to how one man described it:

**Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long. Your commands make me wiser than my enemies, for they are ever with me. I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes. I have more understanding than the elders, for I obey your precepts. I have kept my feet from every evil path so that I might obey your word. I have not departed from your laws, for you yourself have taught me. How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! I gain understanding from your precepts; therefore I hate every wrong path. Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path. (Psalm 119: 97-105 TNIV)**

How many have ever felt this way about the Bible?

How many feel this way about the Bible all the time?!?!?!?!?

We really should! It is God-breathed, instructional, inspirational, educational, life giving....so why don't we? Why are we not desperate to spend time studying it?

As I thought about this question, I came up with a few possibilities:

1. Ignorance - Maybe we don't have an accurate understanding of what the Bible is – maybe we believe what the world says about it – it is a good book, but is too flawed to be of use, it is only the product of human hands pushing their agenda, it is just a bunch of stories about people who lived long ago.
2. Relevance - We don't believe it has anything to say to us, now, for our lives (its no longer relevant)
3. Alternative source of inspiration - We have another plan for prioritizing and navigating our lives – we can determine right and wrong, wisdom and foolishness, truth and error on our own.
4. We are too busy (which is just another way of expressing the first three!)

When I spoke this past July, I challenged everyone to read Luke to get to know Jesus better. But that is really part of a bigger challenge to make reading and studying the Bible part of our lives. I want to talk more about that today – WHY we should make studying the Bible a priority in our lives. And I would like to give you a small taste of HOW as well, to help you get started. Let's pray.

## PRAYER

Father, thank you for your Word and for all you have revealed in it. It is our desire as a community to know you more, and to love you wholeheartedly. In our time together this morning, accept our open and willing hearts as worship – a pleasing aroma to you. Speak to us through your Word, and change us, as a body, and as individuals. Help bring us to the place where we love your law, and consider your Word sweeter than honey. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

So, then, what is the big deal about the Bible? WHY do we need to study it? Well, in a nutshell, because it is MORE than just a Good Book.

Specifically, I am going to give you 3 reasons. There are definitely more reasons, which you are welcome to add to the list!

### **Know God: The Bible is one of the primary ways God has chosen to reveal Himself.**

(creation, Incarnation, Holy spirit and the Word of God)

- a. His actions, in and through human history, reveal who He is. Throughout the OT, God acts in a specific way, so that we would KNOW him. At least 73 times, God's actions are linked to our knowing who he is. Here is an example – He sent Moses to the Israelites:

**"Therefore, say to the Israelites: 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. (Exodus 6:6-7 TNIV)**

- b. His actions reveal his character.

**Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; his greatness no one can fathom. One generation commends your works to another; they tell of your mighty acts. They speak of the glorious splendour of your majesty— and I will meditate on your wonderful works. They tell of the power of your awesome works— and I will proclaim your great deeds. They celebrate your abundant goodness and joyfully sing of your righteousness. The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made. All your works praise you, LORD; your faithful people extol you. They tell of the glory of your kingdom and speak of your might, so that all people may know of your mighty acts and the glorious splendor of your kingdom. The LORD is righteous in all his ways and faithful in all he does. The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cry and saves them. The LORD watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy. My mouth will speak in praise of the LORD. Let every creature praise his holy name for ever and ever. (Psalm 145:3-12, 17-21 TNIV)**

All that which David knew about the Lord, he knew because of the mighty acts of God that were passed from generation to generation.

It is these stories that tell of God's splendor, his power, his character. From the stories told in Scripture, which at the time was primarily the first 5 books of the Bible, David came to know God as mighty, compassionate, a provider and Savior, trustworthy, faithful, generous and righteous. David's Psalm attests to that. Going back to these stories affirms these truths for us, too! They give us a picture of the character and nature of God.

A strange thing about us....

- i. We have a distorted, unbiblical view of knowledge. With the Enlightenment of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, there was a move to believe that everything could be understood through reason and scientific explanation. It taught us to believe that knowledge can be detached from commitment and action – we must remain objective if we truly want to know something. This has carried over to contemporary thought – as we are challenged to be “objective” and “unbiased” in our reasoning.
- ii. From the world of the ancient Near East, the world into which the OT was given, this would be nonsense. True knowledge is impossible apart from commitment, involvement and action (think of relationships – how well can you know someone you are not committed to know, involved in getting to know and actively doing things to get to know them better).
- iii. We must immerse ourselves in our subject if we want to know it. If we want to know God, we must immerse ourselves in his revelation to us.

**My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding— indeed, if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. (Proverbs 2:3-5 TNIV)**

- c. One further thing about learning about God's character – The study of ALL of Scripture helps us to know ALL of God's character.

**All Scripture is God-breathed 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. (1Timothy 3:14-17 TNIV)**

- i. CAUTION – We need to acknowledge that we will never understand God completely – he transcends human understanding – thankfully, or he would not be any more worth worshiping and following than the greatest among us. There will always be a part of God that is a mystery to us.

**"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8-9 TNIV)**

- ii. However, if we do not commit to studying all of Scripture, and getting to know more and more of God revealed there, we are at great risk of worshipping not God Almighty, but our version of God. A God made in our image. Maybe One that is forgiving but not also Holy. Or One that is near to us, but not one that is over all of creation. Or One that gives me free will, but not one that remains Sovereign. This is idolatry!

So the first reason to study Scripture is to know God – in the Biblical sense – an intimate, involved, committed sense of knowing his character. Which naturally leads to the second reason, which is to know his Mission.

### **Know His Mission:**

God's nature or character and his Mission are inseparable. He is what he is doing. He does what he is. God is a missional God. We have spent the last 6 months learning about God's mission, and what that entails. His mission is an expression of who he is – and who he is requires that his mission be the restoration of all of creation. The Bible from Genesis to Revelation, from Creation to the coming of a new Heaven and Earth where all God's people from all nations worship Him articulates that mission!

God's creation, destroyed by sin, requires God's gracious hand to redeem it and deliver creation to its final state. God has chosen to do this through His people, which first was the nation of Israel, and then through his son, Jesus Christ, and now through his body of believers.

Knowing God and knowing his Mission leads us to one last reason we should study the Bible.

### **DEVELOP THE CHARACTER OF GOD**

By knowing God, we will know what it means to be the people of God. As we study and apply what we learn, we develop within ourselves the mind and heart of God. We are created in his image – we were made to think and love like him. While this has been distorted by sin, we are in the process of being redeemed, and restored along with all of creation.

**“...you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.”**

**Colossians 3:9-10 TNIV**

After we understand the mind and character of God, as revealed in Scripture, we internalize it () – we take on the character of Scripture, which is the character of God!

**"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ... they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD..." (Jeremiah 31:33-34 TNIV)**

As we study the Scriptures, put them in our minds and write it on our hearts, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we will more and more take on the character of God!

Which brings us back to the original question, if studying Scripture does all this, what stands in our way of making a commitment to doing this?

For me, a big part of getting excited about Bible Study, was learning to understand HOW to read the Bible. We would like to believe that anyone can pick up a Bible and that the Holy Spirit will lead us into all understanding. And I do believe that the Holy Spirit is the ultimate teacher from the Word – and if a person was stranded alone on a desert island with a Bible, I believe the Holy Spirit would graciously provide help in understanding. But there is a big BUT!!!

The Bible was never meant to be only studied alone. Remember that the community to which the Bible was originally given did not read it individually. The printing press had not yet been invented – the Bible was spoken to the community. It was taught and studied together. Each book in the Bible was given for the sake of a community. The Canon was compiled for the sake of the whole faith community. Studying Scripture must first of all be a community exercise. The Book of Acts tells us that as new believers came to faith in Jesus Christ, they

**“...devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles....” Acts 2:42 TNIV.**

They met daily, eating and celebrating together. This is the primary way God has graciously provided us help in understanding – we study together with believers across our communities, across the country, across the oceans, across generations and across cultures. We learn together!

I have been so blessed by the people who God has put in my life to teach me – from Ken and the rest of the TOB team, to my professors and fellow students at Tyndale. My husband Elias, and many Roots Groups over the years. From authors like Rick Warren and Bill Hybels; C.S. Lewis and Henri Nowen; Randy Alcorn and Frank Peretti. I know I have so much more to learn, but it has been an amazing journey. My heart’s desire is for all of us to experience this kind of learning. Let me be clear - I am not suggesting that in order to understand the Bible, you need to go to Seminary. But learning and understanding the Bible doesn’t just happen – it takes a committed effort. I am talking about a committed study of Scripture that will bring us all, together, to a deeper level of knowing God and his mission, so that we can be transformed as His people.

**“...be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” (Romans 12:2 TNIV)**

I would like to share what I am learning with those who would like to learn too. I am not sure yet what form it will take – perhaps a monthly or biweekly class – but I will be teaching a study on how to read the Bible. My goal will be to help knock away some of the roadblocks to reading and understanding the Bible.

And there are roadblocks! It is a complicated book!

- 66 books – 39 OT and 27 NT, written over 1500 year period and through many authors, to many communities in all kinds of circumstances, which each must be understood.

- God chose to speak to us in almost every available kind of communication: narrative history, genealogies, chronicles, laws, poetry, prophetic oracles, proverbs, riddles, drama, biographies, parables, letters, sermons and apocalypses. Each genre requires a different approach for understanding it. You don't read poetry the same way as you read an instruction manual. Knowing the conventions of the genre, or book type, allows you to understand it better.
- It is called God's Word, and we refer to it as the inspired Word of God, but it was mediated through real people. It is God's word in human clothing; a revelation of God communicated through human concepts and imagery. Therefore, like Jesus, the Bible is both fully divine, and fully human. Its divine nature makes it relevant for all eternity – speaking to us in every age and in every culture. Its human nature means it was given in a particular time, to a particular culture. The hard part, then, is that it needs interpretation. We have to take the words and understand what was meant for them, there, then, to understand what it means for us, here, today. Thankfully, the same Holy Spirit that inspired the original, writers and hearers, inspires us in this task.

So, we have 2 basic questions:

1. **QUESTION 1: What did it mean to the original hearers back then, in their culture and circumstances?** In Bible study terms, this is called exegesis – the task of finding out what was the original intent of the words of the Bible.
2. And then, **QUESTION 2: What does it mean to us now?** This is called Hermeneutics – or looking for the contemporary relevance of the words. In order to do good hermeneutics, we have to first do good exegesis. In other words, the Bible can never mean what it never meant. So often, I want to right to the relevance for today, especially when I am reading for my own devotions – looking for a word from God in my life. However, my STUDY of the Bible must start with what it meant and then inform my devotional reading of how I am to live now.

I won't lie to you – this takes time and effort. At times, it is frustrating. But I believe, now that we have a better understanding of why we need to do this diligently and persistently, we can move closer to the Psalm 119 perspective! God's word will be sweeter than honey!

Will you allow me to illustrate how study can show the Bible to be more than just a good book? How it can help us to know God and his mission better, and help us to develop the mind and heart of God? Yes?

In the words of Maria Von Trapp.....let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start!

The first 11 chapters of Genesis are known as the Primary History. They cover the Creation account, the fall of Man through the serpent's deception, the expulsion of man from Eden, the murder of Abel by Cain, the growing wickedness of humankind, God's calling of Noah to build the ark, the Flood and then the repopulation of the earth leading to the attempt to build the tower of Babel, which is overturned by God, who scatters the people, making different languages and cultures. A lot happens in 11 Chapters!

If you want to create a ruckus in any intellectual gathering, mention that you are a creationist and you believe in the Genesis account of creation! With Darwin's Theory of Evolution firmly on the science curriculum, and Big Bang and other theories vying for attention, the Genesis account seems naïve and mythical to this scientifically sophisticated generation. Trying to explain it can seem near impossible.

Unless we start with good Exegesis – trying to determine what this account meant to its first audience. Let's remember that it can never mean what it never meant. The meaning for us comes from the meaning to them.

The first hundred times I attempted to start reading the Bible I only got as far as Genesis chapter 11! I was reading with no tools, no background knowledge and no help from any faith community. I was going in cold! Being committed to the notion that the Bible was God's Word, I was prepared to accept what I read as fact, the way I understood it with my 20<sup>th</sup> century understanding of knowledge, truth and history. I was reading it as a good book. My conclusions about the story were mostly about what God did – about the order of creation, and the appointing of Man as ruler over creation. Not once did I think about what that told me about who God was, or what Man meant to him. I wasn't reading it as revelation.

But once I had the opportunity to study Scripture the way it was intended – as part of a community with some good tools and methods, my understanding was enhanced! Again, I didn't need to go to Seminary for this. I only needed a community to help me, some basic tools, like a good study Bible, access to some Commentaries and Dictionaries, and of course, the Holy Spirit. And once we learn how to go back and dig a little into the context – to do a little Exegesis to find out what the first audience would have concluded about the story – we can learn so much more. Let me show you – this morning, we can only do this in very broad terms, but let me just point out two of the things that were particularly interesting to me:

1. Looking at Genesis as a piece of literature – as a book – we should note where this text is placed in the Bible. This is the VERY FIRST thing presented in the Bible. If we are reading this as a revelation of God, it is our FIRST vision of God. You don't get a second chance to make a good first impression! Every book is written by the author with a purpose in mind – the author makes selections and orders things to achieve that purpose. We believe that authors of the Bible books were inspired by God, so we believe that God's hand is behind these choices. The first picture of God is going to be very important – we must pay close attention!
2. A study of the cultural context would reveal many important things, but there is one in particular that changes everything.

The Genesis story of Creation was not the only available explanation of how the world was created or where mankind came from. It is not even the first. There were many other stories circulating that answered the universal questions of origin and purpose. "Where did the world come from and why?" Therefore, Genesis must be read beside those other accounts that were part of the literary tradition of the time in Ancient Near East cultures. Let me give you a modern example: How many of you have actually read Darwin's Origin of the Species? (not many – nor have I) But how many of us feel we know the main point? (most people) It just part of what people of our culture know.

These stories gives us a clear understanding that the people of those cultures believed a supernatural world existed, and that gods were personal beings that could think, speak, act and interact with humans. They believed humans were more than just physical beings; they had a spiritual nature as well. These stories, around before Genesis was written, told how these gods were responsible for creation. By their words, they separated light from darkness, land from sea.

Many stories speak of a great flood, sent by the gods, which destroyed the earth, except for one survivor.  
Does this sound familiar?

Why would the author of Genesis seem to copy the pagan mythologies of the time?

- i. Because in copying the format, the author was able to highlight the DIFFERENCES between the stories! To the audience of Genesis, they would not have heard the similarities, they would have been shocked by the differences!!! The Creation account in Genesis, when compared to pagan mythologies, paints a picture of God who:
  1. is Absolutely unique – there is only one God, not many gods
  2. is the ultimate Creator of all matter – bringing order to chaos, and creating according to a divine plan.
  3. is Sovereign over all creation – including the sun, moon, stars – all considered gods by the pagans
  4. made Man in his image, as the climax of creation
  5. is Provider, showing caring concern for man’s welfare – food and fellowship

Genesis, from the start, was setting forth a vision of God which remains consistent throughout all of Scripture – there is one all-powerful, all-knowing Creator God that is responsible for all that exists. Humankind is the pinnacle of his creation, and while he is protective and concerned for our welfare, he cannot overlook human sin. Therefore, he continues to intervene in history to redeem humanity and restore creation. The Israelites, living in the middle of ancient Near East culture, needed to hear this – they needed to KNOW God in the midst of pagan mythology – so that they could be called out of that and into a relationship with the one true God to be his people. They needed to know truth, in order to distinguish it from the error that dominated the culture around them. TRUTH was spoken through the differences in the story!

Ch 1-11 set the stage for knowing the truth about the one true God, so that when God came to Abraham and called him out of his culture to be part of God’s mission, it made sense that Abraham obeyed and followed!

What does this mean then for us today? God is still the one, all-powerful, all-knowing creator of the universe who still is concerned for the well-being of humankind as the pinnacle of his creation. We still need to know who God is, if we are going to distinguish error from TRUTH in a culture that is once again, or perhaps still, dominated by pagan mythology. Then we too, can live, knowing that God is still at work, bringing order out of chaos, and moving all things closer to completion in his plan for universal salvation through Jesus Christ. We can be confident in who God is, so that we are prepared, like Abraham to be called out and follow God where he leads us, to live as his people and participate in his mission. We need to live with respect for God's sovereignty in matters of creation – whether it is the diligence in the way we perform our stewardship role or the respect we give to God as the sole creator, give and taker of life.

Knowing the context into which Genesis was given helps me a lot. I feel a lot less pressure to defend the literal understanding of Creation. It may have happened exactly as described, in 6 24-hour periods, and I know Godly men and women who are committed followers of Jesus who believe that. It may be symbolic language to represent a method of creation that is beyond human language and understanding. And I know Godly men and women who are committed followers of Jesus who believe that. And we can agree to disagree because that was not the point! The point was, and still is, that despite what everyone else believed about creation, the TRUTH is that our God, the God of Israel, is the One True God, the creator of all, Sovereign over all, and cares for us! How good is that?!

**When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? (Psalm 8:3-4 NIV)**

That helps us know about God, know about his mission, and know that we can follow him when we are called.

There is no way I would have known all that without some diligent study. There is no way I would have known all that without a community of believers throughout the centuries diligently working and passing on their understanding and knowledge. There is no way I would have the confidence to share this with you if I had not checked its validity with many trusted sources. A devotional reading on my own would certainly bring me feeling closer to God, as I contemplated the magnitude of creation. It would make the night stars seem more incredible, and the sun and the moon more amazing in their perfect alignment. But a deeper study of Genesis and its cultural and literary context that reveals a more profound knowledge of God's character.

We should not be satisfied to know God at a shallow level. We should hunger to know God more deeply. We need to avoid the same trap that the writer of Hebrews warned of – not working hard to learn and grow as God's people!

**“...but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.” (Hebrews 5:11-13)**

Through study of Scripture, we move from milk to solid food, training ourselves to be righteous.

There is pressure all around us to accept a pagan view of God – a God who is watered down. Therefore we must reconnect with God’s revelation of himself in the Bible. We need to read it daily – not as our horoscope for our focus that day, but for our increased knowledge of what God is like, so that we can increasingly order our lives around him. Not reading and studying Scripture opens us up to missing who God is, what he is up to and who he is calling us to be!

If we don’t know God is Sovereign, we won’t trust him with our future, our money, our children, our plans, our time.

If we don’t know that God desires justice and mercy, we will neither work to offer them or stand up and demand them.

If we don’t know God is compassionate to all people, in all times and all circumstances, our own compassion will be frighteningly limited.

If we don’t know God is generous, we will be stingy with our resources, and turn a blind eye to those in need.

If we don’t see the extent to which God is Holy and righteous, we will not challenge ourselves to walk only in the path of righteousness for God’s glory.

If we don’t see God’s gracious works, we ourselves will not offer grace.

If we don’t know God is mighty, we will not trust him to deliver us in our dark times.

If we don’t deeply understand that every Man is made in the image of God, we will not respect every person in this world and stand up for each other’s dignity, health, safety and other basic human rights.

If we don’t know God is at work redeeming the world, we will find ourselves without hope.

If we don’t know God is the one and only, we cannot truly worship him.

Let’s pray.

God, thank you that you did not leave us in the dark, but that you revealed yourself to us through your Word. Forgive us for where we have made You less than You are, and where we have failed to be the people you have called us to be. Continue to work in us. Help us with our study of your Word, and transform us.

Amen

## CLOSING

I can’t in good conscience get up here and suggest that we all need to be involved in diligent Bible Study, and then not help you do it! So, I will reiterate that I will be starting a study in the fall – likely early October – that will walk through the Bible and look at the different contexts in which we can study and read God’s word. As we looked at the context of Genesis, we will look at guidelines for understanding the Laws, the Psalms, Prophecy, Gospels, Letters to the Churches, and whatever else we want to look at! If you are just starting out in your Bible Study journey, this could be a good way to start!

I also know of at least 3 other Bible Studies starting up this fall. One is a Women's weekly study of Ecclesiastes. Another is a study on the book of Daniel, that will look at both how we can live with integrity in a hostile world, as well as the prophecies of Daniel. The third will be looking at the OT names of God, and will certainly help teach who God is. There will be other studies announced as they are organized.

1. How many people here lead a Bible Study/Roots Group last year? Thank you – what you do is critical in this community of believers. Please consider doing it again – you are an essential part of the Body of Christ – we are responsible for equipping each other, and Bible Study is fundamental to that.
2. How many people here participated in a Bible Study Group last year? Well done – keep going! And if you have been participating in studies for years already, consider this year to be a transition year to leadership!! Start to pray about leading your own group!! I know from personal experience that you learn faster when you have to teach it!!
3. OK – as I say to my husband and children on a regular basis, there is a correct answer to this next question! How many people are planning to get into a Bible Study this coming fall?! Don't let anything deter you from this – let's make this a priority in all our lives – let's get to know God better, so that we can love him more, and be transformed into people who reflect his love and glory. Let's agree, as a community, to move from milk to solid food this year.....and all God's people said....AMEN! So be it.

May you hear God's invitation to meet with you in his Word, with the guidance of His Spirit, through the power of His Son, Jesus Christ.

As always, the Prayer Room is open in the back corner, for those who would like to have someone to pray with this morning.

Enjoy this last week of summer!