

God's Book

By David Feddes

If we took seriously the fact that the Bible is God's book, we would make sure to read the Bible every day to hear God and to cultivate a relationship with him. All too often, however, even church people seldom read the Bible and don't know what it says.

We're living amid a surplus of Bibles and a shortage of Bible knowledge. Even those who claim to believe the Bible often don't know what it says. A longtime professor at Yale University says, "When I first arrived at Yale, even those who came from nonreligious backgrounds knew the Bible better than most of those who now come from churchgoing families." The *unbelievers* of yesterday knew more of the Bible than the *churchgoers* of today!

Our biggest problem isn't that people think the Bible is a bad book. There are always people who hate the Bible and reject God outright, but if you're like most folks, you don't hate the Bible. You think of it as the Good Book. But do you really approach it as God's Book? Do you read it? Do you know what it says? Do you base your life on its teachings?

Maybe you think of the Bible the way you think of Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. You know it's supposed to be a classic, and you've got nothing against it. But it's too long, and it's just not your thing. Well, it might be okay to skip *War and Peace*, but the Bible isn't just another classic. It's the one book you can't afford to ignore.

For those who totally reject the Bible, it's urgent to see it in a new light, but it's equally urgent for those of us who say the Bible is God's Book to start acting like it. After all, if church people are true to the Bible, there's always hope that those outside the church will be drawn to the truth. But if even church people don't live under the Bible's authority, then why expect unbelievers to turn to the Bible or to the God of the Bible?

Let's focus on four facts about God's book. First, the Bible is God-given. Second, the Bible is true. Third, the Bible is understandable. And fourth, the Bible is useful.

God-Given

Let's begin with the fact that the Bible is God-given. The human writers of the Bible didn't write down their own made-up ideas. They wrote down what God had shown them. As the apostle Peter put it, "We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty... Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:16-21).

God used various writers to produce the 66 books of the Bible. Peter was one; Paul was another. Paul said, "The gospel I preached is not something that man made up... rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ" (Galatians 1:11-12). Paul knew that the truths he taught came directly from God, and he knew that this was the case with all biblical writings. He said, "All Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16).

Now, if the whole Bible is God-breathed, how should we respond to what God says in it? Many of us think the Bible is a good book, but we tend to handle it the way

we handle advice from our grandfather. Sure, grandpa is a nice old fellow, and he says a lot of good things, but the old guy can get kind of boring at times. We don't want to get stuck listening to him for too long. Also, his memory isn't always so good, and sometimes he slips up. On top of all that, times change. Some of grandpa's ideas are old and out of date; they just don't work in the modern world.

Well, aside from saying that grandfathers deserve more respect than that, I've got news for you: God isn't your grandpa. He's the Lord of the universe. He is God today just as much as he was God thousands of years ago; his ideas don't get outdated. He knows all things; he doesn't make mistakes or have memory lapses. God is eternal, all-knowing, and almighty, and when he speaks in the Bible, he speaks with final, absolute authority. We can't ignore or avoid anything the Bible says, for it's not just something people came up with on their own. The Bible is God-given.

True

Here's a second basic fact about Scripture: the Bible is true. How could it be anything but true, since it comes from God? "It is impossible for God to lie" (Hebrews 6:18). Some religious people say they believe the Bible is God's Word in some general way but think it contains errors. But that's not what Jesus said. Jesus declared, "Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). An inspired biblical writer said, "All your words are true; all your righteous laws are eternal" (Psalm 119:160).

The Bible is true. You and I are in no position to say that we are right and God is wrong on some matter. The truth of the Bible doesn't depend on whether you or I believe it. Some critics insist that the Bible isn't reliable, that it is wrong about many things, but does this mean the Bible is wrong? No, it means the critics are wrong.

If you're like a lot of people, however, you don't attack the Bible or say it's false. You simply don't talk about true and false at all when it comes to matters of religion. You figure we all need to choose our religious beliefs on the basis of what works for us. And so you choose your beliefs, not on the basis of whether the beliefs fit the facts, but on how they make you feel.

Professor and author Gene Edward Veith points out that more and more people talk in terms, not of truth, but of taste.

Instead of saying, "I agree with what that church teaches," people say, "I like that church." Instead of saying, "I believe in Jesus," people say, "I like Jesus." Of course, they don't usually "like" the Bible's teaching on sin, Hell, and judgment. What they do not like, they do not believe.

When people exclude truth, basing their faith on what they enjoy and what they desire, they can believe in literally anything. That is why affluent, well-educated people are so open to psychic hotlines, crystal vendors, channelers of space aliens, and what would seem like obviously fraudulent New Age gurus. How could anyone believe in such things? The answer, of course, is that truth has nothing to do with postmodernist religious beliefs. Devotees say such things as, "The Maharishi is really cool." Or, "I really like Buddhism." Or, "Scientology really helps me get in touch with my feelings."

The greatest enemy of biblical truth these days isn't any direct attack which denies that the Bible is true. The greatest enemy is the attitude that it doesn't matter all

that much whether a belief is true; what matters is how a belief makes you feel. You look for a church that can give you the best pep talk in positive thinking and makes you feel good about yourself, without much concern about how truthful its teachings are. You look for a preacher who is funny and entertaining and likeable, without asking whether he's preaching the Bible and not just his own cleverness. You join a church because you feel at home with the style of music without much caring how accurately its doctrines reflect the truth of the Bible.

When you do this, you deny the truth of God just as surely as someone who openly insists that the Bible is false. The fact that the Bible is true means not only that we must never directly deny its reliability but also that we must never base our beliefs on taste rather than truth, on how we feel rather than on what God says. God's truth puts us in touch with who he is, not just with who we imagine him to be.

Understandable

A third basic fact about God's book is that it's understandable. God gives Bible truth to enlighten us, not to confuse us. As Psalm 119:130 puts it, "The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple."

There have been times in history when Bible reading by ordinary people was discouraged by the religious elite. They claimed you had to be an expert to know what the Bible really means. But the Bible doesn't just speak to scholars and experts. The Bible is understandable. God speaks through laws and stories and poems and letters that can be understood by ordinary people. The Bible "gives understanding to the simple."

This doesn't mean we can always understand every sentence of the Bible the first time we read it, or that we'll never be left with any unanswered questions, or that scholars and preachers are useless. But it does mean that simple, ordinary people can read the Bible for themselves and understand the great truths that God wants them to understand.

The Bible "gives understanding to the simple." Does that mean the Bible treats people as simpletons? No, biblical authors treat people with respect, as thinking, responsible persons. You don't have to be a genius or an expert to use the Bible, but you do have to read carefully, think hard, and respond to the truth that confronts your mind.

What does this mean for preachers and churches in an age of salesmanship? For one thing, it means we must never try to bypass the brain, the way some advertisers do. Many TV ads have colorful images and catchy music and clever humor but present no factual information whatsoever about the product being sold. Some churches take this same approach. They offer colorful, catchy, clever religion without much real content. They entertain without engaging the mind. That's a betrayal of the Bible and an insult to the people they are trying to reach.

Then there's the advertising strategy of presenting only those facts which the buyer will find appealing. You've probably seen offers of a free gift or a fabulous deal. The offer may be true, but all too often the offer is stated in huge print, while the further costs are hidden in fine print that you can hardly read. The goal is to sign you up for something without letting you know what you're getting into.

In the same way, some churches and preachers are tempted to present only the aspects of God's truth that people like and to hide the rest. But Jesus never did that, and neither did the prophets and apostles of the Bible. Scripture speaks of peace and joy and other wonderful promises, but it is also honest and up front about sin and repentance and judgment and other facts which people don't like to hear. The Bible shows the blessings of being a Christian, but it also states plainly that you have to give up certain things in order to follow Jesus.

The apostle Paul said, "We have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God... For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord" (2 Corinthians 4:2,5). So let's not try to make biblical truth so complicated that only experts can grasp its main thoughts, and let's not make church into a sales job that manipulates people into buying a gospel they don't understand. The Bible is understandable. God wants us to understand his truth in Christ so that we can make a meaningful, informed response.

Useful

The fourth and final fact I want to deal with here is that the Bible is useful. Its two main areas of usefulness are in showing us how to be saved and in showing us how to become the people God wants us to be. The Bible says, "The holy Scriptures ... are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

We often think of usefulness in terms of the needs we feel. But our felt needs aren't always our greatest needs. Let's say you go to the doctor because you've got a sore throat, and you want a prescription for some antibiotics. But your doctor discovers a cancerous growth in your throat and says that immediate surgery is the only thing that can save your life. At that point, you'd better forget about what you thought you needed. You don't need a quick prescription. You need surgery. You have to accept the doctor's diagnosis and submit to his cure.

In the same way, you may go to church wanting help with finances or an emotional lift, but Scripture says you've got bigger problems than that, and God has something far more wonderful to give you. That's why truly biblical preachers don't just offer reassurance; they call for repentance. They don't just offer an emotional lift; they announce eternal life.

The Bible makes us wise for salvation: that is its first and greatest use. It does this through two main strands of Scripture: law and gospel. The law, as summarized in the Ten Commandments, provides us with a diagnosis of our problem: it shows us our sinfulness by showing what a holy God expects of us. The law shows that we fall far short, and that our greatest need is to be rescued from sin and hell. Then, once we know our sin from hearing God's law, the gospel shows us the way of salvation. The gospel shows us that Jesus' death is the only payment for our sin, that Jesus' resurrection is our link to immortality, and that faith in Jesus is the only way to be made

right with God and receive eternal life. The first main use of the Bible, then, is to make us wise for salvation through faith in Jesus.

The second great use of the Bible is to teach people who have been saved and guide them in the ways of God. As the Bible itself says, it is "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." Unfortunately, this use of Scripture is quite foreign to the way many of us think nowadays.

Professor Veith, whom I quoted earlier, tells about a conversation between a pastor and a young man in his church. This young man said he believed strongly in Christ and the Bible. But he also believed in reincarnation. He thought it would really be cool to come back in a number of different lives.

After arguing with him but getting nowhere, the pastor finally decided to set him straight. "You do believe in the Bible, right?" he asked.

"Sure," the young man replied.

The pastor sat down with him, took out a Bible, and had him look up Hebrews 9:27: "Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment."

"So you can see," said the pastor, "that the Bible clearly teaches that we aren't reincarnated. We die one time, and then we are judged. The dead don't come back, but are sent either to Heaven or Hell. That's what it says, right? 'Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.'"

The young man paused a minute. Then he said, "Well, that's your interpretation."

Was that just the pastor's interpretation? No, it's what the Bible bluntly says. It's a God-given, true, understandable sentence that is useful to teach and rebuke and correct a common error. How is it, then, that most people in North America say the Bible is inspired, and yet many believe in reincarnation? A great many simply don't know what the Bible says, and when they're told what it says, they don't want to let the Bible teach them and rebuke them and correct their errors. When someone shows us a Bible verse that clearly contradicts our errors, we stubbornly say, "Well, that's your interpretation."

It's time we all stopped being so stubborn and shifty. It's time to humble ourselves before God and submit to his Word. We must submit our beliefs and our behavior to the Bible. Churches must build their message and ministry on the Bible, so that those outside the church will hear the saving, life transforming message of Scripture.

Don't just call the Bible "the Good Book." It is God's book: it's God-given, it's true, it's understandable, and it's useful. So read it. Pray over it. Think about it. Learn God's way of salvation in it. Discover Jesus Christ through it. And give up any belief or behavior of yours that contradicts what it teaches, and live by God's Word instead. Wherever the Bible is read and believed and obeyed, a great revival of spiritual life is sure to happen. Wherever the Bible is rejected or neglected, spiritual disaster is sure to follow. The words of God's book are not just idle words--they are your life!
(Deuteronomy 32:47)