



Theme: It's Ok to Ask


"What Do I Do with Strange Passages in the Bible?"


Weekly Memory Verse:

105 Your word is a lamp to guide my feet and a light for my path.

– Psalm 119:105

Monday, January 22 – Read **Jeremiah 1:1-3** and **2 Peter 1:16-21**. In our Wesleyan Tradition, we talk about the Bible as the inspired "word" of God, which is different from thinking about the Bible as the "words" of God. Sometimes it is assumed that inspiration means that God composed the Bible, word for word. But the word "inspiration" in English is not the same as "being dictated." Bible writers seemed to agree. The prophet Jeremiah said it was his words bearing God's word, God's message. The apostle Peter said that while the Holy Spirit led them, men and women did the actual speaking.

 Scholar Craig Keener wrote in the *NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*, "Ancient thinkers often viewed prophetic inspiration as a divine possession that temporarily displaced the prophet's own mind. The distinctive styles of different Biblical prophets show that this view oversimplifies the matter; inspiration still used human faculties and vocabulary." Since humans have been using the written word, finding ideas from their culture or occasional errors of fact in the Bible shouldn't trouble us. How can seeking the overarching message rather than the details deepen and enrich your Bible study?

 Peter compared the prophetic writing to, "a lamp shining in a dark place." He drew on images from his "Bible"—the Hebrew Scriptures we call the Old Testament in Psalm 84:11, 119:105, and Malachi 4:2. As you have read the Bible with God's help, when have you had this sense of a lamp shining on some dark challenge you faced?

Prayer: *God, thank you for being with the Bible writers as they used their words to deliver the messages you inspired them with. Thank you for being with me as I read the Bible. Amen.*

Tuesday, January 23 – Read **2 Samuel 24:1** and **1 Chronicles 21:1**. A surface reader might see these two verses as a “contradiction” in the Bible. But Israel’s historians weren’t “on the spot” with notebooks or video cameras. 1 Samuel through 2 Kings reached final form shortly after Israel returned from exile around 530 years before the time of Jesus. Chronicles retold much of the same history, but from the time of around 325 to 400 years before Jesus. In that time, more Israelites came to see God, not as the sole force who caused all events but as a loving God who faced evil forces opposed to God’s will.



Many followers of Jesus today still struggle with the idea that God causes everything—every illness, accident, injustice, even violent crime. It looks like the writer behind 2 Samuel 24:1 shared that view. How did (and does) that idea impugn God’s goodness? In what ways did that make Jesus’ teaching about God’s response to suffering, such as in John 9:2-3, especially vital?



The meaning of the Hebrew word “Satan” shifted over time. In Zechariah 3:1-2 and Job chapters 1-2, the term was used of one of the “sons of God,” an accuser in heaven’s court. Later in Chronicles, the Accuser moved David to do something offensive to God. The figure of Satan later becomes an incarnation of evil, or an entity independent from God. How does that shifting idea point to the Bible writers’ humanness, even as they kept unfolding God’s larger purposes?

Prayer: *Lord God, thank you for continuing to teach and unfold your purposes to me, even as you did to the people who wrote the books in the Bible. Help my understanding of you to keep growing, as theirs did. Amen.*

Wednesday, January 24 – Read **Genesis 17:9-14**, **Acts 15:4-19**, and **Galatians 5:1-6**. Christians have wrestled with various parts of the Bible throughout history. In the first century, some thought it was wrong to accept uncircumcised Gentiles into the faith. They could quote Genesis 17:9-14, which said any uncircumcised male had broken God’s covenant. But that didn’t convince Peter, Paul, or James. Based on other Bible texts, these apostles said God was leading differently in their day, pouring out the Holy Spirit on all who showed faith in Jesus.




These readings are a useful case study because few Christians today have big debates about circumcision. After the Christian Pharisees in Acts 15:5 urged a circumcision requirement, James also quoted a Bible passage, Amos 9:11-12, and said God aimed to reach all nations. On what grounds did the apostles decide it was better to follow Amos than Genesis in dealing with Gentile converts? What can we learn from their example about how to apply the Bible?




Paul passionately urged the Galatian Christians not to give up their freedom in Christ. While no one today is trying to force Christians to be circumcised, what are some other ways you’ve seen “rules” pressed as crucial to salvation? How can living in Christian freedom produce “faith working through love”? When have you really thought you were right on a secondary point, but let it go out of love rather than pressing it?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, like all your children, I miss the mark at times. I'm so thankful you died to set me free from guilt, and that you empower me to keep living into your love in the freedom you offer. Amen.


Thursday, January 25 – Read **Exodus 21:18-25 and Matthew 5:38-44**. We saw yesterday that the apostles Peter, Paul, and James boldly claimed that, in the light of Jesus, they should act differently than Genesis 17 said. They learned that approach from Jesus himself, who taught, "It was said...but I say to you...". The law in Exodus 21, as well as Leviticus 24 and Deuteronomy 19, made retribution proportional— "an eye for an eye"—and avoided massive retaliation. But Jesus said his kingdom went further, into a more radical domain: "Love your enemies."


 Students of ancient history see that, in a world in which revenge often went beyond the original injury, such as, "you hurt me, I'll kill your whole family," Israel's proportional revenge law was more merciful than most. Over and over the Bible's stories are about God working with any willing human material available. Could it be that the law in Exodus was as far from the more vengeful ancient ideas as God could lead Israel at that stage in their spiritual life?

 We think of ourselves as more enlightened than in the ancient world. But we sell T-shirts and bumper stickers saying things like "I don't get mad—I get even." How does it alter human relationships to replace a wish for revenge with an ideal of mutual love and service? In what ways does Jesus' teaching speak to the spirit in which you deal with others?

Prayer: Lord God, phrases like "massive retaliation" and "force is the only language they understand" still tempt me. Please keep leading me into the quality of love that Jesus taught. Amen.

Friday, January 26 – Read **2 Timothy 3:10-17**. The Bible is not short on details, from naming generations in the Old Testament to the locations where God delivered Paul from abuse. They don't always seem to match perfectly. But the details aren't the point of the Scripture's deep story. God's loving acts redeeming humanity are. Every inspired Scripture is part of a story aimed at bringing people into a vibrant relationship with God through word and deed. As followers of God, Scripture shows humans how to live a life reflective of God's love and redemption.

 When you read Scripture, how often do you find some of the details deflecting your attention from the larger story? Whether in the Meditation Moments, in sermons, or in your personal devotions, do your best to view each individual passage, especially its details, in the framework of the larger story, the "metanarrative," that the Bible has delivered for centuries.

 To say that "Scripture is inspired by God" means that the writers of the Bible were filled with God's Spirit as they wrote the truth to the best of their knowledge. This is the reason that the authority of Scripture derives from the movement of God's Spirit in times past and in our reading of it today. How do you open your heart and mind to let God's Spirit, who guided the Bible's writers, also guide you to let the Bible authoritatively shape your life?

Prayer: Lord God, help us to see the wisdom contained in your word so that we may live lives inspired to do everything that is good. Amen.

Saturday, January 27 – Read **John 5:35-40 and Hebrews 1:1-4**. Jesus challenged the Pharisees in Jerusalem, some of the world's top experts on the Hebrew Scriptures. Many of them could recite huge sections of the Bible from memory. Yet Jesus said they missed the focal point of the Bible's story—they wouldn't recognize him as God among them. Missing that focal point, Jesus said, just a vast technical knowledge of the Bible could not bring them life. To readers who most likely knew and loved the Hebrew Scriptures, the writer of Hebrews said God had indeed spoken through the prophets, "in many times and many ways." But, he added, God's greatest revelation, God's ultimate word, was not a book, but a person: the person of Jesus. Christians believe that only through Jesus can we rightly understand the rest of God's story unfolded in the Bible.



These passages need to shape how we read the Bible. Sometimes we read it as just a set of short, almost random verses, all equally true, and not relating to other parts of the Bible. We can easily miss the big idea that the Bible is meant to be a love letter from God, helping us deepen that relationship with the living Christ. If Christ is the ultimate word of God, then we need to read all the pieces of the Bible in terms of how they fit into the Bible's grand overall story, which reached its saving peak in Jesus. How can you study the Bible, not just as a cerebral exercise (though it will call on all the mental firepower you have), but to come into Jesus' presence and learn from him? When have you sensed Jesus' presence as you read your Bible? What has he taught you about the priority of love? In what ways does making him the standard of all truth cast a different light on many of the Bible's difficult parts?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, lead my mind and my heart beyond theories, abstractions, and rigid systems. Meet me as I open myself to the Bible and speak your life-giving word into my heart. Amen.