

WHY AND HOW SHOULD I READ THE BIBLE?

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Resources for Christ-Centered Discipleship

John 5:35-40 (NIV)

John was a lamp that burned and gave light, and you chose for a time to enjoy his light. ³⁶ "I have testimony weightier than that of John. For the very work that the Father has given me to finish, and which I am doing, testifies that the Father has sent me. ³⁷ And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form, ³⁸ nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent. ³⁹ You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, ⁴⁰ yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

When I was a teenager I loved to read, and still do. In High School I became interested in reading about religion and philosophy. I read Sidhartha, Herman Hesse's book on the search for self-knowledge and spiritual enlightenment, as well as a little of the mystical, psychological work of Karl Jung. I read Aldous Huxley's "The Doors of Perception" about people who tried to expand their consciousness through psychedelic drugs, and I read some of the Bhagavad-Gita, which is Hindu Scripture. All of that reading was interesting, but I still remember the difference when I opened the Bible for the first time and began to read it for myself.

One afternoon I was alone at home rummaging around in the garage when I found a Bible. I had read portions of the Bible as a child in Sunday School, but I had never in my life, with any seriousness or sincerity, opened the Bible and read for myself the words of Jesus Christ. As I read the Bible that day the words of Jesus seemed to be in a completely different class from all the other books I had been reading about spiritual life. The Bible was alive, powerful, and compelling in a way that nothing else was.

Many people, like me, have discovered in the Bible not only a source of guidance and truth, but also a source of life and strength. What is it about the Bible that makes it so powerful for so many people? How important is the Bible? How should we think about and read the Bible to get its power into our lives?

There is no one better to help us with these questions than Jesus Christ Himself. He made some very strong, important, and helpful statements about the Bible and it's especially interesting to see what Jesus actually said about it. In John chapter 5 there is the story of a confrontation Jesus had with some of the religious leaders in his day. Out of the midst of this confrontation came some strong words about the Bible.

The background for the story and the cause of the confrontation was that Jesus had healed a paralyzed man on the Sabbath day. This created a conflict

because it was the Sabbath day, which was a religious holiday, a prescribed day of rest. Religious people had taken this to mean something that was never intended and they even ruled out acts of healing like the one Jesus had just performed. As Jesus explained his actions and his authority the religious leaders realized he was claiming to be equal with God and they challenged his claim. Jesus said, "If I just give you my testimony, you won't receive it so let me give you three lines of evidence that back up my authority."

- 1.) The testimony of John the Baptist
- 2.) The miracles (the work) that Jesus himself performed
- 3.) God the Father's testimony

The three witnesses, or lines of evidence he gives are summarized in verses 35-37.

John 5:35-39: (1) *John was a lamp that burned and gave light, and you chose for a time to enjoy his light.* ³⁶ *"I have testimony weightier than that of John.* (2) *For the very work that the Father has given me to finish, and which I am doing, testifies that the Father has sent me.* ³⁷ (3) *And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form,* ³⁸ *nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent.* ³⁹ *You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me,*

The point to stress first is that in Jesus' argument, and in his teaching, the testimony of the Father is the same as the Scriptures. As testimony one has John the Baptist, the work of Christ (his miracles), and the Word, which is the testimony of God the Father, on the pages of Scripture. Jesus stating that the Bible is the Word of God has to be one of the best answers to the question: "Why should I read the Bible?"

We Should Read the Bible because it is the Word of God

The Bible is the Word of God because God inspired it. In 2 Timothy 3:16-17 the apostle Paul wrote: *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,* ¹⁷ *so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.* 2 Peter 1:21 put it like this: *Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*

God used their personalities and experiences to work with and through the human agents in such a way that the final result of the process of inspiration was what could only be called the word of God.

Jesus often referred to the Scriptures, the Bible, as The Word of God.

In Luke 11:28 Jesus said, "*Blessed ... are those who hear the word of God and obey it.*" Jesus so clearly believed in and taught the inspiration of the Bible that He based his own life and ministry completely on the Bible. Therefore, we cannot truly believe in Jesus without also believing in the Bible. Jesus always pointed people back to the Bible as the source of true answers for what to believe and how to live.

When I first became a Christian I believed in the Bible primarily because of the powerful way it spoke to me. After a while I began to wonder if there were other reasons to believe in the Scripture. I discovered there were. The fulfilled prophecies of Scripture, the remarkable preservation of the original text of the Bible, and the unique unity and power of the Scriptures all reflect divine inspiration. There are also compelling historical evidences for the reality and uniqueness of the life of Jesus, his profound teachings, his miraculous works, and especially his resurrection from the dead. Jesus is the most outstanding and authoritative figure in all of human history. By him telling us that the Bible is the Word of God we don't have to resolve every difficulty and answer every question in order to believe in the inspiration of the Bible.

Billy Graham tells about a particular night when he was struggling with some unanswered questions about faith. He said he got his Bible and went out into the moonlight and when he got to a stump put his Bible on it. Kneeling down he said: "Oh God, I cannot prove certain things. I cannot answer some of the questions... people are raising, but I accept this book by faith as the Word of God." He said he felt a tremendous sense of God's presence and inward peace as he made that decision. Later in life more and more of His questions were answered after making that statement of faith.

When you take an honest and sincere look at the Bible one of the things you learn is that you can come to the place where you believe in the Bible even though you still have some questions about it. It's true that faith in the Bible, if it is real, has to be reasonable. There has to be some basis for belief. Don't make the mistake of thinking you have to have every question fully answered before you can believe.

The Bible is the Word of God. Jesus told us that. We have to choose to believe it. If we believe, it follows that we should read the Bible as our highest authority for faith and life.

We Should Read the Bible as our Highest Authority for Faith and Life

If the Bible is God's word then it has to be our supreme authority for what we believe and how we act. Jesus made it clear that he lived his life under the authority of the Bible. He always pointed people back to the Bible as the source of true answers for what to believe and how to live. In Luke 11:28 Jesus said, "*Blessed ... are those who hear the word of God and obey it.*" Accepting the

Bible as your highest authority gives you the only foundation on which you can build a life of strength.

The Bible provides true answers that tell how to live our lives on this earth. It is filled with page after page of clear and practical instructions for day-to-day life. We know from the Bible that only God can fill the deepest needs of our hearts and that we must develop a personal love relationship with him in order to be fulfilled in life. The Bible tells us that in the midst of stress and pressure we must turn to God in prayer and rely on his promises. Also, the Bible tells us that being single can be a high calling used by God, (1 Corinthians 7:7-8) but it is the exception rather than the rule; marriage is the norm (Genesis 2:24; 1 Corinthians 7:2). If you are a Christian and you marry you must only marry another Christian (1 Corinthians 7:39). Sexual intimacy outside of marriage is wrong, but within marriage it is great. These are practical teachings for day-to-day life. The Bible says we should be generous with our possessions, love people, forgive those who hurt us, fulfill our responsibilities to our families and friends, and face the trials of life with courage and faith in God. The Ten Commandments have been called a brilliant summary or analysis of the minimum conditions for a civilized society.

Some people say: "I don't want all these rules. It's too restrictive. I want to be free to do what I want to do so I can enjoy life." Imagine that a friend buys a couple of acres out in the country to build his dream house. He invites you out to see it and over on one part of the land, a huge foundation with conduits for wiring and pipes for plumbing are sticking up in all the right places, but there's something funny about the house that is in the process of being built. About half of it is on the foundation but the other half of the house is sprawling off the concrete and off onto the sand and grass. You turn to your friend and ask why the whole house isn't on the foundation. He says: "Look, this is my dream house and I just don't want to be limited to this one foundation as I build the house. I wanted to be free to let the house take shape as I build it. If I only build on the slab I won't be able to do that." Of course we know that's crazy. No one would ever think of building his house that way, but people try to live their lives that way all the time. In Matthew 7 Jesus said: *"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand."* You should not think of the Bible's teachings as a restriction but rather a foundation.

People often say: "I want the freedom to follow my own heart and be my own spiritual authority," but the Bible says that is a very naive way of looking at the issue of freedom. The truth is that your heart is subject to all kinds of pressures and powers. If we don't come under the truth of God we end up dominated by our own misguided ideas, desires, emotions, and weaknesses. The result is that people get hurt. Jesus tells us that submission to God's truth revealed in the Bible is wise and good.

Accepting the Bible as your highest authority gives you the only foundation on which you can build a life of strength.

Accepting the Bible as your highest authority gives you the only foundation for a real relationship with God.

I heard an example once from an old Star Trek episode in which there was a character named Harcourt Fenton Mudd (Harry for short) who had a planet that was his own world. He lived as a king on this planet with beautiful women who were actually robots he had made. He made these robots so whenever he said anything they said "yes". He also had a robot of his wife who did nothing but nag him. She would begin to say: "Where have you been Harcourt Mudd? Is that alcohol I smell on your breath? How dare you!" The trick was, whenever he didn't want to hear it, he could turn her off and she would fade out. "How dare you, you, you..." Now, had he created a paradise? No, it was miserable because there was no real relationship. When you have people that you can turn off whenever they offend you, are surrounded by people who only and always say, "Yes dear" and never challenge or contradict you, it sort of sounds like it might be nice to try, but what happens is there is no intimacy or relationship.

It's the same with God. When you say, "I believe in God but I don't accept the Bible when it says this kind of behavior is right and this kind of behavior is wrong." What you are basically doing is saying, "I believe in God as long as he doesn't contradict me or annoy me." It's the same as if you are saying, "When God's word, the Bible, contradicts, offends or challenges me I'm just going to turn it off in my mind." If you do that you will experience the peace of foolishness at the price of real relationship.

You will never really or deeply know Jesus Christ if you do not accept his view of the Bible. His view of Scripture was the basis for his entire life. He said the Word of God is the Father's testimony and that it is truth from God. Unless you receive it as the revelation of God what you end up with is not relationship and paradise, but silence and emptiness. Jesus said God has revealed himself in the Bible. If you turn off, turn down, or tune out that revelation that is coming from God in the Bible you cannot have a real relationship with God.

Read the Bible, and when you read the Bible, read it as your highest source of authority for faith and for life. But don't stop there. When you read the Bible and receive it as your authority for life, read it also as a love letter from God to you.

We Should Read the Bible as a Love Letter From God Himself

Let's go back to John 5 and notice what Jesus says in John 5:39-40: *You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess*

eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, ⁴⁰ yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

Jesus is talking to people who believe the Bible is the Word of God and who were diligent students of the Scriptures. In verse 39 Jesus says, “*You diligently study the Scriptures.*” But, even though they believed in the inspiration of the Scriptures and studied them diligently they completely missed the meaning, the point, and the purpose of the Scriptures. What was it in the Scriptures that they missed? Jesus says, “You study the Scripture diligently but you're not coming to me personally to receive life from me!” It is no good studying the Bible if the Scriptures are not bringing us to Christ!

This applies in two ways: First, In the Bible God speaks to people who are not yet Christians and draws them to faith in Christ. That is exactly what happened to me.

God uses his Word to bring us to faith. From the Bible we learn that God's love isn't something we earn or deserve and eternal life is not a reward for being good or religious. Christ died on the cross and rose again for our redemption. He paid for our sins. You receive Christ as your Lord and Savior by simply and sincerely turning to him and trusting in Him just as you are.

We turn to Christ because God graciously draws us to Himself and leads us to faith. When God works in us and on us to draw us to Christ the primary instrument or tool that the Holy Spirit uses is the Word of God, the Bible. James 1:18 says: He chose to give us birth (spiritual birth) through the word of truth....

In the Bible God speaks to people who are not yet Christians and draws them to faith in Christ. Second, In the Bible God also speaks to Christians to continually draw us deeper into faith in Christ and relationship with him.

A great summary of the purpose of the Bible, and really of all Christian ministry is found in Colossians 1:28. Paul is describing his ministry as an apostle through whom the Scriptures were being inspired. He says: *We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.* There is the purpose of the Bible in a nutshell.

1.) The message of Scripture: Verse 28 *We proclaim Him* (Christ!). This is not just the truth about Him, but Christ Himself, offered to people in personal relationship.

2.) The method of Scripture: Admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom.

3.) The mission of Scripture: So that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. The mission is to see people transformed by Christ into the image of Christ.

In the Bible God is continually speaking to you in love and wisdom to draw you deeper into a relationship with Christ that transforms you into the image of Christ.

Learn to listen to Scripture with your heart. Hear the voice of Christ himself speaking to you from the pages of the Bible. In John 10:27 Jesus says: *My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.* When you read the Bible read it as a love letter from God, read it prayerfully, humbly, and thoughtfully. Hear in it the voice of Christ your Savior and shepherd speaking to you personally, assuring you of his love and care, and guiding you as you follow him.

The same Jesus who taught the multitudes in the Sermon on the Mount and counseled the disciples in the upper room speaks to you through the Bible when you listen, read, and believe. That is why one of the most powerful things you could ever do in your life is to make a commitment and begin to build a habit of setting aside some regular time for reading the Bible and drawing near to God.

Give time to reading the Bible. Choose a time and a place, a notebook and pen, and dig in. Ask God to cleanse, nourish, and build your life through his word. Then read, pray, think, and reflect.

Ask questions:

- 1.) What does the passage say?
- 2.) What does this Scripture mean?
- 3.) How does this passage apply to my life?

Is there a Sin to confess or avoid, a promise to claim, an example to follow, a command to obey? Is there something that leads my heart to Christ as my Savior and my source of life?

- 4.) How does this passage lead me to Christ?

What does this show me about my need for Christ or his grace toward me?

In John 5 Jesus says the Scriptures lead us to Him so that we can find life in Him. If you let the Bible lead you to Christ and keep you close to him what you will find is life.