

## **A Final Word**

### 2 Timothy 3:10–4:5

There's a scene in Tolkien's *Hobbit*, where the dwarves are preparing to cross through Mirkwood, a dark and dangerous forest, but the only thing standing between them and the Lonely Mountain, their destination where they hope to reclaim their lost kingdom. But the evening before they arrive at the forest gate, Gandalf, the wizard who has guided their party and protected them and even rescued them several times, tells them that he is not going with them. The dwarves are filled with despair. How will they make it through? What if they get lost? What if they encounter more goblins, or something worse? And yet he leaves them with one final instruction: Don't leave the path. If you stick to the path, you might just make it to the other side. If you go off the path, "a thousand to one you will never find it again and never get out of Mirkwood."

I kind of wonder if Timothy felt a little like the dwarves at the edge of Mirkwood when he received Paul's second letter to him, recognizing the dangerous path before him, but realizing that Paul would not be with him much longer. Paul describes the situation before the church in 2 Timothy 3:1-5:

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. <sup>2</sup> For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, <sup>3</sup> heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, <sup>4</sup> treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, <sup>5</sup> having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.

Walking in faithfulness to Christ is not going to be easy for God's people. But then Paul tells Timothy the really bad news, that he's about to die. Chapter 4:6-8, he says,

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. <sup>7</sup> I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. <sup>8</sup> Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

That's great for Paul, but what will Timothy do? What will the churches do? Paul had been Timothy's Gandalf. His guide and mentor. He and the apostles were the church's connection to Jesus. They were the ones who knew him, learned from him, saw him raised from the dead, and who passed on his teaching. And now, like Paul, they're beginning to go the way of all the earth. How will the church hear from God? How will the church make it safely through Mirkwood and avoid false teaching and false living and stay true to Christ, if Paul isn't going in with them?

That's really what this letter is about. It's Paul's final instruction to Timothy and the church at the edge of Mirkwood just before he departs. And his central charge comes in ch. 4:2: "Preach the Word." It's Paul's version of "don't leave the path." Preach the Word; hold fast to the Word.

Look at Paul's charge to Timothy in 4:1-4, and how it addresses the problem he raised at the beginning of ch. 3:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: <sup>2</sup> preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. <sup>3</sup> For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, <sup>4</sup> and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. (4:1-4)

How will the church remain faithful and healthy and effective until Christ returns? [4:2] *Preach the Word*. And the "word" that Paul talks about is the "all scripture" he mentioned a couple verses earlier in 3:16. To stay on the path is to hold fast to the Scriptures. Don't add to it or take away from it; don't turn from it to the right or the left. The Scriptures are the sufficient revelation of God for the ongoing life, health, and ministry of the church.

But this raises a few questions for us I want to explore together, namely: What Word? Why the Word? And what now? First, *what Word?* What does Paul mean when he says "all Scripture"? Because different Christian traditions have answered that in different ways. Second, *why the Word?* What is it about the Scriptures that make it the sufficient revelation of God for the ongoing life of the church, such that we need not improve upon it, add to it, or take away from it? And then third, *what now?* What difference does all of this make?

### **What Word? *The Canon of Scripture***

I want to talk first about *what Word?*—what we call the canon of Scripture (canon spelled with one 'n'). What does Paul refer to when he says "*all Scripture* is breathed out by God?" But to answer that, we need to take a broader look at the passage.

Paul warned Timothy at the beginning of ch. 3 about what's going to happen during the "last days" as he puts it (which is a phrase Paul and other New Testament writers use to talk about the time period between Christ's first and second comings, e.g., Heb. 1:1). And after warning him about how badly people will stray from the path, he then encourages Timothy in vv. 10-17, basically saying, 'I have confidence that you know better.' And there are two reasons Paul is confident that Timothy will stay on the path—v. 14: "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed [stay on the path], knowing from whom you learned it [the example of people in your life, like me, and like your mother and grandmother] and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings [the Scriptures], which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (3:14-15).

Notice here that Paul doesn't just point Timothy to a book. His answer for how the church will remain faithful is not, 'take these two Bible verses and call me in the morning,' as though the Bible is some kind of magical talisman that will keep me from sin, or even as though the goal is to make sure we believe all the right things and have the right information (an academic endeavor). There's an intensely relational aspect to walking with God. Paul shared his life with Timothy; he says in v. 10:

“You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra - which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me” (3:10-11).

And yet, what is it that Paul has sought to ground Timothy in and point Timothy to *through* that relationship? To the Scriptures. The same Scriptures his mother Eunice and grandmother Lois imparted to him since childhood (cf. 1:5). Paul points him to the Scriptures as the key to faithfulness, because, he says in 3:16, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work” (3:16-17). The Scriptures are the sufficient revelation of God for the ongoing life, health, and ministry of the church.

But then comes our question, *what Word?* What does Paul mean here when he says “all Scripture”? In the immediate context, Paul is talking primarily about the *Hebrew Scriptures*, what we call the Old Testament. Remember that when Paul was writing this letter, the New Testament was still in formation. The early church’s Bible was the Old Testament. *But*, by the time Peter wrote his second letter, some of Paul’s writings had already begun to be recognized as “scripture” (2 Pet. 3:15-16). And so, while Paul is talking primarily about the Old Testament, what he says about the Old Testament can be rightly applied to everything that belongs in the Bible—that it is breathed out by God and useful for teaching and equipping the church.

And so the next question is, what belongs in the Bible? Which books are properly understood to be Scripture? Should we expect any more? In other words, what is the *canon* of Scripture—the standard collection of books belonging in the Bible—and is that canon “closed” or complete? Because the Protestant Bible in your hands has fewer books than a Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox one.

Some of us here have grown up in Catholic or Orthodox traditions, and so we’re familiar with what’s called the Apocrypha (which means “hidden”). These are 14 or so additional books or portions of books that you don’t find in a Protestant Bible. Which is to say that Protestants don’t recognize them as Scripture. They’re not bad to read; in fact, they’re quite useful for history and even for edification. They’re just not the Word of God, and there are several reasons why.

This is a big conversation, but here are a few brief points: First, though they come from the time before Christ, and are typically included among the Old Testament, none of them were ever recognized by Israel as divine Scripture. And the church gets the Old Testament from Israel (cf. Rom. 3:2; 9:3-4). Second, none of the apocryphal writings themselves claim to be Scripture. For instance, the prologue to Ben Sirach (or Ecclesiasticus) explicitly distinguishes itself from the Old Testament Scriptures. Third, none of the apocryphal writings are quoted in the New Testament as Scripture. And finally, it wasn’t until after the Protestant Reformation had challenged the inspiration of these books that the Roman Catholic Church officially canonized them (the Council of Trent in 1546). Up to that point, even Catholics were divided on the issue. Jerome, who translated the Latin Vulgate, viewed the Apocrypha as books of the church, but not books of the Bible.<sup>1</sup>

And so there are good reasons to apply what Paul says about Scripture to the 66 books of the Bible in your hand. These books are the sufficient revelation of God for the ongoing life, health, and ministry of the church.

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<sup>1</sup> David deSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha: Message, Context, and Significance* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 36-37.

But should we expect more books to be added some day? Maybe not the Apocrypha, but something else? In other words, is the canon “closed”? Is the Bible finished or complete?

This actually brings us to our second big question, why the Word? What we call the sufficiency of Scripture.

### **Why the Word? *The Sufficiency of Scripture***

Of all the things Paul could point Timothy to in order to guide the church through this dark world, why is Scripture his emphasis? He doesn't point to an infallible office in the church. He doesn't point to a living prophet. He points to an abiding Word, the Scriptures—the apostolic message, which was written down for all generations. As one author puts it, “the Scriptures contain everything we need for knowledge of salvation and godly living.”<sup>2</sup>

We see this in Paul's words to Timothy here in ch. 3. The Scriptures are sufficient for both salvation and godliness. Look again at 3:14: “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, *which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus*” (3:14-15). The Scriptures contain everything we need for knowledge of salvation, because the Scriptures reveal to us our sufficient Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's these words that reveal to us our created purpose, that we were made in God's image to have relationship with him as his children and servants of his kingdom. It's these words that reveal to us our fallen condition, that our sin has separated us from God and brought us under his divine judgment. It's these words that reveal to us God's divine promise, that he will restore what was lost by redeeming a people for himself. And it's these words that reveal to us how God has in fact accomplished that redemption through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who gave his life as our sufficient sacrifice on the cross, that all who believe in him might be saved.

This is the overarching message of Scripture, and it is through this Word that salvation is possible, such that the New Testament even describes the Christian as having “been born again . . . through the living and abiding Word of God” (1 Pet. 1:23). God's Word is powerful to save. You can think of it this way: it's the Word of God that does the work of God as the Spirit applies it to our lives. The Word of God does the work of God as the Spirit applies it to our lives.

And this is true not only for salvation, but also for sanctification and godliness. Paul continues in vv. 16-17: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.” How can a Christian be changed? How do we grow in our knowledge of God? How do we stay on the right path? How are we trained in righteousness, that we might serve God? How do we become equipped for *every* good work? *Through the Scriptures*. “We do not need to add to it to meet today's challenges or subtract from it to mesh with today's ideals. The word of God is perfect and complete, giving us all we need to know about Christ, salvation,

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<sup>2</sup> Kevin DeYoung, *Taking God at his Word* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 44.

and godliness”<sup>3</sup> (cf. 2 Pet. 1:3-4). Because Jesus is sufficient, the Bible is the sufficient revelation of God for the ongoing life of the church.

This is also the reason we can be confident that the canon of Scripture is in fact closed, that Bible is finished and there are no new books to be written. Because the *redemptive work of God in Christ is finished*. Revelation bears witness to redemption; God makes himself known for our salvation and godliness. And so to suggest that we need more books, or a new word, is to suggest that the redemptive work of God is incomplete. That Jesus wasn’t enough.

But listen to what Hebrews 1:1-4 says:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets,<sup>2</sup> but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.<sup>3</sup> He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,<sup>4</sup> having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

There is a finality to God’s revelation here (“in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son”), because there is a finality to Christ’s redemption here (“after making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become . . . superior”). As one author writes, “We are awaiting no other king to rule over us. We need no other prophet like Muhammed. There can be no further priest to atone for our sins. The work of redemption has been completed. And we must not separate redemption from revelation. Both were finished and fulfilled in the Son.”<sup>4</sup>

Because Christ is sufficient for salvation and spiritual growth, the Bible is the sufficient revelation of God for the ongoing life of the church.

So what now? What difference does all this make? What does the sufficiency of Scripture mean for the life of the church?

### **What now? *The Sufficiency of Scripture in the Life of the Church***

First, it means we need to *prioritize the Word in the life of the church*. I think we’ve made this point every week in this series, but for obvious reasons.

We don’t need to add to the Word, update it, or take away from it. What we need is to *preach it* and *teach it*. Again, Paul’s central charge to Timothy: “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” (4:2).

This means that the Bible must be central in every ministry and every relationship. The Word of God does the work of God as the Spirit applies it to our lives. And so walking with Christ means staying on the path of the Scripture and bringing that Word to bear on every aspect of life.

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<sup>3</sup> DeYoung, 45.

<sup>4</sup> DeYoung, 49.

For preaching in our gathered worship, my own conviction is that this means our main diet on Sunday mornings should be what's called "expositional preaching." The kind of preaching where the message and aim of the sermon is shaped and driven by the message and aim of the biblical text being preached. If the Word of God does the work of God, then what we need for godliness and salvation is not a series of cleverly crafted principles that come from the Bible; we need the Bible itself. We need to trust the sufficiency of Scripture, that God's word will accomplish all that he sends it to do (Isa. 55:11-12). This is why our normal practice is to work through whole books of the Bible on Sunday mornings, from both the Old and New Testament. Because *all* Scripture is breathed out by God and useful for shaping God's people.

So we need to prioritize Scripture in the life of the church. Second, we also need to *work hard at handling the Word correctly*. To make sure that what we're saying and hearing is what God is actually saying in his Word. Paul put it this way in ch. 2:15, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth."

The Bible does not mean whatever we want it to mean. It means what God intends it to mean. There will always be a temptation in this dark, fallen world for people to no longer "endure sound teaching, but having itching ears [to] accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and . . . turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths" (4:3-4). But we must stay on the path. We have to work hard at understanding God's Word correctly. That's an important part of the discipleship process, and something we have spent time teaching in some of our Sunday School classes. But here are four simple reminders to help us handle God's word well:

1. Read the Bible in *context*. When we pay attention to the context (historical or literary), it's a lot harder to make the Bible say something it doesn't. For instance, you could suggest that Psalm 14:1 says "there is no god." The phrase is there. But the context clarifies what it actually means: "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'"
2. Read the Bible in *conversation with God*. In other words, read it in prayer, asking God to make himself known to you in his Word.
3. Read the Bible in *community*. We need each other to help us understand and obey it, not only our brothers and sisters right here, but others around us and those who have gone before us.
4. Read the Bible with an eye toward *Christ* and his fulfillment. He is the center of the biblical story; every passage in some way points to him or is anchored in him. Read and obey the Scriptures in devotion to and dependence on Christ.

And that brings us to our final implication. If the Bible is God's sufficient revelation for the ongoing life, health, and ministry of the church, then we can't stop with just understanding it; we need to *apply it as though our life depends on it*, because it does. As Moses said to Israel in the wilderness, and as Jesus quoted when facing Satan in the desert, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God'" (Matt. 4:4; cf. Deut. 8:3). And they weren't just talking about learning the Word, or even just believing the Word, but *obeying* the Word. Obey the Bible like your life depends on it—because it really does.

Not because our relationship with God is some sort of legalistic transaction, where we do something good for God and he rewards us. The Word is not a handbook for self-improvement

or spiritual bragging rights; it's food for the weak and weary. The only food that truly lasts, and actually satisfies. Everything else in this world will leave you hungry and disappointed. Only life according to God's Word, in devotion and dependence on Christ, brings lasting joy and satisfaction. Because it's the way life was meant to be lived.

The Bible is the sufficient revelation of God for the ongoing life of the church. If you stick to this path, by God's grace you will make it to the other side. If you go off the path, you may never find it again and never get out of Mirkwood. Don't leave the path. To quote Moses again, "For it is no empty word for you, but your very life, and by this word you shall live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess" (Deut. 32:47).