

Sermon Transcript from January 17th, 2016
The Book of Strange, New Things
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"You study the Scripture diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life."

When I read the Scriptures, I for one have all sorts of questions. Questions like, "Why the Bible? Why read it, study it, invest hours and hours over the coming year to journey through the Bible as a community?"

Why? Why live under the authority of this ancient library as followers of Jesus? And questions like, "What is the Bible in the first place?" This is a weird, alien, strange thing. What exactly is it? And then what is it for? What role does this play in the Kingdom of God and life and everything? And where does it come from? Rumor has it that we don't actually have the original manuscripts. What we have is thousands of copies of the original manuscripts. Is that true? Is that not true? Is what we have reliable or not? Is the Bible full of errors and contradictions? Yes? No? Kind of? What's the story?

And then, of course, how do I read it? Do you ever think that? You get down it's like – I mean, obviously when you read you start at the top and go down. But, how exactly do you read it and meet with God and read it with intelligence but also with the right heart and mind? What exactly is this thing?

And we don't have all the answers here at Bridgetown by any stretch of the imagination. But, the hope for the first part of the year is to kind of tackle each one of those questions one after the other. So, last week, we covered why the Bible? Remember? Short answer: because we're followers of Jesus and Jesus was obsessed with the Bible. He was a rabbi or a Bible teacher. That's why. And then, tonight, we want to tackle "what is the Bible?" Next week we'll go after "what is the Bible for?" The week after that, Tim Mackie will actually be here to teach on "where does it come from?" And then, finally, "how do I read it?"

So, that's essentially the map for the next month or so. Sound good? Yes? Anybody? Kind of? Sort of? Okay. So tonight, here's the question to start off: what is the Bible? Is it an encyclopedia of truth where you look up a subject of interest and learn all there is to know?

"God: G. G-O. G-O-D. Boom boom boom. There it all is."

"Marriage: M. M-A. M-A-R..."

"Sex."

"How to get ahead in life."

Is that what it is? Or is it not that at all? Is it an allegory about you and Jesus and the right way to read it is to look for the deep symbolic or spiritual? Meanings? This morning you read about Moses and the river, but actually the river was symbolic for the Holy Spirit and it's how we flow in the Holy Spirit. Hint: that's not right.

But, that's how a lot of people read the Bible. A lot of people I know. Or is your professor read Bible in college as Lit class? Is he right? Is this thing no different than the Iliad or the Odyssey? It's an ancient book. That's all. It's human. It's full of errors. It's full of contradictions. It's not trustworthy at all. But, you know, it's interesting if you want to know what ancient Hebrew men thought about God. Is that it? Is that true? I'm sure he or she has a lot of good stuff to say.

Or is this something else? Now, here's why this matters: if we misunderstand what the Bible is, the odds are that we will turn it into something it's not. That we will use it and abuse it to our own ends. So, I have a little brother who is 12 years younger than me. So, when I was in high school, he was a toddler. Poor guy. And I remember once I was babysitting, I think I was 16 and he was 4, and we were in the kitchen and there's a pantry off to the side and he said, "I want an apple."

And I said, "Go for it. In the pantry on the ground."

He goes in and he takes out a giant red onion. Since I'm such a fantastic older brother, I

said, "Go for it, Matt. All you man."

And, at four years old, I just remember this gigantic, mouth-watering bite all the way into the red onion. And then he just started to smile and then he started to cry and then he started to scream. It was so awesome. But my point is if you come to the Bible and you misunderstand what it is, the odds are it's going to taste weird in your mouth. It's going to come off wrong.

So, what exactly is this thing? Here's my answer: I would argue that the Bible is a library of writings that are both divine and human but, together, tell a unified story which leads us to Jesus.

I repeat: the Bible is a library of writings that are both divine and human but, together, tell a unified story which leads us to Jesus. Let's pull that apart phrase by phrase.

First off: the Bible is a library. It's not a book. The title "Bible" is misleading. That is from the Latin "biblia" and it means "book." But, the Bible itself never calls itself a book. It never calls itself the Bible. How ironic is that? Bible is an unbiblical name. Now, it's not wrong to call it that, but it's just never called that in the Bible itself. It's easy to forget that the Bible is not a book since it's all put together in one – what? – book.

But remember, it wasn't put together like this until hundreds of years after Jesus with the invention of the codex. And it wasn't for over a millennium later until Gutenberg did his thing and made it possible for you to carry your Bible around in your purse or your man-bag or whatever it is.

Prior to that it was on scrolls made out of papyrus, for the most part from the Nile River in Egypt. There were 24 scrolls just for the Old Testament, not to mention all of the letters and such in the New Testament. It was a library. Now, it's very important that you wrap your head around this idea and that you think of the Bible as a library, because it has a huge effect on how you read the Bible.

Think about it. You come to a library very differently than you come at a book, right? A book usually has one genre. It's a novel or it's a memoir or it's a cookbook or a textbook or a comic book or it's poetry. But, a library has it all and more. But you read each type of literature very differently. Very few people sit down on the couch with a good cup of coffee and read through a cookbook. I mean, you're welcome to if you want. And even less people take notes and underline stuff in a sci-fi thriller. It's just not really how you read it.

In the same way, the Scriptures are diverse and have all sorts of types of writing and literature. For example, here's a few of the books that I'm reading right now. I'm rereading "Outliers" by Malcolm Gladwell, one of my all-time favorite non-fiction books. He's a journalist. Great read. And then I'm reading "The Drama of Doctrine." It's a 600-pages-long, thick, heady, academic textbook. Then I'm reading this little coffee table book, "Daily Rituals." It's about two pages on two hundred and fifty different artists and writers and creators and what their daily routine was like.

And then, of course, "Jurassic Park" by Michael Crichton. I just had never read any of his stuff. Josh Porter turned me on to him. I've read three of his novels in the last week. I just can't stop. This is seriously so good. They should make a movie out of it or something.

Now, each one of these books – here's my point – conveys truth about God, the Bible, doctrine, human nature, science, medicine, chaos theory. Remember that from the 90s? Each one of these conveys history, conveys truth. But, each one does it in a very different way. And, because of that, I read each one very differently. This is how we need to come at the Bible. All sorts of problems come when people don't recognize that the Bible is a library, written by dozens of authors and all sorts of genres in three very different languages, full of history and memoir and biography and poetry and prophecy and apocalyptic (which is a genre of literature we don't even have anymore), census data, genealogical records, letters. I mean, so much is in here.

And, because of that, we need to read the Bible not literally, but literarily. See what I did there? That was good. Meaning we need to read the Bible according to its genre; according to – here's how you know – what the author was actually to get across. That's why we don't claim around here that we read the Bible "literally." A lot of people brag about that or claim about that or make fun of people who whatever. Read the Bible "literally."

The reality is that nobody actually does that if by "literally" you mean "at face value."

Because the Bible is chock-full of metaphor and word picture and Hebrew and all sorts of ancient ideas. Now, most of the time when you read the Bible, it's crystal clear if what you are reading you are to read literally or as a metaphor. For example, when you're reading Isaiah and you read that the trees of the field will clap their hands, I don't care how fundamentalist you are, nobody reads that and actually says, "It's going to happen. One day the trees are going to be like Lord of the Rings horror movie style. They're going to clap. Praise Jesus."

I don't think so. It's pretty obvious that's Hebrew poetry. That is a beautiful way of saying that when Jesus is king over everything, it will be felt at an ecological, even at a cosmic, level. That creation itself with celebrate the freedom when Jesus is king of the world. That's beautiful.

But then there are a number of other passages in Scripture where it's not crystal clear if it's literal or if it's a metaphor. Think of Paul's famous line about Jesus coming back on the clouds. I very much think that is a metaphor and I don't have time to go into. Go back and listen to the Thessalonians series. A lot of other people very much think, "No. Jesus is actually going to come back up there on the clouds. After all, it says that Heaven is up there past the sky with the Jedi and such. It's out there."

So, we don't agree. Whatever. Wherever you land on that, my point is we have to read the Bible not literally as much as literarily. Otherwise we create unnecessary problems and people have to pick between God or the Bible and science, or the Bible and history. But, think about it: if you're reading, say, a fantasy novel like The Chronicles of Narnia by C.S. Lewis, and halfway through you find out that – guess what? – C.S. Lewis made all that stuff up. There's no White Witch. Maybe your mother-in-law but, other than that, there's no White Witch.

There's no Aslan. He made all of that up. That is not shattering to you. Why? Because it's not a history book, it's a fantasy novel. But, here's the thing: that doesn't mean that it's not true. Because, the reality is, most of us have read that story and think, "Wow. That is true and that is profound."

In the same way, the Bible is full of all sorts of genres of literature that are true, but we don't necessarily read at a literal, face-value level. For example – and agree to disagree here – we just finished reading Genesis. You may or may not know this: there is all sorts of debate and controversy over the first 11 chapters in Genesis. From Genesis 12 to the right, Abraham to the right, it basically reads like history. The same kind of literature that we have in 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Samuel about King David and Solomon and all of that is for the most part backed up by archaeology.

But, Genesis 1-11 is something ancient. I mean, by its own account, it goes back millennia, before Christ even, and no scholar is exactly sure how to read it or what the genre even is. There's no consensus. Okay? So, when you come to that debate, when you come to that controversy, the first question that you ask is not, "Is the Bible right or science? Was the Earth created 10 thousand years ago in 6, 24-hour days or is that a metaphor? Is that a word picture? Is that something else? Was the flood global or local? What about Adam and Eve? Was there actually one man and one woman even though biochemistry says that actually is impossible? So, is he more like an archetype?"

The first question you ask is not even, "Is this true or not?" The first question you ask is, "What type of literature am I reading? Am I reading history? Is this the same thing as 2 Kings? And, if so, if I am reading history, does ancient historiography play by the same set of rules as modern historiography? Should I expect the exact same behavior from an ancient historian, a millennium before Jesus, that I do from a journalist for the New York Times? Yes or no? Or is this not history at all? Is it something else? Is it myth? Not myth in the "false" or "lie" sense of the word, but in the academic sense of the word. Is it a pre-modern, pre-scientific story of origins that asks the big, huge questions of life? Who are we? Where do we come from? What is the meaning and purpose in life? Is there a God? What is He like? Or is it an allegory? Is it parabolic? Is it poetry? What is it?"

Come Wednesday night. Dr. Timothy Mackie. 6:30 P.M. Right here.

My point for tonight is the first question you ask is "what type of literature is this?" and then you go from there, because we read the Bible literarily because it is a library. Now, are you with me? Yes. Okay. Moving on.

There's a library of writings that are both divine and human. We'll talk about each one.

Writings that are divine in that God is behind each word and phrase. You read that last week with Jesus. Not the smallest letter will by any means pass away. In another spot, Jesus said that Scripture "cannot be broken."

Paul puts it this way in 2 Timothy 3:16: **"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."**

That phrase right there, "God-breathed," is just one word in Greek. It's "theopneustos." It's usually translated as "inspired." The Scriptures aren't just inspiring in the pep-talk sense of a Jesus shot in the arm, but the Scriptures are actually inspired in the technical sense of the word.

Here's N.T. Wright's definition of inspiration:

"Inspiration is a short-hand way of talking about the belief that, by His Spirit, God guided the very different writers and editors so that the books they produced were the books God intended His people to have."

I love that. To the point. So, more literally, this word "theopneustos" means "God-breathed." I love how Peter words it in 2 Peter 1:20: **"Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture..."** – that's a way of saying no book in the Bible – **"...came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things."**

So, if you – right now we're reading Exodus – imagine, the author, up on Mt. Sinai, it's not like he was just up there, alone, making crap up. Like, "I need to lead a new nation. I need law. Let's put God behind it. What should the law be? Hmm... this. How about this? How about this? How about this? And, let's put it in first person, 'and God said,' to kind of give me a little 'umph' and backing."

No. No Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things.

"For prophecy..." – and prophecy here means the writing of the Bible – **"...never had its origin in the human will, but prophets [the writers of the Bible], though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."**

I love that language. The prophets – which is the main thing that the Bible calls the writers of the Bible – were carried along by the Holy Spirit. So, inspired by the Holy Spirit. Breathed out by the Holy Spirit. Carried along by the Holy Spirit. So, when you read this library of writings, you are reading the words of God. Let that sink into you. When you wake up tomorrow morning, oh my gosh, think about the gravity, the sobriety of that. You are reading the words of God Himself.

But, that said, it is a library of writings that are both divine and human. You are also reading the written words of Moses or King David or the prophet Isaiah or the biographer Luke. So, on one hand, don't imagine Moses up on Mt. Sinai making stuff up, but neither on the other hand, don't imagine Moses up on Mt. Sinai in a trance-like, weird state, eyes rolled back, white, all super-freaky like a robot script dictator, "Thou. Shalt. Not. Kill. Thou. Shalt. Not. Murder."

That's the same one. Whoops. You know what I mean. Like, that's just as off. And we laugh, but that's kind of how a lot of people think about the writing of the Bible. But, that has never been what followers of Jesus have said about the Bible. That is not the ancient, historic, orthodox view. It never has been. That is, as far as I can tell, what Muslims believe about the Quran. It's also what Mormons believe about Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. But, it has never been what followers of Jesus, at least not at an academic level, have said about the Bible.

Read the Bible. That's just not how God works in the Bible. God works through free, creative, intelligent, relational human beings. God is all about collaboration. So, God breathed out, He inspired the Bible, but He did it through human beings. And, in doing so, He did not erase the writer's personality or intellect or vocabulary or style or stage of life or even his or her worldview. Paul – have you ever read Paul in the New Testament? He is genius. Literally genius mind. He's also a bit persnickety at times, right?

Ezekiel – have you read that yet? Oh, you will. That guy has a wild imagination. Mark. Do you remember mark? He is curt, to the point, in a rush, "I'm stressed out." You know

those people that you're stressed out just to be around them because they're always [gasping]? Mark, I imagine like that. But, he is a brilliant storyteller. Luke is pedantic, meticulous. He is a historian down to every last detail.

When God inspired the writers of the Bible, He gave ample room for each writer's personality. And guess what? This is a beautiful thing. Often, what happens is that the kind of human aspect of the Bible that is on the liberal or progressive side is thought of as a problem or an issue or proof that the Bible is not trustworthy or it's not actually divine, it's not actually from God because, see, this, that or the other.

And then, on the other side, on the conservative side, often the humanness of the Bible is kind of like a dirty little secret that we have to sweep under the rug and not tell the kids about until they're older. But, this is not a dirty little secret. In fact, the writers of the Bible hide it in plain sight and are open and honest about the humanness of the Bible. I think, for example, here's one example of Paul's letter to the Corinthians.

1 Corinthians 1:1: **"Paul, to the church of God in Corinth."**

Paul. Not "God" to the church of God in Corinth. Paul. Then I love in chapter 1 he writes, "I don't remember if I baptized anyone else." That is so awesome. So this is breathed out by God, but I think there's a little bit of Paul in there too. But then, in chapter 7, he writes – he's teaching on marriage and sex. He writes, "I give this command, not I, but the Lord."

Whoa. That means this command comes from God. But then, one paragraph later, he writes, **"To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord)."**

What the heck? And then, at the end he writes, "What I'm writing to you is the Lord's command [or Jesus' command.]" Do you see the tension there? Now, is Paul trying to hide it? Is he? No. It's right there. It's not a secret. It's not a dirty little secret. But, there is a tension and we have to hold the divine and the human side of the Bible together.

I said this last week, but I want to restate it because I think it's so important: we live in the wake of – and really in the thick of – the conservative/liberal Bible wars. As a general rule – and forgive the stereotype here – conservatives emphasize the divine aspect of the Bible and think of it as Scripture. It's God's thoughts about man. Whereas, liberals or progressives, on the other hand, emphasize the human side, the Bible as literature. It's man's thoughts about God and no more.

Well, who's right? Well, kind of... yes. It's not an either/or, it's both/and. The Bible is a divine and human library of writings. It's both Scripture – sacred writings is what that words means. "Graphe" in Greek – and it's literature. It's a poem, it's a biography, it's a memoir, it's a letter.

The model I like best for how to hold the divine/human tension together, in scholarship, is called the Incarnational Model. Maybe this is helpful, maybe not. But, stay with me. The basic idea is that Jesus Himself is the template for how we think about Scripture. So, at the center of the way of Jesus, for two millennia now, is the mystery or the paradox that is the incarnation – or the infleshing is what that words means – of Jesus. So, ancient, orthodox, historic faith has always said that Jesus is fully God and fully human. He's not God in a body. That's how a lot of conservatives think about Jesus. Like Jesus was faking His humanity.

"I'm tired. (I'm not really tired, but I say it to make you feel better.)"

Or on the progressive side, "You know, it's like He was 99% human, but with a spark of the divine," or whatever my neighbor would say. No, ancient, history, orthodox faith has always said that Jesus is fully God and fully human. He is divinity and humanity existing in the same place.

And, if you're confused, join the club. But, in the same way, the Bible is both divine and human. It's from the source that is the Spirit of God Himself. He breathed it out. He inspired it. And it's from Paul or Moses or Peter or John or "I don't remember how many people I baptized."

It's from both/and. And we have to hold the two in tension. Otherwise, we end up with what Dr. Timothy Mackie – and I love this language – calls the golden tablets view of the Bible. Basically, it's the idea that the Bible kind of dropped out of heaven from God into Moses' lap, which is actually what Mormons believe about the Book of Mormon. But, I want to

say it again: this has never been what we have said. But, this is how more and more people believe. And I know that's a caricature, but this is how more and more people think, on the conservative side, about the Bible.

But, what happens is the progressives come along or the liberals come along – imagine your professor at Reed College or whatever, Bible as Lit class – and poke holes in that view, because it takes about two seconds to say, "What about this? What about that? What about this? What about that? What about 'I don't remember how many people I baptized?' What about this? What about that? What about this thing in Exodus? This thing in Leviticus?"

Because, if you buy into the golden tablets view, it creates all sorts of issues. So, here's one case study and we'll move on in a minute.

This is Psalm 148: **"Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights above. Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his heavenly hosts. Praise him, son and moon; praise him, all you shining stars. Praise him, you highest heavens and..."** – listen to the this – **"...you waters above the skies."**

Wait, what is that? You waters above the skies? This is one of many examples in the Old Testament of ancient cosmology and ancient view of the cosmos. Here's a diagram. This is how your average ancient Hebrew or Egyptian or Babylonian thought about the cosmos. There was the Earth. Under the Earth was the waters of the great deep. The Earth was standing on four pillars. And then above the sky were the waters over the sky. That's why the sky is blue, because there's an ocean up there. Duh.

So, put Psalm 148 back up. So, what's up with this Psalm? "You waters above the skies." If you buy into the golden tablets view, this is one of hundreds of problems for you in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament. Because, are there waters above the sky? Nope. Just Jedi. That's it. Nothing else. There's not an ocean up there. It's not even blue in Oregon. It's just grey. So, if you buy into the golden tablets view, this is a huge problem. This means the Bible is wrong.

But, if you buy into an incarnational model of the Bible, first off, this is exactly what you would expect, and secondly, this is beautiful. God breathed out, He inspired a poem through this ancient Hebrew artist, calling all of creation to worship. This is not a lower view of the Bible, by the way. If anything this is a, I think, much higher view of the Bible. It's more Jesus-like. I think of the poem in Philippians 2 about how Jesus humbled Himself to become a man.

So, He had to set aside things like "omnipresent." God is all places at all times. Is Jesus? He was in a body. He had to set aside His omniscience and ask questions. He humbled Himself to become a man. Therefore, Paul writes, God exalted into the highest place. In the same way, God, the one and very same God, humbled Himself to write the Bible through Paul, Peter and Moses, this ancient Hebrew poet. He humbled Himself. He set aside the fact that, "Dude, there's no ocean over the sky."

This is beautiful. This is what God is like. He's like Jesus. He comes and He meets you and He comes and He meets me right where you're at and He takes the story forward. So, this is a library of writings that are both divine and human – moving on – that together tell a unified story.

You hear this a lot around here, but I want to restate it: the Bible is a story. This is an idea that we will harp on all year long. Here's a pie chart with the three major types of literature in the Bible. Notice how much is narrative: 44%. Just about half. Poetry is a whopping 33%. Look at how much is discourse or teaching: 23%.

That's still a lot. But, by far the largest chunk of the pie is narrative. Most of the Bible does not sound like "thou shalt" or "thou shalt not." That's a minority. Most of the Bible sounds like "there was a guy named Moses."

That's what most of it sounds like. And even the other stuff, the poetry and the discourse, is all embedded in this much larger, what in scholarship is called, meta narrative. This kind of large, complex, drawn out story that all of the writers tell together. For example, even the Torah, the 613 commandments that start in the middle of Exodus – we'll get there next week – and go all the way through to Deuteronomy, even that, which is the Torah or the law, the 613 commandments, it comes after 60 chapters of narrative. Setup, story, Adam, Eve, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Egypt, Israel, the Exodus, Moses and then, finally, you

get to all the commandments.

One of the things that we want to help you wrap your head around in the coming year is this idea. The next series is a six-week series on the story of God. We'll lay out the narrative arch from Genesis to Revelation. Now, here's why: reading the Bible as a story is the best way to deal with the so-called contradictions that you hear on a regular basis are all over the Bible.

Is this charge true or false that the Bible is full of contradictions? Well, the answer is not yes or no. It's not that easy. The answer is it depends on how you read the Bible. If you read the Bible as an encyclopedia of truth – that's how I grew up reading it – then yes, the Bible is chock full of who knows how many contradictions. But, if you read the Bible as a story, then actually, there's very few at all.

For example, Star Wars. It all comes back to Star Wars. In the Empire Strikes Back – hands down the best movie in the canon. That's right. In the Empire Strikes Back, Luke, Jedi Knight, is at the Dagobah system with Yoda, training to become a Jedi. And Yoda says, "You can't go face Vader. You're not ready yet. Stay and complete the training."

Luke is a baby and he goes off and does what he wants, but it's okay. Watch the movie. In Return of the Jedi, the next movie, Luke comes back to Dagobah system, back to Yoda, and what does Yoda say? No. No. Come on. Seriously? He says, "You must face Vader. In fact, you have to face Vader in order to complete your training."

So, wait a minute. Don't face Vader. You have to face Vader. Is that a contradiction? Is that an error? No. It's, first of all, it's a movie, you guys. Actually, it's more of a way of life. But, no. It's a story. At one point in the story, Luke was not ready to go face Vader. But at another point in the story, not only was he ready, but that was what he had to do. Got to love Star Wars.

In the same way, the Bible. The Bible is full of stuff like that. For example, as followers of Jesus, we don't keep the food laws that are in the Torah. We'll get there in a week or two. You'll read law after law about what you can and you cannot eat as an ancient Israelite in the desert. Most of you don't keep that anymore. How many of you eat bacon? So gross. I'm more of a vegan kind of guy. It's gross, but it's not sin. I'll give it that. It's gross, but it's not sin. I will judge you, but not because I follow Jesus. Just because I think it's gross.

You're like, "Really?"

I'm not going to get into that tonight. But, the reality is the food laws from the Torah were for an earlier part of the story. They're not bad. In fact, they were a really good thing. But, they no longer have bearing on you and me as followers of Jesus. Millennia later, Portland, Oregon, 2:15. Listen to what Paul – and I did not make this up. This is all over the New Testament. Listen what Paul has to say about why followers of Jesus do not keep the Torah.

"Before the coming of this faith..." – and he means the Gospel of Jesus – **"...we were held in custody..."** – by "we" he means the Jews – **"...under the law [the Torah], locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed."**

We were waiting for Jesus.

"So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian."

Here's Paul's analogy. That word "guardian," by the way, can be translated "nanny" in English. No, I'm dead serious. That was the basic idea. A guardian was a nanny. It was basically a mom or dad that you paid to raise children. If you were wealthy, you had a guardian or you had a nanny. So, this is Paul's analogy. That's what the Torah was like. It's like a guardian, a nanny, or a mom or a dad. It was there to raise Israel, to grow Israel up, waiting for the coming of Jesus the Messiah. But, now that Jesus has come, we don't need it anymore.

Most of you aren't 35 and, if you are, you don't have a nanny. Hopefully. Maybe you did. Was it bad to have a nanny? No. It's great when you're seven. It's not so hot when you're 35. Every parent gets this. So, I'm a dad. I have three kids. I have a whole list of rules in

my house. Some of those rules are good advice for living. Forever. So, one of the rules is you can't lie. Like, zero tolerance policy in our family for lying, because every healthy relationship is built on trust. So, that's great advice. Like, for Jude right now, who's 10, it will still be great advice when he's 20, when he's 30, when he's 40, when he's 50.

We also have a rule: you have to go to bed at 8:30 at night. And the kids usually sleep until 7. Now, that's a great rule when you're 10. But what about when Jude is 25? Will that still be a good rule? No. In fact, if he were to go to bed at 8:30 and then sleep in until 7 every morning, we would say, "You are lazy. Get off your butt and go to college or something." Right?

The very rule that was a good thing for a time, eventually will become a bad thing. The Bible is full of stuff like that. There are all sorts of laws that we read in the Old Testament that are still fantastic, legitimate wisdom for how to live today. "Thou shalt not murder." That's still great advice. Actually, it's a command. It's still a command.

But, laws about shellfish or wearing clothing made out of cotton and polyester, there was a time when that was necessary and healthy and good. But, that part of the story is over. That's what Paul is writing about. In fact, it became a problem because the food laws, and a ton of other stuff in the Torah, was supposed to keep Israel separate from all of the nations. To keep Israel. Don't assimilate into Canaan or Egypt or whatever. Stay separate. Stay the people of God in order to draw out the Messiah through Israel.

But now, here's the problem: in the wake of Jesus' death, burial and resurrection, now, we the people of Jesus, who are both Jewish and Gentile (non-Jewish), now we are supposed to not stay separate, now we are supposed to go out to the nations and assimilate into the nations with the good news of Jesus. So, the very rules that were a good thing for one point in the story, now are a problem if you want to follow Jesus. And it doesn't mean that the laws are bad, it means they were for a time and that time is no longer.

Why? Because the Scriptures, at it's core, are a story. Tim Keller writes this:

"The reason for our confusion..." – and he means over the Bible – "...is that we usually read the Bible as a series of disconnected stories, each with a morale for how we should live our lives."

We'll talk later about why that's just not really right.

"It is not. Rather, it comprises a single story telling us how the human race got into it's present condition and how God, through Jesus Christ, has come and will come to put things right."

The beauty of a story is that everybody loves a good story. Right? Young, old, male, female, regardless of ethnicity or culture or background. Educated, intellectual, blue-collar. It doesn't matter. Everybody loves a good story. And the thing about a good story is it evokes the imagination. It opens up your heart and your mind to a whole new way of seeing life in the world.

Recently I read Michel Faber's novel "The Book of Strange, New Things." It's this weird book. It's a kind of slow burn, literary sci-fi novel about the first ever missionary to aliens. Yep. It's weird. But anyway, in it – it's actually fantastic – he goes to this alien planet, first ever missionary, plants a church. But, most of the book is about the Oasan's – that's the name of the alien tribe – relationship with the Bible. And in it, the Oasans call the Bible the Book of Strange, New Things.

And all through the book, "Read to us from the Book of Strange, New Things. Tell us a story from the Book of Strange, New Things. Tell us how to read the Book of Strange, New Things."

And I know that I said the Bible's not a book, so I'm not backing off on that. It's a library. But, that said, that's what this is. It's a library of strange, new things. It's a world where virgins give birth or Messiahs die and come back from the dead, the last are first and the first are last, where the most courageous act is not military violence, but is willing self-sacrifice. Where persecution is a virtue. It is a strange, new world. And when you read it, it's not just a list of commands of what to do and not to do. It is. There's a ton in there. But, at it's core, it's a story and it evokes the imagination. A new way for you to live and be human in God's world.

All of which leads me to the last phrase in the definition. It's a library of writings that are

both human and divine but, together, tell a unified story which leads us to Jesus. This library is all about Jesus. Now, I have to clarify that. A lot of the time I hear people say stuff like, "Jesus is on every page of the Bible." Kind of. That's not really true. What people usually mean when they say that is that the Bible is an allegory and that's how they read it. And, with all due respect, I think to read the Bible as an allegory is fundamentally misunderstand what the Bible is.

But, what's right about that, is that on just about every page, every chapter, every paragraph, every line, there's something that, in this much larger meta narrative or story, leads up to Jesus of Nazareth. In fact, this is a fascinating aside to me, but the two most popular names for the Bible in the modern age are "The Bible" and what's the other one? The Word of God. Okay? So, you hear that a lot.

"Ah, I love to read my Bible," or "I love to study the Word," or "dig into the word," or whatever. Sorry. I did not mean to make fun of you. Actually, I did. But, I feel guilty about it. But, as I said earlier, the Bible never calls itself the Bible. It's not wrong to call it that. I do. But, it's not the Biblical name. But, here's what you may or may not know: the Bible rarely, if ever, depending on who you talk to and how you interpret Psalm 119 and a few other places, the Bible rarely, if ever, calls itself the Word of God.

In the New Testament, that phrase "the Word of God" is almost always used for – who? – Jesus. John 1:1, **"In the beginning was the..."** – what? – **"...word and the word was with God and the word was God."**

Is that the Bible? No. Who is that? Jesus. In fact, most of the time, when you read about the word, it's either Jesus or, in a few other places, the Word of God [or the word] means the Gospel or the good news about Jesus and about His kingdom. So, it's either Jesus or it's the message about Jesus.

When we read in Paul, "Preach the word in season and out of season," that doesn't mean teach the Bible in season and out of season, although I love to teach the Bible. That means preach the Word, preach the message that Jesus is king and His kingdom is here and it's coming. Tell people about Jesus all the time, whether you feel like it or not. That's what that is saying.

The classic misquote – and don't feel bad at all if you've done this – is Hebrews 4. There's a famous line about how the Word of God – do you know this Scripture?

Hebrews 4:12: **"The word of God is living and active, sharper than a double-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul, of bone and marrow."**

People almost always quote that about the Bible. "You know the Bible. It's living, it's active."

With all due respect, that's a great Scripture. It's not remotely about the Bible. In context, that's about Jesus and about the message of Jesus and the Gospel of Kingdom. This library is not living. It's not breathing. It's an amazing, sacred, God-inspired collection of writings. It's not alive. Jesus is alive because Jesus is the Word. Jesus is the Word of God.

Now, this is so important to get. Otherwise, love for the Bible – which is a good thing. I want you all to love the Bible and, if you don't yet, I want you to grow in that over the coming year as you start to figure it out and read it and figure out how to read it. We'll talk about that in a few weeks. But, over time, if we're not careful, love for the Bible can bend and warp into Bibliolatry, or the worship of the Bible. Now, I really don't think that's a problem here. It is at other places. I really don't think it's here. Most of us here tonight have too low of a view of the Bible, not too high of a view of the Bible.

But, for that reason, I want to end just by rereading that passage from the beginning. Hopefully your Bible is still open in front of you to John 5. If not, turn there again really fast. I just want to read this over you.

John 5:39, Jesus says this: **"You study the Scriptures [graphe] diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. But these are the very Scriptures that testify about..."** – who? – **"...me,"** – Jesus. This library is about Jesus. – **"yet you refuse to come to me to have life."**

Jesus, here, is speaking to the Pharisees who were the religious conservatives of the day who had a crazy high view of the Bible, but had lost the plot-line of the Bible. So, Jesus is calling the religious conservatives back saying, "Listen. You need to repent. You lost it. You lost the plot-line."

This library is incredible, sacred, holy. In another spot we read that. It's breathed out by God. But, it does not have eternal life. Jesus has eternal life. I say that because the worst thing that could happen over the next 12 months is that we as a community – and if you're new or visiting – just become a bunch of cold, smart, well-educated, kind of mean Bible nerds. Man. The phenomenon of the mean Christian. Talk about an oxymoron. Because, you can know the Bible and not know Jesus. You can study and read the Bible every single day and not be anything like Jesus of Nazareth.

That doesn't mean this is a bad thing. This is a fantastic thing. I think it's essential to discipleship to Jesus. But, we have to remember this isn't Jesus. This is a map to lead you and me to Jesus.

So, what is the Bible? It's a library of writings that are both divine and human, together tell a unified story which leads us to Jesus. Now, just in closing, I know that we're all over the map on this one, you know? And, just in dialogue with you over the last week or two, it's weird because some of you are on the progressive or the liberal side of the spectrum. And so, for you, the idea that the Bible is divine, that it was inspired by God, that, as a follower of Jesus, you live under its authority, this ancient library, even though it's radically out of step with the modern age and against the tide of culture in Portland, that's really hard for you to swallow.

A lot of you, on the other side, grew up in a conservative church or home and you're still that way and so it's kind of more the golden tablets thing and this way of reading the Bible makes you nervous. Then I think most of us are just in the middle and kind of confused.

"What is this thing? I don't really get it. How does it help me get a date again? Why should I read it? Really it's not very fun. Why should I read this?"

I think that's where a lot of us are. I, for one, you all know I love the Bible. But, I've had an interesting kind of history with it. I grew up around the Bible. I grew up in a really great home. My dad's a pastor and there was a high view of the Bible in my home. And so, there was actually a rule where I was not allowed to eat breakfast until I read my Bible every morning. So, no Bible, no breakfast. That was the rule.

So, that's super legalistic fundamentalist. But, to my parent's credit, myself and all of my siblings, we wake up every single day, decades later, and we read the Bible first thing before we eat breakfast. So, I'm actually really thankful for that. I grew up around the Bible. I know a lot of you have never read through the Bible before. That's great. We're so happy you're up for it. I've been reading through the Bible every single year since as long as I can remember. I think I started at like eight or nine or something like that.

So, I grew up around this and I'm so grateful to my mom and my dad and my church and the heritage that I have. I read that line in Timothy. "From childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures which are able to make you wise for salvation."

I'm so thankful. But, at the same time, I grew up in a church tradition that had a very specific way of reading the Bible. A way of reading the Bible that, in the last decade or so, has come to be called Biblicism. Maybe you're familiar with that, maybe not. But, it's a huge issue. The basic idea is that Biblicism, which is how most evangelicals or conservatives in America read the Bible, is the Bible as an encyclopedia of truth, it's timeless, it's the owners manual for life, it's Scripture is a low view of the Bible as literature, the humanness of the Bible is this dirty little secret, we quote it a lot, "The Bible says it, I believe it. That settles it."

It's that kind of a way of reading the Bible. And it's not all wrong. There's good stuff in there for sure. There is timeless truth in the Bible for sure. But, the problem with this way of reading the Bible is that basically the Bible just doesn't behave. The Bible just doesn't play by the rules that, in particular, conservative Americans set up for it. It just does it's own thing. It's not an encyclopedia. It is something else. Something far more deep and profound and fascinating and provocative and subversive to the right and to the left.

And so what happens is this way of reading the Bible is a crisis of faith waiting to happen for every college freshman. It's just only a matter of time. So, true to form, in college and in my early 20s, the Bible, which I grew up around and loved, it just about was the end of my faith, because I had so many questions. The way that I grew up reading the Bible just did not make sense anymore. The answers I was getting from the church and such were

just not satisfactory to me, in my humble opinion.

So, it was this crisis of faith. I just remember this season where I was up here teaching. I was young and I was teaching for this college thing and I would walk off the stage and I would think to myself, "Was anything that I just said even remotely true?"

Horrible place to be in. But, out of that, what was born was, rather than kind of walking away from the Bible and Jesus and my faith, instead what I discovered was that my problem was not with the Bible, my problem was with Biblicism. It was this very odd, kind of American way of reading the Bible. That was my problem. And I discovered there's this whole other way of reading the Bible that transcends the liberal/conservative divide, that goes all the way back to Jesus and the New Testament and the early church fathers.

It's a way of reading the Bible as Scripture and literature, as divine and human, as kind of a story that leads us to Jesus. And this, for me, was so eye-opening. And so I've spent the last decade plus of my life – I feel like I've been relearning the Bible from the ground up. And I've devoted, basically, the rest of my life to teaching this thing, because there is so much life here. Not in this. Life is in Jesus. But, this leads me to Jesus and I want this for you.

So, all that to say wherever you are at in your relationship with the Bible, wherever you plot yourself on the spectrum. Whether you love the Bible, hate it, don't really care. Whether you want to read it, can't wait for tomorrow morning or you're dreading it. Wherever you're at in that, just stay with us on this journey. And, tomorrow morning as you wake up and you pour yourself a cup of coffee and you open your Bible and you read a Psalm and then you read Exodus 4, 5 and 6, my hope and prayer is that you find truth there, for sure, imagination there, yes, a whole new way to be human. All of that there. But, above all, that you find Jesus there.

And, as you have questions – and I'm sure you will. I still have questions. But, I always think of Peter and the disciple's words to Jesus when everybody was leaving Jesus because of a hard teaching. Peter said, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You alone have the words of eternal life."

Jesus alone, the words of eternal life, are in Jesus and in here. And so, my prayer is that, as you open your Bible day after day after day, morning after morning after morning, that you find life in Jesus.

Let's stand and pray.