

SPECTACLES OF FAITH

Exodus 24:12-18; 2 Peter 1:16-21

The Bible is the world's best-selling book of all time. 87% of all households in the United States own at least one. But that doesn't mean it's widely read. A survey showed that less than half of those who own a Bible ever read it very often. Maybe you've heard some of the amusing but disturbing answers people gave. 10% thought that Noah's wife was Joan of Arc. Only 1/3 knew that Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount, not Billy Graham. I couldn't find similar research for Europe, but I suspect the results would be similar. Most people acknowledge that the Bible is important for historical or literary reasons; it's one of those books that people think they should own, like the collected works of Shakespeare or Goethe, but most people don't find it worth their time to read it regularly.

How did it happen that the Bible still holds some degree of reverence but is so rarely used? One reason is because the huge change that took place 500 years ago in the way we view the world is still catching up with us. Before the Enlightenment and the rise of the scientific method, the accepted understanding of the world was that the earth revolved around the sun, disease was cured by evil humors that could be bled out, and mental illness was due to some moral failure. If you asked a European 500 years ago if they believed in fairies, sprites and hobgoblins, they would have looked at you as if you were crazy, as if you'd asked them if they believed in air. In that context it was easier to grasp what the Bible says about matters of the spirit or to understand what Jesus was doing when he commanded demons to leave a person.

No sane person wants to give up what we've gained by seeing the world from a more rationalistic point of view. Our modern way of understanding how the world works has led us to cure diseases using medicine, not charms. Knowing that the earth spins around the sun and understanding the natural

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laws of physics has allowed us to launch weather satellites that save thousands of lives by tracking killer storms. We no longer believe that the gods made our tribe of people the true human beings and that we have to kill off the so-called lesser beings who live in a foreign land.

But as we've understood more about how the world works and the inner workings of the psyche, we've lost something important. We've reduced reality to what we can measure and control and understand. We've lost sight of that aspect of truth that's beyond our comprehension, the reality that we learn about from the Bible.

You might ask So What? The Forbes Magazine happiness survey for 2018 lists the happiest countries in the world. The top four are in Scandinavia, where only 35% of the population say they believe in God. Rounding out the top ten happiest countries is Australia, which has one of the highest percentages of atheists in the world. Switzerland, by the way, came in number five on the happiness index. By whatever standards are used to measure happiness – health or life expectancy or contentment – by those standards you can't say that reading the Bible will make you happy.

But that still leaves a big God-shaped hole in the human being. Where do you find purpose in your life? Where do you find the fortitude to stick with a marriage that is hard? Where do you find hope in the face of death? The Bible may not tell us exactly what we're supposed to do with our lives, but it does tell us why we're supposed to do it. The Bible may not tell us how to cure cancer, but it does show us where to find hope when it invades our body. The Bible may not give us a how-to guide to salvage a marriage, but it shows us what true love is, love that's grounded in something deeper than feeling and desire.

Those are the kinds of issues the Bible deals with, the deepest issues of the human heart. But it's important to understand that the power of the Bible

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does not come from whatever wise advice or guidance its words might give us, although it does give wisdom that can benefit anyone who reads it, whether they believe in God or not. The power of the Bible is that the Holy Spirit speaks to us through its words. Through the Bible, we can see the one who is the source of all life.

John Calvin, that 16th century theologian, said that the Bible is the spectacles through which we see the world. He affirmed that there are plenty of ways to encounter God in addition to the Bible. Psalm 19 says, “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.” Acts of love are not restricted to those who believe in God, and every human kindness is a reflection of the loving God who made us. The Bible is like a pair of glasses that when we put them on we can see what we were unable to see with the unaided eye. When we read the Bible through the spirit of Jesus, we can see the beauty of nature around us and say with the psalmist, “O Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” We can face tragedy and death knowing that God walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death and that God’s goodness and mercy will be with us forever. We can find peace and joy in what we have because we know that what the Bible tells us is true: all we have is a gift from God.

The Bible lets us know the character of God. We know from reading scripture that God is not something we can measure, analyze and control. In the passage we read today from Exodus, Moses was on that mountain for six days before God even spoke to him. To the people gathered at the foot of the mountain, it looked like the summit was consumed in a devouring fire. Anyone who dared to go near that place where God was giving the law was struck dead. When Moses brought God’s words down from the mountain, those two tablets that summarized God’s law in the Ten Commandments were placed in

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a tabernacle, in the Holy of Holies where only Moses and those consecrated as holy could go.

Stories like the one we read about Moses receiving the law show us that God is majestic and glorious beyond our comprehension. God's glory is sometimes compared to that of the sun. We can't live without the sun. But if a spaceship ever took us too close to the sun, it would destroy us. For all the control we human beings have over our lives, we are totally dependent on the power that shines from the sun, which would overwhelm us if we tried to get too close.

So we read the Bible with humility because its subject is this God who is as bright and shining as the sun, but what we learn as we read it is that this God loves us and wants to be in a relationship with us, a relationship that ennobles us and gives us life. We learn that those laws that were given to Moses weren't given to demean us or to keep us in line so God can lord it over us. The Ten Commandments tell us to worship no other gods because other gods like wealth and power and self-centeredness might appeal, but they don't give life. We're commanded to keep the Sabbath so we don't fool ourselves into thinking that if we just work harder we can be in control. It's a reminder that our loving God is in control of the universe, and we honor God when we slow down and revel in that goodness. Laws around sexual morality were given to protect our dignity and humanity, to keep us from treating each other as objects for personal gratification. Laws about stealing and honesty were given to protect our integrity.

How do we know that God's word to us is for our benefit? How do we know that God gave us scripture for our welfare and not for our subjugation? We know through Jesus. In Jesus we know how to read not only the laws of God, but the whole story of God's dealings with humanity. His life was spent

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drawing others to God through his teaching, his healing and his caring. His death on the cross showed the extent of God's love for us, to give his life to deliver us from death. His resurrection affirmed the power of life over death, and his invitation to us to be with him in perfect love for eternity. Through Jesus, the Son of God, we know the One who speaks to us through the Bible, and because we know Jesus, we always interpret God's word as it comes to us in the Bible through him, with love and charity.

The book of Romans in the New Testament says that God's Spirit helps us in our weakness. That Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God. That Spirit, which we know through Jesus, is what makes the Bible God's word to us.

You've probably heard someone say that you can make the Bible say anything you want. And if you use it that way, you can. There are parts of the Bible that seem to contradict each other. In the book of Ezra, the Israelites are told to put away all foreign wives who don't share their religion or nationality, but in the book of Ruth we read how the foreigner Ruth marries the Israelite Boaz to become an ancestor of Jesus. In one of the gospels Jesus tells his followers, "Whoever is not against us is for us," whereas in another gospel he says, "He who is not with me is against me." The Bible was written for all people, across all time, living in very different situations. It takes discernment, through the prayerful guidance of the Holy Spirit, to hear what it has to say for us in our time and place. One of the most important ways to test if our understanding of scripture is God's word to us is to measure our understanding against the main topic of the book, God whom we know in Jesus Christ.

There's a story about a man who was desperate to know what God wanted him to do with his life. He decided he would open the Bible to a

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random page, close his eyes, put his finger on the page, and whatever verse it landed on would be God's guidance for him. His finger landed on Matthew 27:5 – "Judas went away and hanged himself." That couldn't be right, so he tried again. This time his finger landed on Luke 10:37 – "Go thou and do likewise." We know that's just random chance, not the will of God because it's not something that Jesus as we know him through scripture would command.

That doesn't mean that the Bible will always be clear. Until Jesus comes again and sets us all straight, there will be many different interpretations of the Bible. One reason is that the one to whom it is a witness, the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is too big to be explained from any one perspective, whether that be Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox. Even in a single congregation like IPC people will differ on how to interpret certain verses. However we see the world through the Bible, we see it through the lens of love, from the perspective of Jesus.

And it's important to remember that the Bible is given to us, not just as individual believers, but as a community of faith. We need each other to be able to discern how God is speaking to us in scripture. We know from what others have told us that there is power in those words. From the prophets of the Old Testament, to the apostles like Peter, to our grandmothers and our Sunday school teachers, and our fellow church members, we have heard testimony that the Spirit of the all-powerful God speaks through Scripture and changes lives. Even the parts we don't understand, we keep reading because we belong to a community of believers for whom those words have had power. There are some parts of the Bible that I thought I understood pretty well when I was younger, but now in light of years of experience, they're not as clear as they once were. There are other parts of the Bible that I've been reading for years and now I think I'm starting to understand them. There are some parts of

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the Bible that I doubt will ever speak to my heart, but I read them and ponder them because somehow or other they are a witness to Jesus. I just can't figure out how.

One of the things that impresses me about this church is how central Bible study is to your life together. You sponsor a strong Bible Study Fellowship that meets every week to study the Bible in depth. You have other Bible study groups throughout the church. Home groups find the strength of their fellowship around study of the Bible.

The Bible is not what we serve. We don't worship the book. But it is the spectacles God has given us to see each other and this community as God sees us.