

## **The Bible's Disturbing Passages – January 24, 2010**

(Watch “Disturbing Passages” Clip) Maybe you have felt that way at times in the past as well. You've tried reading the bible, you come across passages that were perplexing or disturbing and you've said “I can't see how this could be the word of God.” Maybe you are new to the church – to Christianity all together and haven't read much of the bible but have heard others criticize or even reject it, causing you to question whether you want to venture down this path yourself. You are not alone. Unfortunately, these are not new challenges for the church, so today we want to look at how we can make sense of some of the bible's more disturbing passages.

That will be our challenge this morning and next week we will address the question of suffering. Finally, in the last week of this series, The Case for God in Today's World, I am going to make the very best case I can for why I believe in God and why I think you might want to believe in God as well. And then I will leave it to you to decide. If you have missed any of these sermons they are on our website. Just go to the homepage and click on the title of the sermon and it will come up for you to read.

So let's turn our attention this morning to the scriptures – especially those verses that cause atheists or agnostics and even some of us believers the most angst and anxiety. They generally fall into four categories or criticisms beginning with the issue that there are some factual errors, internal contradictions or at least inconsistencies in the bible. Now for some of you who were raised with a certain view of the bible this may be difficult even to acknowledge. And yet, the more we read the bible the more we must face that it does not always line up with what we know about history and science as we talked about on the first Sunday of the series.

A silly but obvious example is found in 2 Kings Chapter 8 Verse 26 where we learn that Ahaziah became King of Israel at the age of twenty-two. Unfortunately, in 2 Chronicles 22 verse 2 it says he became king at the age of forty-two. So which is it – twenty-two or forty-two? Now for many people it really doesn't matter. But for others – particularly those who believe that every verse of the bible must be perfect and consistent with one another – as well as those who are skeptics of the bible – this kind of inconsistency raises problems. Again this is a pretty silly detail to get excited about but there are other contradictions or inconsistencies that are more problematic – the resurrection story of Jesus being one of them.

We have four gospels in the New Testament that all tell the story of Jesus, but as many of you know, they do not always agree. Now that does not surprise some of us who accept that they are written by four different people – from different perspectives – and written at different times - years or even decades, after the actual events took place. As a result, some of the stories and sayings of Jesus vary or are not included in all of them or the order is often different. As I mentioned on Christmas Eve, the story of Jesus birth is not even included in two of the gospels and is quite different in the two that do report it. But the resurrection is an even better example of what I am talking about – especially since it is reported in all four gospels.

If you read all four accounts you will notice that the number of angels, guards and even women visiting the tomb varies as does the placement of the stone in front of the tomb. Jesus words and the disciples' responses are not all consistent either. So which is it? Some people try to solve the problem by mashing them all together. But I fear that

does an injustice to all of them. What I find most helpful is to accept that they do not all agree but to focus on where they do.

For example, they all agree that the stone was eventually rolled away, the tomb was empty, Jesus' body was gone and there were people or messengers dressed in white - who were a bit frightening - who proclaimed that Jesus was alive. That's the point of the story – not all those little details. But again, you have to have a view of the scriptures that is broad enough to allow you to say that and not get hung up on the other.

We will come back to that a little later so let's move on to the second category or criticism of the bible which is accepted oppressive cultural practices – particularly slavery and the treatment of women. Basically in the first eight books of the bible, women were expendable. Now women are valued, even treasured, and of course created in the image of God just like men but there are some stories that I just find horrendous – especially as a woman. I will not – actually cannot - go into details but if you don't believe me then just check out Judges Chapter 19. I dare to read these stories and want – actually expect – God to say this is not right – to condemn it. But that does not happen or at least is not recorded.

And the same is true for slavery which is clearly an accepted cultural practice throughout much of the scriptures. In other words, the bible does not condemn slavery as we might think or hope and, in fact, gives instruction on how to practice it. We look back on that practice today and know that slavery is just wrong. Actually it is morally reprehensible for one human being to own another human being and we wonder why God didn't say so in the scriptures. To add insult to injury, these two concerns come

together when we find specific instructions in the book of Exodus on how a man sells his daughter into slavery.

Unfortunately, the third category or criticism of the bible is no less troubling to many of us because it addresses immoral and unthinkable commands. These are things God seems to command his people to do that just don't line up with a God of mercy and love. Take for example, Joshua 11 Verse 20 where God commands the Israelites to kill – actually exterminate - every man, woman and child in that land. Kind of flies in the face of what we talked about last week concerning Just War, does it not?

Other examples of unthinkable commands include why and how to practice the death penalty. In the bible – again particularly the Old Testament - you can find justification for stoning to death a person caught in the act of adultery, a child rebelling or acting disobediently, or a person working on the Sabbath. Of course, if we observed all of these and many other commands today, there wouldn't be a single person sitting in this room today.

And finally, the last criticism is that the bible presents such a vengeful, angry God – again particularly in the Old Testament. An example often cited is found in Exodus 32 where we find God's anger ready to boil over because the Israelites have chosen to worship the golden calf.

Now one way some people try to get around these criticisms is to separate out the Old Testament from the New. They say that God was mean in the Old Testament but nice in the New. One early church theologian by the name of Marcion – who was eventually excommunicated – actually went as far as to say that there were two different

Gods – the Old Testament God and yes, the New Testament God or the God of Jesus Christ.

I guess I understand why people might want to do that but I don't believe that is the answer or solution to the problem. Once again, I quote Adam Hamilton of the Church of the Resurrection who reminds us that there are approximately 23,000 verses in the Old Testament. The problematic verses of which I speak occur in about 200 of them. That means that there are 22,800 verses that picture God as merciful and just; a shepherd who loves his sheep; one who casts away their sin as far as the east is from the west; one who is like a father who loves his children even though they hurt him and turn away.

Does that excuse or explain the criticisms? Of course not. Can we just ignore or not bother with them? I am afraid not either. This is our bible. If we hope to be able to answer people's questions or address their concerns we must be ready. In fact, we can't ignore them because we need to make sense of them for ourselves. Rob Bell says it best in his book *The Velvet Elvis* when he writes: "I continue to find the bible the most mysterious book. The more insight I gain, the more I realize how much I don't know. It inspires and encourages and also frustrates and provokes. The bible is a difficult book."

That is true and yet any child can pick it up and read it. We give bibles to our third graders hoping they will read it and will get something out of it and trust that they do. So yes, on one hand it is mysterious and difficult but on the other hand it is simple and profound.

For those of you who find it so difficult that you are afraid to pick it up and read it, I encourage you to attend one of our Sunday school classes or bible studies. In fact,

Karen is getting ready to start a new one this Tuesday. If you can't commit to one of these then at least get a study bible and read it yourself. I am even happy to sit down with anyone who is interested to help get you started. There is so much there – epic stories, history, drama, poetry, instruction and the list goes on and on. What I hope you will find if you do is a most helpful and powerful universal story that is timeless. A story that is actually our story – both in the Old and New Testaments.

Now, I realize that does not address the four criticisms or categories of concern we started out with this morning which is where we must go for the rest of this message. What we must attempt to figure out this morning is: what in the bible do we believe are Gods' words and what are humans' words? Unfortunately, this is where things begin to get real sticky – even among Christians. For as some of you may know - whole denominations have been split apart over the answer to this question.

Throughout much of the bible – particularly in the New Testament – we know who wrote the different books and letters. Luke says, I am writing these things so you might know what we believe. Paul's name is on many of the books – actually the letters - as well. And at the same time we Christians say this book is the Word of God. So which is it? The Word of God or the words of people? This seems to me to be the most important question and answering it seems to be the only way we are going to address and maybe even solve some of these problems.

I am going to suggest that there are three ways on a continuum to address this question. On the one end there are some people who say that God literally dictated every word of scripture to the authors and they were able to record every single word that God said exactly the way God said it. On the other end of the continuum there are

people who say they are not God's words at all but only the words of men – and they were literally written by men. They believe that they are only legends that are subject to errors and problems. And then there are a whole lot of people who hold to some view somewhere in between these two – me included – who say that these are both the words of God and the words of men. We believe that these men wrote in light of their historical and cultural understandings, based upon their own biases and experiences. However, at the same time God somehow spoke through them.

Paul tells us in one of the lessons for this morning that all scripture was inspired by God. The word inspired means God breathed. While some people interpret this text to mean God dictated each word, I believe it affirms that we have human authors who wrote the words but God breathed upon them and inspired them. I realize this is a broader view than some of you are used to and I don't intend to take that away or refute it. But for me, this view allows for both the humanity of the biblical authors and also the divinity of God to speak through them.

I believe that God has been content to allow us to discover things over time and has not insisted that we know everything all up front. If God had insisted I knew and believed everything perfectly that I needed to at the beginning of my faith journey I doubt I would be up here this morning. We certainly don't expect our eighth graders to have it all figured out the first week of their confirmation journey. We want them to grow and learn but we are very clear with them that they won't even have it all figured out after five months of hard work and discovery. If that is true for people like us wouldn't that be true of the biblical authors as well?

In other words, I believe God gradually revealed truths over a long period of time, according to his children's needs and at a rate slow enough that they and we were capable of fully absorbing them. As a result, things got and hopefully continue to get, clearer and clearer over time. It's kind of like going to the eye doctor. They bring that cool device up in front of your face and start clicking those dials and asking – is this clearer or is this one. Each time they do that things get a little sharper and clearer until they have as close to 20/20 vision as possible. This is how I see the bible.

Those who lived in ancient times heard from God, experienced God and interpreted God's word to them in light of what they knew and understood. Gradually that became clearer and clearer and clearer but we have to allow them to live in their own time. And we also have to hear their words and ask what does that mean for us – especially in light of Jesus who I believe offers an even clearer picture – hopefully a 20/20 vision through him.

I realize that this may help some of you but may pose even more questions for others. Some people fear that if we are allowed to question the bible at all we will simply be forced to throw it away completely – which some liberal Christians have done. But we didn't throw out the Constitution of the United States because laws and freedoms and rules changed and developed to meet the needs of society and people over time, did we? If that is true with the Constitution how much more so that is the case with the founding documents of our faith?

Yes, we must acknowledge and accept that there are some errors, contradictions and inconsistencies in the bible. We must understand that cultural practices have changed and evolved over time as have the laws and commandments spelled out

throughout the scriptures. And yes, our understanding of who God is and what God does has changed over time. Not because God has changed but because we have. And the good news is God continues to reveal himself to us each and every day.

For I believe God continues to speak to us even today. If he didn't I think I would have to question what I am doing up here every Sunday. I pray each and every week for God to speak TO me and through me so that his desires for us will become clearer and clearer and clearer. So I want to encourage you – all of you – no matter whether you are a skeptic or a long time believer to read the bible this week and beyond. Begin by asking God to speak to you and simply see what happens. You will never know unless you try! Please take a look (Watch "Bible Transformations" Clip). Amen.