

“What is the True, Original Meaning of the Bible?”

Series: I've Always Wondered – Kids' Questions of Faith

Scripture: Psalm 119 (various)

Rev. Pen Peery



First Presbyterian
Church of Charlotte

If you haven't seen the cutest video introduction for a sermon series ever, I would point you to our church's social media pages. There, you will see that in August we are shaping sermons around the questions of faith that arise from the children of our church.

If you are a kid, I want to tell you a secret: Almost all of the time, your questions about faith are **still** the same questions that adults have about faith. So I am really glad you asked them – and I expect that all of us might learn some things because you did.

Last week, Pastor Mary preached a sermon that focused on the question of “How Come Science the Bible Don’t Match Up?”

Today the question we will explore is – and I'm using the exact language of the child who asked the question: “What is the true, original meaning of the Bible?”

I absolutely **love** this question – and even though there is no way to satisfactorily answer it (just to set expectations...) – the words “true” and “original” signal something that I think might be interesting to think about.

The Scripture we will read this morning is from the book of Psalms. It's a long Psalm – the 119th – that I going to read portions from. Before we hear it, please go to God with me in prayer...

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You spoke creation into existence with a word; when the time was right, you revealed yourself in the Word we know as Jesus; you gift us with your word that is reflected in the books we call the Bible...and so, now, O God – by your Spirit – we pray that you would open us to listen...and, more than listen...trust...and allow that word to shape us...so that we might be instruments of your grace and truth. We ask it in Jesus's name. Amen.

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Again, I am reading from various verses from the very lengthy 119th Psalm. Listen with me for a word from God...

¹ Happy are those whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law of the Lord.

² Happy are those who keep his decrees,
who seek him with their whole heart,

³ who also do no wrong,
but walk in his ways.

³³ Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes,
and I will observe it to the end.

³⁴ Give me understanding, that I may keep your law
and observe it with my whole heart.

³⁵ Lead me in the path of your commandments,
for I delight in it.

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³⁶ Turn my heart to your decrees,
and not to selfish gain.

³⁷ Turn my eyes from looking at vanities;
give me life in your ways.

⁵⁷ The Lord is my portion;
I promise to keep your words.

⁵⁸ I implore your favor with all my heart;
be gracious to me according to your promise.

⁵⁹ When I think of your ways,
I turn my feet to your decrees;

⁶⁰ I hurry and do not delay
to keep your commandments.

¹⁰⁵ Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path.

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There are a few different ways I considered preaching a sermon on this question.

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One way was to unpack what our church – the Presbyterian Church – has said about the Bible...how we understand it, how we are taught to read it. It turns out Presbyterians have a lot to say about the Bible. We call ourselves “a people of the book.”

One of the things we have in the Presbyterian Church that helps us organize our thoughts and convictions about faith is something called the *Book of Confessions*. This is it. This book contains 10 different confessions – they date from about 200 AD to the 1990s. And while all of these confessions talk about how we are to understand Scripture – they don't all say the same thing about how we are to understand Scripture. And since that might be confusing for even the most learned of adults, I thought I'd leave that approach for a Sunday School class rather than a sermon.

Another possible way to preach today was to think about what the Bible says about itself. There's an old saying: “Scripture interprets Scripture.” That's what today's Psalm is doing. “Your word is a lamp to our feet and a light unto our path.” Going further, you might remember from the stories in the Bible that you know that people in the Bible actually talk about reading the Bible – so we actually get to witness how they let Scripture shape their lives and reveal meaning. I thought about going this direction, but if I did we would probably run way past the time the television broadcast cuts out and you might not even beat the Baptists to lunch.

What I thought I would do instead – especially since I want the children who asked these questions of faith to be able to understand “the answer,” is to keep things bigger picture.

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Before I talk more about our Bible, I want to illustrate a point by talking about the sacred texts of two different faith traditions.

For our Muslim sisters and brothers, their Scripture is called the Quran. According to their tradition, the words of the Quran – every one of them – was literally spoken by the Angel Gabriel to the prophet Mohammad – who wrote them down.

For our Mormon sisters and brothers the story is somewhat similar. According to their tradition, the founder of their faith, Joseph Smith, was alerted by an angel to the location of golden plates that contained the exact words of what became the Book of Mormon, which is Scripture to them.

I share that because, to the question at hand – asked by our children: what is the true, original meaning of the Bible – it would be a whole lot easier to answer if our story of how our Scripture came to be was similar to our Muslim or Mormon friends. Frankly, I think some people might like that – because it would be more concrete, literal, and clear.

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For us though, what we know is that what we call the Bible derives from many, many different sources and traditions. We know that before these words were ever written down on a scroll or a page, they were stories that people in the middle east would tell around camp fires with their families and clans. We know that the Bible we have was written over a period of about 1500 years.

Our Bible has 66 books in it. The best analogy I've ever heard for describing what the Bible is, is to think of it like a library. There are different sections in this library.

There is history that chronicles our past. There is poetry that helps us understand truth in a more creative way. There is fantasy designed to unlock our thinking about the future (we call that the book of Revelation). There are origin stories that peer back farther even than when human beings were around, much less communicating. The library of our Bible contains a section called “gospels” – where particular communities represented by Matthew and Mark and Luke and John tell the story of Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection from their own perspective and for their own purpose. Our library contains Prophets who call our attention to injustice and challenge us to work for change. The library also has Epistles (or letters) that give us insight into how the earliest churches came to be – and what challenges and opportunities they faced.

All of those different nuances and perspectives are what make the Bible rich and dynamic and beautiful.

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And – even while we acknowledge that the Bible was written by human beings and shaped by different faith communities and comprised of different sources over hundreds and hundreds of years...a practice that even continues to this day (the latest version of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible like the one in your pew was published in 2021) – even while we acknowledge all of that, we believe that each of the 66 books that comprise our Bible are inspired by the Holy Spirit in ways that reveal God's truth. A truth that never changes.

And – at the same time – all of those different nuances and perspectives that make the Bible rich and dynamic and beautiful also mean that it's never as simple as we might want it to be to understand what the Bible means.

Just like when you take a book off a shelf in a library, it is important that you remember what section you are in.

Just like when you read history that was written long ago, you have to remember that there were things that people didn't know back then that we know now (and there were things that people **did** know back then that we no longer know how to appreciate).

Just like the different communities who told the story of the gospel from their perspective and for their own purposes – we...as a reflection of our particular community and full of our own bias...cannot help but to read the Bible from our own perspective and for our own purpose.

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Which is not to say that the Bible isn't true or doesn't have meaning – it is and it does. It's just not quite as easy as flipping open a page on any one of these 66 books and being able to fully grasp what that truth is...because each of those pages in those 66 books is connected to a larger whole.

Your preacher can feel himself getting a little too theoretical. What can I say – it happens sometimes. But let me share two ways I've seen the dynamic truth and meaning of the Bible come alive in and among you.

One of the things I have seen and come to love is how much the Bible's stories connect to our own. Life in the church and amidst the community of faith that makes up the church has a certain consistency to it. We like to think that every church and congregation are different – different contexts for ministry, different missions, different traditions, different cultures – but the reality is...whatever the church...there are people who are experiencing rebirth and resurrection, there are people who are stuck between the narratives of scarcity or abundance, there are people who are in need of deliverance, there are people who feel like they are wandering in exile, there are people who feel like they are wrestling with God in search of a blessing.

And one of the reasons to get familiar with the stories that are contained within the Bible is to see how those narratives echo the lives of those who God calls into community through the body of Christ we call the church. I can't tell you what a gift it is to recognize *your story* within the pages of Scripture. To feel that seen...to understand just how known you are...to have a framework to help you make sense of your purpose

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and your life. When we recognize that the Bible's story contains our own – that is, many times, when the word of God in Scripture becomes real.

Second, through the practice of ministry, I have learned that the Bible can speak to certain situations in a way that any other words will fail. Over the last 20+ years, there have been different times when the phone would ring or the email or text would ding and I would learn about a sadness or a shock that just rendered everyone dumbfounded and useless.

Sometimes a tragedy creates a pain that no words can (or should) ever fill. That is the place where Scripture can reach beyond the limits of our human expression. Where phrases like “the Lord is my shepherd,” or “be still and know that I am God,” or “I am the resurrection and the life,” are the only things worth saying because we know they are eternal.

It is in moments like those – searing as they are – that the truth of Scripture shines the brightest. It is then that we remember that these words truly are holy.

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What is the true, original meaning of the Bible?

I'm not sure there's a simple answer for that – because the Bible points us toward a truth that is too wonderful for us to claim we can fully comprehend.

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But what we do know is that – at the core – the Bible is a love story.

It is a love story about the relationship that God has with God's people – and the world that God created.

And though we – as God's people – stumble and fall and make a mess of things again and again and again...the God who has loved us will continue to love us...even to the end.

And in the meantime – we have the treasure that is God's word in Scripture – to be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.

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Let us pray: O God, we give you thanks for this word. Eternal. Full of truth. Full of love. Full of challenge. Help us to be shaped by it – and to live into it – and to treasure it – as it points us to be disciples of the one you sent to save us. We ask it in faith. Amen.