

Wrestling with Doubt, Finding Faith – 2. Wrestling with the Bible

Psalm 119:105; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; John 14:6

January 14, 2024

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We are in week two of our sermon series called *Wrestling with Doubt, Finding Faith* where we are openly and honestly addressing our doubts and asking questions, so to allow our faith to grow stronger. I chose this sermon topic because if we're being honest, most all of us wrestle with doubt about our faith. Last week Pastor Bethany shared with us that in a recent survey, over 93% of folks say that they wrestle with some level of doubt. And what were the main causes of that doubt? They were things like, does God exist? Is the Bible true? Is there really a heaven? How do we reconcile suffering and God? Throughout this series we're going to talk about all these things but today....

We're going to talk about the Bible, how we read it, how we understand it and what gives us problems. There's an excellent book written by A. Hamilton called *Making Sense of the Bible*. I have read this book several times since it was published in 2014. In fact, our staff read this book together last fall as we continue to try to understand and teach scripture. This book does an excellent job of walking through questions we might have about the Bible. How was it written? How did it become scripture? How do we read the challenging portions while still reading it for all its worth? If you have questions about the Bible, I highly recommend this book. But today, let's consider some of the doubts I have heard you ask about the Bible, things like:

Let's start with the violence that is attributed to God or even commanded by God? Like in 2 Samuel 24 when God killed 70,000 Israelites as a punishment for David taking a census-a census God prompted David to take. Or in Deuteronomy when the death penalty was commanded for disobedient children or in Leviticus when it says that those who had sex out of marriage. Like many of you, I find all that very disturbing. And so we can't help but read this and wonder, how could a loving God command that?

Or what about the Bible's treatment of women. In the Hebrew Bible, the women are often nameless. In the New Testament, Paul teaches that women should have no authority over men. That we should keep silent in the church and that we are to submit to our husbands. When I read that, I wonder, how can I trust a book that treats women like that?

The idea of the earth being created in just 6 days. Or the conflicting creation stories that are both found in the first two chapters of Genesis. Or in Psalm 19:6 when David says the sun moves across the sky when we know now that the earth rotates around the sun.

And then there's slavery. This was a universal practice in the ancient world. There are 326 references to slavery and all but two affirm it. Captured people were sold into slavery. Children were sold into slavery. Those who could not pay their debts were sold into slavery. Despite the fact that God delivered the Israelites from slavery, the Israelites practiced slavery. Even in the New Testament, it was as though the apostles couldn't imagine a world without slavery. They just asked the slave owners to treat their slaves justly and for slaves to "obey your human masters with fear and trembling." (Ephesians 6:5) Passages like these were used by American slave owners and even pastors to justify the practice of slavery. What did it take to end this tragic practice? It took people asking questions of their Bible, like is slavery consistent with the overarching theme of God's justice and love? Does slavery really reflect the heart and character of God, or merely the historical and cultural context, assumptions and economics of the ancient world?

And then there's those contradictions that we find within the gospels. For example, from where did Jesus ascend to heaven? In the book of Luke, he ascends from the Mount of Olives by Jerusalem. But in Matthew's gospel, he ascends from the Galilee? There is a 70 miles differences between the 2 towns. They can't both be right. Understanding that Matthew and Luke wrote their gospels some 50 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, their recollections could certainly have some discrepancies. What matters to me is that it happened, and Jesus promised to come back, and he gave the great commission in both *to go and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*

It is good to have doubt and wrestle through those questions. It's okay to ask, are my assumptions correct? Are my long-held beliefs, correct? Is what my preacher said true? Doubt is not the enemy of faith. But don't let doubt get you so hyper-focused on a tiny passage of scripture that causes you to miss the overarching message of the Bible. Of the 30,000+ verses only 5% seem to be problematic. The overarching message of scripture is of God's love and his call for us to love. It is to do justice, and love mercy and to walk humbly with God. It is about God's overwhelming love, mercy and grace. God's compassion and the kinds of things God calls us to do and they kind of people God calls us to be. There is so much beauty, power, and influence on our lives found in scripture, but we can miss it if we get caught up on the doubts that we have.

There are **two possible ways** that we can deal with the troubling passages in the Bible. The first one is what has been adopted by many fundamentalist churches since about the 19th century. This is to say that the Bible is **inerrant and infallible and** is held by many conservatives, fundamental, evangelical churches today. So, what does **inerrant** mean? It means that the Bible is without error in everything. **Infallible** means that the Bible is unable to fail, to make mistakes or be wrong. Whatever is written in the Bible is true. There are no mistakes, historically or scientifically. The Bible must be true in everything it says, and whatever it says is God's word to us. This is one way of thinking about scripture.

Going along hand in hand with this is what many people believe today, and it is called **verbal plenary inspiration**. Verbal plenary is the idea that God was dictating to the human authors, forcing them to write every word. And so because God forced them to write every single word and because God never makes mistakes, and always tells the truth, then we are just going to believe everything the Bibles says, no questions asked.

During the Age of Enlightenment, when people started to have a better understanding of science and how the world works, they began to ask questions about some of the things written in the Bible. But they were told to be quiet, not ask questions. Just believe everything the Bible says because it is inerrant and infallible. It's like what you might have experienced as a child when you ask a challenging question of an adult and their reply was, "Because I said so." That never set well with me. How about you? So, for people with reason and intellect, that is not a helpful way to talk about the Bible. If there is no room for thinking people in this faith it's easy to understand why so many walk away from or reject the Christian faith completely.

But there is another way to think about scripture, it sees the authors of the scriptures as human beings who are writing their reflections, thoughts, hope and dreams using their insights into God based on their personal and cultural insights. So instead of God telling the writers exactly what to write, taking away their free will and human intellect, it seems to me to we should think of them as biographers. It's as if you were to ask me to write Jerry Luckhardt's' biography. I know

this man. I have lived with him for over 40 years, but I will tell his story through my lens, my experience and my insight from living with him. Will I get it all correct? Probably not, but it will be my understanding of his story.

One of the podcasts I listen to begins with this statement: the *stories are true as remembered and told our storytellers*. So I have been thinking about how this might apply to the authors of the Bible. They were all being moved by the Holy Spirit in their writing as they recorded their stories of faith and their own experiences of God in their lives. How they felt convicted, challenged and afraid, their fears and hopes and dreams and what they believe God's will was for their lives. Think of them as biographers who were writing about who God is. But they lived in a particular time and place and so they are also people of their time. And so there are certain things they just cannot see and cannot understand. They will see things in slightly different ways from one another. And so when we look at it this way, we begin to understand that those places where we have questions and doubts might be revealing the authors' humanity who are stuck in a certain time and place and can't write about what they do not know. This is why it is okay to have doubts and ask questions.

In fact, we see Jesus do this. How many times do we read Jesus saying, *you have been told or it has been written* as he quotes the Hebrew Law? And then goes on.....**but i say to you**..... He is saying that there are certain places in the text where God wants us to see it differently today and so he pushes back and offers a new interpretation.

We see Paul do this in the New Testament. As he is bringing new Christians to faith, they are wondering/pushing back on the laws of the Old Testament and asking if those laws still apply to them. Take circumcision for example. Paul recognizes that circumcision is a deal breaker for Roman and Greek men. And so he asks, is that what God is really concerned about or is that just a picture of being faithful to God and isn't that what baptism does today? How'd they get there? They understood that it was okay for them to ask questions/have doubts and so the text was able to be reinterpreted for their time.

So how do we know when we're reading scripture if something is true. I want to offer several tools you can use to help you.

Pray for the Holy Spirit to guide you when you read scripture. Before you begin to read, say a prayer and ask for guidance and understanding in what you read. In our daily GPS, we begin with a daily prayer that is there to help you do just this.

Read all scripture through the lens of Jesus. Remember at the Christmas Eve services, we read John's Christmas story that is very different from Luke and Matthew's Christmas story. *In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us.* What does this mean? It means that God revealed God's self to us through the person of Jesus Christ. And so when God wanted us to hear his inerrant, infallible word, he didn't send a book down from heaven, he sent his son. Jesus is the inerrant, infallible word of God.

Many of you have seen this illustration but this is a colander, and it is used for rinsing off dirt from fruits and vegetables and keeping only what is clean and good. If we think of Jesus and the Great Commandments as a colander, and we put other scripture through it, whatever is inconsistent with who Jesus was or what Jesus taught, or what the Great Commandment says, it leaves room for questions. It doesn't mean we discount it or cut it out of the Bible, but it can help us to discern what is true based on God' inerrant, infallible Word of his Son, Jesus. For everything else, there is room for us to ask questions and wrestle with our doubt.

Remember the Great Commandments and the Golden Rule. What did Jesus say was the most important commandment? There's two. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. So as you look at everything else, you must ask, does it align with these? If not, these are the places where there is room for you to ask questions.

Stay focused on the overarching themes of love, compassion, justice and mercy. John says, God is love. Love is a selfless concern for the other person. It is slow to anger, compassionate and merciful. Whenever we read in scripture should reflect that. And if we find something that doesn't, then there is room to ask questions about it.

Discuss and debate scripture with faithful friends. Sometimes these types of discussions bring us insights and understandings that we could not see on our own.

Use reason and experience as you study scripture. That includes our modern knowledge and the experience of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives. Our Methodist tradition gives us the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, the four principal factors that John Wesley believed illuminate the core of the Christian faith. They are **Scripture** - our primary source and standard doctrine. **Tradition** is experience and the witness of development and growth of faith through the past centuries and in many nations and cultures. **Experience** is the individual's understanding and appropriation of the faith in the light of his or her own life. Through **Reason** the individual brings to bear on the Christian faith through discerning and cogent thought.

When the Biblical authors are writing, they were inspired by the Holy Spirit who was working in and through them. It did not erase their humanity but when you open up the Bible and read it, the same HS takes the words of this text and uses them still today to speak to you to give you guidance for God's will for your life.

But let me add one warning here. Don't set aside things in scripture that are inconvenient for you. In fact, if you find something that you don't like because it is inconvenient, that's probably a sign that you should be paying extra attention to those words or teachings and acting accordingly. But when something is hurting another human being or is inconsistent with love or pushes people away, there might be room to ask questions.

Listen again to Paul's word from our scripture readings today. *Every scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for showing mistakes, for correcting, and for training character, so that the person who belongs to God can be equipped to do everything that is good.* 2 Tim. 3:16-17

I do not believe that passage of scripture is teaching inerrancy or verbal plenary inspiration, although a lot of people quote it for that purpose today. When the Biblical authors were writing, they did not think they were writing the Bible. They were writing about history and laws for living together as the people of God. They were recording poetry and wisdom writings. Almost the entire New Testament is made up of letters that Paul was writing to his new little churches to encourage and guide them in their following of Jesus. He did not think he was writing the Bible. What I think this passage is saying is that God has influenced all scripture by working through the Biblical authors so that we can be taught, see and learn from our mistakes, be trained in character, so that everyone who belongs to God can be equipped to live their lives the way that God wants them to live. Scripture is a love story, a road map, a guide for life. It comforts us. It consoles us. It convicts us and sometimes, it moves us to ask questions and those are good and can lead us to a deeper, more compelling, inspired faith.

For Christmas this year, my daughter Emily surprised me with a gift of my father's Bible. She took it two years ago when she was helping my mother (her grandmother) move from our family home that she had shared with my dad for almost 40 years, to her senior living community. Emily saw my dad's Bible and knew that it would be a treasure for me. So with my mother's blessings, she saved it and gave it to me as a Christmas gift this year. And when I open this book, I can see my dad's handwriting the scripture passages that guided his life. I can see the notes that he made in the margins, scripture passages that he listed inside the front and back covers, newspaper clippings and inspirational sayings that he saved as he read this book and how they influenced his life. Passage after passage of notes and underlinings from the Bible of a man who read it and how God spoke to him through it and it became his defining story. His life was shaped by these words and those words shaped my life as well. He found comfort, consolation and hope in these words.

Two weeks ago, I met Bob and Janet Anderson just days before Bob passed. When I met with them, I reminded them of how much I love them and how much they are loved by the Messiah Church family and then, I took out my Bible and read, *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Yeah though i walk through the valley of the shadow of death, i will fear no evil. You are with me. Your rod and your staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.* And once more, through the scriptures, we heard God speak words of comfort and consolation and hope.

There is no other book like the Bible. I read from it every morning. I memorize verses from it and I attempt to live by it. It is through this book that I find God speaks to me. I am a better wife, parent, pastor and friend because of this book. I love this book. But I also say to you, it's okay to have doubts and ask questions. I encourage you to wrestle through them so that you can get to the powerful, beautiful, comforting, and life-giving message of this book. They prepare us to live as God intends us to live. In them we hear God speak. They are our defining story.

Let's pray: God, I pray that you would bless every person who is hearing this message, including/especially those who have serious doubts. I pray that you would help them to understand scripture differently than they were taught as children or the way that they've simply always believed. Help them to see it as this amazing, magnificent, wonderful story, with it's faults like we human have, but all the while, teaching us who you are and what you intend for our lives. Help us to be people of the book, to open read, study, meditate upon and live the scriptures. Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of January 14, 2024

Weekly Prayer

Most Loving and Gracious God, I praise you and thank you for the guidance that you give me in your Word and by your Spirit. I thank you for choosing to dwell within me, and I praise you for calling me to be your faithful servant. As I study your Word today, if I am in need of comfort, may I be comforted; if I need to be challenged, may I be challenged. And through it all, may I grow closer to you. Amen.

Monday, January 15

Scripture: Jeremiah 1:1-3; 2 Peter 1:16-21

These are the words of Jeremiah, Hilkiah's son, who was one of the priests from Anathoth in the land of Benjamin. The Lord's word came to Jeremiah in the thirteenth year of Judah's King Josiah, Amon's son, and throughout the rule of Judah's King Jehoiakim, Josiah's son, until the fifth month of the eleventh year of King Zedekiah, Josiah's son, when the people of Jerusalem were taken into exile.

We didn't repeat crafty myths when we told you about the powerful coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Quite the contrary, we witnessed his majesty with our own eyes. He received honor and glory from God the Father when a voice came to him from the magnificent glory, saying, "This is my dearly loved Son, with whom I am well-pleased." We ourselves heard this voice from heaven while we were with him on the holy mountain. In addition, we have a most reliable prophetic word, and you would do well to pay attention to it, just as you would to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Most important, you must know that no prophecy of scripture represents the prophet's own understanding of things, because no prophecy ever came by human will. Instead, men and women led by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

Observation

Bible doubters (like some Christians) assume God could only speak through a fully correct, consistent Bible. But the prophet Jeremiah said his "words" bore God's "word" or message. The apostle Peter said the Holy Spirit led, but men and women did the actual speaking. Many Christians today believe that God influenced the choice of every word and every idea, so that the words written were literally the words of God. However, that is not taught in the Bible, and it was not taught in the creeds of the early church.

Application

Peter compared the prophetic writing to "a lamp shining in a dark place." He drew on images from his Bible—the Hebrew Scriptures or "Old Testament" (Psalm 84:11, 119:105, Malachi 4:2). As you have read the Bible, asking God's help (Psalm 119:9-18 models a lovely prayer to pray as you read the Bible), have you ever had this sense of a lamp shining on some dark question you faced?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, as I read my Bible, shine into my heart through its message so that your kingdom life of love, joy and peace will shine out of me. Amen.

Tuesday, January 16

Scripture: Leviticus 24:18-20; Matthew 5:38-45

Someone who kills an animal may make amends for it: a life for a life. If someone injures a fellow citizen, they will suffer the same injury they inflicted: broken bone for broken bone, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. The same injury the person inflicted on the other will be inflicted on them.

"You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you that you must not oppose those who want to hurt you. If people slap you on your right cheek, you must turn the left cheek to them as well. When they wish to haul you to court and take your shirt,

let them have your coat too. When they force you to go one mile, go with them two. Give to those who ask, and don't refuse those who wish to borrow from you.

"You have heard that it was said, You must love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who harass you so that you will be acting as children of your Father who is in heaven. He makes the sun rise on both the evil and the good and sends rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous.

Observation

Students of ancient history see a world in which revenge often went beyond the original injury (e.g. "you hurt me; I'll kill your whole family"). The law in Leviticus 24 (and Exodus 21, Deuteronomy 19) made revenge proportional — "an eye for an eye" — and averted massive retaliation. Israel's law of proportional revenge was more merciful than most. But Jesus didn't feel bound to be "consistent" with that. He said his kingdom led his followers into more radical, difficult territory: "Love your enemies."

Application

We think of ourselves as more enlightened than the ancient world. But we still sell T-shirts and bumper stickers saying things like "I don't get mad — I get even." How does replacing a wish for revenge with an ideal of mutual love and service alter human relationships for the better? In what ways does Jesus' teaching speak to the spirit in which you deal with others?

Prayer

Lord God, phrases like "massive retaliation" and "force is the only language they understand" still tempt me. Please keep leading me into the quality of love that Jesus taught. Amen.

Wednesday, January 17

Scripture: Genesis 17:9-14; Acts 15:4-19; Galatians 5:1-6

God said to Abraham, "As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants in every generation. This is my covenant that you and your descendants must keep: Circumcise every male. You must circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it will be a symbol of the covenant between us. On the eighth day after birth, every male in every generation must be circumcised, including those who are not your own children: those born in your household and those purchased with silver from foreigners. Be sure you circumcise those born in your household and those purchased with your silver. Your flesh will embody my covenant as an enduring covenant. Any uncircumcised male whose flesh of his foreskin remains uncircumcised will be cut off from his people. He has broken my covenant."

When they arrived in Jerusalem, the church, the apostles, and the elders all welcomed them. They gave a full report of what God had accomplished through their activity. Some believers from among the Pharisees stood up and claimed, "The Gentiles must be circumcised. They must be required to keep the Law from Moses." The apostles and the elders gathered to consider this matter. After much debate, Peter stood and addressed them, "Fellow believers, you know that, early on, God chose me from among you as the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and come to believe. God, who knows people's deepest thoughts and desires, confirmed this by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, but purified their deepest thoughts and desires through faith. Why then are you now challenging God by placing a burden on the shoulders of these disciples that neither we nor our ancestors could bear? On the contrary, we believe that we and they are saved in the same way, by the grace of the Lord Jesus." The entire assembly fell quiet as they listened to Barnabas and Paul describe all the signs and wonders God did

among the Gentiles through their activity. When Barnabas and Paul also fell silent, James responded, "Fellow believers, listen to me. Simon reported how, in his kindness, God came to the Gentiles in the first place, to raise up from them a people of God. The prophets' words agree with this; as it is written,

After this I will return,
and I will rebuild David's fallen tent;
I will rebuild what has been torn down.
I will restore it
so that the rest of humanity will seek the Lord,
even all the Gentiles who belong to me.
The Lord says this, the one who does these things
known from earliest times.

Therefore, I conclude that we shouldn't create problems for Gentiles who turn to God."

Christ has set us free for freedom. Therefore, stand firm and don't submit to the bondage of slavery again. Look, I, Paul, am telling you that if you have yourselves circumcised, having Christ won't help you. Again I swear to every man who has himself circumcised that he is required to do the whole Law. You people who are trying to be made righteous by the Law have been estranged from Christ. You have fallen away from grace! We eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness through the Spirit by faith. Being circumcised or not being circumcised doesn't matter in Christ Jesus, but faith working through love does matter.

Observation

Christians have wrestled with parts of the Bible throughout history. In the first century, some thought it was wrong to accept uncircumcised Gentile men into the faith. They could quote Genesis 17:9-14 to say any uncircumcised male was outside God's covenant. But Peter, Paul and James didn't believe that settled the matter. God, they said (based on other texts like Amos 9:11-12, and Jesus' example), was leading differently in their day, pouring out the Holy Spirit on all who showed faith in Jesus.

Application

These readings are a useful case study because few Christians today demand circumcision. After the Christian Pharisees (Acts 15:5) urged a circumcision requirement, James quoted the prophet Amos, who'd said God aimed to reach all nations. Based on the apostles' evidence that God accepted Gentiles who had faith, the apostles agreed it was better to follow Amos than Genesis in this case. What can we learn from their example about how to apply the Bible?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, like all your children, I miss the mark at times. I'm so thankful you died to set me free from guilt, and that you empower me to keep living into your love in the freedom you offer. Amen.

Thursday, January 18

Scripture: John 5:35-40; Hebrews 1:1-4

John was a burning and shining lamp, and, at least for a while, you were willing to celebrate in his light. "I have a witness greater than John's testimony. The Father has given me works to do so that I might complete them. These works I do testify about me that the Father sent me. And the Father who sent me testifies about me. You have never even heard his voice or seen his

form, and you don't have his word dwelling with you because you don't believe the one whom he has sent. Examine the scriptures, since you think that in them you have eternal life. They also testify about me, yet you don't want to come to me so that you can have life.

In the past, God spoke through the prophets to our ancestors in many times and many ways. In these final days, though, he spoke to us through a Son. God made his Son the heir of everything and created the world through him. The Son is the light of God's glory and the imprint of God's being. He maintains everything with his powerful message. After he carried out the cleansing of people from their sins, he sat down at the right side of the highest majesty. And the Son became so much greater than the other messengers, such as angels, that he received a more important title than theirs.

Observation

A fancy word for one Christian attitude is "Bibliolatry." That means worshiping the Bible more than the God of the Bible. Jesus challenged the "bibliolatry" of some Hebrew Scripture experts. Many of them memorized huge sections of the Bible. Yet Jesus said they missed the focal point of the Bible's story — they wouldn't recognize him as God among them. They "knew" their Bible (at least their view of it) so well they couldn't accept God in the flesh.

Application

Scholar Scot McKnight said some Christians "read the Bible as a collection of...sanctified morsels of truth." But the Bible isn't just a set of short verses, all equally true and making the same point. That's why the writer of Hebrews said although God had spoken through the prophets "in many times and many ways," God's ultimate word was not a book, but a person: the Son, Jesus. How has (or can) the Bible, above all else, draw you to know and love Jesus?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, lead my mind and heart beyond theories, abstractions, and rigid ideas. Meet me as I come to the Bible and speak your life-giving word into my heart. Amen.

Friday, January 19

Scripture: Matthew 7:1-5; Romans 2:11-16

"Don't judge, so that you won't be judged. You'll receive the same judgment you give. Whatever you deal out will be dealt out to you. Why do you see the splinter that's in your brother's or sister's eye, but don't notice the log in your own eye? How can you say to your brother or sister, 'Let me take the splinter out of your eye,' when there's a log in your eye? You deceive yourself! First take the log out of your eye, and then you'll see clearly to take the splinter out of your brother's or sister's eye.

God does not have favorites.

Those who have sinned outside the Law will also die outside the Law, and those who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law. It isn't the ones who hear the Law who are righteous in God's eyes. It is the ones who do what the Law says who will be treated as righteous. Gentiles don't have the Law. But when they instinctively do what the Law requires they are a Law in themselves, though they don't have the Law. They show the proof of the Law written on their hearts, and their consciences affirm it. Their conflicting thoughts will accuse them, or even make a defense for them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the hidden truth about human beings through Christ Jesus.

Observation

Some Christians sow doubt about their faith by saying God only saves those whose faith is just like theirs. In his book, *Making Sense of the Bible*, Pastor Adam Hamilton says, "Most mainline Protestants, Roman Catholics, and a sizable number of evangelicals reject...*Christian exclusivism* in favor of...*Christian inclusivism*. This view [says] Jesus is the only Savior of the world...[but] insists that Jesus' saving grace can be given to whomever God chooses based upon the criteria God chooses...this does not mean everyone will be 'saved.' But it appears in Scripture that many who sought to know and love God, but did not know Christ, will in the end...receive the gift of his saving grace."

Application

Many "religious" people condemned Jesus for befriending "tax collectors" (who collected taxes for the occupying Romans) and "sinners" (who did not fully follow the many laws or customs religious leaders demanded). Who in your world might be classed as "tax collectors and sinners" in 2024? How do you believe Jesus would treat such people? Do you agree with Paul that only God (not us) can "judge the hidden truth about human beings"?

Prayer

Creator God, you came to save every member of your human family who is willing to trust you. Give me a heart that knows you yearn to redeem everyone and rejoices in all who respond. Amen.

Saturday, January 20

Scripture: 2 Timothy 3:10-17

But you have paid attention to my teaching, conduct, purpose, faithfulness, patience, love, and endurance. You have seen me experience physical abuse and ordeals in places such as Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. I put up with all sorts of abuse, and the Lord rescued me from it all! In fact, anyone who wants to live a holy life in Christ Jesus will be harassed. But evil people and swindlers will grow even worse, as they deceive others while being deceived themselves. But you must continue with the things you have learned and found convincing. You know who taught you. Since childhood you have known the holy scriptures that help you to be wise in a way that leads to salvation through faith that is in Christ Jesus. Every scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for showing mistakes, for correcting, and for training character, so that the person who belongs to God can be equipped to do everything that is good.

Observation

United Methodists believe "that God speaks to us through the Bible and that it contains all things necessary for salvation. This authority derives from three sources:

We hold that the writers of the Bible were inspired by God, that they were filled with God's Spirit as they wrote the truth to the best of their knowledge.

We hold that God was at work in the process of canonization, during which only the most faithful and useful books were adopted as Scripture.

We hold that the Holy Spirit works today in our thoughtful study of the Scriptures, especially as we study them together, seeking to relate the old words to life's present realities. The Bible's authority is, therefore, nothing magical. For example, we do not open the text at random to discover God's will. The authority of Scripture derives from the movement of God's Spirit in times past and in our reading of it today." *

*<https://www.umc.org/en/content/our-christian-roots-the-bible>

Application

Some details, facts and even ideas in the Bible don't match each other perfectly. But the point of the Bible's deep story is God's loving work to redeem lost humanity. Every inspired Scripture is part of a story aimed at bringing people into a vibrant, life-changing relationship with God. The Bible shows people who want to respond to God how to live a life reflecting God's redemption and love. When you read the Bible, how often do some of the details distract you from the larger story? How can the GPS, sermons and other times of personal Bible reading and study help you view each individual section in the framework of the larger story, the "meta-narrative," the Bible has told God's people for centuries? How do you open your heart and mind to let God's Spirit, who guided the Bible's writers, also guide you to let the Bible authoritatively shape your life?

Prayer

O God, master and guide, I need your help and wisdom today and every day. As I read the Bible, use it to equip me more and more to daily be your physical presence in my world. Amen.