



October 1, 2017

THE BIBLE IS YOUR GUIDE, NOT YOUR GOD
Pastor Jason Bryan-Wegner

PSALM 119:105-112 NRSV

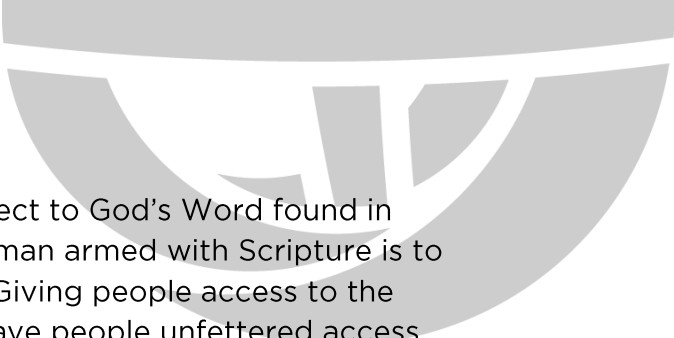
¹⁰⁵Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. ¹⁰⁶I have sworn an oath and confirmed it, to observe your righteous ordinances. ¹⁰⁷I am severely afflicted; give me life, O Lord, according to your word. ¹⁰⁸Accept my offerings of praise, O Lord, and teach me your ordinances. ¹⁰⁹I hold my life in my hand continually, but I do not forget your law.

¹¹⁰The wicked have laid a snare for me, but I do not stray from your precepts. ¹¹¹Your decrees are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart. ¹¹²I incline my heart to perform your statutes forever, to the end.

When you go on a road trip, how do you figure out how to get to your destination? Do you make the route up as you go along, casting your fate to the wind? Do you plug your destination into your phone, obeying every command it chirps at you? "In 500 feet turn right...No! Your other right!...In a ¼mile make a U-turn." Or are you more old-school and take out the Rand McNally Road Atlas and have your spouse or friend chart your course? Be aware, this option may lead to marital distress or loss of friendship.

Knowing how best we get anywhere is important. The same is true for how we arrive at faith. We need to ask ourselves what sources and tools guide what kind of God we believe in.

One of the key elements of the Reformation was Luther's emphasis on the Bible. In Luther's day, the Church wasn't such a great navigator. Many church practices veered people right off the spiritual map. The Church at the time was more concerned with control than direction and in some cases practiced faith completely opposite of what Jesus taught. Luther insisted that the Bible was the only guide for a life of faith; not just for priests but for laypeople too. Luther called this Sola Scriptura or Scripture Alone. He translated the Bible into German and encouraged people to read it, not just in church but in the home too. In Luther's

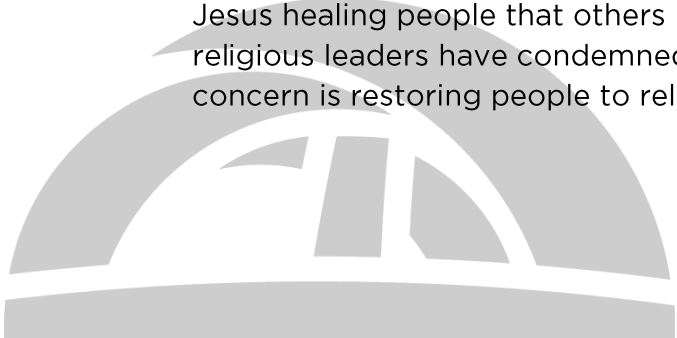


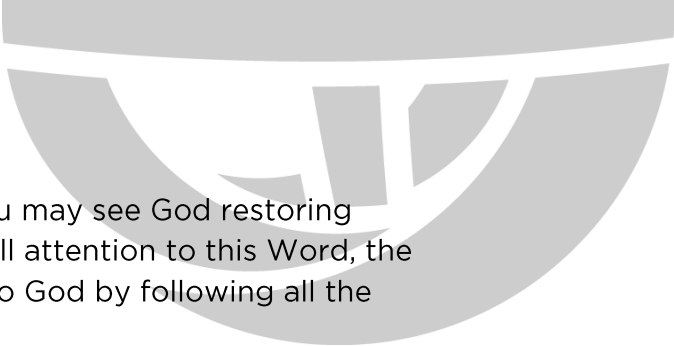
view, church tradition and papal authority were subject to God's Word found in the Bible. Luther went so far as to say, "A simple layman armed with Scripture is to be believed above a pope or a cardinal without it." Giving people access to the Bible took power out of the hands of the elite and gave people unfettered access to God's commands and promises.

Today, virtually everyone in the Western Hemisphere has some opinion of the Bible, whether they are part of the church or not. This week, I took a quick poll on Facebook about what people think about the Bible. I think that what people think about the Bible may say something about how people understand God. Not surprisingly, there was a wide range of thoughtful responses. The most common response to my poll was that the Bible is "God's Word". Some said it's a rule book or instruction. A number of people said it is "old". Others commented on what they find in it: love, courage, strength, and hope. Some commented on how it has been used to judge, manipulate, and justify hate for other people. One might wonder how one person can find hope and courage and another person sees nothing but condemnation and judgement. I wonder if one of the unintended consequences of Luther giving the Bible to the people was that it gets read and interpreted all kinds of ways.

One of the loudest interpretations of the Bible in America today is biblical literalism or fundamentalism. It seems like a compelling way to read the Bible if you see the Bible as a book of facts, but isn't much use if the Bible is a series of narratives and poetry that reveal the Living God. Literalists do theological gymnastics to smooth out any inconsistencies. In some cases, they see any other way to read the Bible as a fundamental threat to the existence of God. It's not beyond reason to think that this hard lined reading of Scripture has contributed to others feeling like the Bible is less helpful and less hopeful for their own faith. It may also be one reason that people, even Christians today read the Bible less now than they did even a decade ago. After all, if the Bible's reputation is steeped in judgment, who would want to read it?

In my Facebook poll several people said the Bible is complicated, which it is. It is not just one book, but a collection of books that tell us what God wants to say, not just once but over centuries of time. Where we begin to read in the collection shapes how we read the rest of the Bible. If we start at the very beginning, Genesis and Exodus are pretty good, but as you get into the purity code and animal sacrifices in Leviticus, you might get the impression that God is obsessed with people following all the rules. But when we start with the Gospels, and we see Jesus healing people that others have ignored and forgiving people when other religious leaders have condemned them. You get the idea that God's primary concern is restoring people to relationship with others and with God. Then when





you go back to read some of those earlier books, you may see God restoring people to relationship there too. Luther strived to call attention to this Word, the Word that tells us the truth that we cannot make it to God by following all the rules, so God comes to us.

The Bible itself is not the only Word of God. It points to Jesus as the Word of God. John's gospel begins, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. Through him all things came into being...And the Word became flesh and lived among us." When God speaks, it's not just information, it's relationship. God comes off the pages and into humanity. Rather than just having rules and stories about an invisible God, we see in Jesus that God brings hope and new life to the world.

God's Word is also real when we tell one another what God does in particular times and places. Luther called this proclamation. We might think of it as preaching. But it's not just what pastors say from the pulpit. When you show up and offer a prayer and courage for a sick friend you speak God's Word. When your faith compels you to stand with people who are being persecuted or oppressed or advocate for a people who have no voice you speak God's Word. When you speak the truth in love to a person who is doing harm to themselves or others, you proclaim God's Word. Yet, we cannot proclaim if we're not in relationship with Jesus, the Word made flesh and we don't know Jesus unless we spend time in the Bible.

During the baptism service, we instruct parents to raise their kids within the community of faith and to place in their hands the Bible. But it's not enough to get it in their hands; it needs to be in all of our hands. And it needs to be opened and explored. The words on the page need to be consumed and come alive in us so that we not only know the Word, but that we live it too.

Next week, we will help families of 3 year olds and 3rd graders make good on their promise to place the Bible in their children's hands. We will teach parents and children how to open these Bibles so that the Word may come alive in them. My kids have both been the recipients of these Bibles in the past, and though I will admit we don't open them every day, it is amazing what happens when we do. I watch as they develop a deep and imaginative faith in the God who loves them and has claimed them as his own. I am challenged by their questions and amazed at how real Jesus is for them. As one of the respondents to my Facebook poll said, "Closed, the Bible scares me. Open, it is the source of life." For when we open the Scriptures, God's grace and peace take up residence in us. The words, God's Word is made fresh and new. And the Spirit empowers us to embody God's love for all creation in Jesus Christ. Amen.

