

The Trouble with the Bible Is

Intro Turn to John 3.

There is something wrong with the Bible. I suppose different people might have different problems with the Bible, depending on what the person thought and believed.

But I have a problem with the Bible that goes back quite a few years. It kind of chewed on the back of my mind, but I have not really been able to even put the problem in words.

It was there and bothered me in a kind of semi-conscious way. If someone had said to me what I will say in a few minutes, I think I'd have agreed right away. But I have not even been able to describe the trouble with the Bible, even to myself, until recently.

IF we read the whole Bible, or read in many different parts of the Bible, and IF we believe that God uses the Bible to teach us and lead us and help us and encourage us and call us, then sooner or later we will have this problem.

The Problem

The problem with the Bible is that a lot of the Bible does not answer my questions. There are questions in my mind, that I would like God to answer, and a lot of the Bible is not answering any of my questions.

And some of my questions are not answered anywhere at all in the Bible. If the Bible is God speaking to his people, if it is God's word, why does it not answer our questions?

Let's say the same thing another way: a lot of the Bible does not meet my needs. There are things that I feel like I need, encouragement or comfort or answers or relief or help.

A lot of the Bible, when I read it, is not helping. Why does so much of the Bible, when I read it, not help me at all? I can feel needs in me, ways in which I am lost or empty. I read the Bible, and it is not helping. I read it for help, and what it says does not help.

It does not answer my questions. It does not meet my needs. Here's a third way to say much the same thing: so much of the Bible is not practical, or relevant. Some is, lots not.

People in churches want practical sermons. When I was a seminary student, I was taught to teach the people things that were practical. Make it practical and relevant, they said. But I'm saying that there is a lot of the Bible that is very hard to make practical.

I read through the OT, and I'm now reading in Numbers, where Moses tells what the different clans of Levites will carry, when they move the Tabernacle and its furniture. It's kind of interesting, but how on earth can I make that practical, or relevant?

Part of the problem here is just me; I'm better at figuring out what a part of the Bible might have meant to the first readers than I am at figuring out what it might mean for us.

That's one of the reasons we have discussion and response after sermons: there are people here who are better at that than I am, and your responses fill a gap I cannot fill.

People want practical sermons. It makes sense to me when they say that. I'm saying that there is a LOT of the Bible that I do not know how to make practical or relevant.

There are parts of the Bible that DO meet our needs, and parts that DO answer our questions, and parts ARE practical. But a lot of the Bible is not any of those three.

What is going on with God and us in those parts? That's the question, and the question we want to work on for the rest of this morning. There is a real God behind this book.

He made people, he loves people, he sent his Son to die for people, he wants to be personally involved in people's lives. Is God out of touch? Why does God seem to be missing his people? Lots of people quit reading the Bible for this reason.

When we read parts of the Bible that don't meet our needs, don't answer our questions, and that are not practical or relevant, what is happening between us and God? What's he thinking? What does he have in mind? Are we just to ignore those?

To answer this, we'll look at Jesus in the Gospels. After we've looked at Jesus and the Gospels, we'll come back to the trouble with the Bible.

How Jesus Answered Questions

Turn to John 3. In the Gospels, when people asked Jesus questions, he did not always answer their questions. We'll go over examples of people asking Jesus a straightforward question, not a bad question, but Jesus did not answer it.

He gave them an answer, but he did not answer the question they asked. He answered a different question, which they did not ask, but which he thought more important.

John 3:1-3 - Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

Nicodemus wants to talk about whether or not *Jesus is from God*, and if *God is with Jesus*. It is not a question, but Nicodemus does set a clear direction for the conversation.

Listen to Nicodemus: *"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."*

Nicodemus wants to talk about Jesus and God. That would be a good conversation topic. But Jesus completely changes the topic. Listen:

³ Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again." Jesus ignored the topic Nicodemus introduced, and started an entirely new topic. **Jesus** wants to talk about **Nicodemus** and God. Is **Nicodemus** going to see God?

What Nicodemus *should have* asked was, "how can I enter the kingdom of God?" He did not ask that question, but that is the question Jesus answered. Let's try this:

Nicodemus asked, "How can I enter the kingdom of God?" Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again."

That works much better. Jesus felt free to answer the question Nicodemus **should have** asked instead of the one he **did** ask.

Now I have a question for you: Do you think Jesus has ever done this to you? You wanted something from Jesus, and he ignored what you wanted and took you in a different direction? I think this is a common experience. In John 4 is another example.

John 4:7-10 - *When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?"*⁸ *(His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)*⁹ *The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)*

What does the Samaritan woman want to talk about? She wants to talk about why Jesus asked her for a drink. Why would a Jewish man ask a Samaritan woman for a drink? But Jesus does not want to talk about that. Just like with Nicodemus, Jesus changed the topic.

¹⁰ *Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."*

Here Jesus actually tells her what she should have asked. The woman wants to talk about why Jesus wants a drink from her. That's not a bad question. But Jesus wants to talk about who **he** is, and what **he** can give her.

He does **not** answer her question and then carry on. As with Nicodemus, Jesus **ignores** her question, and steers the conversation in a different direction. What should the woman have asked? Not, *"How can you ask me for a drink?"*

She should have asked, *"Who are you, and can you give me living water?"* That's what she should have asked. Listen to Jesus: *"If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."* Jesus ignored her question, and took the conversation in a different direction.

Both Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman speak to Jesus about something that seems useful to them, practical. It felt to them like what they need answered. Why does Jesus change the topic? Is he just rude? Is he careless? Do their feelings not matter to Jesus?

No. Jesus loved both of those people. He loved them too much to talk about what he knew was not important, even though it was to them. He knew that a different conversation would take them farther.

Jesus loved these people, and he knew what they needed better than they did. What they thought was relevant and practical was not, and he knew it, and he forced the conversation in a different direction. He did not join them in their topic, at all.

It's true that often Jesus did answer the questions that people asked. That happened more often than not. Jesus often did answer questions straightforwardly. But not always.

One more example, Mark 13, although Matthew and Luke have much the same story.

Mark 13:1 - *As Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!"² "Do you see all these great buildings?" replied Jesus. "Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."³ As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him privately, ⁴ "Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?"*

This time it happens with Jesus' own disciples. They ask a clear question: *when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?*

That's clear enough: When? And, what's the sign?

⁵ *Jesus said to them: "Watch out that no one deceives you."* Those are Jesus' first words of answer: watch out that no one deceives you. Does that tell them when the End will happen? Does it tell them a sign? No.

What the disciples should have asked, when Jesus talked about the temple being destroyed, was: *what will be the dangers to our faith? How can we stay faithful to the End?* The disciples asked for the time, and for the signs, and Jesus said, *watch out!*

Jesus has a long teaching after that, and in this teaching Jesus does talk about the signs, and he also talks about when. He does get around to the questions the disciples asked.

But Jesus' biggest concern is **not** what the disciples asked. Jesus' wants to talk about the dangers to their faith, and how they will stay loyal to him. Remember, they asked about the time and the signs.

Listen to these lines from Jesus' teaching: v5 *Watch out that no one deceives you.* V6 *Do not be alarmed.* V9 *You must be on your guard.* V11 *When you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry before hand about what to say.* V13 *The one who stands firm to the end will be saved.* V21 *If anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' of, 'Look, there he is!' do not believe it.* V23 *So be on your guard.* V33 *Be on your guard! Be alert!* V35 *Therefore keep watch.*

V37 is the last sentence. Remember the **first** words, in v5? *Watch out that no one deceives you.* **Last** sentence, in v37 *What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'*

The disciples asked about the time and the signs. Jesus turned the answer into a spiritual survival manual. If the disciples had asked, "how will we stay faithful?" then Jesus' long answer fits perfectly. **That is not what they asked. But that's what Jesus answered.**

By the way, some will say that if we just believe in Jesus, then no problem, everything will be okay. That's not the whole story. Jesus was actually concerned that his people would last. It is not easy to stay faithful to Jesus. Jesus didn't think so. Don't be fooled.

Let's think about Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman and the disciples with Jesus on the Mount of Olives. Does Jesus not care about these people? Is he out of touch with their concerns? Does he not love them? Has he no interest in their needs?

Looking back, we can see that he *does* care, he *does* know, he does love, he's *full* of compassion for these people, he wants *only* what's best for them. As so he takes his dealings with them in a different direction.

In some ways, Jesus' whole ministry was a disappointment to people. The Jews in Palestine had clear ideas about what kind of Messiah they needed, and what kind of Messiah they should get. Jesus was not it.

Jesus says at one point, *Blessed is the one who does not fall away on account of me.* (Matt 11:6; Lk 7:23). This comes after we learn that even John the Baptist was disappointed in Jesus, and doubted that Jesus was the Messiah.

John was in Herod's prison. The Messiah *was* in Israel, and evil Herod was *not* being judged, and John was *not* being released. Was the one in Israel really the Messiah?

Blessed is the one who does not fall away on account of me. That is a haunting line. Jesus has such a different idea of what questions need answering, what needs should be met, what was practical and relevant, that people would leave God because of it.

People would not be able to connect who Jesus was and what Jesus offered with what they thought they needed to get, and they would leave God because of it.

The Trouble with the Bible

What Jesus is to people in the Gospels, God is to us in the Bible. He is not missing us, he is not out of touch. God is not irrelevant, and God is not unconcerned with what ordinary people needed in these days.

Coming to the Bible requires the same thing as coming to Jesus: submission. The only people who got anywhere with Jesus were those who let him change the topic, those who would give Jesus the benefit of the doubt, and trust that Jesus had a better idea of what would meet their needs.

God does not intend to meet all of our needs through the Bible. A lot of what God's people need God gives through the body of Christ, through believers coming together, talking to each other, caring for each other, confessing sins, praying for each other, encouraging each other. That is a huge piece of God caring for any one disciple.

But as far as the Bible goes, we need to assume that *all* of it is what God's people need to know, need to absorb and reflect on.

God thinks we need to know a lot about what he did a long time ago, how he called people, what he asked them to do (even when he is not asking the same from us).

We need to know how others failed, and how God treated them, and how others were loyal to God, and what happened to them.

Let God set the agenda. Let God decide what's best for us. All who are going to read the Bible a lot need to humble themselves before God. As Jesus did in his life, so God does always: he takes his dealings with us in the way that seems good to him.

From Jesus to the Bible to all of Life

This is not just about Jesus in the Gospels, and not just about the Bible. It is all of our lives. In what ways do you assume that God is missing you, or not paying attention, or he's out of touch, or God is just not relevant?

All these things you cannot control, and they are not what you had in mind at all, and perhaps you've prayed about this and God seems to be ignoring your requests. So we assume distance between God and us, and that makes us even more miserable than the thing we don't like and can't control.

But what if God was actually very close, paying close attention, and motivated by what was best for us? What if God was doing with us exactly what Jesus was doing with Nicodemus, and the Samaritan woman, and the disciples on the Mount of Olives?

What if the problem was that we would not let God change the topic? Jesus never asked permission. He just steered things in the direction he thought best. He did that because he loved those people. God does to us all the time, but we are tenacious with **our** plans.

The trouble with the Bible is this: God knows best. It turns out that he's God. We either humble ourselves or we assume God ignoring us and playing hard to get. We either submit to God or we conclude that he's far from us and not paying attention.

If we use the example of Jesus, though, God is paying close attention, and doing exactly what we need the most.