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### **Instruction Book or Travel Journal?**

Various, especially Ecclesiastes 1-3

You've probably heard this before: "If you're struggling with life, you should try reading the instruction book" – accompanied by a picture of the Bible. The message is clear. "If only people would read the Word of God! Then their questions would be answered and they would know what to do. It's just such a shame that God has given us a clear and simple guide to effective, happy, confident living, but people are just too lazy to pick it up that guide and read it." And the irony here is that anyone who says something like that has obviously *not* read the Bible.

That approach to the Bible makes a couple of assumptions. First, it assumes that God's purpose in inspiring the Bible is to give us guidance to make our lives easier and, second, all we have to do to obtain that guidance is pick it up and read it. The first assumption is highly doubtful. The second is flat out wrong.

What we actually have here – instead of an instruction book – is an anthology of a wide variety of different kinds of writings. The majority of the Bible is made up of stories. And, as I pointed out a couple of weeks ago, usually not morally edifying stories. As I said in that sermon, even the "good" characters, the heroes to whom God is revealed, tend to be rats. David was the man after God's own heart – so long as you look past the adultery and murder and lying and grudge holding. I think the only one of the Ten Commandments that David did *not* trample on during the Bathsheba business is the one about keeping the Sabbath. Probably. And don't get me started on Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. The only good thing I can say about this self-centered, manipulative weasel is that one time – in Genesis 32 – he prayed what appears to have been a genuine prayer. Probably. So, no – the narratives of the Bible do not offer practical models for living. As for the rest of the Bible, much is poetry – all the psalms and most of the prophetic books are poems – which are great for extended metaphor and visual imagery, but again not so good at step-by-step advice.

Nevertheless, I do have to admit that some parts of the Bible do contain clear instructions. So let's take a look at some of those passages. We begin with Exodus 30:1-4:

*You shall make an altar on which to offer incense; you shall make it of acacia wood. It shall be one cubit long, and one cubit wide; it shall be square, and shall be two cubits high; its horns shall be of one piece with it. You shall overlay it with pure gold, its top, and its sides all round and its horns; and you shall make for it a moulding of gold all round. And you shall make two golden rings for it; under its moulding on two opposite sides of it you shall make them, and they shall hold the poles with which to carry it.*

See? That's fairly clear. It's how to make an incense altar. Let's look at Deuteronomy 25:11-12.

*If men get into a fight with one another, and the wife of one intervenes to rescue her husband from the grip of his opponent by reaching out and seizing his genitals, you shall cut off her hand; show no pity.*

Again, this is fairly straightforward. Not widely applicable, and maybe a little extreme – as in Sharia law extreme – but straightforward. Let’s spin the wheel again. Leviticus 11:29-30.

*These are unclean for you among the creatures that swarm upon the earth: the weasel, the mouse, the great lizard according to its kind, the gecko, the land-crocodile, the lizard, the skink, and the chameleon.*

Finally, some biblical instructions I can get behind. My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us not eat skinks. One more, Deuteronomy 22:9-11.

*You shall not sow your vineyard with a second kind of seed, or the whole yield will have to be forfeited, both the crop that you have sown and the yield of the vineyard itself. You shall not plough with an ox and a donkey yoked together. You shall not wear clothes made of wool and linen woven together.*

Um . . . no fabric blends? Why?

You probably got my point a couple of readings ago. Yes, there are clear, specific instructions in the Bible. And the clearer and more specific they are – the more pointless and obsolete they tend to be. When I began this series on the Bible, I asked you if you had any questions, and one of you asked, “How do you know which laws from Leviticus we have to follow?” That’s an important question, because what we see today are people who appeal to *parts* of the Old Testament law – especially to Leviticus 18, which condemns a wide variety of sexual behaviors, including homosexuality – and point to those decrees as eternal, unchanging law from God. But the Sharia-law-style-hand-chopping penalties and the kosher meat guidelines and the agricultural laws and rules against eating multigrain bread – that stuff they ignore.

We can’t do that. We can’t cherry-pick our favorite laws – like not eating lizard meat – and ignore the ones that are inconvenient to us. We need a consistent way to deal with all the instructions and rules we find in the Bible. So let me illustrate a different approach, by using just one book as a test case, the book of Ecclesiastes. Listen to the following selections from the first three chapters of this book.

*Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,  
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.  
What do people gain from all the toil  
at which they toil under the sun?  
A generation goes, and a generation comes,  
but the earth remains for ever.  
The sun rises and the sun goes down,  
and hurries to the place where it rises. (1:2-5)*

*I said to myself, ‘Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself.’ But again, this also was vanity. I said of laughter, ‘It is mad’, and of pleasure, ‘What use is it?’ I searched with my mind how to cheer my body with wine—my mind still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, until I might see what was good for mortals to do under heaven*

*during the few days of their life. I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself; I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. <sup>7</sup>I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house; I also had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem . . . Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun . . . What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity. (2:1-7, 11, 22-23)*

*I said in my heart with regard to human beings that God is testing them to show that they are but animals. For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. (3:18-20)*

So how does this strike you as an instruction guide to life? Can you imagine one of those “look at the instruction book” people picking up the Bible and turning randomly to this book for his daily affirmation? But, in a weird way, it *is* useful. The book of Ecclesiastes is the story of a man’s search for meaning. He tries to find meaning in wealth, in pleasure, in achievement – and concludes it’s all a worthless chasing after wind. Does he get his answer? Something like “let go and let God” maybe? No. But by the end of the book, exhausted, he decides he has nothing left but to hope in God. So he does, faintly. Do *not* go to this book for bumper sticker faith statements. But if you will take time to read the whole thing and watch this man’s journey, you may find strength for your own path.

The Bible’s like that. As a whole, it is the journey of the people of God, including all their stumbling first steps and youthful mistakes. In this book we watch God’s people grow up, grow in their understanding of God and bit by bit reimagine faith. By the end of the Bible, in the words of Jesus and Paul, we discover that it’s not about law at all. It’s about love. But the Bible records the whole journey, including the times when Israel tried to live a legalistic faith. We should read the law codes of the Bible, but as we do, we need to remember that this is not the end of the story. The law remains instructive, but all of it – even the parts we like – has been transcended by something greater, which Paul calls the “Law of Love.”

When I was sixteen – a devout young Southern Baptist youth – I believed a lot of things I don’t believe anymore. A faithful story of my life would have to include those early convictions, and they aren’t bad. Indeed, they may have been exactly what I needed to believe at that time if I was ever going to move forward. But neither should you take those early beliefs as the essence of my faith. You have to keep reading.

The Bible’s like that. It is not a life manual. It is a travelogue. Don’t come here looking for instructions. Come here looking for possibilities, for potential. You will not find here the definitive answer to every question; but you will find yourself. Whether you are looking for God, struggling with God, angry at God, or grudgingly ready to give God a chance – you’re in here.