

18 October 2015

Eternal Truth or Living Word?
2 Timothy 3:16-17; Hebrews 4:12-13

We began this sermon series on the Bible – way back in September – by reading this passage from 2 Timothy, chapter 3, verses 16-17.

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

Today, as we conclude the series, we go back to the New Testament epistles and read a similar, but slightly different, statement. We read Hebrews chapter 4, verses 12-13:

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

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These are the two passages of scripture that are most frequently used to support the authority of the Bible. That by itself is an interesting concept: arguing for biblical authority by quoting Bible verses. “The Bible must be true! It says so in the Bible!” But logical or not, that’s how these two passages are often used. Of the two, I prefer the one from Hebrews. 2 Timothy calls scripture “useful” and treats it as a tool for us to employ. But Hebrews describes the word of God as taking the initiative – dividing, revealing, transforming. 2 Timothy talks about a book; Hebrews about a word that is “living and active.” What does that mean, though? How can a word be *living*? Here’s one thought: living things *grow*. They change. They adapt. They – dare I say it? – evolve. Now some don’t like that sort of talk about scripture. Those people value permanence and regard anything that changes as weak and unreliable. And that’s fine if you’re talking about building foundations or bridges. But that’s not how it is with living things. In the sphere of life, things that don’t evolve are either extinct or they are ferns. Things that do evolve thrive.

And our scripture evolves. Let me show you. Let’s start with a reading from Numbers, chapter 5, beginning with verse 11:

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Israelites and say to them: If any man’s wife goes astray and is unfaithful to him, if a man has had intercourse with her but it is hidden from her husband, so that she is undetected though she has defiled herself, and there is no witness against her since she was not caught in the act; if a spirit of jealousy comes on him, and he is jealous of his wife who has defiled herself; or if a spirit of jealousy comes on him, and he is jealous of his wife, though she has not defiled herself; then the man shall bring his wife to the priest. (Numbers 5:11-15a)

I won't read the whole long passage, but let me summarize. The jealous husband brings his wife to the priest, along with some specified offerings, such as the "grain-offering of jealousy." The priest then takes her to the holy shrine where he

shall take holy water in an earthen vessel, and take some of the dust that is on the floor of the tabernacle and put it into the water. The priest shall set the woman before the LORD, dishevel the woman's hair, and place in her hands the grain-offering of remembrance, which is the grain-offering of jealousy. (5:17-18a)

Then the priest solemnly pronounces an oath, something along these lines: "If you have betrayed your husband, let this curse fall upon you and enter into your inward parts that your uterus may fall." And the woman, in the only words she is permitted to speak, says, "Let it be so. Let it be so." Then

the priest shall put these curses in writing, and wash them off into the water of bitterness. He shall make the woman drink the water of bitterness that brings the curse, and the water that brings the curse shall enter her and cause bitter pain. (5:23-24)

Then, we read, if the woman is guilty, her stomach will swell, her uterus will drop, and she will be punished. The punishment for adultery is public stoning.

There's not a whole lot to love about this passage. In fact, there's something here for nearly everyone to hate. From a scientific perspective, it sounds like the most ignorant of superstition. Really? Dousing for adultery with a magic potion? From a religious perspective, it sounds like a voodoo ritual. Add a pinch of dust from the tabernacle floor and then wash the words of the curse off the scroll into the water! And most of all, it's offensive to our sense of equality. The woman is not permitted to defend herself. She's shoved to her knees in the holy place, her hair disheveled, all before she has even been tried. She's assumed guilty, then forced to swear an oath and drink dirty water. And no, there is no equivalent ritual for a man whose wife suspects him of unfaithfulness. Yeah. That's in our Bible.

Now I should admit that it *can* be argued that this law actually protects women. In the Ancient Near East, women were chattel, and jealous husbands were within their rights to beat their wives to death if they chose. This law forces the husband to bring his wife to a supposedly impartial judge, and it at least acknowledges the possibility that she might be innocent. So in its historical context, this might count as a step forward. Maybe that helps a little. Not much, though. It's kind of like the cherished Southern myth of the "good slave owner." Yes, I'm sure that there were some plantation owners in the South who treated their slaves less brutally than did others, but that doesn't make those people chivalrous role-models to get nostalgic over while we watch *Gone with the Wind*. They were still slave owners, all right? In the same way, this adultery test law might be slightly better than the Taliban-esque world that Israel lived in, but it's still appalling. And, as I said, it's in our Bible. What do we do with it?

Here's what we do. We read this, from John 8. As we read the Holy Gospel, I ask those who are able to stand in reverence:

Early in the morning [Jesus] came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?' They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.' And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, sir.'" And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.' (John 8:2-11)

This isn't even a woman *suspected* of adultery; this is a woman caught in the very act. But what a difference we find here! Unlike Numbers 5, Jesus makes no distinction between the adulterous woman and the (conspicuously absent) adulterous man she was with. In fact, Jesus doesn't even distinguish between the adulterous woman and her sanctimonious accusers. To him, clearly, no one is righteous enough to pass judgment on others. Jesus' goal is not to determine and punish guilt; his goal is to transform a life. His method is not magic or law or public stoning; his method is loving forgiveness and challenge. If the law of Numbers 5 represented a tiny step forward, then John 8 is the destination it was stumbling toward. Our Bible records the whole journey, from the first faltering steps all the way to fulfillment in Christ, but *this* is where God was leading. That's what I mean when I say that the word of God evolves. That's what I mean when I talk about a living word.

Reading the Bible this way – as the record of our evolving understanding of God and of God's gradually deepening revelation – is absolutely necessary. God is guiding the people – and us – through the narratives of the Bible, leading us at each step to a deeper and fuller faith. Let me give one more example. As we started this series, several of you asked about all the killing in the Old Testament – especially the genocide of the Canaanites that God is said to have commanded in the book of Joshua. In the Ancient Near East, war was always waged in the name of the gods, and victory was seen as a sign that the winners' god was the strongest. The Hebrew Bible reflects that mindset. It does make a few positive modifications – like banning Israel from profiting personally from holy war – but they still slaughtered people in the name of God, and it's still repugnant. But as we go through scripture, that holy war motif fades slowly away, being completely reinterpreted in the prophets, until we reach Christ – who refuses to take up arms against Rome or to fight back against his accusers, forbids violent revenge, and commands us to love our enemies. It takes a while to get there, but again, in Christ, we see where God was leading all along. And, if I can add one personal word here: Now that we've gotten to *love your enemies*, for God's sake, let us not go back to holy war.

I started today by pointing out some differences between the the 2 Timothy passage – *all scripture is inspired by God and useful* – and the Hebrews 4 passage – *the word of God is living and active*. Notice again the difference in terminology. 2 Timothy talks about writings, and Hebrews talks about the word of God. That's a huge difference. This book of ours is the sum

total of our scriptures; but the word of God is bigger than this and cannot be confined to words on paper. When Hebrews says “word of God” it isn’t talking about the Bible so much as about Christ, the Word made flesh. We need this book, all of it, so that we can discover Christ. And Christ is the living Word that makes this book the word of God.