

The Scripture we are about to read is one which is debated a lot as to its meaning. It is used whenever people debate whether or not the Bible is to be taken literally.

We have been reading through some passages from the letter in the Bible called 2nd Timothy. This is a letter which is a very personal letter in which Paul or someone using Paul's name writes a letter to his friend Timothy about how to live his life. A couple of weeks ago we noted that this letter is like the letter written by someone on their deathbed. This person is on their deathbed and they are telling someone that they care deeply for their final thoughts they want their friend to know.

Read 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

So what does it mean to say that all scripture is "inspired by God" as the NRSV says or "God-Breathed" as the NIV quotes and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness? A couple of points I want to first share. First of all, when these words were written the Bible as we know it had not come into being. The creation of the Bible as we know it would be a process that would take hundreds of years.

Different church councils gathered to debate and decide what should be included and what should be excluded. When these words in 2nd Timothy were written many of the books which are part of our Bible were not known by the author of 2nd Timothy.

Christians today do not agree on what books should be included in the Bible. At the time of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th Century, the Protestants decided to remove some of the Old Testament books that the Catholic Church recognized as authentic.

That is why a Catholic Bible is bigger than a Protestant Bible because there are books of the Bible that are included in the Catholic Bible that are not included in the Bibles that we use as Protestants. We Protestants call these disputed books the "Apocrypha."

The second point I want to address is the question of what does it mean to say that the Bible is "inspired." We hear a lot of words thrown around today about how we should view the Bible. We hear some say that the Bible is "inerrant" and that we should take the Bible "literally." Meaning the Bible is without error and meaning that we are to take everything literally in the Bible.

In studying this passage this week, I came across an interesting book and TED Talk video. The book is called *A Year of Living Biblically*. This book was written by a man named AJ Jacobs. AJ Jacobs describes himself as an agnostic Jew who decided to attempt for one year to live a literal Biblical life. He decided to read several versions of the Bible and to attempt to follow all of the rules of the Bible.

I also discovered a similar book called *A Year of Biblical Womanhood* where author Rachel Evans does the same from a woman's perspective. I just found out about her book and look forward to reading it.

Jacobs said he got to know the Bible really well. In fact, he describes how a Jehovah Witness came to his door and after debating this Jehovah Witness for 3 hours finally the Jehovah's Witness said he had to leave. Jacobs thinks he is the only person to ever inspire a Jehovah Witness to end a conversation about religion after the Jehovah Witness knocked on his door.

AJ Jacobs said that in reading the Bible he discovered that there were over 700 rules to live by. So he set out to follow them all. He only wore clothes made of one fabric. So he only wore white tunics for a year. He did not shave his beard as prescribed in the Old Testament book of Leviticus in the Bible.

If we had seen him on the street we would probably have assumed he was someone with mental illness. He worked in New York City with this long beard and wore these white tunics and sandals.

He also said that he could not sit in his house because when his wife heard that a man was forbidden from sitting in a seat where a menstruating woman had already sat she then went around to every seat in the house and sat in it while she was menstruating. He ended up having to carry around a seat of his own.

He read where he was to be fruitful and multiply. In that year his wife gave birth to twins so he felt that he followed that Biblical rule.

He had a man come up to him and ask him why he was dressed the way he was dressed. After hearing his reasons, the man then told Jacobs that he was an adulterer. The man then picked up some stones and threw it at Jacobs and asked him if he was going to do the same back to him since the Bible says that adulterers are to be stoned.

At the end of the year of attempting to lead a life when he tried to literally live the Bible, Jacobs came to some different conclusions. His first observation is that changing his behavior caused him to change his thoughts. Changing his behavior caused him to change his thoughts. He said it was pretty easy to not kill but it was not as easy to not gossip, to not covet what others had.

He said that he attempted to focus on being thankful everyday instead of noting what went wrong each day. He would pray prayers of thanksgiving every day and found himself appreciating what went right each day. Again he was offering up these prayers even though he was agnostic. He doubted the presence of God. But he said his actions changed what he believed and he found himself living joyfully each day rather than seeing the negative in the world.

He also says that he learned to appreciate Sabbath and holy rituals. Jacobs says that he had always been a workaholic and he began to recognize the importance of taking time away from always feeling as though he needed to produce something. He began to appreciate rituals as holy endeavors that allowed him to keep focused on what was important.

He says he would donate to a cause and he would become committed to that cause. He read in Proverbs that if you smile you will become happier which he found to be true.

But he also came to appreciate that he needed to read the Bible as if he was in a cafeteria. He said that in a cafeteria you have to pick and choose what you eat. He says that he has been in some cafeterias where he chose some poor food to eat and it was not a good experience. But he said that he has been in good cafeterias where he chose good food and had a good dining experience.

Jacobs acknowledges that one cannot and should not try to follow the entire Bible literally. As he discovered, there are over 700 rules in the Bible. But he began to figure out that rules such as where he was to sit or what he was to eat were not important rules to follow so he discarded those rules. But living a joy filled and thankful life was a lifestyle change that he believes that reading the Bible taught him to focus on doing.

So getting back to the scripture we read from Timothy. What does it mean to affirm that "all scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness?"

Let me tell you what I don't think it means. I don't think it means we read the Bible like this. Where you have a question and you go to the Bible to find the answer to your question. You ask, "Does the Bible tell me I am to go to church today?" (Act out opening the Bible and placing my finger inside and reading what it says. Don't like the answer so I go to another verse.).

I don't think we read the Bible that way for stupid questions and I don't think we read it that way for the big questions. Because if we go to the Bible for answers we will find the answer which agrees with what we already believe it will say. The author of 2nd Timothy acknowledges that we want to surround ourselves with teaching which affirms what we already believe.

Instead I think we read the Bible as if we are dating the Bible and figuring out if we want to marry the Bible. When you are dating someone, you spend time getting to know them and you attempt to see what you have in common with them. You allow the other person to shape you. You allow the other person to challenge some assumptions you have.

You join with the other person in discovering new learnings together. The other person shapes you by teaching you their values. You decide if the values of the other are values which you want or need to adopt.

For a relationship to grow, you spend time with the other. The more time you spend with the other the more you discover who they are and what they are about. The more time you spend with them the deeper you are able to see into their soul.

So I challenge all of us to read the Bible not as an answer book but as a relationship partner. A relationship partner that has a lot to teach us about what is important, how we are to live life, what we are to value.

A relationship partner that is not perfect. A relationship partner that has some quirks and that has said some things in the past that don't necessarily apply today and might be kind of embarrassing. I think we would all agree that it does not matter what type of fabric you have in your clothes today. I think we would all agree that adulterers should not be stoned although if you are the one who has been cheated on you may want to carry out that biblical rule.

I wish you the best today in initiating a growing relationship with words which the writer of Timothy tells us are words which are inspired by God and which are useful for teaching, correction, and for righteous training. AMEN.

-Jacobs, AJ, http://www.ted.com/talks/a_j_jacobs_year_of_living_biblically.html

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"The opposite of faith isn't doubt. It's certainty." Cathleen Falsani