

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Loving and Living the Bible

(Selected Bible passages from the Old and New Testaments)

A Northwest Core Value: Loving and Living the Bible

At a time when many have little or no connection to the Bible, we are passionate about helping everyone deeply engage with God's powerful, life-changing Word.

Introduction: Equipped...

By no stretch of the imagination am I an ace mechanic. But I am cheap enough to enjoy trying to fix stuff that's broken.

My beloved chainsaw - beloved because it helps me kill cedar trees - had been broken-down for several months. So, on Monday I tore it apart, replaced a few parts, put it back together, and got it to run. I was able to do this only because I was equipped with the tools I needed to do the job.

Unfortunately, when Kathy's car started giving us trouble a few months ago, I was NOT equipped with the thousands of dollars' worth of tools or with the hundreds of hours of training I would have needed to fix it. So, off to the shop it went.

For specific tasks, we need specific equipment.¹

Equipping and equipment is crucial for a mechanic, an athlete, or a computer programmer. It's also crucial for a Christian who wants to enjoy a fruitful walk with Jesus.

At the beginning of this year, the Elders told Jeff and me that they wanted us to give a few messages that were explicitly designed to equip the church to take next steps with Jesus.

Now, Jeff and I hope that ALL our messages are "equippers", whether we're working our way through a topical series or a book like 1 John or Ephesians. But what the Elders had in mind was that we would give a few stand-alone sermons that would provide you with tools you need to live for Jesus.

For instance, in last Sunday's message, "Working for Jesus" (Colossians 3), Jeff equipped you with truth about how God views your work life. In April I brought a message about disciple-making, the idea being to help you help others take their own next steps with Jesus.

And two Sundays ago, my sermon focused on generosity. The point was to equip you with tools from God's Word to take a leap into the world of extreme generosity.

These messages have all been given with a focus on action:

- Someone discipled you. Now, you **make disciples**.
- You've been richly blessed by God. Now, **give** of your time, talent, and treasure, knowing that He will richly reward you.
- Your trust in Jesus' work on the cross results in eternal life. Now, for Jesus' sake, you, **work hard** at whatever work you do.

This morning, I've got another equipping message for you. This one is foundational to our faith *and* it is central to what our church has always been about. Today's sermon is about the Bible.

But, I'm not taking a single passage from the Bible and talking about that one passage like I normally do.

I'm talking about the Bible itself, and by the time we wrap up, my hope is that you will understand something of what the Bible is all about, why we believe it is reliable, and how to approach it as God wants us to approach it.

¹ I've mentioned before that I would have been a great basketball player if I had been equipped with height and talent. Oh well...

Like the other equipping messages have been focused on action, so is this one. This morning I want us all to be equipped with tools to help us **love** and to **live** the Bible in the era and in the place in which we live. San Antonio. America. 2019.

When Kathy and I talked about my giving this message a week or so ago, she had sage advice for me. (I have learned to pay attention when she offers advice. It's generally sage.) She urged me to go "full nerd" today.

Wikipedia defines a *nerd* as "a foolish, contemptible person who lacks social skills or is boringly studious." She wasn't counseling that, which is par for my course, anyway.

No, she wanted me to take you into my study and lay out facts, background material, reasons and rationale for holding the Bible in the highest esteem. So, here I go, at my nerdiest.

The Bible is a unique book among the world's books. There is no other book like it. And one of its uniquenesses lies in the effect it has on the cultures into which it is placed.

The Form of the Bible

Unique in its Influence on Surrounding Culture

Impact on language

When the Bible is translated into the language of a people group, it makes a splash. It tends to standardize that language.

For instance, when Martin Luther translated the Bible into the German of his day (Die Heilige Schrift) it standardized the German language for hundreds of years. The 1611 King James Version did the same for English.

Today, people who serve with groups like Wycliffe Bible Translators or for The Seed Company render the Bible's message into languages that have never had the Bible.

Their translations are very so impactful that it produces a society-wide influence on the language and the culture itself.

Impact on culture

As the Bible has saturated western civilization, it has certainly that impact.

The teachings of the Bible have greatly influenced western philosophy, morality and ethics, art, and music. It has provided the foundation for the West's standards of law and politics.²

In addition, the Bible has greatly impacted literature. It's not an exaggeration to say that without a knowledge of the Bible, there really is no way to "get" much of Western non-fiction, fiction, and poetry.

I graduated from college with a degree in English and one of my professors - a man who didn't believe a word of the Bible - told my class, "*If you want to understand great literature, read the Bible.*"³

The Bible is uniquely influential. It is also uniquely reliable.

Unique in its Reliability Among Ancient Documents

You could travel to Washington, DC, and view in the Rotunda of the Capitol, under constant protection from violence and sunlight, the originals of the Declaration of Independence, the US Constitution, and the US Bill of Rights.

There are zero surviving original documents of any of David's Psalms, Isaiah's prophecies, the Gospels, or of the writings of Peter, Paul, or John. We don't have any of the original manuscripts.

² Philosophers like Rene Descartes and Immanuel Kant were guided by the Bible's teachings. Even if their works were taken to unbiblical conclusions, these fathers of western philosophy were guided by a generally biblical worldview.

³ My professor went on to make the point that the writings of every great English author from Chaucer to Shakespeare and well into the 20th century was saturated with biblical imagery.

But, we do have extreme confidence that the Bible you are holding in your lap or on your app is, for all intents and purposes, identical to what the biblical authors wrote.

We have this confidence because of the treasure of ancient copies of the original manuscripts we possess of both Old and New Testaments.

Consider the New Testament. There are thousands of 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th generation manuscripts of the original Greek New Testament. Some of these copies date back to as early as the second century AD. Some of these have been found in Israel, some in Europe, some in Northern Africa.

And when you compare a document that contains, for instance, a passage from John's Gospel found in Turkey with another found in Egypt and another one found in Rome, what you consistently find is that the documents are identical.⁴ That similarity tells us that these copies were carefully transcribed from a common original.

The same sort of congruity exists between what you read in the Old Testament in your Bible and what scholars find when they look at the Hebrew⁵ copies of the Old Testament found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, which date back to 400 BC.

It is freely admitted by believing and unbelieving scholars alike that the manuscript evidence for the Bible exceeds that of any other ancient literature.

You and I can have every confidence that the Bibles we hold in our hands today are faithful renditions of what the original authors wrote down.

⁴ Papyrus fragments of the Gospel of John date from as early as AD 117. The time span for most all the New Testament is less than 200 years from authorship - many from less than 100 years. This should be contrasted with the average gap of over 1,000 years between the date of composition and the earliest copy of the writings of other ancient authors.

⁵ A couple of sections, Daniel's 2nd-7th chapters, Ezra chapters 4-7, and one verse in Jeremiah (10:11) were written in Aramaic.

(Please see the Appendix at the end for more information on manuscript evidence and archaeological evidence of the historical accuracy of the Bible.)

So, the Bible is unique in its influence on society and in its historical reliability.

It is also unique in its internal consistency. The teachings of the Bible are consistence, which is amazing given conditions under which the sixty-six books of the Bible were written.

Unique in its Continuity and Consistency

Despite authorship and the author' "moods"

For one, the various books of the Bible were written by over forty authors.

These authors include Moses, Samuel, Ezra, Nehemiah, David, Solomon, Isaiah and all the other prophets, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, Peter, Jude - and others.

These men came from a variety of walks of life. They were kings, peasants, philosophers, fishermen, poets, statesmen, scholars, and farmers.

Yet, amazingly, they agree with each other when addressing similar themes.

These literary works were written when the authors were in various moods, too.

Paul seems angry - even agitated! - through much of the book of Galatians. He is tender and fatherly when he writes to Timothy. He jots off a quick note to his friend, Philemon and then sits down to write a theological masterpiece to the Romans.

Isaiah's Hebrew style is courtly and majestic.

Then, with apologies to fishermen, Peter the fisherman's Greek style and vocabulary is about what you would expect. David's Psalms span the emotional spectrum from fury to grief to ecstasy.

And yet, despite this variety of styles and personalities and even moods, there is a thematic consistency as you move from book to book.

Despite the authors' writing from different locations

Some parts of the Bible were written in southern Europe, some in the land of Palestine, some in the lands of captivity - Persia and Babylon - and some of it was written in northern Africa.

Many of the Bible's authors never saw the writings of other biblical authors.

And yet there is a great similarity to the way these writers dealt with the issues they faced.

This consistency would be remarkable even if all the Bible had been written within the span of a couple of generations. But that's not what happened.

Despite centuries in the making and a variety of literary forms

The first Bible book written was likely the book of Job. We believe that Job was a contemporary of Abraham, which places him in the two thousand BC time frame. The Apostle John finished writing the book of Revelation close to the end of the first Christian century.

So, from beginning to end, it took roughly 2100 years to complete the books that make up the Bible.

But Job and John and everyone in between describes the same one, true God. Each one using his own distinct personality, they speak with consistency to the grand themes of life: the nature of humanity, judgment, Heaven and Hell, angels and demons, nature, salvation, the future - and more.

The Bible includes all sorts of different kinds of literature. There is historical narrative, apocalyptic prophecy, law, poetry, wisdom, and parable.

Despite all this, the Bible speaks with one voice on the themes it addresses.

Through the centuries, the Bible has withstood criticism and ridicule. There have been many attempts to eradicate it and lots of persecution of those who believe it.

But, portions of the Bible now exist in well over 2,000 languages. And such is the passion of people who love the Bible to get the Word out, that if the prayers and plans of many today yield fruit, by 2025 every language group on planet Earth will have at least a portion of the Bible.

So, what conclusion might we draw from this data? Here's where I land.

Uniquely Inspired. Period.

A book written by over forty authors from different walks of life over a time span of two thousand years on three continents in three languages that is uniquely influential, reliable, and consistent can legitimately lay claim to having a divine Author working behind the scenes who produced a unified result.

Yep. The Bible is not only uniquely influential and uniquely reliable. It is the authoritative, inspired and inerrant Word of God.

And because this is true, the Bible is also the primary source for knowledge of God.

To get in touch with God we don't try to work ourselves up into a state of ecstasy. We don't discover what "saith the Lord" by high morals. Meditation in a mountain cave isn't the path to enlightenment.

The Christian path to learning about God and His ways, and to discern how to follow Jesus is to reach for a book. THIS book. And that is why we are committed to loving and living the Bible here at Northwest.

Now, let's think together for a couple of minutes about what the Bible claims to DO.

We could spend lots of time here, but what I'm aiming to do is to highlight two astounding claims about what the Bible does as its message connects with a human soul.

The Function of the Bible

It Teaches and Guides (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

[16] All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; [17] that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

Here is a pragmatic reason to learn and to love and to live the Bible. It is all profitable. The whole of it. Not just the wisdom literature or the poetry or the Gospels or the letters of Paul. Not just the stories we like. All of it.

Every story. Every recorded prayer. Every genealogy.⁶

The Bible's teachings will help you gain wisdom for living. Scripture will lead you to the pathway to purity. It will lead you into the life you were designed to live. It will give you knowledge about God and will lead you into a reverent fear of the Lord.

For this reason, you should get as much exposure as you can to the Bible through reading, listening, discussing with friends, meditating on what you are learning.

⁶ Sometime when you have a few minutes, read Psalm 119. It is a psalm containing 176 verses, each of which proclaims the benefit the Bible brings to those who absorb it and live by its teachings.

In addition to providing life skill/wisdom, though, the Bible also exposes wrong directions. It reveals sin and inner ugliness. It prompts repentance.

Listen to what the author of the book of Hebrews says about the way the Word of God impacts those who explore it.

It Reveals and Exposes (Hebrews 4:12)

[12] ...the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Yes, the Bible comforts the afflicted and it afflicts the comfortable. It is a disturbing book. Anyone who tells you otherwise hasn't spent much time reading their Bible.

Within the space of a few pages, the Bible tells of the courageous and faithful exploits of its heroes and then exposes them, warts and all.

We watch Abraham, the father of the faithful, march north and south through ancient Palestine, "**calling out in the name of the Lord**" (i.e. - preaching). And then, in the same chapter (Genesis 12) he goes to Egypt and betrays his wife for personal safety.

King David loved God, worshipped God, and led the people of God. He also violated Bathsheba and murdered her husband, Uriah, so that he could take her as his husband.

When the Bible's heroes act heroically, they are applauded. But no pedestal is safe. The Bible exposes its heroes' clay feet. It will expose yours, too, and will send you tumbling off of any pedestal you mount.

And the Bible will force you to think.

The Psalms bring us sweet songs of trust in God AND songs that'll will freeze the blood in your veins with questions about God's goodness and calls on God to curse enemies.

Proverbs confounds us by giving us wisdom like this
[Proverbs 26:4] Do not answer a fool according to his folly
 that is immediately followed up by wisdom like this
[Proverbs 26:5] Answer a fool according to his folly.

Solomon is calling you to think and to realize that different situations sometimes call for different responses.

Jesus' parables are designed to be thought about, meditated upon, reflected on, and argued about on the way to understanding.

The Bible urges husbands and wives to love each other (Ephesians 5) and then calls disciples of Jesus to hate their families. (Luke 14)

And in all of this, the Bible is NOT crazy-making. Understood in context, and considered thoughtfully, there are no ultimate contradictions in Scripture.

It is provocative in the best sense possible. It invites reflection.

There is not a superfluous word in the book. It is all designed to serve as a mirror so that we can see ourselves as we really are. It is a window that gives us a vision of what we can become by God's grace.

As the verse in Hebrews suggests, the Bible is a sword that cuts right through whatever hypocrisy or rebellion is wreaking havoc with our lives.

Once, on a solo camping trip, I was reading in my Bible and was devastated for weeks afterward when I came across the last verse of Psalm 119. I've been caught up short dozens of time when I have reflected on Jesus' words about forgiveness.

The Bible's truths will convict you of sin. The sword of the Spirit will cut deep as it calls you to reflect on how you speak to others, on how you deal in business, on how you spend your time online.

And this sword will lead you to health and recovery by confession and repentance.

The Bible is profitable. It diagnoses as it exposes. It is God's truth, and we need it.

And you might suspect that from this point on I am going to tell you to make the Bible your own. And, yes, that is exactly what I'm going to do.

But I'm going to issue a warning, first. When approaching the Bible, be careful. Be very careful.

The author of a good portion of the New Testament, the Apostle Paul, gives us a warning that we would do well to heed.

The Proper Approach to the Bible

With Caution (1 Corinthians 8:1; 2 Corinthians 3:6)

[1 Corinthians 8:1] Knowledge makes arrogant...

So, should warning labels be attached to the Bibles we pick up on Amazon? Yeah, I think they should.

The danger of Bible knowledge and Bible study is that any of us would be tricked into thinking that there is something intrinsically beneficial in knowing Bible factoids or in being able to have biblically literate conversations with others who are capable of having biblically literate conversations.

It is easy to slip into the mindset that the more knowledge of the Bible you have, the more godly you will be. Not true.

If that was true, then Jesus' closest friends and confidants would have been the Pharisees. They weren't.

The pursuit of biblical knowledge, absent the passionate pursuit of a life-changing relationship with God, leads to cold, dead orthodoxy, prideful arrogance, a pharisaic love of trivia, and disdain for those who don't have such knowledge.

Paul writes, [*2 Corinthians 3:6*]...*the letter kills*. Indeed.

But it is possible for us to receive the truths of the Bible in such a way that it has its life-changing effect on us.

How so? Well, when urging us to learn its teachings, the Bible's authors typically revert to the language of our senses.

With our Senses

*Sight ("Read") (Acts 8:27-28)*⁷

The Spirit of God sent Philip the Evangelist to travel the road leading south out of Jerusalem so that he could share Christ with an official of the queen of the Ethiopians.

When Philip caught up to the Ethiopian's chariot, the man was [*Acts 8:28*] *reading the prophet Isaiah*.

From the beginning, we find people reading their Bibles to learn about God and His ways. They use their eyes to scan alphabet symbols. The message moves from eyes to brain to heart.

Reading the Bible, privately, or even better, in a group setting where lots of perspectives are shared, is a tremendous privilege.

You and I may take literacy for granted, but most people in the ancient world and plenty of people today don't have the opportunity to take up and read because they can't read.

Now, we who believe in Jesus are a people of the Book. And the primary reason Christians and Jews have always valued literacy is so that we could read God's Word. Reading God's Word is reserved for those who can decipher the symbols on a page.

Those of us who can read have this wonderful opportunity to use our eyes to interact with the words on the pages of our Bibles, knowing that they are words from God.

More often, because the opportunity to hear is universal, we are told to use our ears.

Listen ("Hear the Word of the Lord...") (Matthew 13:9)

When Jesus said, as He often did at the end of a teaching or when wrapping up a parable, "**Let him who has ears to hear, listen**" He was repeating what the prophets had been saying for centuries.

When we listen, the speaker is in charge. We can read ahead in a book to get to the punch line before the author would have wanted us to. But we can't "listen ahead."

The speaker controls the content and the pace of the message. "**Listen to the word of the Lord**" assures us that we are not in control. God is.

Reading is one way to take in God's message. Listening is another. We hear the message of God's truth, it enters our brain and makes its way to our heart.

So, we use our eyes and our ears. And one more sense. Scripture speaks to our appetites, to our palates. We are told to *taste*.⁸

⁷ Deuteronomy 17:19; 2 Kings 22:8; Nehemiah 8:18; Jeremiah 36:10; Matthew 19:4; Mark 12:26; Luke 4:16; 10:26; Acts 13:27; Colossians 4:16; 1 Timothy 4:13; Revelation 1:3.

⁸ Many thanks to Eugene Peterson for this image from [Eat This Book](#), quoting Baron Friedrich von Hugel, p. 3.

Taste (“Eat this book...”) (Revelation 10:9)

There is a wonderful scene in Revelation 10 in which an angel hands a little book to the Apostle John. This little book represents the word of God.

The angel didn’t tell John to open it and read it. He said, **[10:9] “Take it and eat it.”**⁹

John took the little book out of the angel’s hand and he ate it. He chewed it up line by line and swallowed it. He ingested the word of God. He took it into his innermost being. What a picture.

God wants us to see the Bible as sustenance.

- Jesus said that we don’t **[Matthew 4:4] “live on bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.”**
- Peter urges, **[1 Peter 2: 2] like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, [3] if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord.**

When you are exposed to the Bible in a sermon or in an Adult Bible Fellowship or at a Care Group meeting, imagine a seven-course banquet laid out for the nourishment of your soul.

And while we’re thinking about taste, don’t forget that some food is tastier than others. The angel warned John, **“...it will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it will be sweet as honey.”**

Eat this book - the Bible - and you will from time to time get a stomachache. Not everything will be to your liking.

There is hard truth that will explode the way you view the world and life. There are challenging calls to discipleship that will upset the apple cart of your comfort.

⁹ Similar words were spoken to the Old Testament prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

But why would we want to read a book if all it did was confirm our convictions and leave us unchanged?¹⁰ The message of the Bible, *seen, heard, and ingested*, changes us from what we are into what we were created to be.

Conclusion:

Today, you and I are not living in Bibleland.

Bibleland is a place where the Bible is universally admired and respected and obeyed. That is not our current context. Culturally, we are in a place more like that of the prophet Daniel who moved from Bibleland (the land of Israel) to Babylon.¹¹

Here in our own Babylon, the Bible may be dismissed as irrelevant. We know it as God’s ever-relevant truth that has impacted our lives. It may be viewed as outdated and unreliable. We know it is imminently reliable.

Here in Babylon, we’re happy to talk with our friends about why we love our Bible. But we don’t try to argue them into a forced submission.

No, the most powerful thing we can do for our friends and for the cause of Christ is to allow them to see us who love our Bible, shine like bright lights for Jesus as we live out what it calls us to do.

¹⁰ The German poet, Franz Kafka, wrote, *“If the book we are reading does not wake us, as with a fist hammering on our skull, why then do we read it? A book must be like an ice-axe to break the frozen sea within us.”*

¹¹ This message is particularly timely because, while the Bible has historically played a major role in shaping the landscape of American society, America does not monolithically embrace or respect the Bible. A landmark study in 2013 by the research company, The Barna Group, found that the percentage of Americans who are positive about the Bible had stayed relatively static over decades, but that fewer and fewer people are neutral and more and more are negative toward the Bible.

APPENDIX: Notes on the Historical Accuracy of the Bible

Relative to manuscript evidence...

With respect to the Old Testament, we have far fewer ancient manuscripts than we do of the New Testament. But, there is a reason.

The copying of the Old Testament texts was handled with the utmost care.

A group of Hebrew scholars called the Masoretes had been charged with the copying work from about 500 AD until the printing press was invented (~AD 1450). Such care had been given to the copying of the texts that the words written by the biblical writers had been faithfully preserved for hundreds of years - even a thousand years - to reflect exactly what the author had written.

There was such reverence for the written Word of God among the Jews that often, when a copy of the text was made - by hand, remember - the original was destroyed. As well, any copy that had defects or that was damaged in any way was destroyed.

For that reason, until relatively recently, we had very few ancient manuscripts of the Old Testament. In fact, the oldest documents we possessed dated from about the 6th century AD (and this is far less ancient than the earliest copies we have of the New Testament!).

The Dead Sea scrolls.

Then, in 1947, an astounding discovery was made near the Dead Sea. Hundreds of Old Testament texts that had been stored by members of the "Zealot" party in caves near the community of Qumran at the north end of the Dead Sea around the first century were brought out of the caves into the light of day.

These texts, written on leather and found in jars, pre-dated the oldest Old Testament texts we had by as much as one thousand years.

Yet, amazingly, scholars found that when they compared the copies of the sixth century AD with texts from the Dead Sea Scrolls (centuries before Christ), there were virtually no differences.

Relative to archaeology...

Space and time are all that keeps me from telling more fascinating stories from secular history that have confirmed - time after time after time - the historical accuracy of the Bible. But consider these:

- Tablets discovered at a site called Ebla confirm the accuracy of much of the later chapters of Genesis.
- Excavations at other places with names like Nuzi, Mari and Alakh, have provided information that fits well with the Genesis stories and sheds light on patriarchal customs.
- For years, some people believed that Moses could not have written what Jesus referred to as "Moses' writings" (The first five books of the Bible) because, they said, writing had not been invented when Moses lived. Then came the discovery of the Law Code of Hammurabi to confirm that Moses (1500 BC) could indeed have written the Pentateuch. In fact, writings have now been discovered that pre-date Moses by a thousand years.
- For most of the 19th century, many people discounted any references in the Bible to the Hittite Empire, because the Hittites were unknown through any corroborating secular sources - until 1906, when the capital city of the very advanced civilization of the Hittites was discovered.
- That discovery led to more of the same, leading to the growing realization that the Hittite Kingdom was huge, a major dynasty in the Ancient Middle East, gaining ascendancy right when the Bible said it was.
- A century ago, scholars in some circles proclaimed that Jesus Himself was a legend and did not actually live. Today, nobody suggests that. There is more historical evidence, unearthed through archaeology and ancient writings, for the life of Jesus than there is for Julius Caesar.

And there is more...

- The Moabite stone yields information about the reign of Omri, king of Israel which agrees with the Bible.
- The Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III depicts how King Jehu of Israel had to submit to the Assyrian King.
- The Ras Shamra tablets (found in Ugarit) help us understand Hebrew prose and poetry and Canaanite culture.
- The Taylor Prism has an Assyrian text which describes Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem when Hezekiah was King. (recorded in Isaiah and 2 Kings)
- The Lachish letters refer to Nebuchadnezzar's invasion of Judah and illustrate the life and times of Jeremiah the prophet.
- Luke's accuracy as an historian has been validated over and over again.

Scripture makes many references to historical events that are verifiable through secular sources. These references have never been contradicted. In short, archaeology undergirds and confirms the accuracy and historical reliability of the Bible.

One archaeologist (some call him the foremost archaeologist of the twentieth century) and a well-known student of the ancient world, Nelson Glueck, who was also the president of the Jewish Theological Seminary has said this:

“In all of my archaeological investigation I have never found one artifact of antiquity that contradicts any statement of the Word of God.”