

UNDERSTANDING AND NAVIGATING THE STRANGE WORLD OF THE BIBLE

John 6:53–69 • Char Brodersen

Introduction: Good morning, Church! On January 1, we began a journey as a church community to read the whole Bible in one year. And we are dedicating this year to reading, studying, applying, and discussing The Story of Scripture.

Why are we doing this? The message of the Gospel and the story of Jesus were written down for us by the early disciples of Jesus and were later compiled in a library of books we now call the Bible. What happened in and through Jesus wasn't just an isolated event, but Jesus himself taught that he and his work were a continuation and fulfillment of the story of God and Israel contained in the Jewish sacred Scriptures—what we call the Old Testament: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. Since the beginning of the Christian movement, disciples of Jesus have dedicated their lives to this story. To read it, to meditate on it, to follow Jesus—the object and fulfillment of the story—in order to be transformed by him. Christians are people of “the book.”

Yet most Christians (even pastors) have never read through the Bible or even a whole book in the Bible. These days, we tend to get our theology from podcast, sermons, and maybe if we are a bit more studious, we pick up a commentary or a systematic theology. But this leaves us divorced from the story, context and customs, and ultimately the actual Bible.

So as we read through, study, dive in, and struggle with the Bible this year, it will help us to grow in our understanding of the full narrative and grand story of salvation and confidence of the goodness and unfailing love of our God. And by God's grace, to find our story being continually caught up, shaped more and more by the biblical story.

The Church, especially here in the West, is now facing a big problem, and that is that a biblically illiterate culture is using the Bible to attack a biblically illiterate church. It used to be that people and modern culture saw the Bible as prudish and outdated; now people see the Bible as morally reprehensible and dangerous to human rights and human flourishing. The argument goes—if we are going to progress as the human race, we need to get rid of oppressive religions and their religious dogma.

How do we respond to views and arguments like this one? I believe one of the ways that we do this is by increasing biblical literacy and fluency in our churches, by tackling the issues that both Christians and non-Christians alike have with the Bible head on.

Taking this year to read the Bible and teach through the major themes of the Bible will allow us to cover the “big problems” in the Bible and I hope will stir up rich conversations among us, in our homes, and in our small groups about this Incredible and difficult story about broken human beings like you and me and God's unfailing determination to rescue and redeem us to what we were created for.

I. What do I mean by problems with the Bible?

- A. Let's just get out in front of it and say—As Christians, we have problems with the Bible. We are uneasy about the Bible. There are passages of Scripture that at best we scratch our heads at (ancient near-east culture is so foreign to us—Grace reflecting on the story of Laban and Jacob), and at worse, there are passages we are absolutely shocked by. I think most of the time we just ignore those embarrassing parts. Reading the Bible, especially the Old Testament, you come across some really difficult passages (wait till we get to Judges and to the Prophets—they are violent, and it's not just people's violence but God's violent judgment as well). There are difficult things for us to get around, not just culturally, but also theologically. Even in the story of Israel itself, we find some hairy stories and sordid characters (the sons of Jacob; Judah and Tamar).

Reading the Old Testament is startling. There is a whole lot of BLOOD, a whole lot of SEX, and a whole lot of VIOLENCE, and for many reading it for the first time, or maybe the first time in a while, it can be disenchanting and disturbing, and especially so when we remember that this is God's Word, his revelation, his story of the world. There are many now who were committed to Jesus and their local church community but upon reading the Bible, felt they could no longer believe in the God of the Bible. They were absolutely horrified by the things they found in it.

- B. Part of the issue is that if you depend entirely on your Bible knowledge from attending a church gathering (podcast, Christian books, etc.), you are probably not going to hear or have to wrestle through those bizarre parts of the Bible. I mean, when was the last time you heard a teaching on Lot's incestuous relationship with his daughters or read a devotional on the raping of Dinah? If we are honest, there are large portions of Scripture that the everyday Christian has no idea what to do with.
1. And of course, there are real problems with the Bible; it has horrible things in it. And people have used the Bible to justify terrible things throughout history: slavery, mass genocide, oppression of women and sexual minorities, the Holocaust, the denial of science and true progress, and the list goes on. You can use the Bible to destroy someone's life—and many people do. There are people and practices in the Bible you should never emulate. Are you following me?
 2. I imagine that most of us still are engaging with the Bible because we know Jesus. We are convinced that he is the only Way, the Truth, and the Life! He has transformed our lives. We love the story and message of the Gospel, we love, believe, and are putting into practice the way of Jesus as taught in the Sermon on the Mount. Our issue isn't with Jesus, we want to follow Jesus. But a lot of the Bible seems to be an out of date part of Christianity that most of us are rather embarrassed about and would like to forget. If you are my generation, it's like that stage of your life when you had a proper mullet and wore a fanny pack, with a tank top and tube shorts ... we all know it happened, we just don't like talking about it.
- C. How do thinking people understand and believe the weird and disturbing things found in the Bible? What do we do about the problem of the Bible?

II. Move on from the Bible?

- A. Amber Dillon, a writer for the UK newspaper *The Independent*, wrote an article in 2013 titled: "Christianity is not the problem, the Bible is." She writes, "*I do not have a problem with the Church of England. I happen to think Christianity, and religion in general, is something that should be celebrated and cherished. For example, the Christian teaching of true charity (giving time and love to people in need, not just throwing money at causes) is something that is incredibly important in modern society. Christianity is not the issue. The Bible is ... I can't help thinking that some of the Bible's teachings are irrelevant to modern-day life and I feel that it is time for Christianity to move on, and that Christians should accept the Bible as a product of its time ... If Christians accepted the Bible as a product of its time there would be no more animosity and hate directed at the Church because of their controversial beliefs that contradict our progressive society.*"
1. So her solution to the problems in the Bible is to simply accept the Bible as a human construct of its time. It lacks little to no relevance to today. Let us finally move on from it.
 2. Very similar is the classic Piers Morgan objection, this one from his interview with Joel Osteen in 2011—"Shouldn't the Scripture be dragged kicking and screaming into the modern age. I mean ... eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, not everything in the Scriptures, really, is, in my view, conducive to modern life. I mean, like everything else, doesn't it

have to move with the times and isn't it down again to people like you to interpret it in a way that evolves when you're known as a very progressive preacher?"—Piers Morgan

3. What we are hearing in these two objections to the Bible is what I referred to earlier as biblically illiterate people using the Bible to critique a biblically illiterate church. I think a good question to ask is where did Amber Dillon and Piers Morgan get their moral lens to judge the Bible? By the arguments they make, it would seem to me that they got it from the Judeo-Christian ethic that has shaped the Western world.
4. I recently read a book titled *Remaking the World* by Andrew Wilson. It is a fascinating read that chronicles how the year 1776 has radically shaped the last 250 years of world history.
 - a. In his chapter on skeptics, Wilson tells the story of Thomas Jefferson sending a draft of the Declaration of Independence to Ben Franklin, asking him to give his own personal edits to it. Ben Franklin actually made very few edits to the Declaration but the ones he did would radically alter the course of history. Thomas Jefferson's statement had originally said "We hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable." Franklin crossed out both words and replaced them with one: self-evident. Wilson writes, "*Jefferson's version, despite his theological skepticism, presented the equality of men and the rights they held as grounded in religion. They are 'undeniable' because they are 'sacred' truths that originate with the creator. By contrast, Franklin's version grounded them in reason. They are 'self-evident' truths, which are not dependent on any particular religious tradition, but can easily be grasped as logically necessary by anyone who thinks about them for long enough.*"
 - b. I think Wilson's insights give a helpful analogy to the world we live in now. Our Western culture is so shaped by the Judeo-Christian ethics of righteousness, justice, equity, mercy, and charity that we believe them not to be sacred or divinely given, but self-evident. And now, ironically, Christians and non-Christians are using their ethical convictions that have been given and shaped by the Bible to critique the Bible.
 - i. We often hear modern critiques of Christianity that say things like—*religion poisons everything; the greatest evils done in the world have been done by highly religious people.* And we hear it enough, we begin to wonder; and then you read some pretty gnarly things in the Bible and realize that people have used the Bible to justify all sorts of evil. How do we reconcile these things?
 - ii. Thomas Cahill, who wrote *The Gifts of the Jews*, comments on the seeming harshness of the Law of Moses to modern ears. He says, "*But it is also true that this long-winded, unwieldy compilation of assorted prescriptions represents an overall softening—a humanizing—of the common law of the ancient Middle East, which easily prescribed a hand not for a hand but for the theft of a loaf of bread or for the striking of one's better and which gave much favor to the rights of the nobility and virtually none to the lower classes. The casual cruelty of other ancient law codes—the cutting off of nose, ears, tongue, lower lip (for kissing another man's wife), breasts, and testicles—is seldom matched in the Torah. Rather, in the prescriptions of Jewish law we cannot but note a presumption that all people, even slaves, are human and that all human lives are sacred. The constant bias is in favor not of the*

*powerful and their possessions but of the powerless and their poverty; and there is even a frequent enjoinder to sympathy: 'A sojourner you are not to oppress: you yourselves know (well) the feelings of the sojourner, for sojourners were you in the land of Egypt.' This bias toward the underdog is unique not only in ancient law but in the whole history of law. However faint our sense of justice may be, insofar as it operates at all it is still a Jewish sense of justice." Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels**

- c. Reforming the Bible to fit our modern enlightened perspective seems a bit short-sighted and just hypocritical.

III. Cut it up and cut it out?

- A. Another option is to get rid of what is offensive and disturbing in the Bible. In fact, Thomas Jefferson was known to have created his own Bible. It excluded all miracles by Jesus and most mentions of the supernatural, including sections of the four gospels that contain the Resurrection and most other miracles and passages that portray Jesus as divine.
- B. A well-known megachurch pastor is on record saying: "I'm convinced that we make a better case for Jesus if we leave the Old Testament or the Old Covenant out of the argument."—We can make a better case for Jesus than the case Jesus made for himself?
 1. He actually claimed that the church veered into "trouble" when it began to make its arguments on the basis of the Bible. He cited "deconversion" stories in which people told him that they lost their Christian faith when they lost confidence in the Bible. He said: "If the Bible is the foundation of your faith, here's problem: it's all or nothing. Christianity becomes a fragile house of cards religion."
 - a. The problem with this view is that in the end, I am the one who is the critic and shaper of the Bible, rather than the Bible critiquing and shaping me. I decide what the Bible should and shouldn't say, I judge for myself what is right, wrong, good, beautiful, and true. But am I, or are you, learned enough, mature enough, and wise enough to actually make that judgment?
 - b. C. S. Lewis referred to this kind of thinking about one's own time and culture as intellectually superior to other times and cultures as chronological snobbery, "The uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited." Lewis goes on to show that with this kind of thinking, you come to the realization that your own age/time is also "a period" and certainly has, like all periods, its own characteristic illusions and self-deceptions.
 - c. Now the truth is that we all do this; even in this room, there are parts of Scripture where we are all in, and there are other parts where were like—not so much, or NO WAY! We stand in judgment over what we read and discern for ourselves whether this is helpful or harmful to our lives.
 - d. Robert Mulholland Jr., in his book, *Shaped by the Word*, brings insight to what is at work in all of us as we read and study any work. He writes, "*The moment you opened this book to read, a powerful set of preconditioned dynamics of perception went into operation. You are the 'victim' of a lifelong, educationally enhanced learning mode that establishes you as the controlling power (reader) who seeks to master a body of information (text) that can be used by you*

(technique, method, model) to advance your own purposes (in this case, spiritual formation). We have a deeply ingrained way of reading in which we are the masters of the material we read. We come to a text with our own agenda firmly in place, perhaps not always consciously but usually subconsciously. If what we start to read does not fairly quickly begin to adapt itself to our agenda, we usually lay it aside and look for something that does.”—Robert Mulholland Jr, Shaped by the Word

- e. Again, am I, or are you, learned enough, mature enough, and wise enough, to actually make that judgment? Do we see the whole thing clearly? Or are we like all people biased to some degree due to our surrounding culture and the time we live in?
 - i. Now I’ve shared pretty honestly about some of the problems and difficulties with the Bible. Maybe some of you are wondering are there any good reasons for the Bible?

IV. Some reasons for the Bible

- A. Well as I mentioned earlier, everything we believe in the Western world about justice, individual human rights and dignity, charity/philanthropy is based upon the Judeo-Christian ethic taught in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures.
- B. Not only that but the teachings of the Bible and people who have been deeply devoted to submitting their lives to the teaching of Scripture have been used to do some of the greatest good in the history of the world—from health care, to orphanages, to the arts, to the abolition of slavery, to the Civil Rights Movement, to women’s rights, and the list goes on.
 - 1. Alvin J. Schmidt, in his book, *How Christianity Changed the World*, attributes the sanctification of human life; the elevation of sexual morality; women’s freedom and dignity; charity and compassion; hospitals and health care; education; labor and economic freedom; science; liberty, justice and human rights; and the abolishment of slavery all to Christianity and Christian teaching.
 - 2. By the way, I think that every Christian should read church history and know the beautiful legacy we have as the people of God. We have a lot to be proud of and thankful for generations of Jesus followers who have gone before as well as some things to grieve and repent over.
 - 3. These are all fascinating things to talk about, but ultimately for followers of Jesus, our trust in the Bible, our commitment to the Scriptures, to read them and be formed by them, comes from our deep trust in Jesus Christ. If you are a follower of Jesus, then you’ll be keen to believe and obey what the Bible says because that’s what Jesus did!

V. Jesus and the Bible

- A. I think for Christians, followers of Jesus, those who have received and believed the Gospel—a good question is what did Jesus do with “the Bible” or the Scriptures? Did he dismiss them as irrelevant and outdated; did he unhitch the Old Testament from who he was or what he was doing?
- B. Jesus spoke to the religious leaders of his day who prided themselves on their knowledge of Scripture. He said, **“You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.”—John 5:39–40**

- C. Or there is that passage at the end of Luke’s gospel where Jesus gives the most Jesus-centered Bible teaching ever, **“He said to them, ‘How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?’ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.”—Luke 24:25–27**
1. Jesus saw himself as the main character of and culmination of the biblical story—it’s all, ultimately, pointing to him.
 2. Jesus constantly quotes the Bible—he said again and again in his teachings: it is written, or have you not read.
 3. In all his teachings, he referred to the divine authority of Scripture (the Old Testament) (Mt. 5:17–18; 8:17; 12:40–42; Luke 4:18–21; 10:25–28; 15:29–31; 17:32; 24:25–45; John 5:39–47).
 4. He quoted the Old Testament 78 times (at least that we have recorded), the Pentateuch alone 26 times. He quoted from Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Psalms, Proverbs, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Amos, Jonah, Micah, and Malachi.
 5. Jesus was raised in a Jewish household where the Scriptures would be taught and discussed day and night. Most Jewish boys could recite the Torah, and the Psalms were the songs and prayers of the nation of Israel. Jesus’ life was immersed in Scripture.
 6. It is believed by many Bible commentators and theologians that while Jesus was being crucified, he was reciting the Psalms to himself. The Gospels record his reciting Psalm 22:1: **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,”** and Psalm 31:5: **“Into your hands I commit my spirit.”** Could it be that Jesus was comforting himself with these words and songs, beginning with Psalm 22 and ending with Psalm 31?
 - a. At Jesus’ darkest hours, he turned to the Scripture for hope—Psalm 23, the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want ... even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will not fear for you are with me. Psalm 24, Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully. He will receive blessing from the Lord and righteousness from the God of his salvation. Psalm 25, In you, YHWH my God, I put my trust. I trust in you. Do not let me be put to shame nor let my enemies triumph over me. Psalm 26, Vindicate me, O YHWH, for I have led a blameless life. Psalm 27, the Lord is my light and my salvation ... whom shall I fear. Psalm 28, To you YHWH, I call; you are my rock, do not turn a deaf ear to me. If you remain silent, I will be like those who go down to the pit.
 - i. Jesus breathed, he ate, and drank in the Scripture. They were his source of comfort and hope.
 - ii. When Jesus was attacked and tempted by the Devil in the wilderness, each time, he used the Scripture and submitted himself to its authority. As he said to the Devil when he tempted him, **“Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”** Jesus lived by the Scriptures; they were his daily sustenance.
- D. Jesus saw himself as the main character of and culmination of the biblical story—it’s all ultimately about him, continually pointing to him and finding its fulfillment in him.

- E. **What do I mean?** It's not just that there are a few places in Scripture that allude to the trinity—Father, Son, and Spirit—or a few theophanies here and there, where the pre-incarnate Son of God shows up in the narrative, or certain passages that clearly indicate or “prophesy” about his birth or life. No, in fact the whole narrative of Scripture is about him and ultimately hinges on him. The Bible is continually telling the story of human's slavery to some kind of oppressor and God's compassion and kindness to rescue and redeem people, setting them free to live without fear and to prosper under his reign.
 - F. **Examples:** The exodus (Slavery); the (defeat) of Israel and capturing of the ark of the covenant; or even the story of David and Goliath (Oppression). It's all about Jesus. The stories contained in Scripture are microcosms of the great story of God's redemption of his people, through the life, death, and resurrection and eternal reign of Jesus Christ over the kingdom of God.
 - G. The reason for the Scriptures is to know this God of creation and salvation through his Son, Jesus Christ, and to know and understand history and humanity from God's point of view, but not as a spectator, not as disconnected information, but ultimately for our lives to be brought into God's great story.
 - H. Scripture is for the purpose of being shaped and formed in the story of God by following the way of Jesus, to bear his image, to practice his way of life, to become like him. Being caught up in this story requires participation, active listening, response—dialoguing with God, the one who is speaking ... Being transformed more and more into the image of God.
 - I. Paul tells us that the end (or purpose) of the commandments is love from a pure heart. The purpose of the Bible is to form that same love of God that was demonstrated in Jesus in us, that we might demonstrate God's love to a world that is in desperate need of it.
 - J. To miss this, to miss Jesus and the new life that he came to bring to humanity in my searching, reading, and exploration of Scripture is to miss out completely, not just on the purpose of the Bible but on the meaning of life!
- VI. **Conclusion:** Okay, you say, I get where you're coming from—*The Scriptures are ultimately about Jesus and the message of God's great rescue of the world through him. But there are still things in the Bible that seem so out of line with that and out of line with the character of God. What do we do about that?* I would say this:
- A. There is a passage in the Gospel of John where Jesus starts getting real with the multitudes that are following him. I mean, he draws a definitive line in the sand and says, Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you will die in your sins. You will be cut off and separated from the kingdom of God. And Jesus kept saying other really hard things to stomach. The result was that many who were his disciples turned away from following him. Jesus then turned to Peter and the other disciples and said, **“Do you also want to go away?”**
 - B. I'll be honest, there are many things in the Bible that I still don't understand, that I wrestle with, that I'm still working through. I don't have it all figured out. I'm not sure anyone totally does. But for me or you to think that we can dismiss the Bible or cut out portions of it that we don't agree with or have a hard time with is incredibly presumptuous. Besides that, if I only read and submit myself to things, people, and situations that I agree with 100 percent, I will grow lopsided and unbalanced. I will be stunted in my mental, emotional, relational, and spiritual maturity. So then, are we willing to humble ourselves to the scrutiny of Scripture rather than us being the judges? If we can do this, we will grow immensely. We will be transformed into wise people of deep character—people who reflect Jesus, the object and fulfillment of Scripture.
 - C. Also for me, when I find something in Scripture that seems out of line with the revealed character of God, I fall back on what I do know. We need to use the clear passages of Scripture to help

us interpret what is unclear in Scripture. What I do know is this—the life, character, person, and work of Jesus are incomparable with any other person in history. His words, his compassion, his humility, his grace, his sacrifice on the cross, I have never heard more powerful, life-giving words or ever heard a greater message in my life.

1. *“Woven into the fabric of Christian theology is the insistence that Jesus Christ is the truest, most perfect, most glorious (and happiest) human being who has ever lived—and that those who want to experience true, full, rich humanness must become like him, must pattern their lives after Jesus’ humanity.”—Wesley Hill*

D. And this leads me to say with Peter, **“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.”**

1. *“Test the alternative answers to the world’s major questions, and we, too, will come to Peter’s perfectly put questions and affirmation: Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of deep, lasting life, and we have come to believe and so to know that you are the Holy one of God.”—Fredrick Dale Bruner*

VII. **Close:** As we read through the Bible this year as a community, I encourage you to:

- A. **Think deeply** about what you are reading—what it meant to the original recipients, what it means in the grand narrative of the Scripture, how does it ultimately point us to God’s redemption through Jesus? Think about what it means for your life in following Jesus as his disciple.
- B. **Express your doubt:** Dishonest doubts are both proud and cowardly; they show disdain and laziness. A dishonest doubt is to say, “What a crazy idea!” and then just walk away. “That’s impossible” or “That’s stupid” is an assertion, not an argument. It’s a way of getting out of deep strategic thinking and a hard decision. Honest questions are humble because they lead us to ask questions and not just put up walls. So please bring your true doubts before God, before his Word, before others Christians, before your pastors and leaders. We need to read and wrestle with Scripture in community.
- C. **Surrender:** If I follow Jesus, will I have to give up (fill in the blank)? Will I have to pray, read my Bible, give up sex, quit my job? You know what we are doing? We are negotiating the cost rather than counting it. As disciples, Jesus calls us to surrender. Usually we are willing to surrender things, but we aren’t willing to surrender the right to decide what those things are. And like Peter and the other disciples, we may not have all the problems solved—the problems of following Jesus and saying yes to his teaching and his Lordship and his saving work. He may confuse us at times and baffle us with things he says and provoke us and offend us. But Your heart must say something like—Jesus, I have no idea what you will ask of me, but I’m determined to follow you because I believe that you alone have the words that lead to deep, lasting life, and that is worth surrendering everything.