

# Taking the Bible seriously

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, we're going to think this morning just a little bit about taking the Bible seriously. So you could start by picking up your Bible and having it in your hands, and that would be a good sign.

I always remember Dick Lucas saying to me that whenever somebody asked him the question, do you take the Bible literally? I'm sure people have asked you that question.

He always answered by saying, I take the Bible very seriously. And I think that's really rather a good answer. Because of course, do you take the Bible literally is a foolish question, because it could mean all sorts of different things.

How do you take poetry literally? On the other hand, there are other things that are very plain and absolutely straight. You can't take them any other way. I remember somebody once having this discussion with me at a family wedding.

Went something like this. Yes, in our village there's a church, it's one of those evangelical churches. Seems to have a lot more people in it than our church.

[ 1 : 14 ] All the young people seem to go there and so on, but I don't feel quite comfortable with it myself. Somebody else then chipped in, oh yes, those are those funny sort of happy clappy people, aren't they? Somebody else said, oh yes, they sort of do things like dance and speak in tongues.

And somebody looked at me and said, you're not one of those evangelicals, are you? I suppose, as a matter of fact, I am. But it doesn't quite go like that.

Oh, well you don't take the Bible literally, do you? Well, I said, I take the Bible very seriously. I said, there are some parts that really, I think you want to take literally, don't you? Oh, I don't think we can take it literally at all, said this lady.

I mean, it's all just a nice poem, isn't it? It's all a metaphor. It's all about teaching us truth in a sort of roundabout, different kind of way.

I said, all right, well which bit of this do you want your husband not to take literally? You shall not commit adultery. Oh, what a lovely hat that lady's got on, she said.

[ 2 : 16 ] And off we went like that. It's rather how it goes, isn't it? We as evangelical Christians take the Bible seriously. And according to the Bible itself, if we're not serious about the Bible, if we're not devoted to reading and understanding the Bible, then we're not really Christian people.

We don't really know God. Jesus says that, doesn't he? Many people like to talk a lot about God and Jesus. They like to sing a lot about God and Jesus.

But Jesus says, many of those people don't know me at all. They don't know God. It's quite shocking that, isn't it? Jesus says that they will discover on the last day, on the day of judgment, that Jesus himself will be saying rather stark and terrible words to them.

Listen to this, Matthew 7 verse 21. Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.

Many people, he says on that day, will say to me, oh, we did this, that and the other in your name. And Jesus will say, I have no idea who you are. I've never known you.

[ 3 : 36 ] It's the people who do the will of God, says Jesus, who enter the kingdom. Well, how do we know then the will of God? If we're talking about a real God, not just a pretend God, a God who's transcendent, who's beyond our human world, who's made this world, then by definition, he is bigger, he's beyond, he's outside.

We can't possibly find him, can we? By sending a spacecraft up into the sky, like the Russians did with Yuri Gagarin. And he came back triumphantly saying, well, I've been up into space, and I couldn't find God, he wasn't there, so there's no God.

Well, that's just ridiculous, isn't it? If God is truly a God worth being a God, he's a God who is so far and beyond and above everything that we are or conceive, that the only way we could find him is if

he made himself known to us.

If he came into our world and revealed himself. That's why Christians are not followers of a religion. Religion is a man-made thing.

Religion is man seeking for God and trying to find out about him. Christians are recipients of revelation, which is God reaching out and revealing himself to us, because there would be no other way for us to know him.

[ 5 : 05 ] And therefore, Christians are those who respond to divine revelation, to God's revelation, and the appropriate response is faithful obedience, or obedient faith.

The Bible puts it both ways, but it's just the same thing. Faith in the Bible is never a leap into the dark. It's not believing something that isn't true, but we would love to be true. It's responding to something that is true and makes a demand upon us, which we can respond to or reject.

And so right from the very beginning, God has been revealing himself to human beings in order that they might respond with obedient faith. Long ago, in the beginning, the book of Hebrews says, God spoke to us by the prophets.

But in these last days, it says he has spoken to us his final word about his final work for human beings. He has spoken to us, he says, in his Son.

And the New Testament calls that the faith, the revelation that has been once and for all delivered to the saints and transmitted to us in the words of Scripture. In the words of the Old Testament prophets and the law and the Psalms.

[ 6 : 24 ] In the words of the Lord Jesus himself and his authoritative interpretation of that. And in the words, the commands of his apostles that he has given to us. 2 Peter chapter 3 verse 2 is a very, very important verse, isn't it?

For us to understand what the Scriptures are. Peter says he's writing to the church that you should remember, listen, the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of our Lord and Savior through your apostles.

All of the revelation of God and the commandments of our Lord and Savior finally, in his words and in his words revealed through his apostles are given to us in Scripture.

And therefore, everything that we believe, everything we hope for, everything we stand for, stands firmly upon the revelation that God has given us.

I want to just say three things this morning, three things of vital importance about the nature of the Scriptures, the Bibles that we have. Presuppositions that the Bible itself gives to us that unless we get that right, we're going to get the whole purpose of Scripture completely wrong.

[ 7 : 44 ] And even as Christians, we might find ourselves dangerously misusing Scripture. Now, we've got to be honest about this. We've got to hold up our hands as Christians in the face of criticisms by atheists and secularists and so on.

We've got to hold up our hands and say, I'm afraid it is true that many, many Christians abuse the Scriptures and have done in many ways. It's true that often as Christians we have not been, as Luke calls us to be, servants of the Word of God, but we're tempted to be users of the Word of God. That's because we're sinful people, that's because we are at the center of our world and not God. And no matter how hard we try, constantly we drift so that however much we want to serve the Lord, our own needs, our own desires and cares continually keep coming to the center of our consciousness.

Don't you find that? I think if you're a human being, the answer is yes. Certainly is with me. But it's easy to misuse the Word of God instead of submit to it and serve it.

So three things that we must get absolutely clear about the Scriptures if we're going to study it to our own profit and if we're going to proclaim it with integrity to other people.

[ 9 : 08 ] Not peddling in a dishonest way a message that we're trying to con people into believing, but as Paul says, having done away with all kind of dishonesty, we don't huckster the Word like somebody trying to sell snake oil.

we clearly set forth the truth of Scripture. So three things. First, the Bible is God's revelation to us. Secondly, the Bible is God's self-interpreted revelation to us. And thirdly, the Bible is a coherent revelation to us.

First then, the Bible is revelation. It's revelation about God and for us. That's its purpose. Now, just think about this.

A relationship is only possible, isn't it, with communication, with words. I can stand up here and I can speak words to you and I'm conveying something about myself.

[10:14] You can understand something about me just by these words that I'm saying. You know that yourself. In any relationship, it requires communication, doesn't it? And the first sign of a breakdown of a relationship is breakdown in communication.

That's why all marriage reconciliation, all political reconciliation, social reconciliation is all about getting people around the table and being able to talk to one another again.

Now, God, the true God, according to the Scripture, is a God of relationship. He is not a distant deity who is totally separated from his creatures, disinterested in them, only interested in them for what they can give him.

That is a conception of many religions. I think it would be fair to say that largely that's the conception of God held in Islam, for example.

It's almost blasphemous to say that you could know God or relate to him in that personal way.

That's something that no Muslim would speak of in that sense.

[11:24] In Hindu religions, for example, people don't speak about knowing personally or intimately the many gods of the Hindu pantheon. They want to appease them, they want to please them, offer offerings and that sort of thing.

But this concept of deep and personal relationship is really unique to the claims of the God of the Bible. But the God of the Bible is from beginning to end in every way a God of relationship.

That's why the word that's used even of God, the God of covenant, is so pervasive in Scripture.

Covenant is a deep, binding, committed relationship between two parties.

We know that in our own language. We talk even about the marriage covenant, which is the deepest personal covenant in that sense. And God is the covenant God. So from the very beginning when you read Genesis chapter 1 and 2 he creates a world and that world that he creates is in relationship with him perfectly.

Everything is very good. And he creates human beings and he speaks to human beings and they respond to him. And their response is as of creatures to their creator.

[12:39] But it's more than that. It's of friends to their God. Adam and Eve walk with the Lord in the garden in the cool of the day.

That's what friends do. They talk together. Of course, sin comes in and utterly destroys that relationship. And what that means is that human beings can't relate to God anymore.

The imagery there is that they're cast out of the garden and a great sword, a flaming sword is placed to stop them. a barrier between human beings and God, a great communication barrier. Unless God should break that silence, himself by crossing over the barrier, himself by revealing himself, by initiating communication to human beings, then human beings can't possibly relate any longer to God.

God. But the whole story of Scripture is that that is precisely what God did. Read Hebrews chapter 11 for that great list of those faithful ones of the Old Testament to whom God spoke and who responded to God in the obedience of faith.

[13:53] Faith wasn't some sort of nebulous quality that some people happened to have and others didn't have. Faith was a response of obedience to the God who spoke. And so the call to believe that the Bible gives us is always a call to obey.

It's a call to respond to God's word of revelation. I wonder if you've got your Bibles open and you could turn with me to 1 Peter chapter 1. It's just one of the very clear places where we see what faith really means.

1 Peter 1 and verse 2 he speaks about those he's writing to according to the foreknowledge of God the Father in the sanctification of the Spirit they're called for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood.

That's what a believer is. somebody called for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood. Look down to verse 22 of chapter 1. How are our souls purified?

How are we saved? How are we put into right relationship with God? Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth. It's just another way of saying having purified your souls through faith.

[15:22] Verse 23 You've been born again says Peter not of perishable seed but of not of perishable seed but imperishable through the living and abiding word of God.

Born again through the living and abiding word of God. Called for obedience to that word made known in Jesus Christ.

What's the opposite of faith? What's the opposite of somebody who is a true believer? Look at chapter 2 verse 7 Oh sorry verse 8 Those who stumble I'll read verse 7 and 8 So the honour is for you who believe but for those who do not believe the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone and the stone of stumbling a rock of offence.

They stumble because they disobey the word as they were destined to do. Those who do not believe are those who disobey the word.

Look down to chapter 3 verse 20 This strange verse about Christ speaking proclaiming to the spirits in prison whenever that was. But verse 20 Because they formerly did not obey.

[16:45] Look down to chapter 4 verse 17 It's time for judgment to begin with the household of God and if it begins with us what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?

That's something we've been seeing in Romans as well and we see it in so many places through the New Testament. In many ways there's a greater emphasis on that word obey than there is on the word faith but the two mean exactly the same thing.

in Bible language. Of course there's a sense in which we distinguish these when we're talking particularly in theological language but for the Bible for the New Testament let's get absolutely clear.

The Christian believer is the one who obeys the revelation of God. The unbeliever is one who disobeys the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. So the Bible is clearly vital.

It's the revelation of God to us and it requires a response from us and that's its primary function.

That is why God has given us the scriptures as Paul said to Timothy and we read to make us wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

[18:00] Now that means that something very important must always be in our minds and it's this the Bible is not primarily about you or me. it's not a religious implement it's not a tool it's not an accessory that we're to use as Christians as many pagans use a horoscope or something like that.

But the problem is that very often I'm afraid Christians have used the Bible like that haven't they?

They pick it up and they say well what's God saying to me in this? I've got this happening and I've got that happening and I want an answer I want to have guidance as to what I should be doing.

So I'm going to open my Bible and surely the answer will be there to tell me about what I need to do. And guidance so often for people becomes dipping into the Bible looking for a word looking for something special that will just confirm me in what my decision has got to be.

But I'm afraid we have to recognize that the Bible is not speaking directly to us in that way. It just isn't primarily about us. It's about God.

And if we turn it completely around like that and say well this is a book to tell me about my life and how I can live it and what right decisions I should make, we're using the Bible in the opposite way that God intended it.

[19:24] And that's why so many people get into a terrible fankel about guidance. Somebody once told me a story which illustrates this very perfectly, this kind of approach to reading the Bible or to looking for that kind of special guidance.

There's a chap who was convinced that God was calling him to missionary service but he had a terrible anxiety and a terrible agony because he could not work out where it was he was supposed to go. He'd had endless discussions with his pastor who tried to calm him and say to him look, let's get you trained and ready and if that's the right sort of thing for you then there will be many places you can go.

But no, he was paralysed by the fact that he desperately needed to know which country it was that God was going to send him to. And he would pour over his Bible readings in the morning looking for some hint that God would give him a country to go to that should be his.

One day he'd been earnestly praying in the morning and had taken the words from scripture that God will surely show you the way and lean not to your own understanding and all this sort of thing. And he said, Lord, I believe you. Tell me today. Tell me today where it is I've got to go. Off he went down to the local shop to buy his newspaper and he opened the door. And it just so happened that from the day previously the shopkeeper had set out a whole new confectionery stall in the shop.

[20:51] And there was right at the door when he went in the first thing that hit his eyes was a huge display of chocolate Brazil nuts. And he looked at them and he said, thank you Lord, this is marvelous.

He ran off to tell his pastor, I know where God wants me to go. It's Brazil. I prayed this morning and he showed me. To which his pastor just rather sagely said to him, well, wasn't it a good thing? It wasn't Mars bars. We're laughing, but most of us have done it.

Do we go to the Bible expecting a word just to jump out at us like that in our daily readings? Would just tell us exactly what we need to do? God in his grace and mercy sometimes does give us things that jump out at us in his providence as we're seeking his way in his future.

Of course he does. We can get in all sorts of danger if we do that. And if we look at that as the primary way of what our Bible is about, that's treating the Bible as a horoscope, isn't it? But it's not.

[ 22 : 05 ] It's not about me and my decisions. It's a revelation of God. Remember another depressed student who was in a very poor state over his girlfriend who had given him the ditch.

And he was looking to God for guidance and knowing what to do. So he prayed and he closed his eyes and he said, Lord, give me a verse that will just tell me what you want me to do. And he opened the Bible and he read the verse right in front of him, Matthew 27, verse 5.

Judas went out and hanged himself. And he thought, well, that can't possibly be right, so he closed his Bible and he prayed again and opened up. And this time it was Luke 16, verse 37.

Go and do thy likewise. So very despondent he closed his eyes again and tried one more time. This time his eye fell on John 13, verse 27.

What you're about to do, do it quickly. Well, you see, he's not talking to you, silly. He really isn't. And that is just not the way to read the Bible.

[ 23 : 12 ] No part of the Bible is written directly to you and me in that kind of a way. So when you're looking at the scriptures, so often we look at a passage of the Bible and we say, well, which character in this story do I identify with?

How does this make me feel? What response does it give in my heart? That it's not about you and it's not about me. When we open the scriptures, wherever we're reading, the first thing we say is, what is this teaching me about God?

And how am I to respond to what this scripture reveals to me about the greatness and the goodness and the kindness of our God? What does it tell me about myself in relation to God? What does it reveal about me when I read this truth about him? So the Bible is revelation. That means it's from God to us, but it's about God.

And the most important thing that we can understand is that it is about God and not about us. God is the focus, first thing. The Bible is revelation of God to us.

[ 24 : 23 ] Secondly, and very, very important also, the Bible is interpreted revelation. It is God preaching God to us in his own words.

That's how Jim Packer once put it. That means the Bible is not the raw materials waiting for us to give our interpretation. In our kind of modern, post-modern culture that we live in today, it's very, very common to hear that, isn't it?

Oh, that's just your interpretation. You've heard that, haven't you? Oh, it's just your interpretation of the Bible, but I interpret it very differently and somebody else interprets it differently again. So the Bible becomes like Humpty Dumpty's words.

It can mean anything that you want them to mean. But that is absolutely not true. The Bible is its own interpretation.

It's God interpreting himself to us. Another illustration that Dick Lucas often used is Delia Smith's cookery course.

[ 25 : 24 ] You've all seen Delia Smith on the TV, haven't you? In her lovely kitchen with all her ingredients. And Delia loves to teach you how to bake a cake. And out she comes and it's beautifully clean.

There's never any dirty dishes, are there, in Delia's kitchen. Have you noticed that? But it's all beautifully clean. And nothing is in a tub. You have your butter in a little glass bowl and it's just the right amount.

And you have a little bowl of sugar and a little bowl of cocoa and a little bowl of flour and everything else. And that's how we all cook, isn't it? We all have lovely little bowls. And Delia says, well here you take this and you take this and you put in this and you mix it all around and then you do this and this and everything eventually is all in the cake bowl and then into the tin and she puts it in the oven. But then of course, because it's television and there's no time, here's one I baked earlier and out comes the cake. Now you see, when we are reading the Bible, we are not baking Delia's cake.

The Bible is not lots of little bowls of ingredients that we then put together and say, well this is our message. The Bible is the ready-cooked cake that God has made earlier.

[ 26 : 41 ] His writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, Isaiah, and whoever else, have baked the cake. They're not giving us a whole bunch of disparate things that need to be worked together to find an interpretation.

He's giving us the cake. And our job as Christians is to cut the cake up and digest it and let it do us good. So the Bible is not just giving us events, it's not just telling us things that God did in history and allowing us to make our own interpretation, it's giving us the events and telling us what that interpretation is.

events plus that interpretation make up God's revelation to us. Let me show you two places just to make that very clear.

Turn to 1 Corinthians chapter 15. 1 Corinthians chapter 15 and verse 3.

Paul says, I deliver to you as of first importance what I also receive, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures.

[ 27 : 56 ] Christ died. Christ died. That's the event, isn't it? That's the fact. Nobody disputes that.

I wouldn't think even Richard Dawkins disputes that fact. It's a fact of history, isn't it? But that is not a gospel that Christ died.

Sometimes people say, oh well, we just need to stick to the basic gospel, just the story of Jesus.

That's all we need. Well, the trouble is that the story of Jesus meant very different things to different people.

To the Pharisees and the scribes, they were delighted that Christ had died. To those who are atheists today, they'll accept that Christ has died, but that doesn't mean they're believing the gospel, does it?

No, Christ died, that is the fact, that's the event, but Paul gives us the divinely inspired interpretation of that event in these words.

[ 29 : 00 ] He died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures. And do you see that? He's telling us Christ died for a purpose. And that purpose wasn't just to be a martyr, it wasn't just to bring an emotional reaction in his followers, it wasn't just for any of these myriads of other reasons that we might say Christ died, and indeed people do say Christ died.

He says Christ died for our sins. So somehow or other it was a death that was because of people's sins. And even that is further interpreted in the next clause, isn't it?

He died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures. In other words, it was according to plan, and a death for sins is something that can only be understood if you understand the whole nature of the Old Testament scriptures.

There are books and books about the sacrifices of the Old Testament, the sacrifices for sin, for making atonement, for shedding blood because of the sin of the people.

And what he is saying here is that God's revelation to us through his apostle is that Christ died because of people's sins, and he died to make an atonement for those sins according to everything that the Old Testament teaches about making atonement.

[ 30 : 26 ] That is what makes it a gospel. The fact that Jesus died alone doesn't make it a gospel. Even his own apostles, his own disciples were distraught and in misery when Jesus died before they understood what it was all about.

So you see, our approach to scripture can never be one. Here's a text that tells us what took place. Now, we must try and interpret that and see what it means to me. What does this make me think of when I read this?

Let me just say, whatever it makes you think of is totally irrelevant. It's what another person thinks. It's what the author thinks and what the author has said. It's the command of the Lord Jesus given to us through his apostles.

When Jesus said to his apostles in the upper room the night before, he was betrayed, that after he ascended to heaven, the Lord would send his spirit to lead them into all truth, he meant precisely that.

He's led them into all truth and they have set that truth down for us here in the scriptures. And that means when we read this or any other part of scripture, it's God preaching God to us.

[ 31 : 39 ] God doesn't just give us raw material. the whole message of the Bible is his teaching to us and therefore our job is not to interpret it, but it's to listen to it, to receive it, to learn to read it

properly.

Bob Files is fond of saying that 90% of the task of teaching the Bible is just learning to read the Bible properly. I think I'd modify that a little bit, Bob. I don't think you're here this morning. I think I'd say, well, it's half learning to read the Bible properly and the other half is learning how to obey what you've understood. That's the bit I find much harder, even than understanding. Sometimes people say, what do you find of all these bits of the Bible you can't understand properly? Well, there are many parts of the Bible I don't think I fully understand. Strangely enough, those are not the ones that are the real problem to me.

The ones that are the real problem are the ones I understand perfectly well and I don't want to do. Isn't that right? The Bible is God revealing himself to us.

[ 32 : 44 ] It's his revelation. It's his own interpreted revelation. And thirdly, as we would expect from God, it's a coherent revelation.

It's not just text to be pulled out at random here, there and everywhere to try and be seen to be relevant to us and to our world. Not to read it just superficially like that, sentimentally.

Often, often these daily reading notes that we get are like that. Just a nice little thought, like a little sweetie to pop in your mouth and suck on during the day and make you feel a little bit happier about life and so on.

But that again is not how God reveals himself to us, by throwing sweeties into the audience. God reveals himself to us in a way that demands serious work from us.

Remember my father always used to say, the scriptures will not yield their riches to chance inquiry. And it's a coherent revelation that God has given us and that's why we've got to read it like that. We can sum it up just with one word really and that is context.

[ 33 : 52 ] Text, any text, without its context can so easily become a pretext for almost anything you want. Let me just illustrate that to you. Turn to Luke chapter 19 and verse 31.

This is the story of the triumphal entry. Do you remember? And Jesus sends his disciples on ahead of him and tells them that there's going to be a man who will have a cult and so on.

And verse 30 says, go into the village in front of you where on entering you'll find a cult tied on which no one has ever yet set untied and bring it here. If anyone asks you why are you untying it, you shall say this, the Lord has need of it.

I was watching once one of these satellite Christian TV programs called the God Channel.

I hope none of you watch it. But I watched it when I was on holiday once just to see what it was like. And I turned it on and I'd never seen it before. And they were having what they were calling a week of mission.

[ 35 : 09 ] I thought, well this will be interesting. But what it turned out to be for a week of mission was a week of incessant fundraising 24 hours a day coming on and demanding that people give money to keep the station from having to shut down because it was losing money.

And there were constant, constant appeals for people to send money. And all along the bottom of the screen would go the names of people and the amount of money they were giving. Mrs. Jones Cardiff, given 250 pounds.

Mr. Bloggs from London, 500 pounds and so on. On and on it went. And they went to various different parts of the world and had people coming on as great Christian leaders and preachers to encourage people in giving the money.

And on came this American pastor called Rodney Howard Brown. And he turned to this passage here and he said, I want to show you how it is that God wants you to be able to give.

Now I know many of you have already given, he said. Many of you will have given to this appeal already and from your income you will have given perhaps everything that you've got. But what I want to say to you is this. That God wants you to give of your capital too.

[ 36 : 18 ] That's how he's going to bless you. Look what happened in this story. You see this man had fixed assets. He had a colt that was tied up and he released his fixed assets and gave it for the master had need of it.

And that brought blessing. Now maybe you have got a colt tied up. Maybe you've got a car that you could sell and give your money to this appeal. Maybe you've got a house that you could sell. Maybe you've got some shares that you could sell.

But whatever you've got, you can release it for the most master has need of it. This is God's word to you today. Well you see once you've done that you can make the Bible say almost anything you

want can't you?

And no wonder, no wonder skeptics will look at that and say not only is that absolutely ridiculous, it's scandalous. It's exploited. It's terrible isn't it?

And yet in many ways that's what Christians often do when they take a verse and they say, oh now this is a special word for me. This makes me really feel that God wants me to do this or that or the next thing.

[ 37 : 25 ] You see, that's like going into the middle of a novel and opening it at page 362, never having read anything else and reading one sentence and saying, ah yes, I know what this is all about.

But you would never do that, would you? You assume that the writer is coherent in the story he's telling. You assume that you have to read the whole thing and understand what he's going on about.

So the Bible is a coherent revelation. Just think of three different ways briefly in terms of how we have to think of that context. It's a coherent revelation of God.

That is, God's nature, his ways, his demands and so on. It means that if you read the scriptures, God can be known truly. He can be known without contradiction, without error.

That means that we can compare one part of scripture with another. And we need to do that to assimilate what we call doctrine, our body of understanding of who God is.

[ 38 : 27 ] So what does the Bible say about any one particular thing? Marriage, for example. We don't just go to one text in the New Testament or the Old Testament. We look for a coherent theology, a whole understanding of the nature of marriage running through scripture from beginning to end.

We don't want to know what the Bible says about honesty. We don't just go to one of the Ten Commandments. We look at everything else, too. Same for sexual behavior or anything else. That's why we have a whole science called systematic theology. It's just a posh way of saying everything that the Bible says about any one particular subject. But we should go to the Bible expecting it to coherently tell us about God and his ways and what he wants.

Secondly, we would expect the Bible to give us a coherent history of salvation. That's another way of saying the Bible's actually got a storyline from beginning to end. And we need to understand that story.

We need to understand the big picture of the Bible. And whenever we go to a text in Leviticus or Matthew or Romans or Revelation for that matter, we need to ask ourselves, well, where does this fit in that overarching story?

[ 39 : 46 ] Does it come, for example, before the coming of the Lord Jesus or afterwards? How far on in that story are we when this particular thing is happening? That means, of course, that we're not going to treat, are we, this with exactly the same way.

A command in Leviticus about not eating certain types of food with a command that Paul makes to a New Testament church in Ephesus or in Corinth about certain kind of foods.

We're going to expect a coherence that overall God has certain cares and concerns about the things that we do even in our everyday lives. Yes, even including the way we eat and the sort of things we eat and the mental attitude we have.

But we won't expect it to be exactly the same for the children of Israel in the desert or in the promised land or the people in the New Testament church in the 21st century. Unless we understand that coherence of the Bible story, well, you'll fall into idiotic sort of things where people say, ah, well, you know, how can gay sex be wrong if people can eat prawns today?

Stupid things like that. That's just failing to see that the Bible has got an unfolding story. And we need to grasp that. And we need to take it seriously. The third thing we need to take seriously about context is also that the Bible is a coherent literary work.

[ 41 : 05 ] It's composed under God's inspiration by ordinary human beings using ordinary language and writing with all the conventions of human literature.

We as Christians, we don't believe that the Bible just magically dropped out of the sky rather in the way that, as far as I can understand it, Muslims seem to believe that the Koran kind of dropped out of the sky fully formed in that sort of way.

Muhammad was just like a dictaphone. No, we assume that the Bible tells us God can say everything he means to say, but because he wants to communicate to human beings in the idioms

and language of human beings, he does it through human writers. He's able to make them say exactly what they mean and for that to mean exactly what God wants it to mean. That means we have to approach the Bible in some ways, as we'd approach any other book, as a literary text. We need to say, well, what does the text actually say? How is it saying it? Why is it actually here? What context is it in this letter, in this paragraph, in this whole thing? In the least the word we talk about it, using the term the melodic line.

[ 42 : 22 ] We mean the chief themes that are running through a book of the Bible. We're seeing that in our studies in Romans, aren't we? Paul's great concern is for outreach, for the gospel to go to the whole world.

And his great concern is that the church in Rome, Jew and Gentiles, would be united in that. And all the way through his marvelous arguments and his great revelation of the work of Christ, those two things keep coming out.

And we have to say to ourselves, how does this relate to what Paul is wanting to say to this church at Rome about mission? And we need to do that with any book of the Bible that we're reading. We need to work out what it is the author's big concern is. Just look at John's gospel briefly. John's gospel is at the very end, chapter 21, chapter 20 rather.

It's one of the commonest places that we can demonstrate this from. Not many books of the Bible give us it quite as clearly as this, but John in these two verses at the end of his book tells us precisely why he wrote his gospel.

[ 43 : 25 ] John 20, verse 30. Jesus did many other signs, he says, in the presence of the disciples which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

You see that? These things he's written, the evidence of these signs, are so that you might have faith and find life in his name.

Evidence that leads to faith which brings life. That's why John's writing. Now you read through John's gospel and you will find that in almost every part those three themes or two of those three themes are dominant.

Evidence, faith and life. John unfolds the great signs that Jesus did and shows how they lead to either faith, belief or unbelief. To life or to death.

Unless you see that, unless you take the writers seriously, you're never going to understand the riches of what God is actually giving to us. Well, a believer is somebody who responds to God's revelation ultimately in the Lord Jesus Christ given to us in scripture.

[ 44 : 48 ] And God's revelation of himself comes to us in the Bible. It's revelation about God. It comes to us interpreted for us by God.

God's revelation of God. And it's coherent. That means we can find understanding. But it also means that we'll have to use our brains. We'll have to use our wits and our intelligence to understand it, to help one another, to learn to read, to see what it is that God's saying to us. But when we do that, when we approach the Bible properly, not as a random collection of text, not as a horoscope, not just as something to give us a little fill up for the day, but of something, a great revelation that tells us all that we need to know about God, about life, and about godliness, then that's when we find that God does constantly speak to us today into our own lives with power and with purpose.

And he brings us many surprises. He changes our thinking as we're shaped, as we're challenged, as our previous misconceptions are turned around so that we know more of him.

So that's why we do what we do on Sundays, and on Wednesdays, and on Thursdays, and on every other opportunity that we have to gather together here, whether it's in large groups or small groups, whether it's one-to-one, whether you're a brand new Christian, whether you're not even a Christian.

[ 46 : 18 ] That's why we do Christianity Explored, because we want you to read Mark's preaching of the gospel, his interpretation under the Holy Spirit's guidance of who Jesus is and what he's done.

I don't have any wisdom to impart to you. I know that's probably very obvious to some of you, but it's true. And neither do any of the rest of us who stand at the front here.

All I can do, and what I must do, is point you to see and to understand and to read the wisdom that is already here articulated for us.

Simply a matter of together, learning to open our eyes, to read God's word, to hear it, and above all, to respond to what we've heard.

So let's give thanks that God has given us such wonderful clarity. Not to leave us guessing, but to give us a coherent, complete revelation of himself that will exhaust our minds and hearts as long as we live, and indeed, I'm sure, all through eternity as well.

[ 47 : 31 ] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are a speaking God, a God who brings clarity, and who loves to bring truth.

Help us, we pray, to respond to the light of that glorious truth to us, and to thrill all the more in approaching this, your glorious word. For Jesus' sake.

Amen.