

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, January 31, 2010**

**A HEART FOR GOD'S WORD**

**2 Timothy 3:14-17**

**THE BOOK THAT UNDERSTANDS ME**

I want to tell you a story today about a man you may have never heard of. His name was Emile Cailliet. He was born in a small French village more than a hundred years ago, in 1894. He was brought up with a naturalistic education which left no room for God or any kind of divine intervention in human affairs. As a young man he showed absolutely no interest in spiritual things. He had never even seen a Bible. He was a student of philosophy, but his studies in philosophy and the naturalistic world view he embraced proved to be inadequate when World War I came and he fought in the trenches in the French Army. Confronting the horrors of war, he asked himself:

“What use [is] the ill-kept, ancient type of sophistry in the philosophic banter of the seminar, when your own buddy at the time speaking to you of his mother – dies standing in front of you, a bullet in his chest? Was there a meaning to it all? A [person] can endure anything if only it appears meaningful. I, too, felt – not with my reason, but with my whole being – that I was naked and, war or no war, destined to perish miserably when the hour came.”

During long night watches in the foxholes, Cailliet began to long for what he called “a book that would understand me.” But he knew of no book that could explain life and help him in times of difficulty. After being wounded and later discharged from the army, he returned to his studies in philosophy and began to secretly compile a notebook of quotations and passages that would speak to his condition. When he had put the finishing touches on this “book that would understand me,” he sat down to read his anthology. As he read, though, a growing sense of disappointment came over him as he realized it had no power to explain the meaning of life or to help him when the troubles and stresses of life pressed in on him.

That same day, his wife – who knew nothing about his secret project – stumbled into a small Huguenot (French Protestant) chapel she had never seen before. Impulsively, she asked the pastor if she could have a Bible in French. He gave her one. She took it home with her, even though her husband had always been adamant that religion was taboo in their home. After she returned home, she hesitantly told her husband about it, fearful that he would be angry. Instead, Cailliet said to his wife: “A Bible? Let me see it. I have never seen one before.”

When she showed him the Bible, Cailliet said, “I literally grabbed the book and rushed to my study with it. I opened it and ‘chanced’ upon the Beatitudes [of Jesus]. I read and read and read – now aloud with an indescribable warmth surging within. I could not find words to express my awe and wonder. And suddenly the realization dawned upon me: This *was* the Book that would understand me! I needed it so much, yet, unaware, I had attempted to write my own in vain. I continued to read deeply into the night, mostly from the Gospels. And lo

and behold, as I looked through them, the one of whom they spoke, the one who spoke and acted in them, became alive in me.

“The providential circumstances amid which the Book had found me now made it clear that while it seemed absurd to speak of a book understanding a man, this could be said of the Bible because its pages were animated by the Presence of the Living God and the Power of His mighty acts. To this God I prayed that night, and the God who answered *was the same God* of whom it was spoken in the Book.” (From Emile Cailliet, *Journey into Light*, Zondervan, 1968).

Emile Cailliet eventually came to America and taught at Princeton Theological Seminary for many years. God called him home to heaven in 1981. To his dying day he continued to bear witness that the Bible is “the Book that understands me.”

It is true. The Bible *is* the Book that understands us. John Calvin said that the Word of God is like a mirror in which we see a true and accurate reflection of ourselves. In the Bible we see what we are really like. And what *God* is really like. The Bible exposes the true moral and spiritual condition of our hearts. It shows the depth of our need for a Savior. And it reveals what God Himself has done for us. The Bible understands you and me like no other book because it is God’s Book. It is, as James Boice said, “the living voice of God.” In it God has spoken and continues to speak to our lives today.

### **“I LOVE THE BIBLE”**

John Piper has written: “I love the Bible the way I love my eyes – not because my eyes are lovely, but because without them I can’t see what is lovely. Without the Bible I could not see ‘the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.’ Without the Bible I could never know ‘the unsearchable riches of Christ.’ Without the Bible I would not know that I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior. I love the Bible because it gives the wisdom that leads to salvation, and shows me that this salvation is nothing less than seeing and savoring the glory of Christ forever, and then provides for me inexhaustible ways of seeing and knowing and enjoying Christ.”

Do you love the Bible? Do you read it regularly? Do you allow God to speak to you by taking time to read and think about what He has said in His Word?

Should we love the Bible, as Piper suggests? Yes. Absolutely. But we must be careful not to worship the Bible. We are not to make an idol of it. We are not to let the Bible itself (or anything else) take the place of God in our lives. The Bible is not God. And the Bible does not save us. You can memorize the Bible from beginning to end and still miss out on the gift of salvation. You can fill your head with every fact about every person and every event in the Bible. But all that Bible knowledge will not save you if you do not act on it. The Bible gives us the message of salvation. It tells us what God has done in the person and work of His Son to accomplish our salvation. The Bible tells us how to be saved. In the words of Paul, it makes us “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15). The Bible points us to the Savior.

God uses the Bible to bring people to an awareness of our sinfulness and our inability to fix what is wrong with us. God uses the Bible to reveal the answer to our predicament. God uses the Bible to bring us to repent of our sins, to turn away from them and seek God's forgiveness, and to place our trust in the saving work of Christ for us. The Bible itself does not save us, but it can bring us to faith in Christ. And He is the one who saves us.

Like John Piper, I love the Bible because, without it, I would not know the truth and power of the gospel to change lives. Including my own.

### **OUR PRIME MERIDIAN**

Here is another way of thinking about the Bible. If you were to go to Greenwich, England, you would want to be sure to visit the Royal Observatory, which is famous as the location of the prime meridian. Do you know what the prime meridian is? It is the vertical line that marks zero degrees longitude on the globe of planet Earth. Like all longitude lines, the prime meridian begins at the North Pole and ends at the South Pole. From north to south, it passes through England (Greenwich), France, Spain, Togo (where Lacey Mackey is serving with the Peace Corps), and down to Antarctica.

The prime meridian is really a human invention. Prior to 1884, when an international conference was held to discuss it, there was no uniform system of keeping time around the world. Establishing its location and its relation to the stars enables us, in a sense, to find our place and time in the world.

The prime meridian came about through the work of an astronomer named John Flamsteed, who made it his mission in life to produce an accurate navigational chart of the heavens. He mapped the location of thousands of stars. His work enabled scientists to help people find their position on the planet. To help us know where we are.

The significance of the prime meridian is that it is a fixed position through which our knowledge of time and place can be understood. It is a helpful way, I think, to understand the Bible and how it operates in our lives. The Bible is our prime meridian. Which is to say, it is true from beginning to end, its truth is unchanging (just as God Himself is unchanging in His character, in His love and faithfulness, in His will for our lives), and it is authoritative for our lives. It is a fixed position in an ever-changing world, through which we can understand who we are, who God is, where we are, and how God wants us to live (Adapted from Kenton Anderson, *Choosing to Preach*, Zondervan, 2006).

### **THE ORIGIN AND PURPOSE OF THE SCRIPTURES**

The apostle Paul speaks unambiguously in 2 Timothy 3 about the origin and purpose of the Holy Scriptures – which, for us, consist of the Old and New Testaments. In verse 16 he speaks of the origin of Scripture. He tells us where it comes from. It comes from God. He says: “All Scripture is God-breathed.” Other translations use the words “inspired by God.” The Greek word Paul uses here is the word *theopneustos*, which means “breathed or breathed

out by God.” Paul doesn’t really address the *how* of inspiration. He simply states the fact that the Scriptures came into existence by the breath of God. We affirm that it was breathed out by God and expressed through the personalities of individuals chosen by God for that purpose.

All of Holy Scripture – from Genesis to Revelation – is God-breathed. It originated with God. Because it is from God, it is both authoritative and trustworthy. We can have confidence that it is reliable and unerring in all it teaches. In one of his books (*Growing Deep in the Christian Life*), Chuck Swindoll said that the Bible is the authority, the final resting place of our cares, our worries, our griefs, our tragedies, our sorrows, and our surprises in life. It is the final answer to our questions. As Emile Cailliet would say, it is the Book that understands us and speaks truth – God’s truth – into our lives.

What is its intended purpose? First, in verse 15, Paul says there is nothing like the written Word of God to show us the way to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (*The Message*). John Stott has written: “The Bible is essentially a handbook of salvation. Its overarching purpose is to teach not facts of science which (we) can discover by (our) own empirical investigation, but facts of salvation, which ... only God can reveal. The whole Bible unfolds the divine scheme of salvation – man’s creation in God’s image, (our) fall through disobedience into sin and under (God’s) judgment, God’s continuing love for (us) in spite of (our) rebellion, God’s eternal plan to save (us) through His covenant of grace with a chosen people, culminating in Christ; the coming of Christ as the Savior, who died to bear (our) sin, was raised from death, was exalted to heaven and sent the Holy Spirit; and (our) rescue first from guilt and alienation, then from bondage (to sin), and finally from mortality” in our resurrection to eternal life. “None of this,” says Stott, “would be known apart from the biblical revelation.”

But it does not end there. “More particularly,” writes Stott, “the Bible instructs us for salvation ‘through faith in Christ Jesus.’ So, since the Bible is a book of salvation, and since salvation is through Christ, the Bible focuses its attention upon Christ. The Old Testament foretells and foreshadows Him in many and various ways. The Gospels tell the story of His birth and life, His words and works, His death and resurrection. The Acts describe what He continued to do and teach through His chosen apostles, especially in spreading the gospel and establishing His church from Jerusalem to Rome. The Epistles (letters) display the full glory of His person and work, and apply it to the life of the Christian and the church. The (Book of) Revelation depicts Christ sharing the throne of God now and coming soon to consummate His salvation and judgment. This comprehensive (portrait) of Jesus Christ is intended to elicit our faith in Him, in order that by faith we may be saved” (John Stott, *Commentary on Second Timothy*).

The purpose of the Scriptures, then, first of all, is to make us wise for salvation, which comes through faith in Christ.

Next, in verse 16, Paul says that God’s Word is useful or profitable in four different ways. It is useful for *teaching*. It helps us to learn the truth about God, about ourselves, about God’s will for our lives, about the problem of our sin and what God has done about it. It is useful

for *rebuking* or *convicting*. It shows us where we have gone wrong and how our sin grieves the heart of God. It is useful for *correcting* us by showing us what is right and how God wants us to live. And it is useful for *training in righteousness*. It trains us to live in a way that pleases God.

So, the purpose of God's Word relates to both our beliefs and our behavior. It addresses both our creed and our conduct. God cares both about what we believe and the way we live. And His Word speaks to both.

What is God's goal in all of this? We find the answer in verse 17: So that we may grow to maturity in Christ and be equipped for every good work – to do everything God wants us to do in His service.

The Bible is the gift God has given us to help us both to know Him personally and to grow to spiritual maturity.

### **DEALING WITH DIFFICULTIES IN SCRIPTURE**

As an aside, if you tend to get bogged down in or you get down about the difficult things in the Bible, the things that are hard to understand, listen to what an old man once said to the famous London preacher Charles Spurgeon: "For a long time I puzzled myself about the difficulties in Scripture, until at last I came to the resolution that reading the Bible was like eating fish. When I find a difficulty (in Scripture) I lay it aside and call it a bone. Why should I choke on the bone when there is so much nutritious meat for me? Someday, perhaps, I may find that even the bone may afford me nourishment."

Take that to heart. I don't think God wants us to be derailed from reading His Word or even from following Him because there are things we don't understand. Keep reading. Keep growing. Focus on living out what you do understand, even as you ask God to enlarge your understanding of His Word.

### **A HEART FOR THE WORD**

I believe God wants every one of us to cultivate and nurture a heart for His Word. A heart for God's Word is indispensable if you want to grow in your faith and life as a follower of Christ.

If you have never read the Bible, or never read it with any consistency, there is no time like the present to get started. Some people like to start in the beginning, with the Book of Genesis. Others like to start in the New Testament, with the Gospels. Still others choose to start with the Book of Psalms, which gives voice to the prayers and praises of God's people. The important thing is to get started and to keep reading.

If you have gotten out of the habit of reading God's Word, there is no time like the present to get back into it. For some of us, there was a time in our lives when we were more devoted, more disciplined, more passionate about reading God's Word. Perhaps, for you, it is time to rekindle your love for God and His Word.

If you have been reading the Bible for years, let me urge you to keep on. Keep on mining for the treasures found in God's Word. Continue to grow not only in your knowledge of the Bible but in living out its teachings.

If you want to thrive as a follower of Christ in today's world, cultivate a heart for His Word. It is, like no other, the Book that understands us. It is a mirror that shows us who we are and what we are like. It is our prime meridian. It is God-breathed. And there is nothing like it for showing us the way to be saved through faith in Christ.

Ask God to speak to you as you read it. Ask God to change you, to mold you and shape you according to His perfect plan for your life. Ask God to give you wisdom. Ask God to give you faith, or to increase your faith. Ask God to make you complete and to equip you for every good work in His service. And He will.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.