

## CCH 12<sup>th</sup> Jan 2020 Why the Bible #1: Weird or Wonderful?

*Reading: Luke 24:13-16, 25-32*

I'd like to start with some words of Moses in [Deut 32:46,47](#): *"Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day.... They are not just idle words for you – **they are your life**".*

A couple of times in my life I've been asked to be involved in a "Grill a Christian" event put on by university students or teenagers at school to give their friends, whatever their faith background, a chance to come and "grill a Christian" about their beliefs.

They can be good fun, but always slightly scary- you never know quite who will be there, or where people will be coming from. One time a youngish Cambridge professor who had obviously had a few drinks decided to ask a few questions. I can't remember exactly what he asked, but it was to do with the Bible. "Why should we believe such an ancient book? It's just an ancient piece of random literature?" (I think he was a Greek scholar and thought I was taking a rather naïve approach to the gospels). "You don't take it seriously do you?" **Why the Bible?**

Putting it another [way](#), *"Why should I let my life be dictated by a weird, often misused book, written by people from so long ago?"*

Well it may be that you have been asked a question like this, or even you are asking it today. And it's an excellent question. It takes us to the heart of the Christian faith. After all, if you've been coming to CCH for any amount of time, you'll know we base all our teachings and beliefs on this book, and try to change our lives by it even when it's unpopular. So why the Bible?

We're going to answer this question over 4 weeks, taking a break from our normal practice of working through a Bible book, and each week we'll tackle a different part of the question. We'll actually cover quite a few different things about the Bible as we go through.

Next week, we'll focus on who it's [written](#) by. The **AUTHORSHIP** and therefore authority of the Bible. Just ancient people, or is possible to believe that there is a real God who was behind every word?

Then week 3, thinking about how it's [misused](#), we'll address how to use and **INTERPRET** the Bible. Can you really just make it say whatever you like, or is there a right way to read the Bible?

Week 4, having covered the ground in weeks 1-3 we will indeed ask whether it should [dictate](#), or better direct our lives- how do we **RESPOND** to and use the Bible.

But this week, we'll start by looking at some of the content or **CHARACTER** of the Bible, because as the question implies- it is a bit [weird](#).

If you were to flick the Bible open at any page (what people call Bible Roulette), depending on where you land you might find any number of things, and we have to admit some *are* a bit weird....

- How to differentiate between different rashes on the skin in Leviticus. ([Leviticus](#) 13).
- Kids mock the prophet Elijah for being bald in 2 Kings, so he curses them and 2 bears come out of the woods and attack 42 of them. (2 [Kings](#) 2:23)
- The prophet Ezekiel is told by God to bake bread on cow dung rather than his own excrement ([Ezekiel](#) 4:15).
- A prophecy of locusts with lions' teeth, women's hair and torturing scorpion stings in the book of Revelation. ([Rev](#) 9)

We have to be fair, and say that as we open the Bible we are entering an alien world, that is removed from us by geography, time and culture. It certainly is a bit strange in parts.

But perhaps more concerning to most modern readers are the passages in the Bible that talk about slavery or homosexuality, or commend the total destruction of other tribal groupings. Is this really a book we should be reading, and encouraging our kids to read?

Well we'll cover some of these specifics as we go along, and there are good answers to those difficult passages, especially when the Bible is read carefully in its context, but be sure, we will find it surprising in lots of ways.

Nevertheless, Christians still want to say, though it's a surprising book (so it should never be boring) it is above all a **wonderful** book that we should pay attention to, and take to heart.

And this is my big point today.

WEIRD? Perhaps in parts, but above all **WONDERFUL**. Why? Because it's **PERSONAL**. That's what we will focus on today.

Let's look at this from two angles.

**First of all the Bible is personal (and therefore wonderful) because it introduces us to the person of Jesus.**

Here's a verse from Hebrews 12:1,2: *In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe.*

Now many people today don't believe in God. They are atheists, and think that this world is all that there is. Well if you believe that, you have to face the possibility that the beauty in Creation is just an accident, that human relationships are wonderful but not ultimately of any worth, and that your conscience is just an evolutionary memory nudging you to make certain, potentially wrong choices during the short time you have on this planet.

But just for a moment suppose that there is a Being who made this world. That he has created us, and loves us and wants a relationship with us. It is reasonable that if there is a God who is infinite, and we are finite, that if he wants to he may have actually taken the trouble to communicate with us. And that's what these opening verses in Hebrews is saying.

God has spoken. In the past through his spokesmen the prophets in lots of different ways; eg Moses, Micah, Malachi. But at Christmas, we remember that he actually sent his Son into the world, the Word made flesh, to speak to us in person.

I used to have 2 goldfish. Fish and Chips. Sadly, one died one summer when my mum was looking after them. She was terribly upset for me, but I wasn't too worried (I had only bought them for a talk illustration!) But suppose I wanted to communicate to Fish, the remaining goldfish, and send him my condolences. I could text him, write diagrams on the sand, use hand signals. But what better than to become a fish and jump into the bowl and speak fish language?!

It's a silly and perhaps slightly irreverent illustration for Jesus, but God has become man. He's turned up on the planet, he's moved into the neighbourhood, and people saw him and wrote down what he said and did.

God is not hiding. We are not living in a lonely universe with cosmic tumbleweed blowing across the silent galaxies. God has spoken. And he's spoken in his Son, Jesus.

The Bible is personal. It's about God- A God actually in 3 persons: The *Father* revealing himself by his *Spirit* in his *Son, Jesus*.

And the Bible is all about Jesus. This is who the Spirit shines his spotlight on. Let me read to you a key verse from our Bible reading today: *Luke 24:27. "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, Jesus explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself"*.

The Bible is a complex book. In fact, it's more of a library of 66 books in one. But every page whispers Jesus name (as one of our kids Bibles puts it). It's all about Jesus.... "concerning himself" v27.

Simplified, the *Old Testament* is the story of Jesus **promised**, and the *New Testament* is the story of Jesus **present** and **proclaimed**.

Wouldn't you have loved to have been a fly on the wall, or perhaps a fly on the rucksack on the road to Emmaus, the day that Jesus did a bible study with 2 of his disciples on the day that he was risen from the dead (Luke 24- today's reading). At first, they didn't recognise him, but he showed them throughout the Bible what was being said about him. Predicted and patterned for thousands of years- a rescuing dying suffering, rising victorious King. No wonder they said (v32), *"Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road, and opened the Scripture to us?"*

One of the times I most grew in my faith and was encouraged was doing a "bible overview" course for the first time in my early 20s. It's a sort of helicopter view of the Bible, seeing the big picture- how it sets up for Jesus through all of the OT, and introduces us to him in the NT.

In fact "God's Big Picture" is the name of a book, and a free online video course<sup>1</sup> run by Vaughan Roberts that the men's Sunday night group are starting every 2 weeks next Sunday. It takes you through the whole Bible in overview in 8 chapters (actually in 8 P's- which I rather like!) to introduce you to the big plotline of the Bible: Creation, the rebellion of mankind, Abraham and his descendents, the Prophets, the coming of Jesus, the early church, Jesus' return. I commend it to you. It kind of puts all the jigsaw pieces together.

But my point is the Bible is wonderful because it's personal. It's all about the person of Jesus. And *he* is so wonderful.

You could never have made him up. A man who is 100% God and 100% Man, part of a Trinity of three persons in One God. A man who can still storms, change water into wine, who taught us to love not just our friends, but our enemies, who challenged the religious establishment, but forgave the men who nailed him to the cross.

Do you know the phrase "Truth is stranger than fiction". Or perhaps you've seen the hilarious film starring Will Farrel. Sometimes real

events can be more surprising than an imaginary story, and that's certainly the case with Jesus. You could never have made it all up.

So as you read the Bible, and even the accounts of Jesus, perhaps it is a little strange in parts, but that could be because we are strange, and we don't get things straight away and are more familiar with the things of man than of God. But remember in the Bible we meet Jesus.

As Martin Luther, who rediscovered the centrality of the Bible, and God's grace for himself, and perhaps for Europe put it, *"The Bible is the Manger in which we find Christ"*.

So the Bible is wonderfully personal because it points to the person of Jesus- we've just seen that. I'd like to move to the second reason why the Bible is wonderful because it's personal.

### **It's personal because through it, God is communicating to US!**

Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible. 176 verses long, and all but (I think) 3 verses contain a reference to God's Word the Bible, or at least that portion of the Bible that was written by that stage.

*Commands, Precepts, Laws, Statues, Decrees, Promise.*

The writer is meditating on the wonder of the Bible, and he's just delighting in it. He loves it.

- V47 *I delight in your commands because I love them.*
- V48 *I reach out for your commands which I love.*
- V97 *Oh how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long.*

I remember the early flutters of being interested in girls in my teenage years. It was before email, so from time to time you'd get a letter, hopefully with familiar handwriting on it, personally addressed to you landing on the doormat. How exciting.

But dear friends, we have a love letter from God. A personal letter, showing us...

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.godsbigpicture.co.uk/>

- How to be rescued.
- How to face up to our past
- How to know God
- How to be forgiven, how to forgive others.
- How to live according to the maker's instructions

Again, as Psalm 119:105 says “your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path”.

The bible is wonderful because it's personal. Personal to you and to me. And it's so relevant. It talks about what we need to hear.

**Here's Andy**<sup>2</sup>. Sitting in his cell in prison waiting for the prison officers to change over so that he could put the rope around his neck and end it all. But a voice in his head said “Just read that Bible”. There was a Gideons Bible on the shelf in his room. He opened the Bible and started to read. At the Story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15) tears started to flow, hopelessness disappeared, and that Sunday in the prison chapel he gave his life to Christ.

**Here's Rosaria**<sup>3</sup>. She's a leftist lesbian professor of English and Women's studies in the States. She hates Christians for their bible verses at Gay Pride marches and the fact they love that she and everyone she loves is going to hell. She writes a controversial article but gets a kind letter from a pastor, and becomes friends with him and his wife. She starts to devour the Bible, and a transgendered friend says it's changing her. And one day she says “What if it's true, what if Jesus is a real and risen Lord”?

Here's **Stephen**<sup>4</sup>. He never knew his father, his mother abandoned him at birth. He's living on the streets of Zimbabwe, abandoned by his. Part of an angry gang of youths that only want to wreak havoc and destruction. He hears the gospel and his life is turned upside down,

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<sup>2</sup> <http://blog.gideons.org/2012/08/testimonies-of-how-gods-word-has-prevented-suicide/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/january-february/my-train-wreck-conversion.html>

and he is soon introduced to Psalm 27:10 “*Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take you up*” . He repeats it over and over again and it brings comfort and healing.

Slightly less famous, here's **Charlie**. He's walking back from a church meeting. Perhaps a little discouraged or down on himself for some reason, and then he remembers a song he was taught as a teenager straight out of the Bible. “I'm confident of this very thing, that he who has begun a good work in you, he shall perform it until the day of Jesus Christ”, taken straight from Philippians 1:6. and it encourages him. That was me this week.

I'm not saying that the Bible is always easy to read, or that you'll find a verse that speaks straight to your exact situation. It has to be read in context, and it speaks first to the first readers for example in Corinth in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century before it speaks to us in Huntingdon in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, and that bridging of the gap takes a bit of work, and explains a bit of the “weirdness”.

But ultimately the Bible is God speaking to us, and he's very good at it, which is why these words have a self authenticating . So these words are precious, because they are wonderful and personal. As the founder of the Methodists, John Wesley put it. “*O give me that book, at any price give me the book of God!*”<sup>5</sup>

Maybe you are not a Christian, and so you don't believe that the Bible is God's word. That's OK. You don't have to believe it is to start reading it. Why not open it up, perhaps at one of the gospels, and just start reading it for yourself, as we are doing at Christianity Explored with Mark's gospel.

And if you are a Christian, but you've stopped reading it. Pick it up again. Ask God to speak to you. You may well find that like Tim Keller,

<sup>4</sup> “Out of the Black Shadows”- the autobiography of Stephen Lungu.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in JI Packer, “Fundamentalism and the Word of God” p75.

American Pastor who has written many books about the Christian faith, you start out reading the Bible to question and analyse *it*, but that after a while he discovered that soon he found that the Bible, or rather Someone through the Bible was question and analysing *him*! He says as he quotes another Christian thinker, “The Bible is the book that understands me”.<sup>6</sup>

Well we’ve seen that the bible, if weird in part is actually wonderful because it’s personal. We still need to think about who wrote it, and how to interpret it and use it today, but at the very least I hope that we are resolved to look at it for ourselves, whoever we are.

I’ll finish with a last story. It was when I was invited to a friend’s 21<sup>st</sup> birthday many years ago. It was super posh with black bow ties, ball gowns and a smart sit-down dinner for about 40 people in this extraordinary home that was more like a small national trust property. And after the meal my friend’s dad, who was actually a famous architect, gave a speech. We were all eager to hear what he said, thinking that we might hear stories of his daughter when she was growing up or embarrassing things she had done as a teenager.

Actually, in this speech, the dad who was a Christian, addressed his daughter and all her friends by quoting Moses in the book of Deuteronomy of all places. And he spoke the words that I started this talk with. They were originally given to God’s people on the eve of going into the promised land 3000 years ago, but he wanted all of those young people to take them on board, just like I want us to take them to heart today. (And with these I’ll finish this talk for week 1):  
*“Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day.... They are not just idle words for you – **they are your life**”.*

Let’s pray.

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<sup>6</sup> Tim Keller, “King’s Cross” page xv.