

Finding Christ in the Scriptures

DAVE BAST

So what kind of book is the Bible? What is it really about? Is it a handbook for successful living? Is it a guidebook about how to find the way to heaven? Is it a textbook of theology, a source for formulating doctrines? Or is it a storybook focused on Jesus? Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast. Joining me today is Dr. Tim Brown and Dr. Todd Billings from Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan. Tim and Todd, welcome back to *Groundwork*.

TODD BILLINGS

It is good to be here, Dave.

TIM BROWN

Thank you, David. I have enjoyed being here.

DAVE BAST

So, we are in the midst of a series entitled: How to read the Bible. We talked last week about the authority of the Bible – its rule over our lives and our doctrines – our beliefs – that great text from 2 Timothy about how scripture is profitable or useful.

TIM BROWN

Sure: ^{3:16}All scripture is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness. I want to point out the second and third words – reproof and correction – to me, on one level sounds like the same thing, but they are actually quite different. Reproof, as we mentioned earlier, indicts us or changes us – calls us out, as it were...

DAVE BAST

Shows us where we are wrong.

TIM BROWN

Exactly. Correction is a little different. The root word behind it actually is the word from which we get our word, *orthopedics*. It has to do with setting broken bones or healing us. So, I would like to say that the scripture has within it the inherent power of healing our deep wounds. In fact, Augustine, one of the early Church theologians, said this when he watched Ambrose reading the Bible: My wounds were closed by your healing fingers as his eyes glided over the page. Isn't that interesting? So, the Bible can heal us in very deep and profound ways.

DAVE BAST

And it sort of a yes and no kind of thing. It is almost an X-shaped text with those four words. It is: Yes, believe this. No, don't believe that. Yes, do this. No, don't do that. And in all those ways, the Bible sort of sets us on the right path; but you know, it is also easy – and we can all probably choose examples of people who maybe use the Bible in somewhat the wrong way; and Todd, I know that you have thought a lot about

this, and actually addressed it in a book and an article that you have recently published. It really isn't necessarily the key to successful living in worldly terms, is it – the Bible?

TODD BILLINGS

I think that is the wrong way to frame it, even though a lot of books in Christian bookstores and a lot of Christians try to approach it as God's answers to the questions that I am currently asking; and those questions being: How to be successful; how to be financially independent; how to...

DAVE BAST

The Bible way to wealth, you know; seven easy steps...

TODD BILLINGS

Exactly; or the Bible diets have been very, very popular; and so, rather than actually seeing... I mean, the problem with the Bible diet is that you don't have to believe in Jesus or be a follower of Jesus to extract information from the Bible about how to eat certain food and avoid other things; and so, it is using the Bible for a purpose that God wants it for a much deeper, much more profound purpose that will have effects on our daily lives, but it will go beyond just accomplishing our own personal weight loss goals, and will make us, actually, into disciples of Christ.

DAVE BAST

Well, even approaching the Bible as sort of a guidebook to heaven – you know, it is really only about how you can be saved as an individual. Tim, you and I both love that great quote from John Wesley... how does it go again?

TIM BROWN

I want to know the way to heaven. God has condescended to show me the way. He has written it in a book. Oh, give me that book at any price. I have it and I have life itself.

DAVE BAST

And then he goes on to say: I want to be a man of one book.

TIM BROWN

Yes, exactly.

DAVE BAST

Well, it is all true. I resonate with that – we all do; but the Bible is even more than just the story of personal salvation – of how to make sure you escape judgment and find your way into the heavenly gates. It is a bigger story, isn't it?

TODD BILLINGS

The Bible brings us into a drama; a drama where the God of Jesus Christ, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is the central actor; and so, rather than just leading us to make a conversion and then we just maintain our faith commitment until we then go to heaven, through the Spirit's power, the Bible opens us up into a new world. We start to live in a different reality because of the world that the Bible opens up to us.

DAVE BAST

Yes; God is doing a bigger thing in remaking and reshaping the creation – the new heaven and new earth. I was struck by something – just a phrase, Todd, that you used. You talk about reading the Bible Christianly. I wonder if you would just say a little bit more about that because I like that. I think it is easy to read the Bible kind of as a non Christian for this tip or that interesting anecdote or even this sort of historical whatever.

TODD BILLINGS

I think that sometimes even Christians don't read the Bible Christianly, because they look to the Bible to solve their own problems or for their own purposes. Now, let me just quickly say the Bible does address our practical needs and our practical issues; but we need to read as people who are open to hearing from our Lord Jesus Christ speak through these words by the power of the Spirit, and not simply getting help to our specific problems with, you know, finances or...

DAVE BAST

Yes, well, you think about the wisdom literature. That is full of very practical advice for daily life; so, it is certainly there.

TIM BROWN

You know, I say to students that there are virtues that are necessary for a faithful reading of the Bible. When Paul tells us in Colossians:

3:16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; he precedes that by a list of virtues: 3:12 As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. I think those particular virtues are necessary for a faithful reading of the Bible. For instance, you have to be patient. There is nothing worse in a conversation than somebody...

DAVE BAST

Excuse me, interrupting?

TIM BROWN

Exactly. Thank you very much. So, you have to be patient and let this word come to you.

TODD BILLINGS

I think that on that virtue of patience, it is actually one that some theologians might, like myself, sometimes make a mistake and sometimes err. Sometimes we think that our own system of theology is better than the Bible itself. So, some of what I think it means to read the Bible in a Christian way is to read it on a journey of coming to know the triune God in Christ more and more; and you have to be patient in that process.

DAVE BAST

All of us who read theology or have read theology are guilty of cramming the Bible into our system, aren't we?

TIM BROWN

Sure, sure; or take the virtue of humility – that is, recognizing... not taking yourself more seriously than you ought, regardless of how well-schooled you are or how wise you are; to recognize that in this word – the word of God – you are meeting another who is your superior.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and you better listen to him.

TIM BROWN

You better listen.

TODD BILLINGS

And that is in contrast to even some Bible scholars who think they have Paul figured out. You know, they are master over Paul because they have figured him out. I don't think we can ever be master over the Bible. I mean, we want God to master us *through* the Bible.

DAVE BAST

I remember hearing John Stott in a lecture once say: Well, if I have to choose between the view of theologian X and that of the Apostle Paul, it will not take me long – it won't be a difficult decision which one I am going to heed.

The key thing, I think, that we all want to do in reading the Bible Christianly is find Christ in it.

TIM BROWN

Yes, amen.

DAVE BAST

And especially in the Old Testament because that is what Jesus himself did, and we are going to look at a great passage after this break where he does just that.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. Along with Todd Billings and Tim Brown, who are both professors at Western Seminary in Holland, Michigan, I am your host, Dave Bast; and we are getting into the subject of reading the Bible Christianly – as Christians – specifically finding Christ there – the great drama of the triune God revealing himself in and through Jesus Christ, and creating a whole new order and a new reality into which he invites us, culminating in a whole new creation; and I want to focus on the specific thing of what that does for our reading of the Old Testament as Christians. You know, that is not so simple, but yet, the Church has always insisted that the Old Testament belongs to us, too. It is not just the Hebrew Scriptures, but we read it in a different way.

TODD BILLINGS

We do read the Old Testament in light of Christ because the New Testament tells us that Christ is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, that even Old Testament writers who did not think they were predicting anything were actually predicting Jesus Christ. Certainly, we have certain Old Testament passages which are predictive in talking about a Messiah, but when you look at the way the New Testament writers draw upon the Old Testament, they use all sorts of passages...

DAVE BAST

Yes, they go way beyond that, don't they?

TODD BILLINGS

Exactly. They think that Christ is the fulfillment of God's purposes in creation, in covenant, in what a human being is to be. Jesus is the fulfillment of God's purposes in an ultimate way; and that means that the Old Testament is extremely valuable to us because the Old Testament is God's word and it bears witness to Christ in ways that even the Old Testament writers themselves could not have comprehended.

TIM BROWN

Sure. One of the classic examples of this is the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, where Philip, beginning with the prophecy of Isaiah, proclaimed to him the Good News in the scripture, and the scripture he is referring to is the Old Testament.

DAVE BAST

Right; but that is Isaiah 53; that is pretty easy for Christians to see Jesus there. You know, with his stripes we are healed and all that.

TIM BROWN

Yes, point taken, but he begins with Isaiah, but it is pretty clear in the text that is not where he stopped.

DAVE BAST

And even Jesus himself did this. There is this famous incident just at the end of the Gospel of Luke, from Luke 24, where the risen Christ is appearing to his disciples in the upper room and he says this:

⁴⁴He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you; everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms.” Then he opened their minds so they could understand the scriptures and went on from there. This is what is written: The Messiah must suffer and die and be raised and then repentance will be preached in his name to the nations. So, Jesus believed that he was the hero of the whole story; and every part of it – every book from Genesis to Malachi. I mean, that is a huge idea.

TIM BROWN

It is a huge idea, and we cannot forget it.

TODD BILLINGS

It is an astonishing claim that is at the center of the Christian faith. I mean, this is ultimately why we talk about God as Trinity because we encounter in Jesus Christ one who cannot just be explained in terms of being just another prophet; but through our encounter with Jesus Christ, we see that he is, in fact, one with God, and in fact, he is God and human, and people did not come up with the doctrine of the Trinity because of weird math. They came up with it because they were coming to terms with this astonishing, world-changing claim of Jesus that he was at the center of God’s purposes testified to in Israel’s scriptures.

DAVE BAST

I have often thought that, along those same lines, Todd, it was not like the apostles sat down and said: Can we invent this weird idea that nobody will understand? But it was more a question of: Wow, Jesus is God. We realize that, but wait a minute. God is God, we know that, too; and oh, God is one; so how does this work?

TODD BILLINGS

Exactly; so Jewish monotheists are bowing down and worshipping Jesus. Well, that would have been an idolatrous thing to do in a monotheistic context, but we have to come to terms with that.

TIM BROWN

And over and over again in the Old Testament God self-reveals as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, although the term “Trinity” is not...

DAVE BAST

In the Old Testament, you say.

TIM BROWN

In the Old Testament, of course, even in the beginning. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void and darkness covered the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God brooded over the waters. So here you clearly have God the Father, the creator; you have the Spirit brooding over the waters; and then God speaks. That is the Son speaks.

DAVE BAST

The Word, yes.

TIM BROWN

And it is pretty clear that John, in his prologue to the Gospel, interpreted it just that way.

DAVE BAST

All things were made through him and without him nothing was made.

What are some examples? What strikes me out of Jesus' words to his apostles is that breakdown of the Law of Moses, the Psalms and the Prophets. So, he is thinking comprehensively of the whole Old Testament, and he says: It is all about me – written about me; what are some examples of different passages, not just the obvious prophecies about the Messiah, say from Isaiah, but some other places where you see Christ foretold in the Old Testament?

TODD BILLINGS

I think the book of Hebrews is a great answer to that question, Dave. I mean, even in just the first chapter of the book of Hebrews you have the writer quoting the Psalms, quoting 2 Samuel, quoting the Law in Deuteronomy. So, in a sense, some of these quotations may strike us as odd today because they are not traditional Messianic quotations like Isaiah 53 that we made note of earlier, but the reason that they are totally appropriate is because of who Jesus Christ is. Because Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the Law, then all sorts of things written in the Pentateuch – the first five books of the Old Testament – are fulfilled in Christ. Because Jesus Christ is the perfect speaker for God, all sorts of things are spoken about in the Prophets, even when they weren't prophesying Messiah, are properly applied to Jesus Christ, and in the Psalms as well.

DAVE BAST

Yes, let me ask you both a question then: Do you think as we read the Old Testament whenever we come across the word *Lord*, which is a transliteration or translation of the Hebrew Yahweh, the personal name of God, we should think *Jesus* – every time we read *Lord* we should think, the Lord Jesus – that is who is talking – that is what it is talking about.

TODD BILLINGS

I wouldn't read it quite that way.

TIM BROWN

Yes, I am kind of running through all the verses I can think of. I don't think that would be quite right; but it is certain that the person and the work of Jesus is on full display in the Old Testament. I am thinking now of Psalm 110 and the way that Peter interprets that.

DAVE BAST

"The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand.'"

TIM BROWN

Exactly so; because Peter says in his sermon: For David did not ascend into the heavens – David, who wrote the psalm – David did not ascend into the heavens; and yet, he said, "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand.'" So, Peter is saying he is referring to somebody else...

DAVE BAST

Who is enthroned in heaven at the right hand of God.

Tim Brown/

TODD BILLINGS

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

I wonder who that could be?

TODD BILLINGS

I think that we need to keep in mind that God is triune, and part of that is that God is one. So, we can say when God speaks in the Old Testament as Lord, that Jesus is the perfect expression of the word of God, but

that does not mean that we have to always read a particular person of the Trinity back into the Old Testament.

TIM BROWN

That is helpful.

TODD BILLINGS

As we read the New Testament, we see that Jesus is the Word of God and in his humanity he is the perfect expression of the word; and the Spirit bears witness in our hearts to Jesus; yet, Father, Son and Spirit are one. They are all almighty. They all act in a united way.

DAVE BAST

It is best not to overly separate them in there.

TODD BILLINGS

I think it is good not to overly separate them; especially in our reading of the Old Testament.

DAVE BAST

I want to pick up on something else you said earlier in the program, Todd, that sometimes the meaning of the Old Testament scripture will go beyond what the author understood or intended; and that seems to run contrary to one of the basic principles of biblical interpretation that most of us have been taught, which is what is the author's intended meaning? That is what we have to start with. We cannot just ditch that and go put our own meaning into it or allegorize or spiritualize it; and yet, if we learn from the early Church, and even from the Apostles in the New Testament, very often they interpreted Old Testament passages in a spiritual sense as pointing to Christ. Think of Paul: The rock was Christ; speaking of the wilderness experience. So, how do we do that? When do we do that? Give me some examples of where you think that is legitimate.

TODD BILLINGS

Well, let me just first say that to read the Old Testament spiritually does not mean just to add any meaning that you think would be appropriate; but it means to read in light of who Jesus Christ has been revealed to be as the perfect prophet, the perfect priest, and the perfect king. So for example, when you are reading about the various kings – the good and the bad kings in the Old Testament, you can see ways in which even the good kings did not completely reflect the rule of Christ; but there are certain ways in which King David, in certain parts of his reign, does, in a sense, reflect the reign of Christ, and shows us something about Christ.

DAVE BAST

Or you think of Psalm 72, which describes the ideal king. It was never lived up to by any of the actual kings; but Jesus is the fulfillment of that; Jesus is the perfect example of what that king will be when he comes again.

TODD BILLINGS

Exactly; I mean, I think the key thing is that we need to read the Old Testament so that it has a story and a narrative in and of itself, but that narrative is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. So for example, the psalms of David; people will read the psalms of David and they will say: Oh, well, David foreshadows Christ, and so they completely leave out the narrative of David and Saul and some of the things that the psalms tell us are talking about. I think we need to read the psalms of David as being about David and Saul, as well as about Christ. Ultimately about Christ in a very significant sense, but we should not just pretend that the Old Testament stories are not there. We need to cherish them. We need to cherish their words because if we do not cherish them, then we are actually going to miss out on God's revelation and parts of what God wants to teach us.

TIM BROWN

Absolutely so, but there is always this double meaning. You can see Christ in the text. Let me just give one example. Moses' mother sees that Moses is a fine baby, and she takes a papyrus basket and lays the child in the basket. Now, I would like to suggest that you can see in that a shadowing of Mary wrapping the babe in swaddling clothes and laying him in a manger.

DAVE BAST

Sure, yes.

TIM BROWN

It is an allusion, and it is fair then to see because Moses is this great redemptive story that is pointing to the greatest of all redemption stories.

DAVE BAST

Right; I remember hearing another example. I remember hearing a preacher say once that the ark was a symbol of Christ because it was gold on the outside and wood on the inside, and he was God and man at the same time; and I thought: That is not quite legitimate, but look at what the New Testament says about the ark. It says the lid of the ark – the mercy seat – was the place of atonement, and it calls Jesus that. It says at the cross that was our place of atonement; so there is a legitimate and maybe not so legitimate way of doing this; and especially if we are guided by the New Testament.

TODD BILLINGS

Exactly.

TIM BROWN

And I think when you talk about legitimate and illegitimate ways of doing it, it requires of the individual reader a kind of humility to read the book in community and listening to the point and counterpoint of other sisters and brothers, both in our presence now and throughout history.

DAVE BAST

And that is a great point on which we will close this program. So, thank you, Todd, and thank you, Tim; and I am looking forward to our next program in this same series on how to read the Bible.

And thanks to you for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. Don't forget, it is listeners who are asking us questions and participating that will keep the topics relevant. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing and suggest topics or passages for future *Groundwork* programs. You can visit us online at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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