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# How to Read the Hard Stories

## DAVE BAST

If you are a longtime Christian, the Bible has probably become very familiar and comforting to you; perhaps so familiar that it no longer surprises you; but the Bible is a book that ought to startle us, even shock and upset us. Stay tuned, and you will see what I mean.

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. With me today is Dr. Tim Brown and Dr. Todd Billings. Tim and Todd are both professors at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan. Tim is also the president of that institution. They also happen to be friends of mine, and they have joined us for this four-part series of programs on how to read the Bible. So, welcome again, Tim and Todd.

## TODD BILLINGS

It is good to be here, Dave.

## TIM BROWN

Thank you, David. Great to be back.

## DAVE BAST

We call this series: How to read the Bible; and we talked before about some of the issues of that. I want to kind of recap that, but before I do that, Todd, I want to ask you a question. You wrote a book, actually, about how to read the Bible, and I wonder, what drew you to that question? Why did you choose to write that book?

## TODD BILLINGS

I chose to write that book because I found that a lot of both Christians and non-Christians had confusion about what it meant to read the Bible as God's word, and read the Bible as scripture. Even as Christians, we sometimes read the Bible in such a way that we are in control. We are in control of the questions being asked. We have a problem we want solved and so we go to the Bible as the answer; and I wanted to give a vision of reading scripture where we enter into a whole new world that is created by God and that Scripture opens up for us a drama of God's salvation in Christ; and so I wanted to fire up peoples' imaginations for reading the Bible.

## DAVE BAST

Yes, because sometimes as Evangelicals – as conservative Christians, which most of us, I suppose, would be identified as – we have a high view of scripture. We say the right things about it. We believe it is God's word, but we tend to treat it as a self-help book for solving my life problems or helping me get a little bit better in my marriage or in my work life, with my finances or whatever; and you are saying it is a much bigger story. We need to read it in a Christian way in terms of that story.

## TODD BILLINGS

Exactly; and so, I think that Evangelicals – we are right to approach the Bible as our authority, but sometimes, even though we say the Bible is our authority, when we approach it, we actually do not want our lives to be called into question as disciples of Christ. We want to just find the information that we want, find certain facts or answers that we want, when God's word is so much more than that, and God wants to change

our lives as disciples of Christ in our reading of scripture. I mean, that is God's intention for scripture; but we often want to be in control of the process.

**DAVE BAST**

So, that book is called *The Word of God for the People of God*. You might want to pick that up and give it a read. It is being widely distributed – great reviews. I am reading it myself with my wife right now, and it is a wonderful resource.

We talked in our past programs about the inspiration and authority of the Bible, Tim, and how it is useful for teaching.

**TIM BROWN**

It is, in fact; and one of the questions I like to pose to students on the authority of scripture: Is there any practice or plausible vision in the culture that you cannot and do not affirm because the Bible teaches otherwise? Or is there anything that you are presently doing that you can identify comes as an act of obedience out of the Word? There ought to be that kind of relationship because the scripture is, in fact, authorial – it has authority over us.

**DAVE BAST**

So, does the Bible say no to you at some point...

**TIM BROWN**

Exactly.

**DAVE BAST**

Where the world might say, yes, that is okay; and does it say yes to you at some point, where the world might be indifferent.

**TIM BROWN**

Exactly so.

**DAVE BAST**

I was thinking of that great line, you know it, Tim, I know, from the introduction to Pilgrim's Progress, where Bunyan says: This book will make a traveler of thee, if by its counsel thou wilt ruled be.

**TIM BROWN**

Oh, yes; sure.

**DAVE BAST**

And that even applies more to the Bible. It is going to shake your life up if you are reading it this way, as Todd was saying, and as you are saying.

**TODD BILLINGS**

It will send you on a journey.

**DAVE BAST**

Yes, exactly; and tell you which way to go as well. So, we have stressed the power and the authority and the usefulness – the clarity of scripture – it shows you the way; but it is not all that easy. I want to start this program with a quotation from C. S. Lewis. It is from an essay that he wrote on the Psalms, and he says this: The dominant impression I get from reading the Psalms is one of antiquity. I seem to be looking into a deep pit of time, but looking through a lens which brings the figures who inhabit that depth up close to my eye. In that momentary proximity, they are almost shockingly alien; creatures of unrestrained emotion, wallowing in self pity; sobbing, cursing, screaming in exaltation; clashing uncouth weapons or dancing to the din of strange musical instruments. I love that passage; but what he is getting at there is the world of the Bible when

we really get into it, especially the Old Testament, is really strange and alien to us. It is not our world, and there is stuff in here – in this book – that is hard; hard to understand; hard to accept; hard to interpret. So, I want to focus in this program on what do we do with the hard stories and the hard passages?

**TIM BROWN**

Well, let me say right at the beginning, we read them, and we read them very carefully, because when Paul says in 2 Timothy: All scripture is God-breathed, he is referring to these passages as well. So, as difficult as they are, they are there for the Church and for the believer to be read.

**TODD BILLINGS**

And I think that we not only read them, but we are honest about our questions in the midst of it...

**TIM BROWN**

Oh, sure; yes.

**TODD BILLINGS**

And I think that we should be able to admit that there are passages that we struggle with and that we wrestle with; but it is precisely because we have love for God's word and respect for this word that has authoritatively come to us that we bother to wrestle with these passages, and to... even to say, yes, I do not really know what to do with this passage at this time; I mean, we are on a journey; we are not there yet. We do not see face to face; so, I think we should have a certain amount of patience with ourselves to, you know, at certain moments saying, I am not really quite sure what to do with this...

**DAVE BAST**

So, do not throw them overboard too quickly.

**TIM BROWN**

Exactly; using the metaphor that Todd is using about a journey, when you are on a long journey, there are things that you pack for the journey that you don't use at every point in the journey; but at just the right moment, you have packed it for the right reason.

**DAVE BAST**

It made me think of Thomas Jefferson, you know; he published a famous edition of the Bible, I think just the New Testament actually, where he cut out all the things that he didn't like.

**TODD BILLINGS**

Exactly; and that is actually the exact opposite of what readers of the Bible in the early Church did. Whenever readers in the first centuries of Christianity came upon a passage that they found troubling, they would pay special attention to, and actually saw as a sign from God, that they were supposed to be especially attentive to discerning the mystery of God's revelation at that point.

**TIM BROWN**

And isn't it true, Todd, that that is why some of the Reformation writers like Calvin and Luther are important to read, because they were actually drawing off of some of those early Church resources?

**TODD BILLINGS**

Yes; both Luther and Calvin and a number of the Reformers saw themselves as reviving the biblical theology of the first five centuries of the Church; and so, even on doctrines like justification by faith alone or things like that, they read the Church fathers and sought to find ones who were saying similar or... They did not want a new interpretation of the...

**DAVE BAST**

They were not trying to start a new church.

**TODD BILLINGS**

No.

**DAVE BAST**

They were consciously living in the Church through the ages; and that also brings up a good reminder – we mentioned this in an earlier program in this series – but when we talk about the Bible alone as our authority – our sole ultimate rule, we don't mean we read it all alone. We just bring our own individualistic ideas of what it means. We are really reading it with the Church and with the saints through the ages, so we use their wisdom and their approach, too.

**TODD BILLINGS**

Exactly, Dave; and I think that is especially important when we come to difficult passages on the Bible; and so, you know, John Calvin for example, when he was writing biblical commentaries he sought to read both Church fathers and others who had come before him; and it can be very illuminating to see how earlier people have struggled with the same passages that we struggle with. Some of the passages about war or rape or things like that in the Old Testament; they struggled in the same way that we did and they often have some wisdom to share with us.

**TIM BROWN**

You have referred now to Church fathers several times. Could you name a few of them?

**TODD BILLINGS**

Athanasius, who was important for the Council of Nicaea and the Nicene Trinitarian theology, Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa; these are some of the names – Gregory of Nazianzus...

**DAVE BAST**

Jerome, the great biblical commentator...

**TODD BILLINGS**

Jerome... yes.

**TIM BROWN**

Basil the Great...

**DAVE BAST**

You know, the interesting thing is, these are all being made available to ordinary Christians in our day. It is a wonderful movement that is happening in publishing. You do not have to be a scholar. People are bringing out editions of these folks' – condensed, edited, so it is manageable – but what they wrote about scripture – what they said; and it is all available for us today.

**TODD BILLINGS**

Yes, so the ancient Christian commentary series that University Press has published has been a very successful series. I mean, many, many pastors and church leaders have purchased this and used this. Another book I might mention is one called: *Reading the Bible with the Dead...*

**DAVE BAST**

With the dead – d-e-a-d, yes.

**TODD BILLINGS**

Exactly.

**DAVE BAST**

Not with Dad...

**TODD BILLINGS**

Exactly. *Reading the Bible with the Dead* by John L. Thompson, and what that focuses on is difficult passages of scripture and the way in which the history of exegesis – the history of biblical interpretation – can help us interpret these difficult passages.

**DAVE BAST**

Tim is writing that title down right now.

**TIM BROWN**

I am most definitely writing that title down.

**DAVE BAST**

Well, you just alluded to some of them; probably a prime example would be 1 Samuel 13; the passage where God commands Saul to completely wipe out a community of Amalekites, and Saul does not do it, and then God judges him for failing to do that. I want to talk about that passage and some of the other tough ones after we take a short break.

*Segment 2*

**DAVE BAST**

Hi. Welcome back to *Groundwork*. I am Dave Bast, and joining me today are Tim Brown and Todd Billings, and we are talking in this program, a part of our series on how to read the Bible, about how to read the hard passages – the tough stories – the difficult verses – the things that strike us as being odd or perhaps even inappropriate. There is a wonderful verse in 2 Peter that gets at this, I think, where Peter says that Paul writes the same way in all of his letters, speaking of them of these matters; his letters contain some things that are hard to understand. So even Peter recognized this; but some of the examples... I misspoke earlier in the program. I said 1 Samuel 13, and it is actually 1 Samuel 15. Let me just read this, where Samuel the prophet comes and it says:

<sup>2</sup>This is what the Lord almighty says, (he is speaking to Saul). “I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel. <sup>3</sup>Now go, attack them and totally destroy all that belongs to them. Do not spare them. Put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys. What did the animals do? What did the infants do? God commands genocide? Actually, my daughter a year or so ago sent me an e-mail and said she had been talking with a young Christian friend, and this guy said to her: I just cannot accept that. I do not buy this, that this is from God. So she e-mails me and says: What do I say to him, Dad? Well, what should I say? What do you say?

**TIM BROWN**

Well, what did you say?

**DAVE BAST**

Well, I said: On the one hand, I cannot just discount this and say, ‘Well, the biblical writer is just putting his own prejudice into this. It didn’t come from God at all.’ On the other hand, we certainly cannot say that God wants us to be genocidal or murderers. I mean, the God we know in Jesus teaches us to love our enemies.

**TODD BILLINGS**

Yes, exactly.

**DAVE BAST**

So, there is something going on in the course of history that affects this; and there is a change between the Old Testament and the New Testament, I think.

**TODD BILLINGS**

I think that with passages like this we do need to be patient with ourselves; to take a deep breath and to consider the passage and to consider that this is God's word to us, which is to lead us to love of God and love of neighbor; so that immediately says to us: This is not a handbook on foreign relations today.

**DAVE BAST**

Yes, right.

**TIM BROWN**

Yes.

**DAVE BAST**

This certainly does not authorize us to go in and carpet bomb anybody we don't like.

**TODD BILLINGS**

Absolutely not; and in fact, when we read this scripture, it is important to keep in mind that when this was written, there were a lot of other writings at the time that spoke about nations going in and wiping out other nations; and oftentimes, when we have researched it, people would say that whether or not that had actually happened...

**DAVE BAST**

So there may be some exaggeration here, exaggerated language, perhaps.

**TODD BILLINGS**

I think that is true, but it is not that the author is in any way being deceptive; but it is that this language of completely annihilating or giving up something is actually the language of worship in a certain sense, that Israel needs to be completely consecrated to God, and so needs to be completely consecrated to God's commands.

**DAVE BAST**

It is a little bit like when Jesus says: You must hate your father and mother...

**TODD BILLINGS**

Yes.

**TIM BROWN**

Yes, exactly.

**DAVE BAST**

It is talking about radical commitment to God.

**TODD BILLINGS**

Radical allegiance to God.

**DAVE BAST**

Radical allegiance, and it is not meant necessarily to be pushed to its literal fulfillment.

**TIM BROWN**

Yes; I wonder if there is a key for us in the passage you just referred to, David, from 2 Peter. <sup>16b</sup>There are things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort. There is a key: Ignorant. Ignorant of what? I feel sure that he is saying ignorant of what God is doing in Christ Jesus. You must always interpret these passages through Christ; and then, *unstable*; that is a word of action and obedience. Like when Paul says in 1 Corinthians: Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Gospel. The point of this is to create a kind of obedience in our lives. Not to mimic the dreadful activity, but to follow suit on the intention that God has for creating a faithful people, much like Todd was just saying a moment ago.

**TODD BILLINGS**

I think we also need to allow ourselves to be called into question in some sense. I mean, we read this passage here and we think: Oh, there is all this ambiguity that God is involved in in this state of warfare, but even today when we look at a situation of warfare, there is all sorts of ambiguity...

**DAVE BAST**

Collateral damage, as they say.

**TODD BILLINGS**

Exactly; and so the Bible actually says that God is part of this messy narrative that we a part of and we don't understand all of how it fits together, but one thing that the Old Testament is very clear about is that God is active and that God is involved.

**DAVE BAST**

Well, here is another one: Psalm 137...

**TODD BILLINGS**

Oh, my.

**DAVE BAST**

That famously ends with the phrase: Blessed is the one who takes your little ones – these are the children and the infants of Babylon – and dashes them against a stone – beats the brains out of these little babies. How do you read that, Tim, as a Christian?

**TIM BROWN**

Well, you just shudder to think of the imagery, but I once heard Eugene Peterson say a very important thing about that verse. You take note of the fact that it is in the Psalms, and the Psalms were both the prayer book and the liturgy of the early Church, and Peterson says: This evil – this hatred – is in the human heart, and the only appropriate place to express that kind of anger is in the presence of God in the company of others in worship. It is like a prayer of confession. If you bottle this kind of anger up, it will show up in your life somewhere else in very, very painful and inappropriate ways; so take this anger and lay it before the Lord.

**DAVE BAST**

I really like what you did a few minutes ago with that 2 Peter text because we do try to dig into scripture. That is what we say the program is all about. I think there is a real possibility that people take these tough passages, or difficult texts, and do distort them. They use them kind of to undermine the Bible and create a sort of instability; and that is not the right way to approach it. That is really a sort of hostile reading of the book that God has given us.

**TIM BROWN**

Well, it is as we were saying in an earlier program, all scripture is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness. Every scripture passage will assist us in these four things; and so we kind of focus and limit ourselves on those four functions of the scriptures.

**DAVE BAST**

And to take a cue from what you said, Todd, maybe with the fathers of the early Church, when we come to a story like this we make a special effort to stop; and what a great invitation: Look at my heart. Do I have this kind of hatred in my heart?

Tim Brown/

**TODD BILLINGS**

Absolutely/Exactly.

**DAVE BAST**

What is God saying to me right now?

**TODD BILLINGS**

When we are puzzled by something in the text according to the Church fathers we need to allow ourselves to be called into question because what is indisputable for them is that this is God's word given for our edification in Christ; and precisely some of these passages that we are pointing to are very puzzling in terms of how is this God's word for our edification? But we need to enter in with confidence that God does speak through scripture and not just use this as an excuse to say: I don't have to take scripture seriously because it says this or that.

**DAVE BAST**

Well, here is one more puzzler. This one actually came from a listener who submitted it online. The incident where Jesus is – this is from the New Testament – he is with the person we call the Syrophenician woman – she is a Gentile – and he says to her... She comes asking for healing for her daughter. You know the story... and he says: The dogs don't get the food that is meant for the children. It is as though he calls her a dog.

**TIM BROWN**

Well, it is *as though* he called her a dog. He did not call her a dog, but he is certainly testing her faith; and you have to read the whole of the story, because she is then honored for her faithfulness and her persistence; and I as a follower of Jesus would walk away from that passage with a greater desire to be like her in that regard.

**DAVE BAST**

Yes; speaking of reading the Bible with the Church, Calvin has a great comment on that passage because I have preached on this story. He says when God seems to shut the door to your prayer, force yourself through the chinks – you know, kind of push yourself through the cracks – that is what this woman does...

**TIM BROWN**

Exactly so.

**DAVE BAST**

And that is the message for all of us, that God really is gracious and He wants to respond to our pleas for help.

Well, that is great, and our time is up. We tried to address what we set out to do in this program; and I think it has been very helpful. Thanks for your insights, both Tim and Todd.

Tim Brown/

**TODD BILLINGS**

Thank you.



## DAVE BAST

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](https://groundworkonline.com) and join the conversation.

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