

# What Use is Scripture?

*A sermon on 2 Timothy 3:14-17 and Jeremiah 31: 31-34 by Nathan Nettleton, 20 October 2019*

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## Message

Reading scripture with God's people keeps us honest as we seek to interpret and live by God's law written on our hearts.

## Sermon

The reading we heard from the second letter to Timothy contains one of the all time top-of-the-pops memory verses. 2 Timothy 3:16 — “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”

The very first sermon I ever preached was on that verse. I was about nineteen years of age and a rabid fundamentalist and my sermon was an assertion of the belief that absolutely everything the Bible says about absolutely everything is absolutely historically and scientifically accurate.

I am now well aware that such a claim was not coming from the Bible, but was being imposed on the Bible, and was much bigger than what this verse actually claims. The list given here of things the scriptures are useful for doesn't include the knowledge of astronomy or biology or even history. Rather it describes them as useful for shaping us so that we can live right and do good for others.

That does not mean that I no longer believe the scriptures to be inspired by God. It is just that I no longer see inspiration as a past and fossilised thing – carved in rock and no correspondence will be entered into. Rather I take more seriously the actual meaning of the word inspired, because this verse literally describes scripture as “God-breathed”, and breathing is a living dynamic thing. All scripture is alive with the life-force of God.

The pairing of this reading with the passage from Jeremiah tonight begs us to give this some more thought. Because in the Jeremiah reading we are promised a new covenant which includes having God's law within us, written on our hearts. And since we both claim to be people of that new covenant, and people of the book, there is a challenge here to work out how the God-breathed word written on our hearts and the God-breathed word written in this book are related to one another.

There is an interesting and quirky bit of background to this image of God's law being written on our hearts. In a number of the surrounding cultures of Jeremiah's time, there was a practice whereby diviners would pose a question to a god and then seek to discern the answer by examining the entrails of sacrificed animals.

The words that Jeremiah uses here are the same words used to describe this practice in some of the old writings from those cultures. It seems that Jeremiah is playing with this image when he says that the message from God will be found written on our entrails, our inner organs, our hearts. He's only playing with the image though, because Jeremiah is imagining us discerning God's word in our lived lives, not in our sacrificed entrails!

Even that should perhaps remind us that the place to discern God's word is not so much in the place where it is written, be it a book or the entrails, but in the lived practice of those words.

We are a congregation who gather around the book on a regular basis. In our worship each Sunday we not only listen to the stories from this book, but we even symbolise our relationship to these stories by honouring the book itself. As it is processed in we stand and bow and acknowledge in song that the Lord's words are the words of eternal life. Before we hear scripture read we pray that the Word will take root in the secret places of our hearts and bear much fruit to God's glory.

We read a lot of scripture. We have three readings and a Psalm every week, and over every three year cycle we hear a broad selection of readings representative of the whole Bible. Some of us have also committed ourselves to daily reading that takes us through the Bible in its entirety.

And we do all this because we stand in a long line of faithful people who generation after generation have found the stories in this book to indeed be the words of eternal life – words which are alive with the life-force of God and which keep us on track and shape us and equip us for lives of justice, mercy and peace. We hear in these stories echoes of our own stories and as we listen again and again we find ourselves being drawn into God's story. We find our stories and God's story being woven together so that we become more and more truly participants in the ongoing story of God's life in the world.

But why, you might ask, is such attention to the book necessary if God's Word has been put within us and written on our hearts? Hasn't the work of the Holy Spirit within us rendered the written Word of God obsolete? Isn't all this attention to written scripture a running back to the old covenant with its codes of laws to be studied and conscientiously observed? Don't we now have a more direct access – an insider knowledge of the will of God – so that we are free to follow the leadings of God whispered in our hearts without having to worry too much about these ancient writings?

Fair questions indeed. There is no question that God has new things to say to us that are not contained in the old writings. God addresses us in the context of what we are living through, and that changes. What God will be saying to people in a world of robotics, the internet and a climate emergency will contain much that didn't need to be said in Jeremiah's day. But Jeremiah recognised that there would be change too. What he said would be written on our hearts was a "new covenant", not simply a restatement of the old.

Through Jeremiah, God describes the old covenant as having been broken, as having failed to shape a people of faith and faithfulness. The thing that is identified as changing most is this thing about it being internalised, written on our hearts. The old covenant then was more external, more something that was imposed on us, but not really owned deep in our being.

Think about that. When a way of living is imposed from outside, it never comes naturally to us, and because it doesn't come naturally, it is something that we have to be concentrating on every step of the way. And what that almost inevitably means is that it will be understood and experienced as a set of prohibitions, as a set of rules about the things that you must not do. What you must not eat, who you must not sleep with, what you must not touch, what you

must not think, where you must not go. It's like being fenced in, and you can never quite get on top of all the prohibitions, so you are always at risk of breaking them because you didn't understand them.

But when a new covenant is written inside us, written on our hearts, it is experienced the other way around. It reflects the shift that we see lived out by Jesus. These are the commandments that capture and sum up everything that matters, says Jesus, love God, love your neighbour, and love your enemies. If what is written on your hearts is love, overflowing Jesus-like love for everyone, you won't be needing to think about what things are prohibited, because people who are overflowing with love don't do those unloving things anyway.

It changes the way we think about God too. There is a world of difference between imagining God as a stern law-maker, watching carefully to see if we break any of the rules, and imagining God as the lover of creation who invites us into a dance of love that fills the world with joy and generosity and mercy.

To be fair though, some of this shift from the old to the new is not just about a change that happened in the days of Jeremiah or the days of Jesus. Some of it is a change that happens in each of us as we grow and mature. When we are young children, much of how we learn to be loving and respectful of others is by being told what we should not do. But as we grow and mature and the ways of love are written on our hearts, we no longer need to be fenced in by tight prohibitions. We become free to live and love because the love written on our hearts would never lead us into paths of hostility and judgement and disrespect anyway.

The persistent widow in our gospel reading (Luke 18: 1-8) is perhaps a good example of this. Driven by a passion written on her heart, she will not give up on her vision of justice, of how things should be. The vision of the world put right is written on her heart, it is completely internalised, and the relentless corruption and callousness of the powerful judge cannot deter what is burning within her. She is living the new covenant.

But the question still stands. What use is the Bible now, if we now have an insider knowledge of the will of God? Are we not now free to follow the leadings of God whispered in our hearts without having to worry too much about these ancient writings? These are good questions, but they are not new questions, and those who have journeyed before us in the faith have passed on some valuable wisdom.

The first thing to remember is that we are called to live the life of faith in community as the body of Christ. One of the implications of that is that I am not called to read the word of God written on my heart alone as if it were only for me. I am called to read it in company. And that is not just in company with the immediate congregation around me at any given time. Instead I am to read it in company with all God's people of every time and place.

To refuse to listen to any traditions from the past would reduce the concept of democracy to a tyranny of those who just happen to be alive at the present time. If we acknowledge our solidarity with those who have gone before us, we want to allow their voice into our processes of discerning what God is saying to us now, and the best way of doing that is to listen to the writings that they have passed down generation after generation because they found them to be bearers of God's wisdom and life.

Another thing that has been learned over the centuries is that although God's Spirit writes the truth on our hearts, there is also a lot of other stuff written on our hearts that is not from God, and we don't always have the wisdom and discernment to pick the difference. There are times when we allow ourselves to be seduced into thinking that something is from God because it suits us rather than because we have really tuned ourselves in with a prayerful and willing mind.

It is the regular reading of scripture in the community of faith that keeps us honest. As we soak ourselves in words and stories that have long proven to be alive with the Spirit of God, we are training ourselves to recognise the difference between the whisperings in our hearts that are and are not from God. Reading the scriptures alone is good too, but it is reading it with other faithful people that really guards us against our temptations to make it say whatever we want.

We are not just called to obey what God told other people in the past. We are called to take our cues from what God is saying to us now, from the God-breathed words that are being written on our hearts. But if we are to be ready and able to competently discern the words God is breathing now, we need to be immersing ourselves in the stories of what God has said in the past and listening together as a congregation who encourage one another and challenge one another in faithful listening and living.

Despite the impression you might sometimes get, even the scriptures of the old covenant are hardly just a list of prohibitions. They are full of rich stories of real people working out who God is and how to live faithful to God in the midst of the real life struggles of their particular world. So we don't immerse ourselves in these stories in order to simply replicate what those people did. We immerse ourselves in the stories in order to compare experiences and learn with them and from them how to discern the winds of God's breath, the directions that God is blowing us.

The important thing is not the words written, but the Spirit of the Word breathed into our hearts and filling our lungs with the promise of a new life of freedom and hope. It is not held captive in the pages of an old book, but without engaging with the living stories in that old book, we will have trouble picking up the thread of where it is leading. Whether it is written in ancient texts or on our hearts, God's word is alive leading all who will hear and follow in the way into the fullness of life and love and peace.