

GOD-BREATHED SCRIPTURE

SERIES: GREAT TRUTHS RECONSIDERED

by Steve Zeisler

**"The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."
(Hebrews 4:12.)**

The word of God is familiar to us in this church. Most of us are readers of English, and we have new translations made available to us every year. In preparing for this message I took inventory, and I have at least 34 Bibles of my own, not to mention those belonging to other people in the family. I have cassette tapes of the Bible that I can play in the car. I have English, Greek, Spanish, and Hebrew texts of the Bible. One CD alone has 14 versions of the Bible on it. I have scores of books that encourage and are helpful in the study of the Bible.

Yet I find in my own life and in the life of people I'm around in this church that sometimes familiarity breeds complacency. We take for granted the sharp "double-edged sword" of the word. We become blasé regarding the treasure of truth we have been given to preserve for the next generation (2 Timothy 1:14).

We're at the end of a series of messages that have taken up themes that have shaped this church (see Discovery Papers 4598-4605). We've talked about a number of things that we have believed, taught, and spoken of over and over again in our 50 years of history. Perhaps it's fitting to end with, as it might have been fitting to start with, the word in the middle of our name: Peninsula *Bible* Church. The Bible has been at the center of who we are as a community from the very beginning.

Why we don't read the Bible

Yet, as central as the Bible has been to our existence as a church, one of our greatest dangers is that we can treat it as if it were ordinary. Our passion for the word of God can be depleted over time. Why is it that though we own and revere the word of God, we no longer read and feed upon it as we once did? Let me suggest reasons why, for some of us, the Scriptures have become less fascinating than they used to be, why the Bible has become a book on our shelf rather than one in our hearts.

For some of us, the Scriptures are too familiar. If you grew up in Sunday School and heard the stories of the Old and New Testaments again and again, often they resulted in over-used platitudes. You might come to think the Bible is a book that has nothing left to say.

A friend sent me by e-mail a series of literal quotations from children in Sunday Schools. One said that Lot's wife was a pillar of salt by day but a ball of fire by night. Another child said the fifth commandment is "Honor thy father and mother." The seventh commandment: "Thou shalt not admit adultery." The greatest miracle in the Bible, said one little boy, is when Joshua told his son to stand still, and he obeyed him. These children were recounting familiar sayings from the Bible, but they weren't accurate. Shallow familiarity with the Bible may make it seem ordinary and unimportant.

For others, the Bible is too unfamiliar. The reason the Bible stays on the shelf is that it seems to be made up of different and difficult sorts of things. The ancient kingdoms, the middle-eastern nomads and farmers, the Jewish religious sensibilities that make up so much of the Bible are too foreign to this time and place. Yet that's not true either, of course. The Bible is about our hearts. It's about the God who loves us and orchestrates events to our benefit. It's about sacrifice and community and other things that never change. Though the settings are not familiar to us, the realities they describe are always familiar, because God doesn't change and human beings don't change.

Some will say that the Bible is too distant. There are, of course, liberal scholars in every generation who say that the Bible is unreliable history, that the events it describes took place two to five thousand years ago, too far back in the past for the Bible to tell us anything accurate about what actually happened.

A greater danger for churches like ours, who accept that the events in the Bible happened as they are described, is that they sometimes treat the Bible as a revered, sacred text but not as something that is relevant in our day and age. In some

evangelical churches it has become commonplace to rely on marketing strategies to persuade people of the gospel message. The Bible is revered, but what is taught are the insights of secular psychology and sociology. In a subtle way, they declare that the Bible is too distant. It's wonderful, but it's not helpful.

The final, and probably most important, reason that the Bible stays on our shelves, something we applaud but we don't love as we should anymore, is that it's too powerful. If we hear it, if we approach God in his word, he will tell us things that are so important we have to respond to them. We have to believe and obey what we read. The God who breathed the Scriptures and who makes himself known in them has plans for us, gifts to give. The more truth there is in our life, the less we're in control. So it's easy to avoid the Scriptures. They are powerful and intrude relentlessly into what is otherwise predictable and under our control.

Whatever the reason, it's too often true of me that I own more Bibles than I read, I applaud the Scriptures at a distance, and although I like the fact that we are Peninsula Bible Church, I'm not sure that I act as if I like it. If you're like me in any of these respects, I want to persuade you that the word of God, which has been at the center of our history, should be at the center of our present and our future. God's clear word makes sense of life. This should become a living book for us again. It should become our passion. We should sing God's praises every day and thank him every night for such a gift, and we should drink deeply of the truth of the word of God.

Direction from the Scriptures

We're going to study 2 Timothy 3:14-17. Let me give you a little bit of context to begin. Paul's second letter to Timothy is the last one that he wrote before he died. At the end of the letter in 4:6-7 he says, "For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." Most historians of the Bible agree that he did write this some very short period of time, just weeks or months, before he was executed. And at the end of his life he's saying, "Of all the lessons I've learned, what would I want to pass on to somebody who is going to take the torch into the next generation? What are lasting passions? One of them is this: The Scriptures are life-giving. Continue in what you have learned. Believe them. Hear them. Be changed by them. Preach them. Rely on this book."

Timothy, on the other hand, is a relatively young man who is ministering in the city of Ephesus, most likely, at this time. He is relatively new at the job of being a pastor. He has most of his life before him. He's setting his course, embracing commitments that will be true of him throughout his ministry. "What should I hold on to? What are the things that ought to direct me?" The Scriptures are God's great gift, the treasure he is responsible for in his generation. In the Scriptures is the good news of Christ: He was prepared for throughout the history of Israel. He came to earth, was born in Bethlehem, and grew up in Galilee. He was crucified in Jerusalem and raised from the dead. He founded the church. These are the things Timothy needs to preach, the convictions he should hold. And so the young man is given a foundation for a life of ministry.

What was the world like when Paul wrote these words? Look at the beginning of chapter 3 again: "But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days." The term "the last days" comes up a number of times in the New Testament. It doesn't usually mean the days immediately before the second coming. The last days are the whole period of time between Jesus' first and second coming. It's the last age, if you will, in which terrible times will come. Look at this long list in verses 2-4 and see if you can find anything contemporary: "People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God...."

Paul is saying, "That's the world that you're going to have to minister in, Timothy." It has been pointed out that this long list is bracketed by two phrases that define everything in between: "People will be lovers of themselves" and "rather than lovers of God." Everything that is listed in between flows from the conviction: "I love myself more than God." Now Timothy was called on to minister in times as hard and unholy as our own. Brutal people, greedy people, self-willed people, lying people, and treacherous people seem to have the upper hand everywhere we look. But what's important when the world is like this? Paul says, "Timothy, the Scriptures are your resource to minister in times like this."

In addition, Paul tells Timothy in chapters 3 and 4 that he is going to find religious impostors on every side, people who claim to be speaking of God, to have religious standing, but who are phonies, liars. He has to minister among religious hypocrites.

Finally, we read of the inevitability of persecution. Consider verses 12 and 13, which set the immediate context for our passage: "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived."

So what do you do as a young man whose mentor is now about to be executed? You're now the senior one on the scene, the one who is being looked up to as a pastor in Ephesus. What resource do you have? The world has changed; it always does. The current generation is not like the former generation. There are always new challenges, new wickedness, new pockets of

hope in the world. There are open hearts and closed ones, open doors and closed ones, in different places at different times. How are you going to know what your calling or your place is, what God would require of you?

Well, the way you're going to know is in God's word. In believing and loving and hearing the Scriptures, you will find the answers, the resource, the direction, the message. That's why the Bible needs to be so important to us.

Let's read 2 Timothy 3:14-17:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

I want to highlight three things here. One is that we have learned the holy Scriptures from someone. We experience the word of God in community most often and best. Second, Scripture is, as Paul says here, "God-breathed." It is the heart and mind of God exhaled through a human individual into writing on a page for us, the very words of God himself. And third, it is useful. It tells us things that can change, encourage, straighten, correct, and empower us.

We learned Scripture from somebody

Let's look at the first idea: You've learned Scripture from somebody. The Scriptures have been taught to you by people whose lives are of such a quality that the message was underlined, because the person who taught you had so obviously encountered God. When we see a life that has the wisdom and power and authority of God in it, and that person is telling us what the Bible says, we're much more inclined to hear it with power ourselves.

Now, it has occurred at times that people will get a Bible completely out of the blue, dropped out of heaven into their life. Perhaps a page of Scripture blowing down the street attached itself to their leg, and they picked it up and read it and were converted. But that's rare. Most of the time, people hear the words of God from someone else. It's possible, in addition, for a Christian community to exist without the Bible, for people to love one another and to grow in the conviction and the power of God. But that too is very rare.

What mostly happens is that believing people gather around the Scriptures, and they learn together, from one another, what the Bible has to say. As I see conviction from God in your face, I am convicted. When I see tears of joy in your eyes, I am able to hear the words of joy from Scripture myself. When I recognize that you are becoming strong where you were weak and hopeful where you were frightened, and when I hear you testify to what God has done for you, then I believe the words myself and I offer testimony to someone else, and they believe.

Paul has a great sense of history in this book. In chapter 1 he talks about Timothy's being his son, and then he says, "I had forefathers generations before me. The prophets, Moses, Abraham, and David in their generation trusted God. I trusted God in mine. Your grandmother and your mother love the Lord and taught you the Bible. You learned it from good people. Now you should trust God in your generation. Teach it to those who will learn it from you as a good man."

Scripture is God-breathed

Second, we're told that Scripture is God-breathed. That's a wonderful term. It says that even though these words were penned by a human being, preached by a human being, announced in the world from a human soul, they are the breath of God breathing out of a human instrument. Someone who plays a wind instrument breathes music out of the instrument they're playing. And God has instruments through whom he has breathed. He said exactly what he wanted to say, not just vague ideas. The words are reliable, trustworthy, without error.

But there's another important aspect of recognizing that Scripture is God-breathed. When can you feel someone's breath? Most of the time, it is when they have their arms around you, when they're very near to you. It doesn't say that Scripture is God-shouted. From a great distance you can hear someone shout, and you may know nothing about them. Or remember when Moses came down from the mountain with the tablets written by the finger of God. The finger of God can be extended far from him. But Scripture in its entirety is breathed from the heart by God, which means that he is near enough to you that you're encountering him in the Bible. This is about a love relationship. It's not just a series of ideas.

We ought to be enthusiastic about the people who do the hard work to become the "workmen who are approved" (2 Timothy 2:15), outlining, tearing apart the text, studying the ancient words, doing all that goes into becoming a skilled, vital, godly Bible teacher. Those people should be encouraged. Their hard work is to our great advantage. But Scripture itself teaches us

about God because he is breathing out from the very pages. He is that near to us, that intimately interested in us. He wants us to hear his heartbeat. He wants us to know what he thinks.

There are people who know and love the Bible who can't read. They've heard the words sung and spoken, and they've believed what they've heard, and they love the truth. They're very Biblical people. It's not required that we be scholars. What's required is that we receive this as a love letter. Somebody has his arms around us, so close we can feel his breath on our face when he's saying these things.

Remember what Jesus said to those who opposed him: "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them [alone] you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me...." (John 5:39.) We need to find him on the pages. We need to find the One who loves us enough to have written a love letter.

Some of the greatest poems in every language are poems about love. Someone writes from their heart a great sonnet praising their beloved. And of course in universities all over the world, students can write a thesis on someone's love sonnet. But it's a much different experience to have the poem written to you. And Scripture isn't just a great work of literature. God wrote it because he loves you. And whether anyone writes a doctoral thesis on it or not, it's a word from the heart of your Beloved, who breathed it out for your sake so that you would know he loves you.

Scripture is useful

The last comment I would make is that Scripture is useful. These are the words that allow us to grow in wisdom, that enable us to think more deeply about the saving work of God in the world, to participate actively in what he's doing in our lives, to joyfully know things we didn't know before. Mysteries are given shape, we receive direction when we were lost, and the chaos has order given to it again.

It's useful in a number of ways. Paul says it's good for teaching and rebuking. That is, if there are errors in our thinking, the teaching will help us understand the errors, and the rebuke will help us change the errors in our thinking. It's good for correcting and training in righteousness. If there are moral failures in our lives, if we're thinking and acting in ways we shouldn't, we can be corrected by the word of God morally, and we can be trained in righteousness so we'll live differently.

Finally, it thoroughly equips us for every good work, to be exactly the kind of people God made us to be and we long to be. This book, about which we're sometimes too complacent, which we don't love as much as we ought to, trains us for every good thing that there is to do.

The conclusion is not only about personal application. I am hoping that you will love and read the Bible with enthusiasm, with effort, expectantly, that you'll feel the breath of God on your face and his arms around you as you read it, that you'll read it in community with other people and hear what they are learning and learn it with them, and share what you've seen. I hope there's a great up-swelling of personal engagement with the word of God.

But the Bible is not just for us, it's for the world. We live in difficult, challenging, anti-Christian, violent, brutal times. Look at 4:1-2: "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season [that is, when you feel like it and when you don't]; correct, rebuke and encourage-with great patience and careful instruction." Tell people. There are folks who need to hear it. It's not just for us. Say what is true, be ready all the time to offer words to people who need them. This is life itself.

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[Back to Index Page](#)

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