

BIBLE M.A.P. #2
(Meaningful: Accessible: Practical)
Scriptures: Isaiah 6:1-9a: Psalm 119:9-18: 2 Timothy 3:16:
Mathew 5:17-20

This month we're talking about making the "Bible: Meaningful, Accessible and Practical." This is week #2. You can check out last week's message on the church website on the Sermon page. Some of what we're going to talk about today you will already know. Some of it will be new to you. All of it I hope will be helpful.

Let's begin with a comment from the Gallup organization who have surveyed knowledge of the Bible over many years. In 2010 George Gallup concluded.

"(Christians) revere the Bible but, by and large, they don't read it"

In fact, Gallup and other researchers are consistent in reporting that ignorance of the Bible in society and in the church, is at an all-time low in North America. And that certainly suggests that the greatest challenge facing the church in North America today is not:

- our secular society
- or people rejecting organized religion.
- or the growth of Islam.

It is our lack of passionate spirituality as revealed in our inconsistent prayer lives and in our ignorance of the Bible. I mean, how can we follow Jesus and live Christian lives if we do not know God's Word and spend time interacting with Him? That's why the Bible is so important to our faith. Second Timothy 3:16 (NLT) explains it this way:

All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right.

OK. Let's talk about some Bible specifics to build on what we learned last week. We all know that the Bible is divided into two sections. The OLD Testament and the NEW Testament. Today we're going to take a quick look at the Old Testament, and next week we'll look at the New Testament.

There are 39 books, of varying lengths, in the Old Testament, written over a period of some 1400 years. The New Testament, in comparison, was written over a mere 100 years. The Old Testament is essentially the historical-

theological record of one group of people known as the Hebrew people, and later as the nation of Israel. They are also known as the Jewish people. The word Jew originates from the Hebrew tribe of Judah! Out of all the peoples of the world, God chose the Hebrew people to be in a special relationship with him. To be his agents, his representatives in the world, to a means of blessing the world. This special relationship is cemented by the covenant, or the agreement that God made with them, expressed in a number of Old Testament verses such as Exodus 6:7:

“I will claim you as my own people, and I will be your God.”

It's not really surprising then to learn, that all of the authors of the Old Testament came out of the ranks of this chosen people. Nor is it surprising to learn that these authors wrote in their own language, which was Hebrew. So the original language of the Old Testament is Hebrew.

It's important for us to understand that when we read the Bible in English, we are actually reading a translation of the original languages of the Bible. That's why ministers in *The Presbyterian Church in Canada* are taught to read both Hebrew, the original language of the Old Testament; and Greek, the original language of the New Testament. This fact alone is one reason Presbyterian ministers are amongst the best educated and trained clergy of any denomination.

Now traditionally the 39 books of the Old Testament are divided into four main sections. First, there are the **Books of Moses**, called this because much of the content is said to have come from Moses and because these books are a record of his life. The Books of Moses are the first five books of the Old Testament. GENESIS; EXODUS; LEVITICUS; NUMBERS & DEUTERONOMY.

Those five books are also called by another name. THE PENTATEUCH. PENTE is the Greek prefix for five. So Pentateuch simply means **“five books”**, just as the Pentagon in Washington is called this because it has five sides.

The Jews also call these first five books of the Bible **THE TORAH** which means **“learning”** or **“instruction”**. The TORAH is also known as **THE LAW** because it contains amongst other things the Ten Commandments and is considered to be the holiest of all of the sacred writings of Judaism. Jesus often referenced these books of the Bible. In Matthew 5:17, he said:

“Don’t misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the Law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to accomplish their purpose.”

And in Luke 24:44 (NLT), in one of his resurrection appearances, he said to his disciples:

“When I was with you before, I told you that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the prophets and in the Psalms must be fulfilled.”

We need to take those verses seriously any time we are tempted to dismiss the Old Testament as being irrelevant to our Christian faith. So the first major section of the OLD Testament is the Books of Moses, also called the Pentateuch, the Torah or the Law.

The next major section contains 12 books. These are the HISTORY BOOKS.

JOSHUA, JUDGES, RUTH: FIRST AND SECOND SAMUEL: FIRST AND SECOND KINGS: FIRST AND SECOND CHRONICLES. EZRA, NEHEMIAH & ESTHER.

These 12 books describe how the Hebrew people occupied and then settled the land that God had promised them. They talk about the early leaders of the people. They begin with JOSHUA, who succeeded MOSES as leader of God’s people. They then describe the leaders who followed him. They are called “Judges”. The Book of Judges names 12 judges including well- known people like Gideon, Samson, and Deborah.

In Hebrew, the word “judges” actually embraces four words that are used interchangeably - “*judges, rulers, deliverers or saviours*”. These judges are remembered for delivering God’s chosen people from their enemies, for ruling over them and for administering justice.

After the Book of Judges the remaining history books tell us about how the Hebrew people, made the transition from being ruled by judges to being ruled by kings.

And in particular, the history books tell the stories of Israel’s two greatest Hebrew kings, King David and his son, King Solomon.

After their deaths, the history books relate the story of how the great kingdom of David and Solomon declined, and became divided into two kingdoms, called the northern and southern kingdoms.

Now let me stop here for a moment. Reading the history books of the Bible can be really confusing if you don’t understand the distinction between the

northern and the southern kingdoms. When the great Kingdom of David and Solomon became divided, 10 of the 12 tribes became known as the northern Kingdom. They took the name ISRAEL. Two tribes – the tribes of Judah and Benjamin became known as the southern kingdom - and took the name JUDAH. Israel and Judah. Each kingdom was separate. Each had their own line of kings. Still one Hebrew people, still God’s chosen people, but now represented in two separate kingdoms. That’s why the history books and the books of prophecy, often talk about Israel and Judah, and about northern and southern kingdoms.

The history books then outline for us how those separate kingdoms were militarily defeated – the northern kingdom first, the southern kingdom second, and how their leaders and leading citizens were taken into captivity by their enemies. The northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed by the great power of Assyria in 722 BC. The southern kingdom of Judah was captured 125 years later when the new power in the region, the Babylonian Empire, captured it in 597 BC. The leaders and influential citizens of this kingdom were then carried into captivity in Babylon for some 58 years. This event is known simply as “The Exile”.

Finally, the history books tell how a remnant – “a trace, the last part” - of the Hebrew people returned to their “promised land”, from exile, and how Jerusalem which had been destroyed by the Babylonians, was rebuilt.

The first Temple, built by King Solomon, had also been destroyed by the Babylonians and the history books tell us how the Second Temple was built as a focus for worship. This was the Temple we read about in the New Testament.

THE BOOKS OF MOSES (5 books) THE HISTORICAL BOOKS. (12 books)The third major section of the OLD TESTAMENT is THE POETICAL BOOKS. There are 5 of them.

JOB, PSALMS & PROVERBS, ECCLESIASTES & THE SONG OF SOLOMON.

These books are also referred to as WISDOM LITERATURE. These five books deal with a variety of issues such as:

- Worship
- What is God like?
- Pain and suffering.
- Life and love.
- Wise rules for living.
- Living out faith in the present reality.

It's because of this kind of subject matter that the POETICAL/WISDOM BOOKS are undoubtedly the favourite Old Testament books of modern day Christians.

The fourth and final section of the OLD TESTAMENT are BOOKS OF PROPHECY. There are 17 of them. When Jesus talks about the "**law and the prophets**", his reference to the law is to the first five books of the Old Testament, and his reference to the prophets is to the 17 books of prophecy. Now these 17 prophetic books -THE PROPHETS- are divided into two sections.

There are 5 who are called MAJOR PROPHETS. The term MAJOR is used because, with the exception of the Book of Lamentations, these are all very lengthy books. Isaiah, for example, has 66 chapters and Jeremiah has 52 chapters. The word MAJOR refers to length and influence, not to the content being more important than that of the other prophets.

The MAJOR PROPHETS are: ISAIAH, JEREMIAH, LAMENTATIONS, which was written by JEREMIAH and in some manuscripts is actually called 'THE LAMENTATIONS OF JEREMIAH', EZEKIEL & DANIEL.

The second section of the PROPHETICAL BOOKS is called THE MINOR PROPHETS. There are 12 of them. HOSEA, JOEL, AMOS, OBADIAH, JONAH, MICAH, NAHUM, HABAKKUK, ZEPHANIAH, HAGGAI, ZECHARIAH & MALACHI.

Now here's what all of these 17 prophets – major and minor - have in common. The prophets were very clear that they were given their words by God. On a regular basis in their writings you read things like this:

The LORD . . . gave . . . messages to Jeremiah.

Jeremiah 1:2 (NLT)

The Lord gave this message to Joel son of Pethuel.

Joel 1:1 (NLT)

The Lord gave this message to the prophet Zechariah. Zechariah 1:1 (NLT)

There's that inspiration, that God- breath, we talked about last week. The prophets all saw themselves as being under the direction of the Holy Spirit as they spoke and wrote. Now remember. In those days, very few people could read. So if you wanted to know what God was thinking, you listened to one of his prophets who spoke out the heart of God. That's how God communicated and that long tradition is continued when ministers preach sermons to explain God's Word.

This series may seem a strange sermon series to some of you. But the bottom line is, I believe that this is what God wants me to speak to you about right now or I just wouldn't be doing this. So in that sense, I am being prophetic.

Let's be clear about one thing. Prophecy is often misunderstood as "foretelling the future". Although the prophets certainly did some of that, most of the time, they simply spoke God's word into the reality of the Hebrew people at a particular point in their history. But here's what we need to understand. Because the prophets were speaking God's eternal Word, we need to listen carefully to what they say because they were preparing the way for Jesus. Hebrews 1:1 in the New Testament says this:

"Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets. And now in these final days, he has spoken to us through his Son."

And what did Jesus say? Matthew 5:17:

"Don't misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the Law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to accomplish their purpose."

Our prayer should always be that, as we read our Bibles, and as we come to understand them more, that God speaks into our lives. Here is what Psalm 119:7-10 says about God's Word.

**The instructions of the Lord are perfect,
reviving the soul.**

**The decrees of the Lord are trustworthy,
making wise the simple.**

**⁸ The commandments of the Lord are right,
bringing joy to the heart.**

**The commands of the Lord are clear,
giving insight for living.**

**⁹ Reverence for the Lord is pure,
lasting forever.**

**The laws of the Lord are true;
each one is fair.**

**¹⁰ They are more desirable than gold,
even the finest gold.**

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

Pastoral Prayer

God, you spoke your word
and everything that exists came into being.

You spoke your word
through leaders, kings, poets and prophets
to guide your people.

Your Word became flesh in Jesus Christ,
who shared our humanity
and who spoke your word afresh into our reality.

You spoke your word,
in gospels and letters and through visions,
and your Church was born
to bear witness to You.

You continue to speak your Word to us today,
in the beauty and majesty of creation,
in the life of Jesus,
in the preaching of your gospel,
and as your Spirit moves all over the world.

As people of your Word,
may we be not only hearers of it,
but those who put it into action,
as we comfort the mourning,
show mercy,
work for peace on earth,
advocate for the persecuted,
help the needy
reach out to the lost,
and offer hope to the desperate.

Lord, many people will never read the Bible,
but they will read us.

May we live and act in ways
that will always bring your glory. Amen.

(NM)