

Investors shrugged off a Labor Department report that the number of workers filing initial claims for unemployment benefits rose in the week ended June 20 and the number of continuing claims climbed.

Stocks fell at the open but the recovery was swift as investors focused on **Bed Bath & Beyond's** earnings report after Wednesday's close, which topped analysts' expectations, and home builder **Lennar's** report of a jump in orders.

The Standard & Poor's 500-stock index rose 2.1% to 920.26, putting it back in positive territory for the year, up 1.9%. Every sector posted gains. The consumer-discretionary sector, which includes home builders, rose 3.5%. Lennar

rose 2.3% at \$70.23. Technology stocks added to recent gains. The Nasdaq Composite index rose 2.1% to 1,829.54. Analysts outpaced declines in the ratio of more than one share of new York Stock Exchange shares. The Dow Jones Industrial Average hit on Thursday after a 12-year streak of low volatility. The bulls' rally remained down for the third date, by as much as 1.05% from the previous day. Treasury yields jumped Thursday after a successful auction of seven-year notes. The rally pushed the 10-year Treasury yield down to 3.547% from 3.547% on Tuesday. Late May's rally on Treasury yields, page C6.

**Thursday's Markets**

DJIA	▲ 172.54
Nasdaq	▲ 37.20
Oil/barrel	▲ 1.56
10-year Treasury	▲ Price ▲ 1.4/32
Dollar	▲ Yield 3.547%
	▲ vs. euro \$1.3989
	▲ vs. yen ¥95.87

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# CrossTalk

## Where Life & Scripture Meet

### Michael R. Emmet



“This is simply the best book about the nature and function of the Bible that I have ever read! It is outstanding in describing the overall narrative of Scripture and in insisting that the individual ‘bits’ of the Bible are read in the context of that ‘big picture.’ It is outstanding in applying that same technique to people’s lives. It is outstanding in the number of concrete examples he uses to illustrate his points. And it is outstanding most of all because it, like the Bible, clearly points to Jesus. Dr. Emlet has written a superb book, which anyone who wants to understand and apply the Bible really MUST read!”

SAMUEL T. LOGAN JR., Ph.D., International Director of the World Reformed Fellowship; theologian; author

“If you want to see how the gospel works in your life, transforming you by the renewing of the mind (the principle on which Jesus and the apostles ‘fixed’ broken lives) then here is a very good place to begin. Rather than offer you a prescription ‘to get you through the next few weeks,’ Dr. Emlet writes one that transforms deeply and lasts a whole lifetime.”

SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON, Ph.D., Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, S.C.; theologian; author of *The Christian Life*

“Depression. Divorce. Death of a loved one. Life can be messy, and pat ‘Christian’ answers won’t help. That’s why Mike Emlet wrote *CrossTalk*—to equip you to tackle real issues with practical, life-transforming truth from God’s Word. If you want to enhance your clinical practice and learn how the Bible intimately connects with your clients’ daily struggles, don’t miss this book!”

DR. TIM CLINTON, President of the American Association of Christian Counselors; licensed therapist; author of *Turn Your Life Around*

“*CrossTalk* isn’t your typical cut-and-paste counseling guide. No, it’s deeper and richer than that. Its pages are filled with light, demonstrating a gloriously redemptive interpretation of Scripture and deep understanding of the condition and needs of the human heart. I highly recommend it.”

ELYSE FITZPATRICK, Counselor, Institute for Biblical Counseling and Discipleship; author of *Women Helping Women*

“Ministry of the Word happens somewhere in between the proof-text snippet and the broad generalities of redemptive history. God’s person, promises, purposes, actions, and commands catch fire in a person’s struggle with personal signs and situational struggles. Mike Emlet probes for the places truth ignites and probes for the ways Christ indwells hearts and conversations.”

DAVID POWLISON, Ph.D., Faculty and counselor at CCEF; author of *Seeing with New Eyes* and *Speaking Truth in Love*

“Mike Emllet’s *CrossTalk* gives biblical counselors crucial lessons in applying the Scripture both accurately and wisely when working with broken and hurting people. Even seasoned counselors will find themselves challenged to dig harder into applying and living out the truths of God’s Word.”

LESLIE VERNICK, Speaker; counselor; author of *Lord, I Just Want to Be Happy*

“Rejecting widespread and simplistic ways of connecting Scripture to our lives, Emllet heads down a more faithful path. He offers helpful insight as well as concrete models that make the Bible come alive in the concrete details of human life. Anyone who wants to live more faithfully in the biblical story as well as help others to do so will benefit from reading this book.”

MICHAEL W. GOHEEN, Ph.D., Geneva Professor of Worldview and Religious Studies, Trinity Western University; coauthor of *The Drama of Scripture*

“As a trained physician and now teacher and counselor, Emllet brings an immense wealth of knowledge and experience—helping us mine the whole counsel of God for the whole person. *CrossTalk* just moved to the top of my required reading list and is one I will commend to my parishioners to take and heed.”

ALFRED POIRIER, D.Min., Author of *The Peacemaking Pastor*

“Thank you Michael Emllet for reminding us that we spend far too much time reducing the story of God’s redemption to a digest version, rather than opening all of Scripture to connect it to people as saints, sufferers, and sinners.”

ROD MAYS, D.Min., National Coordinator, Reformed University Ministries

“Here’s a book I’ve been waiting for a long time: one that deals with the interpretation of the Bible for counseling. It is sophisticated in its understanding of the issues involved, but also practical and well within the reach of laypeople and counselors-in-training. Only two hundred pages, it is bigger than it looks. Its importance is evident in its grasp of the central message of Scripture—the story of Christ—and its instruction in how to use that story to help transform ours. Throughout, the spirit of the author comes across as a compassionate and biblical lover of souls.”

ERIC JOHNSON, Ph.D., Professor of Pastoral Care, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Michael Emllet’s practical insights on bringing Scripture to bear on the challenging problems of life are both simple and powerful. Anyone who masters these principles and uses them in the love and grace of Christ, will be a channel of life-changing truth and wisdom into the lives of others. I thank God for this book and will recommend it to everyone I know.”

KEN SANDE, President, Peacemaker Ministries; author of *The Peacemaker*

# CrossTalk

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**Where Life & Scripture Meet**

Michael R. Emlet



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*To Jody*

With gratitude and joy

I'm privileged to wake up next to you each morning.



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# Acknowledgments

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No one can write a book about the intersection of life and Scripture without a profound debt of gratitude to many people, past and present. I am acutely aware that I stand on the shoulders of giants.

Although I didn't fully grasp it at the time, the seeds of a redemptive-historical, Christ-centered approach to Scripture were consistently sown by Joe Novenson, my pastor in the early 1990s, in his preaching, teaching, and counseling. Through his mentoring and the encouragement of Tuck and Stacy Bartholomew, I came to Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia) in 1996, blithely unaware of the Copernican revolution that was about to take place in my approach to Scripture and to people.

I am deeply thankful for the rich biblical-theological training I received from my professors at Westminster Theological Seminary, 1996–2001. Most particularly, Douglas Green and Richard B. Gaffin Jr. profoundly shaped my approach to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

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My gratitude to my family is more than words can say—but I'll try anyhow! My daughter Lydia and my son Luke are a delight to my heart. Perhaps more than anyone on earth, they have pushed me to practice what I preach. They eagerly anticipated the day when they could hold "Daddy's book" in their hands. I pray that they will continue to fall in love with the One to whom this book points. Finally, I dedicate this book to my wife Jody. Her love for God and for others grows out of the fact that she consistently lives by the redemptive plotline of Scripture. She knows Jesus—and it shows—every day. I am so thankful for the privilege of being her covenant companion for life.

Michael R. Emler



# Introduction

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Rick sat in his chair, his eyes downcast. Despite a renewed commitment to Christ that was demonstrated in months of patient, self-sacrificial living at home, his wife of twenty-two years had decided to file for divorce. He looked up, furrowed his brow, and said, “What good was all this work to end up like this? I know God is up to something, but it feels like my efforts were in vain.”

Max, his good friend and Bible study leader, responded, “Rick, I hardly know what to say. I know that this is deeply hurtful and disappointing to you.” He sat in silence for a few moments then quietly said, “Your grief reminds me of the words of the Lord’s servant in Isaiah 49:4: ‘But I said, “I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing. Yet what is due me is in the LORD’s hand, and my reward is with my God.”’”

Rick looked up. “That really does describe how I feel. I know I need to take to heart the second part of that verse, but it’s hard to have that perspective right now.”

For the next two hours Rick and Max talked about dashed hopes and unfulfilled dreams, framing Rick’s experience through a biblical lens. Ultimately they talked about Jesus, the true Servant of the Lord, who had every earthly reason to take Isaiah’s lament upon his lips as he hung on the cross. Yet Jesus remained faithful, confident that he would be vindicated by his Father and that his reward lay with his God (Heb. 12:2; 1 Pet. 2:23). Although many

more late-night discussions would occur, Rick left that evening more confident that the words of the Servant could become his own.

Who wouldn't want the privilege of using Scripture to help someone in trouble, as Max did? How does that happen? If you're like me, you have probably received more instruction on how to study the Bible than you have on how to practically *use* it in your life and ministry. The fact is, there are many books about how to interpret the Bible, but most of these are heavy on the side of theory, not application, which is the spiritual task of connecting Scripture with life. These resources help us study the grammatical and literary details of a passage, do research into the original historical setting and audience, and draw some conclusions about what the passage might have meant to the original hearers/readers. All of this is valuable—in fact, it's absolutely essential. But the equally important step of relating that study to the messy complexity of life in the here and now is given relatively little attention, even in very good books on biblical interpretation. Too often, we remain people who are all messed up with no place to go!

Resources that focus more fully on the challenge of application tend to concentrate on public ministry such as preaching or teaching<sup>1</sup> or on broader questions of ethics in the life of the church.<sup>2</sup> But if we are asking how the Bible addresses the complexities of our personal lives (or another's life), there are fewer places to turn.

Of course, there is great overlap between using the Bible “macro-ethically” (e.g., applying its teaching to broader issues like divorce, urban blight, and homosexuality) and “micro-ethically” (e.g., learning to minister on a personal level to a friend struggling with the loss of a job or wrestling with anger). Broader issues always filter down to the level of personal decisions and actions, and personal issues always have a broader social context. The common concern is how the Bible should function ethically in our lives, whether one-on-one in personal ministry or in a larger church and cultural setting. In either case, we need a resource that helps connect the wisdom of Scripture with the details of our daily lives, a resource that helps us learn how to bridge the gap between then and now.

And now for a true confession: I wrote this book because *I* need this resource! As a biblical counselor who also trains other counselors, my daily challenge is to bring the good news of God’s redemption to my counselees’ lives—and to help others do the same. Questions (often from my students) frequently arise: “Why did you choose *that* passage?” “Why didn’t you open your Bible that session?” “Why did you address that particular theme in this person’s life?” “How could you be more gospel-centered with this brother?” “How do you build biblical hope for change in this sister?” These questions have prodded me to write about the process of connecting life and Scripture.

When we hit a personal “wall” in counseling or pastoral ministry, it provokes a more proactive, thoughtful approach to both people and the Bible. “How can I better understand this person biblically?” “*I* thought that Scripture was relevant; why didn’t it connect with him?” “Why is this person ‘stuck’?” “What biblical truth might help her grow?” All these questions from the trenches led me to investigate the intersection of biblical truth and peoples’ lives—what is commonly referred to as “application.”

## **The Focus of This Book**

It might help you to know up front what this book will and will not cover. This book is not a comprehensive approach to biblical interpretation. It will not address in detail the interpretive process, but it will build on many of the concepts laid out in books that do. So, for example, I will not cover (in depth, at least) the guidelines for examining a passage in its original context, what biblical scholars call “grammatical-historical exegesis.” I *will* mention several solid resources on biblical interpretation that can help if you have not received formal training in biblical interpretation. Similarly, I won’t address how the varied literature types (genres) of the Bible—such as narrative, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, gospel, and epistle—impact the way you interpret and use Scripture.<sup>3</sup> Nor will I discuss the philosophical intricacies of where the meaning of a text comes from.<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, this book is not a comprehensive approach to discipleship, counseling, or pastoral care. It *does* provide a biblical



“take” on people that I believe is foundational for personal ministry, but if you are looking for a book-length treatment on the nature of people and how to help them, this book probably will not address all your questions.<sup>5</sup>

Lastly, this book is not a survey of the major ethical challenges that confront the church today. I won't be discussing how to use the Bible to address issues such as homosexuality, global warming, women in ministry, and poverty, to name a few. No doubt, the way I propose that we understand the Bible, understand people, and understand the link between the two will impact our approach to “macro-ethical” issues. But my main focus is “micro-ethics”—how we use Scripture to meaningfully intersect with a *particular* person's life as we minister to him or her.

Consider this book a hybrid of sorts, a resource to help you understand both people and the Bible more thoroughly. This book gives attention to interpreting the biblical text and interpreting the person. Both skills are necessary if you are to minister in a way that correctly “handles the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). Both are necessary for effective ministry.

To sum it up, this book can help you read the Bible and “read” people in a way that promotes gospel-centered, personally relevant use of Scripture in ministry to others. It describes a way to use the Scriptures to help people grow to love God and others more fully in the midst of their complex daily lives.

## **This Book's for You!**

What kind of reader do I envision you to be? I'm hoping you are someone actively engaged in personal ministry—counselor, pastor, discipler, spiritual mentor, small-group leader, campus ministry worker, youth leader, crisis pregnancy worker, or intentional friend. I'm also hoping that you're someone who, like me, has wrestled with how to connect God's Word to the lives of people around you (and sometimes failed!). I hope you desire to see how two worlds fruitfully meet head-on: the unfolding story of God's redemption and the complex tapestries of peoples' struggles, sufferings, sin, triumphs, and joys.

If you are primarily involved in a more “public” ministry of the Word such as preaching and teaching, I believe the book will sharpen your approach to Scripture and to people. It’s true that preaching and teaching tend to be more “proclamatory” in nature, whereas “private” ministry of the Word, which occurs one-on-one or in the context of small groups, tends to be more “dialogical” or conversational in nature. But whatever the sphere or scope of your work with others, I believe you will find help to grow in ministry wisdom.

Here’s the bottom line: this book is for anyone who takes the “one another” passages of the Bible seriously and is eager to use the richness of Scripture to minister wisely to the people God has placed in his or her sphere of influence. It is for anyone who has been captured by Paul’s vision for God’s people, namely, “that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:12–13).

## **How Firm a Foundation**

As we start exploring this topic, let’s affirm two foundational truths about the Bible. These truths will support the weight of what follows in the rest of this book.

First, the Bible is God’s “breathed-out” word, according to 2 Timothy 3:16a. Second Peter 1:20–21 notes, “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” Because the Bible is God’s truthful word and not the flight of human fancy, it has authority (applicational weight) for God’s people. It is, as Paul goes on to say, “useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16b). Peter puts it this way: “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that

through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires” (2 Pet. 1:3–4). Peter connects the knowledge of God, the Word (promises) of God, and our participation in God’s nature or character. Both apostles would affirm that the Bible is a divinely authored means of God’s grace to grow us into the likeness of Christ. God speaks to change us.

Second, God in his wisdom used human authors to bring his words to his people. The Bible did not drop out of the sky as a completed document, nor were the writers of Scripture mindless drones who merely took dictation from God. Rather, in some mysterious divine-human collaboration, the human writers of Scripture wrote words that were truly their own, yet simultaneously the exact words that God the Holy Spirit intended, specifically tailored for God’s people living within a certain historical and cultural moment.<sup>6</sup> Jeannine Brown connects these two aspects of Scripture by describing the Bible as “culturally located divine discourse.”<sup>7</sup> Keeping this balance reminds us that (1) God revealed himself progressively in history through the Bible’s human authors *and* (2) the Bible, because God is the ultimate author, remains authoritative for his people throughout all time.

## **The Story of God and the Stories of People**

From what I have just said, it is clear that God’s Word is meant to *inform* and *transform* God’s people. How God’s redemptive message does that is the focus of this book. But for now, realize that the Bible proclaims one comprehensive true story of God’s relationship with people. It moves from creation to the fall of humanity into sin, suffering, and death, to redemption—ultimately accomplished through Jesus—and finally, to a vision of God’s kingdom, complete at Jesus’ second coming.<sup>8</sup> It is the story of God creating a people to rule the world on his behalf, for their good and his glory. It is a story of their rebellion against God’s wise design. But it is also a tale of God rescuing his people from their sin and misery, and the climax of that narrative comes in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah.

Everything in the Old Testament looks forward to this climax and everything in the New Testament looks back to it and/or works out its implications for the lives of God's people. Of course, the New Testament also looks *forward* to Jesus' second coming. This is what the gospel is all about: the good news that God entered history as the man Jesus to bring about the redemption of a people and a world bound in sin and suffering.

But not "generic" redemption. Not "generic" sin and suffering. This good news reaches God's people in the trenches of life and is tailored to the particularities of life. Any attempts at ministering God's Word that do not fundamentally connect the good news of the Redeemer, Jesus Christ, with the details, themes, and plotlines of people's lives will miss the mark (or land off the target altogether!). Hence, it is appropriate to call the approach of this book "redemptive-historical" or "gospel-centered" application. It is an approach that takes the narrative (storied) nature of the Bible seriously in order to make wise connections with the narratives of our lives. Understanding both the Story of God and the stories of the people we serve is necessary to help others embrace the transformation the Bible envisions for God's people.

## **The Goals of This Book**

What specific goals do I have in mind for this book? What do I hope to see happen in your life as a result of reading it? The first goal has to do with your own relationship with God. The apostle John wrote, "these [things] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). That life does not begin in some future place following death. It starts right here, right now, as God brings restoration into the midst of a broken creation (2 Cor. 5:17). God intends our lives to reflect the life of Christ as we encounter him through his Word (2 Pet. 1:4). So, one goal for this book is that your life would be increasingly shaped and transformed by the sweeping story of Scripture. As Eugene Peterson says, "If Holy Scripture is to be something other than mere gossip about God, it must be internalized."<sup>10</sup>

A temptation in ministry is to think that just because we prepared for a Bible study, a sermon, or a discipleship appointment (or wrote a book like this!), we are deeply engaging with the God of the universe. But that's not necessarily true. It's easy in ministry to live more as a "pipe" than a "reservoir." That is, it's easy to live merely as a conduit to others of the transforming truths of God's Word, rather than as a changed and transformed reservoir who overflows with lived-out gospel truth. You wouldn't imagine cooking meal after meal for your family without sitting down to enjoy that nourishment yourself, would you? To paraphrase James 1:22, let's not merely be hearers or speakers or counselors of the Word but doers, first and foremost.

A second goal relates to your relationships with others. If you want to speak helpfully to a struggling brother or sister, this book should increase your ability to listen, ask thoughtful questions, and use biblical categories for interpreting their experiences. Perhaps you have been in a situation where someone asked for your input on a matter. But when you tried to bring biblical truth to the table, it felt as though you were changing the subject (at least from the other person's perspective)! This book should help you interpret people as well as Scripture and suggest relevant biblical applications that will benefit those around you. This should be true whether you are involved in a formal teaching or discipling ministry, in professional counseling, or in impromptu discussions at the local café.

A third goal relates to your attitude toward the Bible and the way you use it in ministry. As you grow to appreciate the unified story line of the Bible *as well as* the uniqueness of individual books and passages, I hope that your Bible will "grow" in size. That is, I hope you will see the wonder and beauty of the gospel in whatever Old or New Testament passage you are reading. This should encourage you to dive into portions of the Bible you previously neglected. It should motivate you to explore the way these passages relate to Jesus Christ—and how they relate to your own situations in life and ministry.

Put simply, the overall goal of this book is to help you live a biblically rich, Christ-centered life in community with fellow believers. It will equip you to make more sense of the details of

the Bible and the details of people's lives. It will equip you to see how the diverse writings of Scripture have a cohesive, kingdom-centered thrust. And it will help you discern life patterns, themes, and plotlines that underlie the details of people's experiences. Ultimately, it should equip you to more carefully read the story of the Bible and the diverse stories of the people you know and to make meaningful connections between the two.

The title *CrossTalk: Where Life & Scripture Meet* captures several of these ideas in overlapping ways. First, *CrossTalk* highlights the interpersonal aspect of ministry and carries the idea of redemptive dialogue occurring between two or more people. Second, the title emphasizes the centrality of the gospel. It highlights personal ministry that points to the Redeemer, Jesus Christ—his life, death on the cross, resurrection, ascension, and future return. Finally, *CrossTalk* focuses our attention on the intersection of two kinds of “speech”—the story of Scripture and the stories of people's lives. This is the place of application. This is *CrossTalk* in action.

Let's begin by exploring the real challenges of connecting the Bible to life.

## Discussion Questions

1. What questions and struggles do you have in applying Scripture to life?
2. Describe your current method of studying and interpreting Scripture.
3. Describe your current approach to understanding and interpreting people.
4. How have you seen your study of Scripture specifically lead to a changed life—your own or another's?



## CHAPTER 1

# Connecting the Bible to Life

---

Do you find it easy or difficult to connect the Bible to people's lives in meaningful ways? To help you answer the question, let me give you a quiz of sorts for some self-evaluation.

I will give you two sets of questions: one on Bible Passages and the other on Life Struggles. For the Bible Passages category, you must think of a contemporary life situation to which you could apply the given passage. For the Life Struggles category, you must choose a Bible passage you believe would address the problem. Each question may have several "correct" answers. Answer each question before reading the succeeding paragraph. (You're on the honor system!)

Let's start with Bible Passages.

1. "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (Phil. 4:6).

More than likely, you thought of situations such as the following: "trusting in God to overcome worry in a financial crisis," "dealing with a loved one's impending death," "facing final exams," "giving your first sermon series," "doing beach evangelism on a summer missions project." What do these answers have in common? They



are all situations that can provoke anxiety or worry, right? The passage appears to speak about how to handle worry so, naturally, anxiety-producing situations come to mind as places for potential application.

2. The Story of Joseph (Gen. 37—50)

Perhaps situations like these came to mind: “how to respond in a godly way when fired unjustly from your job,” “persevering in hope when facing persecution from non-Christians,” “maintaining a perspective that God is working out his purposes even in a series of setbacks, like the ending of a two-year relationship or a pay cut at work.” The way you answered this question depends on what you think the story of Joseph is about and how much you used Joseph’s experience and character in your application.

3. The Philistines capture the ark of the covenant (1 Sam. 4).

This passage may be less familiar to you. For that reason alone, potential applications may not easily come to mind. But if you read the passage, does *anything* come to mind? Unlike the Joseph story, there are no characters to emulate. (You definitely don’t want to be a Hophni or Phinehas!) Unlike the Joseph narrative, there appears to be no happy ending. Here is a passage where the ark, the dwelling place of God, gets captured by Israel’s arch-enemy. The glory has departed! How “applicable” is this, really? And should it be applied in isolation from what happens in chapters 3 and 5?

4. “Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done. You too should be on your guard against him, because he strongly opposed our message” (2 Tim. 4:14–15).

If your first thought was, *Huh?!* that’s quite appropriate! (If your response was, “Watch out for angry atheist welders,” you get extra points for creativity!) Seriously, what should you do with a passage like this? Can you really apply it to a contemporary life situation? If you were able to come up with a potential application, what interpretive “moves” allowed you to generate that application? *Should* it be that easy?

Now let's move to the Life Struggles category. For each problem or situation below, consider what biblical passages might apply.

1. Anger

You may have chosen passages such as the following: “In your anger do not sin’: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold” (Eph. 4:26–27); “My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires” (James 1:19–20); “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Prov. 15:1). Much like the first question in the Bible Passages category, this seems easy, right? In all likelihood, the passages that came to your mind mention anger in some way and, I would bet, are command-oriented. But did you consider the story of Cain and Abel? Isn’t that a story of anger? What about the many Old Testament passages that talk about *God’s* anger? Could you have chosen one of them? And didn’t Jesus get angry with the Pharisees? Finally, is it ever appropriate to choose a passage that doesn’t explicitly speak about anger to help an angry person?

2. Conflict in Relationships

How about this? “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures” (James 4:1–3); or “Don’t have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord’s servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful” (2 Tim. 2:23–24); or possibly, “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts,

since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful” (Col. 3:15). Again, it’s not too difficult to generate a list of passages that are fairly direct in their treatment of conflict.

3. An infertile couple wants to know what technology is biblically permissible to use to achieve pregnancy.

Not so easy, right? No single passage of Scripture comes to mind quickly, I would suspect. With more thought, you might consider Paul’s response to the Corinthians, who were testing the bounds of Christian liberty: “‘Everything is permissible for me’—but not everything is beneficial. ‘Everything is permissible for me’—but I will not be mastered by anything” (1 Cor. 6:12). OK, but do you realize that Paul is focusing on sexual immorality in this passage? Is it appropriate to apply it to such a different problem? Or would you go to Psalm 139 and build a case that life begins at conception, as a guard against the creation of multiple embryos? Or is there something more important in order to minister the gospel wisely and compassionately to this couple?

4. A gambling addict with bipolar disorder, now taking three different psychoactive medications, has a daughter who just attempted suicide.

Let me save you some time. The most appropriate answer here is Job’s response: “I am unworthy—how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer— twice, but I will say no more” (40:4–5). In other words, this is too complex to solve with an easy appeal to the Bible. This is not to say that Scripture is irrelevant to this man’s struggle. Quite the contrary! But it’s important to realize that the ease of considering the relevant testimony of Scripture has declined significantly from our first example.

Now, let’s go back to my initial question: Is it easy or difficult to connect the Bible and life? It depends, doesn’t it? I’m going to call what you just experienced the “Ditch vs. Canyon Phenomenon.”

What I mean is this: sometimes use of Scripture in ministry has the feel of stepping across a ditch (easy!), and sometimes it has the feel of stepping across a canyon (impossible!). The challenge, really, is how to bridge the gap between an ancient biblical text and a present-day life situation. How do we attempt to bridge that divide? Most of the time we assume that a direct line of connection must exist between the situation then (in the text) and the situation now. Or at the very least we think we can extract some “timeless principle” from the text and bring it to the present. This mind-set, where we assume some kind of one-to-one correspondence between a text then and a situation now, is admirable in its goal to “make” the Scriptures relevant for the believer today.

And, in fact, it often works when the passage speaks specifically about a situation or experience we’re facing. Here are some examples of “ditch” passages. If you’re not familiar with these passages, look them up as you go and see if you agree.

- Psalm 23 for fear
- Psalm 51 for repentance
- Proverbs 22:15 for disciplining a child
- Matthew 5:27–30 for understanding the depth and breadth of adultery/sexual lust
- Ephesians 5:22–33 for marriage roles and relationships
- Philippians 4:6 for anxiety (as mentioned earlier) along with Ephesians, James, and Proverbs passages on anger

Other passages seem to fit in this category, but they stretch the width of the ditch a bit more. What I mean is, these passages might not speak as specifically and explicitly about a particular struggle or situation, but they seem “close enough” to allow for a relatively quick connection. Sometimes it’s because of the positive or negative example the passage provides, and sometimes it’s because of a general principle derived from the text. All in all, the path to application still feels relatively direct. For example:

- Numbers 11 as a warning against grumbling and complaining about your job

- Philippians 4:8 for training your mind against sexually lustful thoughts
- Joshua 1:9 as encouragement as you begin an evangelistic crusade in your church
- The story of Joseph as an encouragement amid harassment or persecution from others

But looking for the more direct connection ends up backfiring when we encounter passages that seem far removed from our day-to-day experiences. For example, when was the last time we demolished a house because of a mildew problem (Lev. 14:33–57)? Or used Numbers 5:11–31 as a test for adultery for couples in our congregations?<sup>1</sup> When have we used the regulations for the building of the tabernacle (Exod. 25—31; 35—40) to encourage someone? What life-changing application have we made lately from the first nine chapters of 1 Chronicles, which is essentially a list of names? What should we do with Obadiah (a prophecy against Edom)? When have we used Revelation 17 (the woman and the beast) in a counseling session? What should we do with very specifically directed passages, as noted earlier with Alexander the metalworker in 2 Timothy? Suddenly we find ourselves facing a canyon! Now what?

Our tendency, of course, is to gravitate toward the “ditch” passages because they seem easier to apply; it’s easier to make a connection between then and now. Ditch passages resonate more quickly with our experiences. They have a greater immediacy, so we hang out in these tried-and-true passages and we skim—or avoid altogether—those pesky canyon passages. But what is the result?

In practical terms, we end up ministering with an embarrassingly thinner but supposedly more relevant Bible. Did you ever wonder why publishers sell the New Testament packaged together with Psalms and Proverbs?<sup>2</sup> Why not sell the New Testament with Leviticus and Esther? Or the New Testament with 1 and 2 Kings and the Minor Prophets? A value judgment is being made. The New Testament, Psalms, and Proverbs are deemed more relevant for contemporary life. The New Testament is included because it’s about Jesus and the church. Proverbs makes the grade

because of all that pithy, helpful, concrete advice. And the Psalms are important because of the emotions they evoke and because of their use in worship. (Of course, one must overlook the difficulties of using, for example, Psalm 3:7 in a ministry situation: “Arise O LORD! Deliver me, O my God! Strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked.”)

Have you succumbed to this mind-set even if you don’t frequently use an “abridged” Bible? Take a look at the Bible you regularly use—which pages are the dirtiest and most dog-eared? Hmm. The hard reality is this: genealogies, dietary laws, battle records, and prophecies against ancient nations all take a back-seat to parts of the Bible that connect more easily and naturally to our modern lives. And this is true despite believing that *all* of Scripture is “God-breathed” and “useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). We confess that all of Scripture is helpful for all of life, but that’s not the way the Bible actually functions in our lives and ministries.

The challenge is not just in moving from the Bible to everyday life but also in moving from present-day problems to the Scriptures. Many modern-day struggles and problems don’t seem to be addressed in the Scriptures; there seems to be no point in exploring the biblical world for guidance. We are confident that the Bible speaks relevantly and authoritatively to ditch problems, the everyday issues we all experience, such as anger, conflict, pride, fear, and money. It’s easy to think of a passage (or passages) that deals with those life problems, right? You experienced this earlier when you took the quiz.

But where would you turn in Scripture to address anorexia and bulimia? Or (as we saw) the challenge of infertility? Should you counsel Mr. and Mrs. Jensen to separate in the midst of their troubled marriage? Should Christian parents homeschool or send their children to Christian schools or to public schools? Is it OK to place your children in day care so you can work? How do you help someone who obsesses about the contamination of objects around her and washes her hands repeatedly, to the point of bleeding? What does the Bible say about helping a child diagnosed with Asperger syndrome? Or a person diagnosed with bipolar disorder? The list is infinite!

If you have a passage that you think quickly captures any one of these issues fully, I would almost guarantee that your hearer will find it superficial or irrelevant.<sup>3</sup> The direct approach doesn't seem to work with these canyon problems. But if the Bible becomes functionally irrelevant, people will turn elsewhere for guidance on these thorny questions and issues.

## Widened Ditches and Narrowed Canyons

Before I muddy the waters a bit regarding the ease with which we use ditch passages, let me affirm several things. First, it's absolutely right to use passages that speak specifically to our everyday experiences. As believers in Christ, we have continuity with God's people in the Old Testament and New Testament. We share the same struggles common to people of all eras, so we should expect God's revelation to *them* to resonate with *us*. In addition, let's not forget that God's Spirit gives wisdom and direction in the application of Scripture to life. Although I will stress throughout this book the importance of deeper study of Scripture and people, I want to affirm the often impromptu, Spirit-led connections between the Bible and life that you have experienced in ministry. You already have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16). At the same time, just because God's Spirit graciously uses your current knowledge of Scripture to connect with people, that doesn't mean you shouldn't dig deeper as you have opportunity. View this book, then, as an opportunity to dig for more treasure, even as you use and enjoy the riches you already have found!

So grab a shovel and consider this challenge: *Should* ditch passages be so easy to apply? Consider one of the easiest of ditch passages, Philippians 4:6–7: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Have you used that passage in your own life and ministry in the midst of fear, anxiety, and worry? I certainly have. My concern is not whether this is a helpful passage to use in this situation—it is! Rather, my concern is *how* we go about



using it and whether we have at least considered some of the complexities surrounding the use of this “easy” passage.

For example, has it ever hit you that there is about a two-thousand-year gap between the Philippians who received Paul’s letter and your friend who is struggling with anxiety? How much overlap is there between the people, the social-cultural context, and situation(s) in that first-century church and suburban America two millennia later? More fundamentally, how can a snippet of ancient mail addressed to other people bear fruit in our lives today? Of course, one answer is, because it’s in the Bible, it is God’s revelation for believers of all ages, times, and places. That is true! At the same time, I don’t want us to sidestep the historical, cultural, and situational gap that exists between the first century and now. What gives us the right to extract a verse or two and import it to the present without giving attention to its original context? Shouldn’t we take that into consideration?

As I’m writing this, the Republican and Democratic races for the 2008 presidential election are in full swing. One tactic used time and time again during the debates is for one candidate to seize upon a phrase or statement of an opponent, rip it out of its context, and use it to characterize (caricature) the opponent’s position. We chafe at such misrepresentation in politics or in our own relationships and conversations.

That is why we need to ask a question we often cheerfully ignore: How can we be so sure we are using Scripture properly when we apply it to our friends’ situations? How can we be sure we are doing justice to the author’s intent? Put another way, how can we judge if we have successfully traveled to the first century and back again with the apostle’s meaning intact?

That challenge is even greater when we consider Old Testament passages. *Is it fair to use Joshua 1:9 as an encouragement for an evangelistic campaign without considering the historical and cultural gap between then and now?*<sup>4</sup> What do nomadic Israelites about to engage in bloody warfare have to do with fearful believers about to share tracts with drug users on the streets of north Philadelphia? Suddenly, ditches look more like canyons!

Similarly, life problems aren’t as easy to assign to the ditch category. The fact is, people’s lives are a complex maze of



thoughts, emotions, actions, motives, circumstances, and experiences. What do you say to the angry wife who lives with a lazy, irresponsible alcoholic and is trying to deal with four children in various states of anger and rebellion themselves? Should you take her to Ephesians 4 to instruct her regarding her anger? Maybe. But maybe not.

Or consider how God's Word ministers to the man who cannot rid himself of the anxious thought that he left the door unlocked when he left for work that morning. How does scriptural truth interrupt his cycle of obsessive thinking and the compulsive checking that disrupts his schedule every day? Will you take him to Philippians 4:6–7 or Matthew 6:25–34, which speak explicitly about worry? Perhaps. But perhaps not. Is, in fact, a passage on worry most apropos? Are you sure that's the most important pastoral issue to address?

We need to realize that so-called ditch passages and ditch problems may not be so straightforward after all. *Great*, you may be thinking, *You've just taken my already 'small' functional Bible and made it even smaller! Now I feel even more tentative about using Scripture in ministry!* If you feel that way, please read again the first paragraph of this section! I do not want to make it more difficult for you to minister to others using the Bible. My intent is not to open a Pandora's box of difficulties that limit your application of Scripture. Rather, I hope you will sense increasing freedom in your ministry as you engage the Bible and people more deeply. What might this look like?

I learned to play tennis in high school. I received minimal instruction but played frequently, so I became a decent player. Years later I played for the first time with a friend who had been a standout on his collegiate team. He asked if I wanted some pointers. He recognized that I had nearly reached the limits of my previous instruction and practice. We started with my serve. Suddenly the racket felt like a foreign object in my hand! Double fault after double fault ensued. I seemed to regress rather than progress. But, over time, what initially felt awkward became smoother and more skillful. Eventually, my new style of serving surpassed the accuracy, speed, and spin of the old. There was a long-term payoff. In a similar way, I don't want to take away your

well-practiced “service” of ditch passages; I want to help you make it even better!

Consider the challenges I have posed so far as “speed bumps,” particularly for the use of ditch passages for ditch problems. Slow down! There’s more than meets the eye for this passage or this person. Seek to deepen your Spirit-led intuitions, and your use of Scripture will be even more fruitful. Your “hunches” with Scripture and with people may be right on target, but how much more helpful your ministry will be when you understand them even more deeply from the Christ-centered perspective this book advocates.

Let me give further encouragement: canyon passages aren’t so impossible and canyon problems aren’t so impossible! What makes canyon passages such as the building of the tabernacle, the book of Obadiah, or 1 Chronicles 1—9 potentially meaningful for believers today is that they are all part of an unfolding story of God’s redemption, a redemption that finds its climax in Jesus Christ and into which we’ve been caught up by God’s magnificent grace.<sup>5</sup> We are those “on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come” (1 Cor. 10:11). Because we are united with the One who fulfills (completes) Israel’s story, we share some measure of continuity with the Old Testament people of God, on whose behalf Exodus or Obadiah or Chronicles was written. Similarly, we stand after the cross, resurrection, and the pouring out of the Spirit, in continuity with the New Testament writers and their audiences. What sets up Philemon or the most perplexing parts of Revelation (or any part of the New Testament) to be relevant for us today is that we share the same Savior, the same redemption, and the renewed kingdom brought by Jesus Christ.

It is true that the Bible is historically and culturally situated. And it’s true that those factors require careful consideration in our interpretive efforts, a fact I will stress throughout this book. But because the Bible is “divine discourse”<sup>6</sup> that finds its fulfillment in *the* Word, Jesus Christ, we will find that *he* is the key for bridging canyons (or ditches for that matter). It’s *our* Book because it’s *his* Book, and we are his!

What about canyon problems? Although the Bible does not give an exhaustive, step-by-step approach to modern problems

unforeseen by the biblical writers, it does provide a comprehensive view of people and problems that allows us to wisely dive into the thorniest issues of contemporary life. It treats sin and suffering in such profound and multifaceted ways that no struggle, no matter how complex, stands outside the gospel light it sheds. It is wisdom that unravels the Gordian knots of twenty-first-century struggles.

I hope this book will help you discover that your tried-and-true ditch passages are richer, deeper, and more challenging than you ever dared imagine; and that you will find canyon passages much more alive and accessible. At the same time, I hope you will discover that ditch problems are more complex than at first glance, and that canyon problems are somewhat demystified with a consistent biblical approach for understanding people. In short, I hope you will gain a nuanced approach to the Bible *and* to people that will lead to even more fruitful ministry.

To get there, we need to begin with the nature of the Bible itself. What exactly *is* this Book upon which we stake our lives and ministry? How do we recover the whole Bible for the whole of life? That is our journey over the next two chapters.

## Discussion Questions

1. Which verses, passages, or books of the Bible do you tend to return to again and again? Why?
2. Are there parts of the Bible you have never read? Why?
3. What current problems in your life, ministry, and church community defy an easy application of Scripture? How are you seeking to bring God's Word to bear on those struggles?

## CHAPTER 2

# What the Bible Is Not (Primarily)

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I enjoy shopping at Home Depot or Lowe's, but it can be overwhelming. All the tools, hardware, and appliances dazzle me, but I'm not very mechanically minded. Many of the items would sit uselessly in my basement were I to buy them. Why? Because to use a tool wisely, you need to know what it is and what it does.

The same is true in ministry. We hold in our hands God's amazing personal revelation to us. We know the Bible reveals his character and redemptive purposes. We know that through it the Spirit of Jesus brings life. We have seen ourselves (and others) transformed by its practical truth. But do we ever stop to ask whether we are using the Bible in a way that maximizes its Christ-centered message? Do we ever pause to consider, "What *is* the Bible anyway? What kind of book did God give us? And what does this mean for the way we use it in ministry?" If we're honest, we have to admit that we sometimes find a disconnect between what we believe the Bible is and how we actually use it in real life.

The purpose of the next two chapters is to affirm the essential nature of the Scriptures because this affirmation must precede any interpretation and application we do. What the Bible primarily *is* determines how we ought to interpret and apply it.

This should not surprise us. We go through this process every time we encounter a text. What we expect to learn and how we anticipate using the material varies based on the nature of the written document before us. For example, your interpretive approach to the owner's manual for your car will differ from your approach to your daughter's e-mail. The way you read the editorial page of the newspaper will be different from the way you read the business section, because you implicitly recognize that the nature of these texts are different and therefore demand a different interpretive attitude. You recognize that the editorial page showcases the writer's opinions, while the business section contains a more straightforward reporting of events. Because of this, you are likely to use the information from both sources in different ways. Similarly, your approach to an article in the *New York Times* will be vastly different from your approach to a piece from the *National Enquirer* (at least I hope so!).

Even the way we interpret individual statements will vary based on the type of literature in which they appear. The caption "Tigers Devour Cubs in Record Time" will evoke one interpretation if you're reading about a fast-paced baseball game on the sports page. But it will bring a different response if you are reading a *National Geographic* account of predatory life in the wild!

That is why it is crucial to begin with this beguilingly simple question. The nature of the Bible—what the Bible is—must shape the way we interpret and apply it. In fact, when we see it clearly, the nature of the Bible is what supplies the rationale to do application in the first place! That is, the Bible's identity and character are what supply the answers to the questions, "How do we know the Bible is meant for us today? What gives us the right to use ancient documents originally meant for other people? How should we apply this revelation to our lives?" So, what *is* the Bible anyway, this collection of books from Genesis to Revelation?

Let's begin with some affirmations about what the Bible primarily is *not* because I think the following views of Scripture are fairly entrenched in our evangelical culture. Though each of these positions has merit, none, individually or together, captures the essential nature and purpose of the Scriptures. What's more, each

affirmation, as you will see, leads to an approach to application that is shortsighted or deficient in some way.<sup>1</sup> By seeing the shortcomings of each view, you will be in a better position to use the Scriptures to help struggling people.

## **The Bible Is *Not* Primarily a Book of Do's and Don'ts**

This view of Scripture rightly recognizes that commands, exhortations, and prohibitions are throughout the Bible. God expects and commands a response from his people! As Jesus says, “Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me” (John 14:21). Obedience matters, and that obedience has very specific contours. God’s self-revelation is meant to regulate and shape the details of our lives. Loving God with heart, soul, and strength (Deut. 6:5) is not left hanging as a generic command. God fleshes it out for his people in many specific ways. We see it in the laws God gave Moses on Mount Sinai. We witness it in the exhortations of the prophets to backsliding Israel. We notice it in the words of Jesus. We experience it in the specific commands Paul gave to various churches. The Bible does provide norms for life. This is all true, but several problems arise with using the Bible *principally* as a kind of “rule book” for life.

First, large chunks of Scripture in both the Old and New Testaments have a relatively small proportion of imperatives or commands. Much of Scripture seems to be *descriptive* rather than obviously *prescriptive*. Much of Scripture doesn’t tell us to do anything at all, particularly the historically oriented books. Do these books nonetheless provide guidelines for obedience? This is one reason why we gravitate to passages that contain commands. It seems easier to determine what we are to *do* after studying the verse or passage. This is particularly crucial when people seek our counsel. The stakes are high. Surely we want neither to add to nor subtract from what God asks of believers.

But this leads to a second issue: If we are law-oriented, how do we decide which rules apply in our contemporary situation and which rules do not?<sup>2</sup> For example, consider the following commands:<sup>3</sup>

- “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Gen. 1:28).
- “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:3).
- “Do not steal. Do not lie. Do not deceive one another” (Lev. 19:11).
- “Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material” (Lev. 19:19c).
- “If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who does not obey his father and mother and will not listen to them when they discipline him, his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him to the elders at the gate of his town. They shall say to the elders, ‘This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a profligate and a drunkard.’ Then all the men of his town shall stone him to death. You must purge the evil from among you” (Deut. 21:18–21).
- “Do not withhold good from those who deserve it, when it is in your power to act” (Prov. 3:27).
- “Learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow” (Isa. 1:17).
- “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal” (Matt. 6:19).
- “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ” (Eph. 6:5).
- “And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers” (Philemon 22).

Why would we have the impulse to keep Leviticus 19:11 but scrap Leviticus 19:19? Why don't we administer capital punishment for rebellious teens according to Deuteronomy? You might say that the situation of Israel as a theocracy, with the death sentence in place for certain forms of disobedience, is no longer rel-



evant for our context. More broadly, you might maintain that specific people (e.g., Paul) give some commands to specific people (e.g., Philemon) in specific, historical situations (e.g., the case of Onesimus, Philemon's runaway slave). Fair enough! But isn't that true of every command listed above? Coming up with an acceptable set of applicable rules may not be so easy after all.

Consider what might be the most universal of the commands listed above, the imperative to "have no other gods before me," the first of the Ten Commandments. But even the Ten Commandments were given by specific persons (God, through Moses) to specific people (the Israelites) in a specific, nontransferable context (the rescue of the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt).<sup>4</sup>

To be sure, the first of the Ten Commandments itself, separated from its context, seems more relevant or universal than Paul's directive to Philemon, but that's another problem with the rule-book view of the Bible: namely, that this view of Scripture "decontextualizes" the Bible. It views commands as isolated entities, detached from the real, flesh-and-blood, historical situations that prompted the commands in the first place. We never communicate in this atomistic way as human beings! If meaningful communication occurs, it is because our words are spoken into the shared contexts and assumptions of the speaker and listener.

Third, even among commands considered relevant, an "importance hierarchy" of sorts will develop. Certain traditions may emphasize commands having to do with social justice. Others may choose to emphasize commands regarding evangelism or purity of doctrine. Isn't there some overarching understanding of Scripture that can keep us from focusing on certain commands to the exclusion of others?

If the Bible is essentially a book of commands, what gives us the right to pick and choose which ones apply now?<sup>5</sup> We need something beyond the individual commands themselves, an interpretive approach (supplied by the Bible itself) that puts those commands in a broader redemptive or relational framework. Only then will the full import and relevance of the commands and prohibitions come to light for us today.

Lastly, an exclusive focus on commands paradoxically may minimize the God who graciously redeems us. As we'll see in



only a minute, the Bible never separates imperatives from their basis in God's redeeming love. To create a wedge between the two is a recipe for discouragement and ultimately strips the gospel of its power for change.

Many years ago in medical practice, before I went to seminary, I referred a patient for counseling because of a sexual addiction. He was a professing believer but could not seem to escape years of entrenched sexual lust. Despite many conversations he never gained much traction. The Christian counselor heard his story, then proceeded to instruct him to write Philippians 4:8 on an index card: "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things." The counselor told him to keep the index card with him at all times and to pull it out of his pocket to read when sexual temptation came. This was to serve as a reminder of what he should be thinking about.

A few weeks later my patient returned to me, more discouraged than ever. His counselor had not served him well. He had so focused on the content of the command that he had neglected the gracious redemptive work of God that is the basis and motivation for keeping the command in the first place. My patient needed to see more clearly the God who pursues him in love, who gives commands that ultimately free his people to live as they were created to live.

Similarly, to use a parenting analogy, consider what happens when you give your child a command. Sometimes the child responds, "Why?" This *may* represent resistance to obedience, but it may also simply reflect a plea to understand the reason behind the command. The irritated parental response, "Because I said so," does not engender wholehearted obedience! Rather, children who understand their God-given place in the family, the love of their parents, and God's love for them will be in a better place to hear instruction and obey.

These examples highlight the fact that the commands of Scripture are always relationally rooted.<sup>6</sup> God rescues his people and then he says, "Now live in the freedom of my redemption in these specific ways." Often that relational foundation imme-

diately precedes or follows the command. Here are several brief examples. As you read them, consider the way the relational basis for the command impacts the way you hear and understand it.

- “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:3–4). Here is what precedes it: “If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion . . .” (Phil. 2:1).
- “Set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things” (Col. 3:1b–2). Notice the rationale that precedes and follows: “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ . . .” (Col. 3:1a) and “For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory” (Col. 3:3–4).
- “Do not be anxious about anything . . .” (Phil. 4:6a). “The Lord is near” (Phil. 4:5b) comes immediately before.
- “Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material” (Lev. 19:19c). Notice what precedes all the commands in chapter 19: “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: “Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy”’” (Lev. 19:1–2).

In short, while we must take the commands of Scripture seriously, we can never reduce the Bible to a series of “naked” exhortations and prohibitions. Those directives come to us clothed in redemptive garb: “This is who your God is! This is what he has done, for his glory and your good! Now live in his love by obeying his commands.” We should indeed continue to call our brothers and sisters to live by the commands of God, but let’s do it with an awareness of their redemptive context. We will explore that broader relational/redemptive foundation more fully in the next chapter.

## The Bible Is *Not* Primarily a Book of Timeless Principles for the Problems of Life

This perspective is related to the first one, but at least this approach to Scripture views the Bible as “bigger” than explicit commands. I would say that this view of the Bible—as the source of principles for living—is the most common view of the Scriptures within evangelicalism. These general (“timeless”) principles are then applied to specific contemporary situations.

There are several valid reasons for using the Bible this way. This view of Scripture affirms that you can approach any passage with an application mind-set. You expect to find truth to bring into your present situation, no matter where you are in Scripture, even if the passage does not contain commands. This view also recognizes that some discontinuity exists between the world of the Bible and the readers’ world. That is, we can’t just move in a direct, 1:1 fashion from the biblical world to our own without at least *some* “translation”—distilling the message of the passage into a principle that can be transported to the present day. This approach also helps with the previous issue of deciding how certain commands are relevant for later times. (Perhaps we should look for the general principle behind the specific admonition for an earlier, specific situation—and then apply that general principle in similar but not identical situations today.) There is some wisdom in this; the consideration of appropriate analogies between then and now does seem warranted.

Further support for this approach comes from the biblical writers themselves, who sometimes appeal to other texts in this principle-oriented, exemplary way. I am currently reading 1 Corinthians and Paul uses the Old Testament Scriptures this way. Here are three examples: (1) He quotes Isaiah 29:14—“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate”—to support his argument that through the cross God has made foolish the wisdom of the world (1:19). (2) Paul uses the story of the Israelites in the wilderness to urge the Corinthians to refrain from setting their hearts “on evil things as they did” (1 Cor. 10:6–11). (3) In 1 Corinthians 5:13 he urges the Corinthians to discipline a man who is involved in sexual immorality with

his stepmother: “Expel the wicked man from among you.” He appears to be drawing upon multiple passages in Deuteronomy where God instructed the people to deal with immorality among them: “Purge the evil from among you” (Deut. 17:7; 19:19; 21:21; 22:21, 24; 24:7). In almost all those cases, the punishment for the evildoer (who may or may not have been involved in sexual sin) was death by stoning. Paul seems to take the general principle, “You must not tolerate evil within the covenant community,” and apply it (without the death penalty) to the Corinthian church.

How might this play out for us? One example from the last chapter falls squarely into this category: the use of Joshua 1 to encourage an evangelistic team as it begins its work. The principle gleaned from Joshua 1:9 might be, “God is present with his people wherever they go, so don’t be afraid.” It’s an added bonus that the biblical and modern contexts are somewhat analogous: in both situations, then and now, God’s people are encountering an unbelieving (pagan) culture and require the presence and power of God to succeed. But proponents of this approach to Scripture would say that the situations don’t *have* to match to benefit from the principle. For instance, it would be quite easy to use Joshua 1:9 to encourage a person who is terrified about starting a new job. Now, it may well be that one “payoff” of this passage *is* the encouragement to press forward in challenging circumstances. But isn’t the use of this verse potentially more meaningful by placing it in the broader context of Joshua, and Scripture at large?

This principle-oriented approach to Scripture overlaps significantly with using the Bible as a topical index of various verses for various problems, although it has a bit more flexibility in its interpretive strategy. Many Bibles have an appendix that highlights the appropriate passages to turn to for certain problems of life. Usually these passages fall into the ditch category—they explicitly mention the problem at hand. So, if you are anxious, turn to Matthew 6:25–34 or 1 Peter 5:7. If you want principles on giving, go to Malachi 3:7–10 or 2 Corinthians 8:1–9.<sup>7</sup> There is, of course, something right about this. A passage that references tithing or giving *ought* to guide our thinking about giving in some way. We *ought* to use passages that discuss worry as we minister to anxious

people. The issue is not “Is it appropriate to derive principles for pastoral care from biblical texts?” but rather, “How should we go about doing so?” Is there an approach to the Bible that guides the “how” question?

Viewing the Scriptures first and foremost as the seedbed for general principles creates difficulties. First, there is a continued tendency to overlook the historical, cultural, and social aspects of the Bible. In the previous chapter I talked about the necessity of considering these contextual elements of a passage. Strictly speaking, there are no “timeless texts” of Scripture. *All* Scripture arises in a particular historical context for particular pastoral purposes. “The texts of Scripture both presuppose and are ordered to communities of faith, in all their concreteness, richness, and messiness.”<sup>8</sup> Overlooking these concrete occasions for God’s revelation may lead to unwise conclusions about what principles a particular passage might generate. In fact, rather than *draw out* principles from texts, it is all too easy to *read* principles *into* a text to support a cherished belief, especially when a text is detached from its particular place in God’s redemptive history.

Second, similar to what we saw with the rule-oriented approach, this view of the Bible leans toward the triumph of the principle over the person. In the Bible God speaks to his people. Scripture is passion-filled, truthful communication that reveals the character and work of God, tailored to the pressing needs of God’s people. Such discourse resists being reduced to principles and propositions, although it is not opposed to such activity (as we saw when Paul used portions of the Old Testament in a principle-oriented way).<sup>9</sup>

Again, I am urging a fuller, richer way to approach and apply Scripture that is most in line with its redemptive-historical character. There’s buried treasure to be found that will make your use of commands and principles wiser and more nuanced!

### **The Bible Is *Not* Primarily a Casebook of Characters to Imitate or Avoid**

This is a variation of the preceding view of the Bible. This approach highlights particular characters in Scripture (and there

are a lot of them!) and asks, “What should I think, say, or do based on the ways these characters were portrayed? What example do they give me to follow or avoid?”

Again, there is scriptural warrant for this in the way New Testament writers appeal to the Old Testament. Consider James 5:10–11: “Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job’s perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.” Later in the same chapter James points to Elijah to illustrate his point that the “prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective” (5:16b). He notes, “Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops” (5:17–18). I don’t know about you, but I’m stunned to consider Elijah and myself on the same playing field. But that is the connection James is making!

In John’s first epistle, as a follow-up to his command, “We should love one another” (3:11), John exhorts, “Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother” (3:12a). John is saying in effect, “Do you want an example of anti-love? Look at Cain, who murdered his brother! You can’t call yourself a Christian and hate your brother. Don’t do what Cain did!”

I’ve already mentioned Paul’s instruction to the Corinthians, laced with references to the wilderness community: “Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did” (1 Cor. 10:6). Specifically Paul exhorts, “Do not be idolaters, as some of them were” (10:7). “We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did” (10:8). “We should not test the Lord, as some of them did” (10:9). “And do not grumble, as some of them did” (10:10). Paul applies the example of the Israelites further by warning the Corinthians, “So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!” (10:12). Basically he says in this series of verses, “Don’t do what they did. Instead, be careful, lest you fall also.”

The New Testament writers also appeal to the example of Jesus himself. The writer of Hebrews says, “Consider him



[Jesus] who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (Heb. 12:3). Peter speaks to a persecuted community, “But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ‘He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.’ When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly” (1 Pet. 2:20b–23). Finally, John says, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers” (1 John 3:16). In each case the writers appeal to Jesus as an exemplar for faith and obedience. What is highlighted is not so much the redemptive work of Christ but his character in action.

In a similar way, we might read about David, the man after God’s own heart, in 1 Samuel, contrasting his character and actions with those of Saul. In those chapters David displays unwavering trust in God, courage, humility, patience, and wisdom.<sup>10</sup> Someone using Scripture this way might also find positive examples in Joseph’s sexual purity (Gen. 39), Moses’ intercession (Exod. 32), Josiah’s spiritual zeal (2 Kings 22–23), Daniel’s devotion (Dan. 1), and Stephen’s courage (Acts 7), to name a few. Negative examples might include Abraham’s fear (Gen. 12:10–20), Aaron’s idolatry and poor leadership (Exod. 32), Solomon’s lusts (1 Kings 11), and the deceit of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5).

I recently heard a version of this approach to Scripture at a seminary graduation. The speaker’s text was the feeding of the five thousand (John 6:1–13). He drew his hearers into the story from the perspective of the small boy who supplied the loaves and fish for the miracle. The take-home message was, “OK, seminary graduates, you now have in your possession five loaves and two fish. It isn’t much, but will you take your stuff (talents, education, gifts, passions, etc.) to the Master to see what he’ll do with it?” In other words, they were to have the faith to do what the boy did! For this speaker, even a “minor” character served as an example.

What’s helpful about this approach? First, if you’re in ministry, it’s natural to empathize with the people God has placed in

your life. Their stories ought to draw you in so that you “rejoice with those who rejoice; [and] mourn with those who mourn” (Rom. 12:15). You try to understand their point of view, their struggles, their triumphs, the highs and lows of their faith. It’s hard to stay detached—and that’s a good thing! Why should this be any different when we encounter people in Scripture? Why shouldn’t we feel the thrill of their victory or the agony of their defeat? Why shouldn’t we emulate the pattern of their faith or avoid the example of their unbelief?

Second, a character- or example-oriented approach can highlight that God reveals himself to people who have the same basic problems we do. To borrow a phrase from the hymn “Jesus! What a Friend for Sinners!” the people of God in the Old Testament and New Testament are “tempted, tried, and sometimes failing.”<sup>11</sup> They needed a Savior also! They needed the resources of the Redeemer to live in a fallen world, just as we do. They needed wisdom from God in order to live rightly. Identifying with the characters in Scripture helps us recognize the specific ways God acts and speaks, mercifully and justly, to his suffering and sinful people. In the pages of Scripture, God initiates relationship with real people, not cardboard cutouts! It helps struggling people to see struggling people in the pages of Scripture. This reminds us that the God who draws near to the struggler “is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8).

But here is a shortcoming of this approach: it doesn’t *necessarily* help us understand the overall plot that incorporates all of these characters, praiseworthy or not. In contrast to the last paragraph, it doesn’t *necessarily* highlight the character and work of God. As we will see in the next chapter, the Bible is a story of God that goes somewhere. The characters within its pages play a supporting role to the God who engineers history and then authors the telling of it. The endpoint is not to imitate David, Hannah, or Paul per se, but to relate intimately to the God of David, Hannah, and Paul, who orchestrates history to accomplish his redemptive purposes. The characters are signposts to the pursuing, redeeming love of God.

To return to an earlier example, while it may be appropriate to draw some application from the boy in the feeding of the five



thousand, what we *can't* miss is Jesus! He is the One who sustains his people, who satisfies their spiritual hunger. Ultimately, he is the bread from heaven, broken for his people. He is the Father's manna in the flesh (John 6:32–35). Why shouldn't I want to bring my gifts and training to lay at the feet of such a gracious One? Do you notice something here? I essentially ended up with the same application as the seminary graduation speaker but with a Christ-oriented emphasis. The boy in the story may serve as a touchstone for application, but his example doesn't carry the full "freight" of this passage.

To conclude, there may indeed be a place for using characters as examples to follow or avoid—remember, the biblical writers do it too—so long as it is practiced with an awareness of the Christ-centered plotline of the Bible.

## **The Bible Is *Not* Primarily a System of Doctrines**

No doubt, the study of the Bible can and should lead to theological reflection. This has been going on since the earliest days of the church. It is helpful for the church to consider how to organize the Bible's teaching. In fact, the work of arranging the teachings of Scripture into comprehensive and coherent doctrinal formulations has often (usually!) been done to resolve pressing problems or controversies in the church.<sup>12</sup> These doctrinal conclusions then serve as guardrails for further Scripture study and theological reflection. This organization of biblical teaching over the centuries<sup>13</sup> reminds us that the Spirit's illuminating work hasn't begun with our generation. We stand on the shoulders of those who have studied and arranged the teachings of Scripture topically, whether we are aware of it or not.

But what are some problems with functionally viewing Scripture *primarily* as a series of doctrinal formulations? First, it can minimize the depth and breadth of biblical wisdom. Systematic theology helps to distill the Bible's teachings, but it does not exhaust the complexity of what God means to say to the church. In a similar way, a book report may accurately outline and summarize a book's contents, but it is no substitute for reading the book cover to cover, pondering, relishing, and wrestling through

its details. We never want to make an outline, however comprehensive and accurate, a substitute for God's multifaceted personal communication through his Word.

A second problem is the if-you're-a-hammer-everything's-a-nail syndrome. You will have a tendency to approach texts expecting (and perhaps seeking) to support certain theological beliefs—the Trinity, the nature of the atonement, predestination, free will, justification by faith, rapture of the saints, hell, and many others.<sup>14</sup> This may or may not be appropriate based on the text(s) under consideration. The problem in this approach is that the Bible can be reduced to a set of proof-texts that support key doctrines.<sup>15</sup>

Viewing the Bible in systematic categories may lead to over-emphasizing certain passages or books and deemphasizing others based on your theological predispositions. What is the result? The Bible's wonderfully varied terrain becomes "flattened." Michael Williams notes, "The complexity and ambiguity of reality is lost in the press toward univocal neatness and rational fit, and the dynamics of events and relationships is reduced to broad generalities."<sup>16</sup>

## **A Gospel-Deficient Bible?!**

I have saved for last the most serious deficiency of these approaches to the Bible. Certainly, all four of them extract biblical texts from the flow of history. But if you minimize the historical outworking of God, you potentially minimize the centrality of the death, resurrection, ascension, and return of Jesus Christ! That's where history is going! (See 1 Cor. 15:20–28.) Notice that you could talk about how to discipline your child with the rod (a rule, based on Prov. 23:13–14), draw encouragement from God's presence as you start a demanding new job (a general principle, from Isa. 41:10), emulate David's courage (a character example, from 1 Sam. 17), and discuss predestination (a doctrine from Eph. 1), without ever referring to the coming of the kingdom in Jesus Christ *or* encountering him yourself! Shouldn't the life, death, and resurrection of Christ have some practical connection to disciplining children, God's presence, living with courage, and the

doctrine of predestination? Of course it should—and it does. As we will see, the whole framework of the New Testament is that Jesus the King has come. That’s the gospel (Mark 1:15)! That’s good news for sufferers and sinners!

This redemptive-historical approach to Scripture in no way minimizes the importance of commands, principles, characters, and doctrine in Scripture. Rather, it puts all of them in a gospel-centered, relational framework. It highlights that the Bible is God’s “show-and-tell”: his mighty acts of redemption on behalf of sinners, told for the purpose of restoring broken relationship with his image bearers. As I mentioned in the last chapter, this should enrich and deepen your approach to Scripture and to people. Don’t be discouraged if your current view or use of Scripture frequently falls into one or more of the categories I mentioned in this chapter. Consider the example of Apollos (Acts 18:24–26) as an encouragement:

Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.

What do I want you to see here? God clearly used Apollos to preach the gospel *before* he met Priscilla and Aquila and gained a fuller understanding of the gospel (which included, presumably, the baptism of the Holy Spirit). He wasn’t doing anything wrong or unwise, and he taught accurately. But he had room to grow in his understanding of God’s redemptive plan. So do all of us! This book is the fruit of my own growth in understanding. I hope you will conclude that within these pages is a “more adequate” approach to Scripture and to people, which will only further and deepen your already active ministry.

In the next chapter we’ll explore what the Bible *is*, and see how it sets the stage for wise application of Scripture to life.

## Discussion Questions

1. Consider the ways you heard, read, and/or ministered the Scriptures this past week. Which view(s) of the Bible mentioned above are most characteristic of your life, your community, and your ministry?
2. Where have you seen these view(s) of the Bible helpful in your life and ministry? Where have you seen them to be problematic or deficient?
3. Do you think each passage of Scripture should lead to a principle for living or to some doctrinal proposition? Why or why not?

