

## **Introduction**

I have a pastoral record book in my office in which I've recorded the date, title, text, and place of every sermon I've preached. According to that book, on April 7, 1991, I preached a sermon titled "Be Still" from Psalm 46:10 here at Bethel Friends. I have a confession to make these 22 years later. Psalm 46:10 doesn't mean what I said it means in that sermon. The truth is that I misinterpreted it. There's a lesson in that confession of mine for us all and it's this. When it comes to the Bible, we need to go straight to the source and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

## **Scripture Is Profitable**

Our text is about what Paul calls "**the sacred writings**" in verse 15 and "**Scripture**" in verse 16. Those terms refer to the 39 books of the Old Testament. The equivalent for us is all 66 books of the Bible.

Now, notice what Paul tells us about the Bible in verse 16. It's inspired. That means God revealed its contents to its authors and moved them to write what He revealed. In reality then, He Himself wrote it.

God, as infinite Creator, knows everything there is to know about the universe and life in it. It follows, therefore, that this book He wrote is "**profitable,**" as Paul says it in verse 16. It benefits us and he tells us how in verse 15. It gives us "**the wisdom that leads to salvation.**" Salvation in the New Testament refers to having abundance of life now on earth and completeness of life forever in heaven. Well, the Bible gives us the best possible information about that salvation and how to attain it.

Think about abundant life now, what we call "**the good life.**" Disciples of Jesus can attain it and our part in doing so is this. We must accommodate reality. We must interact beneficially with it. Doing so is a four-step process. First, we ask the question, "**What is real?**" What is true or so about the subject or issue before us? Second, we answer that question correctly. We determine what is true or so about it. Third,

we make value judgments about what is true or so. We identify what is good and bad or helpful and harmful about it. And fourth, we routinely make and carry out decisions that are rooted in what is true or so and what is good or helpful.

Let's relate four words in verse 16 to that process. Paul writes that the Bible is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training. Those words imply that the Bible addresses the second and third steps of our process. It defines what is real and not real (second step) and what is valuable and not valuable (third step). If we then routinely decide and act according to what is real and valuable, we'll live the good life.

I once counseled a young woman whose attorney father's opinion of her was ruining her life. She was an exemplary homemaker for her husband and two sons, but her father's disappointment in her made her think she was a loser. So, I brought Biblical content to bear on that issue of hers. Question - What is real? Correct answer: God thinks that homemaking is as noble a profession as practicing law is. And she is what she is before God (not before her father) nothing more or less. Value judgment: God's approval counts far more than her father's does. Decision: Play to an audience of One, God, not many, her father. The opinions of others is one of our most crushing burdens in life. Playing to God not others removes that burden and gives us peace.

That illustrates that the Bible truly does give us the wisdom that leads to salvation. It teaches, reproves, corrects, and trains and thus, is profitable. It's an essential element in living the good life.

But as profitable as the Bible can be, it is so only if we learn it, which I'll define particularly next week. I speak from experience. I lived for 48 years with the crushing burden of the opinion of others. That's because I didn't learn what Matthew 6:1-18 teaches. But once I did, I acted on it and with the Holy Spirit's help, was eventually set free. I say that to say this. The Bible is profitable – but only if we learn it.

Now, there are two ways to learn it, each of which I'm going to identify and explain.

## Getting It Secondhand

One way is to get it secondhand. We rely on someone else or more likely several someone else's to tell us what it says and means. We call those someone else's our masters, that is, our teachers. They can be parents, pastors, Sunday school teachers, authors, Bible commentators, televangelists, and friends, to name a few.

That is a valid and even necessary way of learning the Bible. In fact, that's how Timothy learned much of it. Look at the clause Paul uses in verse 14, "**knowing from whom you have learned them.**" Timothy had three teachers who taught him much of what he knew about his Bible. Note Paul's observation in verse 15, "**from childhood you have known the sacred writings.**" He knew them because, as 1:5 implies, his mother and grandmother taught them to him. They were two of his teachers. But he had a third, according 3:10. It was Paul. It's clear. Timothy learned the Bible from others and so should we.

For two reasons. First, a teacher can sometimes teach us in a short period of time what it took him or her years of study and effort to learn. Second, a teacher can sometimes teach us what we wouldn't get on our own. It makes sense, therefore, to learn from teachers.

One of my teachers, for instance, is a Bible commentator named Derek Kidner. I've purchased and studied every commentary he's written – on Genesis, Ezra, Nehemiah, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the best commentary I know, his on the Psalms. His grasp of the Bible and ability to communicate what he grasps creatively and clearly is unexcelled. Let me give you an example of what I mean, part of his commentary on Ecclesiastes 10:1: "**Verse 1 puts into a vividly unpleasant form the principle on which the previous chapter ended: that it takes far less to ruin something than to create it. But in this verse it is the sudden lapse or foolish impulse that is the trouble: and there are endless instances of prizes forfeited and good beginnings marred in a single reckless moment – not only by the irresponsible, such as Esau, but by the sorely tried, such as Moses and Aaron.**" Those

are profound insights, several of which I wouldn't have gleaned from the text myself. Learning the reality Kidner taught about the **"reckless moment,"** and then accommodating it, has made both my person and life noticeably better than they were.

Kidner illustrates one way we can learn the Bible. We get it secondhand, from others. And it's good and wise to do so.

### **The Danger of Getting It Secondhand**

But it can also be dangerous. We see that in verse 13.

Paul writes here about **"evil men"** and **"imposters"** who **"deceive."** He's referring to false teachers. They were individuals who came into churches Timothy over saw and taught the Christians there untruths. We know from Paul's letters that false teachers were one of the biggest problems that the first century church faced.

That reveals the ever present danger of getting Biblical beliefs secondhand. It's being deceived. What the person from whom we're learning teaches may be false. What he says is simply not so. There are two possible scenarios in that regard. The teacher knows that what he's teaching is false, but for personal gain, teaches it anyway. Or he doesn't know that what he's teaching is false. He thinks it true instead and so teaches it.

Let's go back to Psalm 46:10. The psalmist writes, quoting God, **"Be still and know that I am God."** That means, I used to believe, that Christians should withdraw from activity and noise and spend time alone with God. Every sermon, Sunday school lesson, and conversation I ever heard about that verse interpreted it that way. So, I believed what I heard and then communicated it to you. But, I was wrong. Don't misunderstand. We do need to withdraw and spend time alone with God. But that isn't what Psalm 46:10 teaches – at all. I was deceived and unintentionally deceived you as a result.

That illustrates the ever present danger of learning Biblical content secondhand. It's being deceived. That's especially so in our age of mass

communication. Countless teachers access us through television, internet, radio, books, and more. Typical Christians, as a result, have chosen teachers outside their local churches. But they can and sometimes do teach things from the Bible that are false.

I once conversed with a Christian who quit playing cards for fun with his family. He did so, he said, because of what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 8. We shouldn't do something if it causes our brother to stumble. He learned that his playing cards with his family offended several Christians he knew and so, he quit. You can see that he took **"cause to stumble"** to mean **"offend"** and I asked him why he did. It was because that was what a preacher he watches on television said. But he was wrong. **"Cause to stumble"** doesn't encompass offending.

His story demonstrates the ever present danger of getting the Bible secondhand. The teachers from whom we learn it can be wrong.

### **Go Straight to the Source**

We must, therefore, do two things.

First, make sure our teachers are good ones. It's imperative that we choose the best teachers from whom we can learn the Bible. We should look for two things. One is competence. They should be insightful, objective people who have a firm grasp of the Bible and human life. Another is character. They should be humble people who have a deep and familiar friendship with Jesus.

Let's go back to verse 14 again and the clause, **"knowing from whom you have learned them."** Timothy needed to know from whom he had learned Scripture and so do we. We take a major step forward in life in fact when we ask and thoughtfully answer two questions. First, who are the ones from whom we have learned what we believe? And second, do they have competence and character? If they don't, we replace them with new teachers who do. We make sure our teachers are good ones.

But there's a second and even more affecting thing we must do. Go straight to the source. The source to which I'm referring is the Bible.

Think of it in terms of the telephone game. Someone whispers a sentence to a person who whispers it to the next person who whispers it to the next person and so on until every person in the group has heard it. The object of the game is to assess how close what the last person hears is to what the first person said. It's claimed in that regard that it's never the same and rarely even close to the same. The moral is that the closer we are to the original source of a statement the more likely we are to get it right. It's better to get it firsthand, from the someone who whispered it first, than secondhand or thirdhand.

It like that with the Bible. It's best, if we can, to get it firsthand by going straight to the original source, the Bible itself. It's best if our understanding of a verse or text comes from our own examination of it, not someone else's. That means that we interpret and apply the verse or text ourselves, which enables us to assure two things.

One is the accuracy of what others tell us about the Bible. Let's go back to the Christian who quit playing cards. I asked him if he himself had carefully examined 1 Corinthians 8 and what it says and means. When he said "**No,**" I encouraged him to do so and to compare the television preacher's understanding to his own.

Going straight to the source enables us to assure a second thing – the accuracy of what we tell others about the Bible. I've learned my own lesson in that regard. I don't do what I used to do - preach from a verse or text secondhand as I did on April 7, 1991. I always preach from it firsthand instead. Asking the Holy Spirit's help, I make sure I carefully exegete or analyze it before I preach it or share it.

## **Conclusion**

What we need to do then, in closing, is clear. Get the Bible firsthand. To do that of course, we must know how and that's what I'm going to preach about next week. In the meantime I leave you with this thought. Don't play telephone when it comes to the Bible. Go straight to the source instead. Interpret and apply the Bible yourself.