

Doctrine of Scripture - Lesson 4

Revelation, Inspiration, Translation

Last week, we talked about how the Bible is *necessary* and *sufficient* for us to rightly know God and His plan of redemption in the gospel of Christ, be saved through faith in Christ, trust and obey God, and to grow and maintain a healthy, mature Christian life. And this is because the Bible is *God's revelation* of Himself to us, since it is God's holy, *inspired* Word. We touched on the idea of revelation last week, but I think it's worth considering a little more deeply today. We'll look at what revelation is, how this impacts our understanding of what it means that the Bible is *inspired*, and see how the Bible came into being. But then, we'll also look at what that means for how the Bible comes to us *today*, through translations, and how this influences the way we should read and study the Bible.

So let's start with the doctrine of *revelation*.

I. **Revelation**

Revelation - God *speaking* in order to reveal Himself to us. We can talk about two types of revelation: *General* (indirect and universal) revelation, and *Special* (direct and particular) revelation.

A. **General Revelation**

God *spoke* and created the world. We can see the world, Creation itself, all around us - it is the byproduct, the result, of God's speech in the beginning; this Creation, as the result of God speaking, *reveals* things about God to us. This is *general revelation* - it communicates general truths about God and reality to everyone - it shows that God exists, that we exist because God made us, and that He is still continuing to uphold all things in His sovereignty. This is *indirect, general* communication from God to all people. He communicates real truths to us - we can learn about God's design and intention for us and the world through studying creation. However, because our hearts and minds are twisted by Sin, we do not rightly understand or receive general revelation - so, we need *special revelation* from God in order to make sense of general revelation and truly, personally know God Himself

Rom. 1:19-21: "For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For His invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened."

B. Special Revelation

1. GOD speaking directly to people (e.g., GOD speaking to Adam and Eve in Garden, or with Noah, Moses, or Abraham)
2. Christ the Word of God - reveals the fullness of God, making God's mystery and plans of old fully known and revealed
3. The Bible itself is God's *written* revelation of Himself to us - it is GOD's *inspired Word*;

II. Inspiration

God speaks through the written Word of the Bible because He *divinely inspired* real men, throughout history, to write exactly what He wanted them to write. So it is true that they recorded God's past revelation of Himself through His speech, works, and miracles. But it is also true that *the very words of the Bible themselves* are special revelation - the entire Bible is God's Word, GOD speaking and revealing Himself, Truth, and His plans of redemption in Christ to us.

A. How did we get the Bible?

The Bible did not float down from Heaven one day. It was written over a long period of time by a number of different men, including Moses, David, Isaiah, John, Paul, and others, even some whose names we don't know. It is made up of 66 different books, and these books are grouped into two main sections. The first section (the bigger one), is known as the "Old Testament." The 39 books of the Old Testament were all written before Jesus came to earth. But even though Jesus Christ does not appear as a character in these books, he is still the focus of them because they tell the story that leads up to him, filled with a number of prophecies about his coming. Because it was written primarily for the Israelite people of old, who spoke Hebrew, the *Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew, with a few sections written in Aramaic.*

The second section of the Bible (the smaller one) is called the "New Testament." The 27 books of the New Testament were written after Jesus came to earth, completed his ministry, died, and was raised. Some of these books were written to tell the story of his coming, and others were written to give instructions to those who believed in Jesus about their faith and how they should live in light of it. *The books of the New Testament were all written in Greek, the language that was used for widespread communication by that time (the time of the Roman Empire).*

Jesus and the apostles clearly affirmed the books of the Old Testament as the Word of God. But the New Testament was not written until after the time of Jesus, so the process of coming to receive the books of the New Testament as God's Word took some time. Over the centuries, the church heard God's voice in these 27 books, and gradually came to a complete agreement that these books, together with the books of the Old Testament, should be regarded as unlike all other books in the world.

GOd *inspired* these men to write the Bible, with the exact words He wanted them to use. And yet, it is also true that *these men wrote it using exactly their own words*. To be sure, there are many parts in scripture where they simply copy what God dictates to them to say, like when the prophets Moses, Isaiah, or Jeremiah receive an audible Word from God, copy it down, and write before it, "Thus says the Lord." But there are many other parts, such as recorded history, narrative, poems, psalms, and even entire letters written to specific people and churches, that were not directly dictated by God. When Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians, he wasn't merely copying down what God dictated, word for word. No, he was writing what he thought the Philippians needed to hear. And yet, at the exact same time, he was being *divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit* to write down the exact words that God wanted him to write, in such a way that it bears the very authority of GOd, as God's holy, inspired, and inerrant word.

Therefore, this means that...

B. The actual words of the Bible are GOD's inspired Word

Now, that sounds plainly obvious enough, but I think it's important to just explicitly recognize this fact. It is simultaneously true that the words of the Bible are both *God's Words* and the *human authors' words*. God inspired *real men* to write *His Word* through *their own human words, in human languages*, to a real, specific, historical *audience*, in a specific cultural and historical context. And these exact words that they wrote are *GOd's inspired words*.

THis means that in order to hear and understand GOd's Word, we have to understand the actual words of the Bible. Again, this might seem like an obvious point, not even worth mentioning (and I hope it seems that way to all of us here today!) But I believe it *is* worth mentioning because there have been many theologically liberal scholars, pastors, and Bible teachers over the last couple of hundred years who have thought differently. In fact, I've even met Christians, Sunday school teachers, even pastors and deacons in S.B.C. churches that have thought and taught differently. They would claim that we hear GOd's Word through *reading* the

Bible, but that the Bible isn't necessarily God's Word itself. They would say that the Holy Spirit speaks to us when we read the Bible, and that the *impression the Spirit gives us*, or the word that the Spirit gives to a preacher in a sermon, or lesson, or the like - they would say that *that* is God's Word; the Spirit tells us God's Word as we read the Bible, but that the words themselves on the page aren't necessarily inspired, or inerrant, or authoritative. Some would even go so far to say that GOD's Word is *behind* the words on the page, so we have to somehow get past, or around, what the words say, in order to get at what God is *really* revealing.¹

And that's clearly *false and dangerous*, isn't it? After all, isn't a sneaky, deceptive way of making the Bible say whatever we want it to say, and getting rid of the parts we don't like by claiming that those particular words or passages aren't really God's Word - they're just there so that God can tell us what He *really* wants us to think when we read them. And if we think that way, well then what we're really saying is that *our* words, *our* thoughts and opinions, are true, trustworthy, and authoritative, not the words of the Bible itself.

But that's just not an option for us as Christians. As we've seen over the past couple of weeks, the Bible itself claims to be God's Word. And that's an all or nothing claim - it is either God's holy, inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word, or it isn't. There is no middle ground. Therefore, we must firmly hold our ground in asserting that the words of the Bible itself, as originally written by the men GOD inspired, are *the Holy, Inspired, and Inerrant - even Infallible - Word of God*.

And since the Bible was written by *real men*, inspired by GOD to write *in their own language and culture*, we have to understand the *words themselves* in order to understand the truth and meaning of GOD's Word that He communicates through the Words - the words on the page themselves as inspired by GOD. Therefore, we understand GOD's Word by *understanding the inspired, written words themselves*.

This means that in order to understand any given Bible verse or passage, we have to understand the vocabulary, grammar, syntax, historical and cultural context, literary context, logical argument and structure of the passage, and so forth. Now, we're going to look at all of that in more detail, when we talk about how to study the Bible. But for now, I want us to simply recognize that this means we have to *understand the words that were originally inspired by God*

¹ Such thinking is found in elements of the German higher criticism movement of the 1800s, and also in the Neo-Orthodox movement of the 20th century. Such thinking can be found, for example, in the works of Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

and written by those inspired men in the original languages: namely, Ancient Hebrew and Koine Greek. But that poses a bit of a problem, doesn't it? None of us grew up speaking these languages. So how, then, are we to understand God's Word if we don't know the languages it was written in?

Thankfully, we can do so through *trustworthy translations*.

III. Translations of the Bible

The Bible was written in the *original languages* - Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek - *not English* - therefore, we need modern translations. The original scriptures themselves are inerrant - not our translations. Translations are only inerrant and authoritative in so much as they *accurately translate and represent the original revelation of God's Word*. This means translations *can be wrong* - some translations are better or worse than others. But, thankfully, we have many translations today that are *very solid, reliable, and trustworthy*.

Still, it's helpful for us to remember that the act of translation is, in itself, an act of *interpretation*. A translation tells you what they think the words mean. That's also what we call interpretation - interpreting the meaning of the words, saying what we think they mean. Therefore, we need to think carefully about how the Bible is translated so we don't confuse *human interpretation* for the Bible itself.

So the first thing we need to know is the difference between a *paraphrase* and a *translation*.

A. Paraphrase vs. Translation

A paraphrase is not the same thing as a translation. A translation tries to give an accurate representation, even a "re-telling" of exactly what was said in the first language by converting it into the second. The job of interpretation is to give the *original author's words*. A paraphrase, on the other hand, merely gives the *gist* or the *overall meaning* of what was said, but *in your own words and from your own perspective*.

For example, let's say my Puerto Rican friend from Brooklyn was visiting us today, walked in, and say, "Buenos dias, mis hermanos y hermanas!"

Now, since most of us don't speak Spanish, I could translate that as, "Good morning, my brothers and sisters!" But notice that I'm not telling you *what it means* per se - I'm not interpreting it, I'm just giving a literal translation. I'm not unpacking what "good morning" means, nor am I explaining all that is meant by "brothers and sisters." Is our Spanish friend

under the assumption that we are his blood relatives, even siblings? No, of course not - he's referring to us as fellow Christians. But that meaning has to be interpreting.

Now, instead of *translating* his words, I could give a paraphrase. I could say, "He means, 'Hey, ya'll!'" Now, that's true - he is giving us a greeting, telling us hey. But that leaves a lot out, doesn't it? It doesn't fully *translate* what he's trying to say.

A paraphrase of the Bible is the same way. It is simply someone from our day saying what he or she *thinks* the Bible says. But we need to recognize that for what it is - it's simply another human's own interpretation of the Bible. We need to treat that the same way we would a commentary or a book about the Bible, and not confuse it for scripture, or give it the same weight.

For example, *The Message* is a very popular *paraphrase* of the Bible today. But unfortunately, many people are under the assumption that it is a translation. But Eugene Peterson never claims that it is a translation - he claims it as his own paraphrase. A good, solid Bible translation is not just the product of one man or woman - it is made up of a whole counsel and board of translators and editors, to try and be as accurate and careful as possible to make sure that the words of the original manuscripts themselves are translated, not just paraphrased into the opinions of a man or woman today. For this reason, I would actually *discourage* us from using a paraphrase of the Bible, like *The Message*. If you're going to read it, just make sure you understand that your reading Peterson's *interpretation* of what he thinks the Bible says, and tread lightly (because we would actually disagree with a lot of his interpretations).

So instead, we need to rely on good, solid, trustworthy *translations*. But that leads us to another issue to think through...

B. Translation and Interpretation

Now, I argued that paraphrases are different because they are *just interpretation*. However, the hard thing about translation is that it always requires at least *some* interpretation on the part of the translator. *Translation* seeks to accurately give the word-for-word meaning of what someone said. But *interpretation* is trying to convey the *intended meaning* of the words said.

So let's return to the example of my friend who comes in and says, "Buenos dias mis hermanos y hermanas!" Now, we all agree that my paraphrase of, "Hey ya'll" doesn't quite cut it. So, I could give a better paraphrase, and say he means, "Good morning, my fellow Christians!"

Now, that gets much closer to the actual sense of what he's communicating doesn't it? I'm communicating the thought behind the words. But notice that I didn't just translate - I *interpreted* the meaning. And in doing so, I changed the literal words used from "brothers and sisters" to "fellow Christians." I got the meaning across - but we also lose out on the close, intimate, familiar connotations of those words "brothers and sisters" don't we? And this could get even more complicated when we talk about translating poetry, or songs, or metaphors and cultural idioms, especially when there isn't an exact match for a word in both Hebrew and English, for example.

Because of this, most translations of the Bible fall along a *spectrum*:

Thought-for-Thought ----- **Word-For-Word**

1. *Thought-for-thought*

These translations try to give the original author's *intended meaning* of the Biblical text, as much as possible. But the problem with this, of course, is that this quickly become the task of *interpretation*. The farther we get from the original words that the Bible was written in, and the closer we get to what we think the words *mean*, then the closer we getting to *interpretation*. If we go too far to this side, we end up back with a *paraphrase*. So the *strength* of this approach is that they are usually a lot easier for us to read and understand. THE *drawback* is this approach is that they usually contain a lot more interpretation in them. But the most trustworthy of these kinds of translations try hard to give the intended meaning while still trying to stay within the appropriate bounds of honest translation.

Strength: readability

Weakness: less accurate

Example: *New Living Translation (NLT)*

Probably the best, most trustworthy thought-for-thought translations available today are the *New International Version (NIV)* and the *Christian Standard Bible (CSB)*. These two are closer to the middle of the spectrum, though; they're much closer to word-for-word translations than to a paraphrase or straight interpretation.

2. *Word-for-Word*

These translations try to give as accurate and literal a translation of each word from one language to another as possible. They try to preserve as much of the original language and

structure as the can, while still allowing the translation to be understandable in the second language. They try to take the word from Greek or Hebrew and move it over as accurately and literally as possible into English (or another language). The *strength* of this approach is that we're preserving the *actual, original words* that the Bible was written in. And, after all, *those exact words* are the inspired Word of God - that's what we need to read and understand! So these translations give us more accuracy in terms of showing exactly which words were originally used. The *drawback* of this approach is that they can be more wooden and harder to understand the more literal the translation is.

Strength: Accuracy

Weakness: Can sometimes be more wooden or less readable

Examples: King James Version (KJV) , New King James Version (NKJV), New American Standard Bible (NASB), English Standard Version

The KJV used this approach, but it is now several hundred years old. THis means that it is not as accurate in its translations as our more modern word-for-word translations (since our understanding of manuscripts and the original languages has improved a lot, espeicially since finding the Dead Sea Scrolls). It is also much less readable than others, since the English language has changed so much in the last 400 years.

I personally think the NASB and ESV are the best, most accurate, and most readable Word-for-Word translations available today.