

The Chaos Ladder

Episode 3 - Yellow lawn mowers

[Podcast intro]

Hi, I'm Steve Flowers and you're listening to The Chaos Ladder-- a podcast that explores how the Bible is not a gaping pit waiting to swallow us but a ladder for us to climb.

[Episode intro]

Everyone, and I mean everyone, brings presumptions or preconceptions about what the Bible is and what it is saying. But that's not the problem. The problem is when we either remain blind to them or, even worse, deny we have any.

[Main content]

A lot of my dreams blend elements from my past with elements that have never been part of my life while I think it's all part of my normal, current life in my dream and it never seems out of place to me during the dream. I want to tell you about an actual dream I had some years ago that was in that category. The dream took place in my previous home church, only it didn't look like my church at that time, and in my dream it felt like we were going through the usual worship service elements, only most of them weren't! The dream went something like this:

It opened well after our Sunday morning worship service had already started. We were listening to the men's choir, dressed in their customary tuxedos, who had started to sing after the jazz ensemble had just finished playing when it suddenly hit me as I sat in the pew-- the yellow lawn mowers were not on the podium! Every Sunday there were always several yellow lawn push mowers started by hand crank immediately after the men's choir finished and then remained running while the offertory music was played.

I took it upon myself to help so I quickly walked out the back of the sanctuary to the church foyer and found all the yellow lawn mowers lined up under the coat rack. Apparently, someone just forgot to move them to the podium. So quietly and efficiently I moved all the yellow lawn mowers on to the podium behind the men's choir (who were lined up on the floor level) while they were still singing. With the men's choir nearly finished, I felt pretty pleased with myself that I managed to avert a significant disruption in our worship and now only needed to start each yellow lawn mower as the offertory began.

And that's when it dawned on me during my dream-- won't the mowers be very noisy, making it difficult to hear the offertory music? And that sudden realization then led to the second and more obvious question I then had in my dream: "Wait, why are we using lawn mowers in our worship service?!" And literally with that revelatory question, my dream ended.

Perhaps as much odd parable as dream, its message was not lost on me. I found myself wondering what yellow lawn mowers I was adding to my worship experience that were out of place, not needed, and just noise covering how God was trying to be revealed.

Similar to my dream, our view of the Bible can be full of yellow lawn mowers that we bring to our understanding of it. Many times our biblical yellow lawn mowers don't seem out of place because either having those yellow lawn mowers is the only way we've known the Bible or adding them seemed to solve some issue we were having with the Bible or in life. The yellow lawn mowers we've added to our understanding of the Bible seem normal but are in fact out of place, serve no positive function, or are just needless noise covering up the Bible's message. We need to come to the same realization I did in my dream when it comes to how we approach the Bible: "Wait, why have we added all these noisy lawn mowers to the Bible?!"

Yellow lawn mowers represent all the presumptions and preconceptions we bring to the Bible. They cover up both what the authors were saying back then and what God's Spirit is saying through the Bible today. As you evaluate your own presumptions or preconceptions you may be bringing to the Bible, I want to take a moment and distinguish between those two terms as regards beliefs about the Bible. A presumption would be an assumption based on very limited information about the Bible. A preconception would be a belief projected onto the Bible so it aligns with other views you hold. You could say a presumption comes from a lack of knowledge and a preconception comes from a bias to protect a particular belief. We all experience both, and, unfortunately, one or both have usually made their way into our understanding about the Bible.

Presumptions and preconceptions drive our view of the nature of the Bible. And by the nature of the Bible, I mean answers to questions such as how did the Bible come to be, what is the purpose of the Bible, and what does it mean to say the Bible is inspired. Let me give you some very broad examples of presumptions and preconceptions people have about the Bible:

- If you presume (limited knowledge) God controlled what's written in the Bible's books then you'll wrestle with some of the Bible's content. You'll struggle to align the Bible's description of history and science according to modern standards and to accept that the fates of some people in the Bible were exactly what God intended.
- If you preconceive (have a bias toward) the nature of the Bible is God's rulebook or God's answer book for life, then it's probably because you prefer a life with structure or specific answers to life's uncertainties. The struggle will come because this preconception will cause you to read everything in the Bible through the lens of whether you're following or breaking God's rules or the lens that every story you read must be an answer to some current life crisis.

- Preconceptions (a bias to bolster or protect a particular view) we bring to the Bible can also be associated with political views we may hold. For example:
 - If you strongly believe that healthcare should be provided for everyone whether they can afford it or not, then every story of physical healing in the Bible is simply God's support for this.
 - If you believe capital punishment is warranted in certain cases then all the biblical laws with death penalties or stories where death is the judgment are simply God's condonement of death penalty laws we have today.

An important and common point here for all these examples is not whether you may be able to sincerely believe God is speaking to any of these issues through the Bible today but what the starting point should be for how you apply the Bible to any of these scenarios.

When we bring our own presumptions and preconceptions to the Bible it's like we've already drawn the picture of what the Bible is. We're simply choosing which colors in its palette of verses we decide to fill it in with. And when we do that, it's called proof texting.

I look at the presumptions and preconceptions we bring to the Bible like the frog DNA from the original Jurassic Park movie. There's a scene when the visitors there to evaluate the park receive a tour of the lab where the dinosaurs are being genetically produced. The tour explains how they captured the dinosaurs' DNA from mosquitoes trapped in fossilized tree sap. Because the long and complex DNA they extracted was incomplete, they used modern-day frog DNA to fill in the gaps of the DNA sequence. Using frog DNA also made them feel they could control how the dinosaurs were created. Sure. Sounded like a solid plan at the time. What could go wrong? It's shortly thereafter that director Steven Spielberg cues the dinosaur chaos!

That's very analogous to what Christianity has been doing throughout its history when it tried to recreate the real message of the Bible by filling in the gaps of their biblical knowledge with their own version of frog DNA, usually with the same idea to control the creation of how they would view the Bible. And similarly in Christian history, when that technique was adopted widely or across governments, that's when we can cue the biblical chaos! When we add frog DNA, that is to say our presumptions and preconceptions we bring to the Bible, it greatly increases the chance that we're corrupting our ability to separate out the archaic and the dehumanization elements from hearing where God is still speaking through the Bible today.

So instead of adding our frog DNA to the Bible to have our preferred answers about who God is and how God operates, we need instead to approach the Bible as is to let it reveal its own nature. This allows us a much better ability to see where and how God is being reflected within the Bible's pages. You'll know every time you're at that fork in the road between your own presumption or preconception and the actual nature of the Bible because there's a clear indicator-- you'll find yourself being frustrated or in denial over something in the Bible. And every time you come upon one of those forks of frustration in the road, the path that seems more comfortable and familiar, that's better paved with wider lanes and plenty of signage will be more likely to be one of your own presumptions or preconceptions. The other road on that fork will be

the one much less traveled, unfamiliar, probably uncomfortable, and looking like it hasn't had road crew maintenance in 20 years. It's time for the Church to take the road less traveled.

In the next episode I'll talk about what I see is both the biggest presumption and preconception I see that Christians, both liberal and conservative alike, bring to the Bible. And, yeah, that's a teaser.

Thanks for listening to The Chaos Ladder. Hope you'll join me next time. Take care.

[Outro statement]

The Chaos Ladder is part of StoriesFromAVillage.org, a podcast and essay ministry of Stone Village Church in Columbus, Ohio. You can find a transcript of this podcast on the web site.
