

The Chaos Ladder

Episode 8 - The greatest revelation of God

[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]

A very logical question for Christians to ask is "If the Bible is inspired because it reveals God, then what of God is being revealed through the Bible?" Well, I don't want to spoil this episode for you but I'll give you a small hint-- it's a one-word answer that begins with a capital J... and ends with esus.

[Main content]

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Many Christians have been taught Jesus is saying that belief in Him, in other words being a Christian, is the only way to get to heaven. But the verse needs to be understood in the context of the entire passage which is a conversation between Jesus and his disciple Thomas. The conversation is not about how to get to heaven but how to know God. And Jesus very clearly answers during the conversation that "If you know me, you will know my Father also" and that "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."¹ The question Thomas asks becomes a teachable moment in which Jesus tells his disciples that if their heart's desire is to know and serve God, then know and follow Jesus because He is God revealed. This truth is at the heart of the second trait I see when answering the question "What makes the Bible inspired?"

Last episode I talked about the first trait I see when answering that question. I said it's how the Bible allows us to walk in the company of those who came before us. When we do that, the books reveal a pattern of individuals and groups finding themselves between two stories. The first story is the narrative of how God was taught or promised by those who came before them, and the second story is the one of how they came to experience God for themselves. What results is an overall progression in how these ancient people saw God being revealed.

The second trait I see when answering "What makes the Bible inspired?" is that the Bible reveals that Jesus is the greatest revelation of God. As I mentioned in a previous episode, we

¹ John 14:5-9

can see points of God's revelation through scripture but the Bible as a whole is "not merely a verbatim record of (God's) revelation." As such, the Bible includes times when its writers got it right regarding how God revealed God's self to them, but they also "often wrote and acted out of harmony with (God's) revelation."²

But however we see God revealed in the Bible, or outside of it, I believe there has never been a greater revelation of God than in Jesus. He is the purest form of God's revelation we have received. The stories, sayings, actions, and teachings about Jesus are arguably not a perfect revelation of God since they, like the rest of the Bible, were also written by imperfect humans, but they are the best revelation of God that we have. When we embrace that, we must make Jesus the standard for our best understanding of God's nature and what God desires from us.

One of my seminary professors taught me to think of God's revelation down through history as three concentric circles that represent the various means in which God has revealed God's self. The outermost circle would represent any events which one believes God disclosed God's self throughout history that are not recorded in the Bible. The middle circle represents God's revelation we can glean through the stories, events, and persons as recorded in the Bible. But the most inner circle is the personal revelation of God as Jesus.

I came to slightly adapt this metaphor of three concentric circles to be looked at as a bull's eye target (no surprise here that thought occurred to me while I was an FBI Agent). Three concentric circles are essentially the same as a bull's eye target. On a bull's eye target, putting a round in the outer bands is considered hitting the target and does give you points when scoring the target. But the best hits and the highest scores go to hitting the smallest circle in the middle, the bull's eye. Seeing Jesus as the greatest revelation of God means that everything Jesus said and did is literally the bull's eye of understanding who God is and what God desires.

A logical question to arise in response to what I'm saying would be, "How should we view all the books of the Bible that do not tell us stories about or teachings of Jesus?" Do we ignore them?

In short, no, for a few reasons.

The Gospels and other New Testament books are the best ones to teach us about Jesus but if we're not careful, we risk making every jot and tittle in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John the box to which we restrict God. Remember, God did not dictate the Bible, including the Gospels, humans did.

Second, and more importantly, those Gospels tell us that Jesus embraced, taught from, and tied Himself to the Jewish Scriptures, which Christians today call the Old Testament. So it would be at best negligent or at worst dismissive to Jesus for us not to embrace the Old Testament as well. Let me give you a few examples of Jesus' interacting with Old Testament scripture.

In Luke, Jesus began his public ministry by reading aloud in the synagogue from Isaiah and then identified Himself as fulfilling those words as the one "anointed... to bring good news to the

² Madeleine S. and J. Lane Miller, *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (1973 ed.), p. 614

poor..., (and) to let the oppressed go free.”³ It was pretty much a drop-the-mic moment in which Jesus connected Himself to that scripture.⁴

In another example from Luke, when Jesus tells the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, his primary point is not the value of the Old Testament scriptures but He does stress that. The parable begins with the rich man ignoring the poor man Lazarus who was always at his gate. When they both died, Lazarus was carried to Abraham while the rich man was sent to Hades where he was tormented. The rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers so they don't make the same mistake with their lives that he did. Jesus ends the parable with Abraham replying to the rich man's request-- "If (your brothers) do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."⁵ The phrase "Moses and the prophets" is a phrase used to refer to the books of the Old Testament. The exact meaning of that last line is open to interpretation but Jesus appears to be implying that the first problem for both the rich man and his brothers was they hardened their hearts to where God is revealed in the Old Testament.

But where things get really interesting is when Jesus reframes Old Testament scripture. In the last episode I talked about how we can see where people and authors reframed scripture in the Bible after finding themselves between two stories about how God was taught to them and how they experienced God. But when Jesus reframes scripture, He's not re-considering the meaning of scripture after finding himself in conflict with how He was brought up to believe about God. He's doing it as the greatest revelation of God. That means his takes on scripture we see in the Gospels are much more than his own reinterpretations. They serve to recenter scripture. They show how God was meant to be, or should have been, revealed in the passage so it more accurately reflects who God is and what God desires. And when we look at what Jesus reframes, we find the traditionally-accepted meanings of some scriptures were either outside of what God desires or did not go far enough. When Jesus reframed scripture, we are essentially watching God change or add to the plain meaning of the scripture text we have in the Bible.

I'll share a couple of examples:

In Matthew's sermon on the mount Jesus reclaims God's intended revelation as He transforms the traditional interpretations taken of laws from Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Jesus uses the repeated pattern of "You have it heard it said" (as in, this is how you've heard these scriptures taught) and then adds a "But I say to you" section (as in, this is how you need to hear these scriptures). He does this a number of times to various passages, including the final one in which He says, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor...' But I say to you, Love your enemies."⁶

³ Isaiah 61:1-2

⁴ Luke 4:16-21

⁵ Luke 16:19-31

⁶ Matthew 5:17-42 (Matthew 5:21-26 references Exodus 20:13 and Deuteronomy 5:17, 16:18; Matthew 5:27-30 references Exodus 20:14 and Deuteronomy 5:18; Matthew 5:31-32 references Deuteronomy 24:1-4; Matthew 5:33-37 references Leviticus 19:12, Numbers 30:2, and Deuteronomy 23:21; and Matthew 5:38-42 references Exodus 21:23-25, Leviticus 24:20, and Deuteronomy 19:20-21)

A second example of Jesus re-centering scripture-- In the story of the stoning of the woman found in John's Gospel, Jesus takes one of the kill commandments head on.⁷ A woman was brought to Jesus and those who brought her said, "This woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. (The law commands) us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They were referencing laws in Leviticus and Deuteronomy which state when a man and woman commit adultery they are to put to death.⁸ (It deserves to be noted but we'll put aside for the sake of time that they only brought out the woman.) The story says they went through all of this for the purpose of testing Jesus. They thought they were cornering Him with an either/or situation which they believed would be a win-win confrontation. Affirm the letter of the law and you show we are right, don't, and you show yourself to be against the law.

But reframing scripture, especially for Jesus, is never succumbing to someone else's either/or ultimatum. Jesus does not affirm the letter of those kill commandments but neither condemns the law as a whole. Instead, He adds a new spirit to what He believes that law was intended to illuminate when Jesus responds by saying: "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." In one sentence Jesus re-centers a commandment away from emphasizing its penalty and puts the light on where God intended-- an introspective challenge for all people to first acknowledge and account for their own sin instead of seeking first to condemn others.

In the next episode I'll talk about the third and final trait I see when answering the question "What makes the Bible inspired?"

Just a quick reminder that the specific citations for scripture and other sources I've referenced can be found in the footnotes of the essay version of this episode located on StoriesFromAVillage.org.

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.

⁷ John 8:3-11

⁸ Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22