

# The Bible and God's Revelation

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## The Question of Meaning and Purpose

We human beings have deep within us a longing to know what our life is about, whether it means anything, whether there is any purpose for our existence, whether we are responsible to anything or anyone outside ourselves. Many argue that human life and the universe are fundamentally **chance events** and that there is no ultimate meaning or purpose for the universe or for ourselves within the universe. The message of the entire Bible and the Christian Gospel, however, is that we are creatures of a God who is the foundation of meaning both for ourselves and for all that exists. God is the ultimate source of all that exists and its ultimate goal. Although God's full reality encompassing the whole universe is far beyond our reach as humans, nevertheless, as creator, God defines the purpose for our lives.

The Bible repeatedly expresses that the universe itself is God's creation and is not independent of God. In itself, the universe doesn't have standing as something divine or a part of God. Since all that we have access to through our physical existence is the portion of the world that we interact with, we have no direct access to God entirely on our own through the physical world. Unless **God chooses to reveal God's self**, we have no way to find God's nature, character, and will. **Biblical faith is not simply a human search for God, though it often incorporates our searching.**

## The Importance of God's Revelation

Without God's direct self-revelation, we might have a feeling of longing for something more than what we physically experience, we may wonder why we have moral values or a sense of beauty and delight, but we would have no means ultimately to solve the mystery of our own existence. **The Bible is about God's choice in love to reveal himself** to his creatures so that they can have a well-founded relationship with God and so that we can deeply and genuinely know who we ourselves are. We come to the Bible because its message makes sense of our existence at the deepest level.

Again, **we want to know God** – who God is, what God’s character is, and what God desires. We want to know the purposes of the creator who made us. **We have no access to those purposes except through God’s revelation of himself.** The Bible narrative and all the prophetic and poetic elements that surround that narrative show us that God has revealed himself in his world in ways that are diverse – sometimes quite explicit and often very subtle and ambiguous.

## **The Importance of Scripture in God’s Purpose**

The **scriptures** themselves are a **crucial link** in that process of revelation since they encapsulate elements of potential revelation that came in many forms. We find narratives of events, personal experiences, visions, prophetic sermons, poetic insights, songs, and other types of expression. The scriptures allow these many expressions to be transmitted to generations long after their original composition so that they can be experienced and interpreted by people throughout subsequent history. It’s therefore crucial that God is actively involved in the whole process of giving to us the scriptures as part of his overall act of grace in drawing his creatures into a loving relationship with himself and giving them eternal life with God.

## **Scripture within God’s Larger Revelation**

**God is in control of the many ways he reveals himself to us.** But the Scriptures themselves shows us that the Bible is not the only way that God has revealed himself. The Bible is given within a particular strand of human history, but it also shows that God is involved in all human history and is the source of all existence, including all peoples and their stories. Therefore, everything that exists and every event that happens in some way points to God.

God has created the universe, and every part of the universe, from the vastness of space and its distant galaxies, to unimaginably small subatomic particles, to the beauty of a snowflake, to the intricate complexities of mathematics, everything reveals something of the intent and purpose of God (Cf. Psalm 19:1; Romans 1:19-20). God even reveals part of himself in our human experience of our own lives. We are conscious of our own intelligence, will, imagination, perception, freedom, and limitation. We can recognize our human sense of conscience, moral imperative, or sense of right and wrong.

All of it reveals God! But nature, human history, and human consciousness are all very challenging and difficult to interpret with clarity as divine revelation. Without the help of scripture, we might never discern the revelation. To a person who has learned to look for God's presence in the world around us, every nook and cranny of our world is clearly permeated by God. But God's presence never overwhelms us or compels our belief. It is never absolutely indisputable. It must be discerned and always involves faith.

## **Revelation within History and Scripture**

God especially chose to reveal himself within human events through his interaction with a particular people. The Bible tells us that at appropriate times God has manifested himself in very concrete acts of revelation among humans such as by **delivering Israel from Egypt in the Exodus** and especially through the **life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus**. These actions of God, events that manifested and advanced his will, often occurred well before the narratives about them were written down. The Bible also shows that in their own time and place, only a relatively few people perceived with any clarity that these actions or events were divine revelation. The events had to be communicated to the great majority of us who are affected by them through the written narrative of the Bible.

## **Events of Revelation become Narratives of Revelation**

The Bible as it has been handed down and studied among the people of God is therefore a crucial link by which God has allowed people of all generations and all parts of the world to understand and be affected by his saving acts within human history. The biblical narratives show us that it was the actual events occurring uniquely at a particular time and place that were the core of God's revelation. But God has chosen to extend the revelation by using the written biblical text. The biblical text shares in divine revelation by communicating the events and their meaning, impact, and consequences to later generations who, of course, could not be present for the original event. **For all of us of later generations, the Bible is our only access to a clear knowledge of God and his will.** It's a crucial and irreplaceable part of the way God has chosen to make himself known to his creatures.

## The Scriptures are “God-breathed”

**The Scriptures are inspired by God.** Along with the apostle Paul, we affirm that the scriptures are “*inspired by God*” or “**God-breathed**” (*theopneustos*) – 2 Timothy 3:16. When Paul wrote these words, he was writing to Timothy about the importance of the Old Testament, the scriptures that Timothy had known from childhood, as Paul says. But his affirmation applies with just as much emphasis to the New Testament. He describes the scripture by using a newly coined word, *theopneustos*, that combines the ideas of God (*theos*) and the spirit or breath (*pneo, pneuma*). The word does not have a history of usage prior to Paul, and therefore our understanding of what Paul is asserting can only grow from the structure of the word itself. Since God has unlimited and indefinable methods at his disposal for affecting the nature and content of scripture, he can participate in the creation of the scriptures in ways that may sometimes be apparent to us readers and are sometimes invisible to our discernment. The fact that all the scriptures are God-inspired (*theopneustos*) does not specify any particular method of influence except that God is involved; his breath or Spirit is present and active throughout the scriptures. If we imagine that we can define or specify God’s means of breathing in the scriptures, we are greatly overstepping the bounds of our knowledge. When we assert that the scriptures are inspired, we’re saying that the Bible in its content and form has been purposefully affected by God so that **the scriptures are as God wants them to be and that they function effectively to help us to understand God’s own revelation of himself and his guidance for our lives.** The best, indeed, the only trustworthy method we have for understanding what inspiration means is to look carefully at the Bible text itself to discern God’s choices in shaping his revelation.

## The Variety within the Bible

The God we meet in the Bible is almost always surprising to our human understanding and imagination. His ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:8-9). He may often shape his self-revelation in ways that we find disconcerting or astonishing. We need to avoid the idea that we know how God must speak to us or reveal himself to us. As we’ve seen, the content of the Bible shows that **God has chosen to use a great variety of kinds of human expressions for his purposes:** historical narratives, laws, psalms of lament, psalms of celebration, expressions of alienation and spiritual struggle, prophecies,

sermons, proverbs, wisdom poetry, wedding songs, visions, prayers, royal histories, drama, parables, gospels, formal letters, informal letters, apocalyptic symbols, etc., etc. **All these different kinds of expression come to us as words of human beings in human language. But they also come to us also as the word of God.** We do not know the mechanism of how God shaped the writing of the Bible, but we experience the effect. As Paul wrote, *“All scripture is God-breathed and useful for teaching, for reproof, for improvement, for training in righteousness; that the person who belongs to God may be capable, equipped for every good work.”* (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

## **Using All Aspects of the Bible**

God uses all aspects of the Biblical text for his purposes and revelation. The beauty and eloquence of the Psalms, the grand scope of Old Testament history, the authoritative power of Jesus’ teaching, the immediacy of the New Testament epistles, the life-transforming power of the vision of God’s love and grace, all serve God’s self-revelation.

But God also uses elements of the text that may seem to us less helpful or even deeply problematic. He uses the many challenging passages that are found throughout the scriptures: for example, the multiple creation narratives; the various theological points of view in different sections of the Bible; poetry that cries out for violent revenge against enemies; laws that enforce slavery, or subordinate women, or call for brutal punishments; texts describing people such as Job crying out against God; the diversity of four Gospel narratives about Jesus; the differences among multiple narratives of the same event; etc. He uses all the elements that people have sometimes decried as weaknesses of the Bible in order to show us what he considers important and what he does not. **All aspects of the Bible play a role in revealing God.** The Bible is as God wants it to be.

## **The Bible as Incarnation**

In a very important sense, the Bible is an **embodiment** or **incarnation** of God’s actions to save humanity, and the Bible itself continues the process of incarnation described throughout the Bible. The God we meet in the Bible seems never to choose to reveal himself through abstract discourse or philosophical conceptualities. He is always involved in the real and everyday life of people, in the events of their unfolding history, in

their worship, in the storytelling and imagination that shapes their lives, in the hopes and values that give them strength in difficult situations. He chose to reveal himself to people by committing himself through promises, covenants, acts of deliverance, laws and guidance to a small, weak, and often rebellious nation like Israel. He revealed himself through their history, laws, poetry, and prophecy. Within that complex and often difficult relationship, he ultimately chose to reveal himself through individual, personal incarnation – the deepest possible involvement in humanity itself. As the Word/Logos became flesh in Jesus, God chose to manifest himself in a particular Jewish individual at a particular time and place – an expected Messiah (Anointed King) who overturned almost every expectation of a kingly Messiah. As God, he became completely human, and he both served humanity and suffered human betrayal, suffering, and death.

The announcement of these earthshaking events was given over to a tiny band of believers empowered by his Spirit. They proclaimed God’s seemingly foolish or scandalous message in the heart of a powerful and hostile empire. This entire process of revelation and salvation was handed down to later generations through written words treasured within the community of believers. Though we suppose that **God could have chosen to reveal himself to later generations in any way he wished, he chose to make himself known through those human words handed down in writing from specific people at specific times.** The human characteristics of the Bible are part of God’s ongoing involvement in incarnation. They reflect the character of the God who *“chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong”* (1 Corinthians 1:27). The character of the Bible may seem *“weak in the world”* but in carrying out God’s purposes it has shown itself to embody God’s own word and power by which he created the world and by which he continues to transform it.

### **The Bible as Specific Books**

**The Bible is made up of those books that under the guidance of God’s Spirit have been recognized by the people of God to express authoritatively the will of God and tell of God’s actions.** The Bible is an anthology of works by many individuals over a long period of time. Some of the authors are known, and many are unknown. The authority of their writings does not depend on the genius, fame, or skill of the authors but on fact that their writings were included within the scriptures. Just as God chose to use human

words in human writings to express his own Word, he also chose to use human communities to recognize, select, and hand down the scriptures.

The books that we call the Old Testament were selected through the Jewish people and recognized and affirmed by Jesus and his disciples and Christian believers after them. The books of the New Testament were identified through the life, worship, and teaching of the early generations of Christians. The biblical “canon” (list of the contents of scripture) was largely complete and agreed upon by the end of the second century, but a few New Testament books were disputed until the fourth century. God’s use of faulty Christian communities to recognize the New Testament scriptures is simply a continuation of how God has used what is weak in order to manifest his own unstoppable strength.

### **The Bible and the Human Desire for Perfection**

**The Bible reflects God’s desire for a response of faith from his creatures.** The Bible does what God intended for it to do, but it does not fit any typical human definition of perfection or “inerrancy.” A careful reading of the Bible shows that there was no ideal of editorial perfection or historical inerrancy that was imposed on its diverse texts. That simply was not a characteristic that God intended for the scriptures to have. God chose, for example, to give us not one but four Gospels that diverge from each other in numerous ways. The Gospels’ differences are nearly as important as their overall similarities in revealing the rich texture of Jesus’ life. If we impose a human ideal of perfect harmony on the scriptures, we are going against God’s own choice for how he wished to reveal his word. We as readers of the Bible, therefore, should not be concerned with harmonizing every alleged or real discrepancy between texts in the Bible. We should accept the texts as they are given to us by God and learn to value all their characteristics, both those that make immediate sense to us and those that challenge us or cause us puzzlement or discomfort.

### **The Bible Narrative and the Narrative of Nature**

Similarly, we should not struggle to harmonize every Biblical text with discoveries about the natural world, geology, astronomy, etc. In almost every situation within the Bible, God was not concerned to give us revelation concerning such physical matters. The

creation narratives of Genesis, for example, do not reveal such basic pieces of information as that the earth is a planet spinning on its axis and revolving around the sun. The narrative uses images of the world that were understandable to ordinary people of the time when they were written. God uses the physical universe itself to reveal the nature and history of that universe. He made the universe discoverable, to be read and understood when people were able to make sense of it. The Bible has a deeper and more basic relationship to human life. There, God gives us what we need to hear and know in order to respond in faith and love to him, to have a relationship with the God who made us. He does not overwhelm people then or now with information we cannot understand. By becoming involved in our faulty human life, he shows his grace and woos us to himself so that we may respond in faith.

**God shows us what is important to him through the character of what is included in the Biblical revelation.** In the New Testament, for example, God has given us four narratives of Jesus' life, teaching, ministry, death, and resurrection – the Gospels. Then, there is a selective narrative (Acts) of the Spirit guiding the spread of the Gospel and the growth of the early Christian communities, followed by specific letters by Paul and others that deal with concrete situations and the application of the Gospel to those situations. Finally, there are visions of the consummation of all things – Revelation. The new scriptures of Christianity fit the new reality of the church. No law books are included that correspond to such books as Leviticus. The character of the scriptures of the New Testament reflects the character of the Gospel itself. The Bible as a whole, shows us an unfolding, continually developing revelation of God through history. The New Testament witness to Jesus provides the crucial lens through which the whole story – both the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament – is to be seen and interpreted. Even as God continues today to work in the world and among his people, any experience of divine guidance today is evaluated and judged in the light of and under the authority of the Bible and its revelation of Jesus.