

How the Bible Actually Works

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Mid-Day Stretch Discussion Guide

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I. The Bible's True Purpose (Chapter 1)

A. What the Bible Isn't - Peter introduces us to his topic by promoting two of his earlier books... "The Bible Tells Me So" and "The Sin of Certainty", both of which he recommends highly. I can confirm that the second one is in fact excellent; I haven't yet read the first. However, his real point here is to tell us in summary fashion about two mistaken assumptions about the Bible that he spends two entire books exploring. The first is the notion that the Bible is set of rules, like a divine instruction manual.... "[f]ollow the rules and you're good to go". The second is derivative of the first, and assumes that the point of biblical interpretation is to be certain that our beliefs about it (including the rules we are supposed to follow) are correct ... and somehow that doubting the correctness of our beliefs (or even worse, failing to act in accordance with them) is akin to a lack of faith.

1. Have these assumptions been true in your life and your faith experience? If so, what do you suppose was the cause? If not, what do you suppose it was about the environment in which you were nurtured that allowed that to be the case?

2. What aspects of parenting, teaching and raising children are at play in these fallacies and in what ways does our desire as parents, mentors and teachers to help our friends and loved ones along their faith journeys perpetuate these fallacies? What about fear?

3. Do you agree with Peter that this is a foundational issue and that starting with these mistaken assumptions causes the whole Christian enterprise to go off course? What are some examples?

B. What the Bible Is... Ancient, Ambiguous and Diverse - Peter points out that, despite our inclination to see these seemingly negative attributes (which are on full display in the Bible ... that it is ancient, ambiguous and diverse) as defects to be avoided or defended, they are actually extremely valuable and are what make the Bible worth reading at all.

1. Realizing we are at the very beginning of the book, do you agree?

2. What words would you use to describe how you have thought about the Bible up until now? Do the words “holy, perfect and clear” come to mind?

C. Freedom for Words and History to Come Alive - Peter says that our “familiarity [with the Bible] risks obscuring how old the Bible actually is” and that “the distance between then and now needs to be respected as a key character trait of the Bible”. It’s antiquity, as Peter puts it, “shows us the need to ponder God anew in our here and now” and, indeed, it “gives us permission to do so”. He goes on to observe that the Bible’s ambiguity and diversity (or seeming contradictions) are intentional and leave us to work things out for ourselves.

1. How can one navigate their way from fretting about the seeming contradictions, inconsistencies and differences in historical context of the Bible, into seeing those attributes as an “invitation to join an ancient, well-traveled and sacred quest to know God, the world we live in and our place in it”?

2. Let’s go back for a bit to our conversation about US statutory law, the constitution, case law and the Congressional record. In what ways is Peter mapping out a similar paradigm here?

3. Can you imagine that a more open and “living/breathing” reading of the Bible, when we are free from worrying about whether we can find the right answers and instead focus on experiencing the Bible simply as it is, opens us to experience the Bible more as God intended? In what ways does fear hinder us in this process? What about motivation? As Peter puts it, “simply by being its ancient, ambiguous and diverse self, [the Bible] blocks us from the simple path of seeking from it clear answers and rather herds us toward a more subtle, interesting and above all sacred quest.”

C. Wisdom - This is Peter’s objective and what he thinks should be anyone’s objective who is trying to read and understand the Bible. “Wisdom isn’t some secret key available only to an elite few” ... it is a “gift from God, liberally available to all”.

1. In what ways is the Bible’s brilliance found in its refusal to be a set of rules? How are its contradictions a part of its brilliance (seemingly justifying slavery and its abolition; keeping women subordinate to men while at the same time emancipating them; justifying violence while at the same time condemning it)?

2. In what ways is Peter describing the Bible more as a window into our world, our humanity and our God than it is a tool to tell us what is necessarily true or right and wrong about those things? ...mystery as opposed to certitude; intimate and learned through experience as opposed to distant passive answers; learned over time as opposed to immediate; God's surprises as opposed to comfort and stability; journeying with courage and peace as opposed to reaching the end of the journey; covering all times and places as opposed to limited specific moments; space to grow as opposed to staying small.

3. Do you feel empowered by Peter's narrative? How would you describe that feeling? How do you imagine it from the perspective of others, maybe less fortunate than you in terms of economic and educational resources?

D. Owning up to Our Responsibility - "The fact that we have a Bible does not free us from this sacred responsibility, but, as we shall see, demands that we accept that responsibility—and do so as an expression of faith, not a rejection of it." "Seeing the Bible as a source of godly wisdom to be explored, pondered, deliberated, and put into action will free us of a common burden so many Christians have unwittingly carried, namely, that watching over us is God, an unstable parent, who is right off the bat harsh, vindictive, at best begrudgingly merciful, and mainly interested in whether we've read and understood the fine print; if not, God has no recourse but to punish us."

1. How do you suppose the generations that have preceded us (both recent and distant past) have lived up to this responsibility... that of embracing the dynamic nature of the Bible as an opportunity for wisdom? In what ways do you suppose it is our responsibility to ensure that the wisdom journey continues for future generations?

2. What about your own faith story? In what ways are the decisions of prior and future generations irrelevant in that process? In what ways do they form the basis of your understanding and framework? Are we supposed to throw the baby out with the bath water?

3. What does Peter mean when he says that wisdom "frees us to hold our thoughts about God, life, and the universe with an open hand rather than clenched fist, to face our questions and fears with the focus of a seasoned explorer facing the unknown"?

4. How do you teach someone, or come to understand the path of “wisdom”? Is it really something that can be taught? Assuming it isn’t, why is that a good thing in terms of how the Bible actually works?

“The Bible is great—not because it is an answer book, but precisely because it isn’t; not because it protectively hovers over us, but because it most definitely doesn’t.”

II. The Bible Doesn't Really Tell Us What to Do — and That's a Good Thing (Chapter 2)

A. “We Just Gotta Get this Deal Closed!” - Before we dig into Chapter 2, an anecdote and a plea. One of the things I've learned closing countless incredibly stressful and time-compressed deals over the years, is that sometimes we just have to let go of our fear of the outcome (a screaming and unhappy client; losing on a key deal point (or worse, getting it wrong in the docs); not hitting a funding deadline; how to deal with a legal bill that has run way over budget, etc.) and take the best next step forward knowing that our years of training and experience (and God) will guide us along the way. Otherwise, we become stuck and unable to do much of anything... and the deal never closes as a result (which is the worst possible outcome).

1. As we move further into this book, each of us will find ourselves at some point struggling to put it all together or thinking that we might not necessarily agree with what Peter is saying or what others in the group are saying (remember our discussion about introverted and extroverted thinkers as well). Or we might find that we are struck with great anxiety over what all of this new information means in terms of what we have learned and come to believe over the years that might contradict it. Or we might find ourselves struggling to understand how the world could be so different from the one described to us by our parents, families and childhood church communities.

2. When that happens, let's all remind ourselves that the point is not necessarily to develop and then be able to articulate some well-formed concept of how all of this is supposed to work. And it's ok, in fact it's a good thing, to be confused and uncertain about all of it... trust me when I say that we all are. Our objective in this group is only to walk through the process and then take stock of where we are when we reach the other side, knowing that all of our training and experience up to this point (and God) will be taking each step with us along the way... and, just as importantly, that while each of us may not be in exactly the same spot or looking in the exact same direction along the way, that we are on the journey together.

B. And Now Back to Our Kids... and Fools and Finances - Peter talks about the thousands of “no-win, directionless, Hail Mary decisions” he made in the process of raising his kids. And goes on to point out that the Bible, when viewed as a sort of parental guide, is not very helpful... at certain points troubling and at others, illegal. He also talks about the contradictory way in which fools and finances are to be approached.

1. How have you interpreted the passages that Peter points to as being somewhere between unhelpful (like “discipline your children while there is hope” or

“train your children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray”) and downright harmful (like “Do not withhold discipline from your children; if you beat them with the rod, they will not die” or “a stubborn and rebellious son ... who will not obey ... shall be stoned to death”)?

2. What about the two back-to-back passages from Proverbs that completely contradict each other ... should you “answer fools according to their folly” or “not answer fools according to their folly”? Do you agree that either decision could be wise depending on which fits the situation best?

3. How do our prior discussions in the Gary book about “relational theology” as over and against “behavioral theology” help us to contextualize and understand these conundrums? Why is it important for us to see them as conundrums in the first place?

4. What about wealth?

C. A Case Study from Politics - Let’s think about this for a moment in terms of politics... a topic generally to be avoided. There are several areas in this arena that very quickly give rise to strong feelings in many of us. And the politicians tend to present these topics to us as binary choices.

1. What are some examples of political issues that are presented to us as binary (or platform issues) when in reality they are actually quite nuanced and depend on facts and circumstances? Why do you suppose they are presented to us as binary choices?

2. What about in the context of scripture? What are some examples of scriptural issues that are presented to us as binary when in reality they are actually more nuanced and fact-dependent?

D. Bible as Ancient Telephone, Decoder and Time Machine - Peter says that the “Bible is a book of wisdom and so funnels us toward taking responsibility to remain open and curious about what it means to live life in the presence of God”.

1. What does Peter mean when he says this? What does he mean by “reading the moment”? Having read the first two chapters, how would you describe the kind of “wisdom” that Peter is talking about?

2. Is wisdom developed simply by reading, understanding and contextualizing words on a page? Have you ever thought of the Bible as more than just words on a page? How many of you remember the scene from “National Treasure” when Nicholas Cage uses the old spectacles with multiples lenses that could move up and down in order to read hidden messages on the back of the Declaration of Independence?

3. What did you think of Peter’s linkage of wisdom and creation? Do you agree that without wisdom there is no creation? How is that by seeking wisdom we are “tapping into something big that created and sustains the cosmos” and align “with the life force that echoes back to the foundation of all there is”? “When we seek to live by wisdom, we will quickly see the need to move beyond the words on the page in order to make them our own. And when we do that, we embrace the mystery of faith by tapping into the life force of creation itself.”

E. Being Trained and Ready for the Little and Hidden Things - Peter says that “Wisdom is about being trained to be ready for the little and hidden things, the unscripted day-to-day moments that sneak up on us... like those having to do with fairness, justice, integrity, self-discipline, family, work ethic, moderation, humility, truthfulness, friendship, patience, guarding your mouth, letting go of control, living in the moment, not needing to be right...”

1. Let’s spend a moment thinking the first four books that we have read together... “Wrestling with God”; “The Cross and the Lynching Tree”; “Take This Bread”; and “Affirming”. In what ways do you see this theme of being trained for the little and hidden things noted above in each of these books? In what ways does being ill-equipped for the little and hidden things often lead to larger and at times tragic outcomes?

2. As you think about where you are today, in what ways has a life of wisdom led you to that point? What aspects of our prior readings, and your ability to contextualize, be challenged by and grow from the experience of reading and discussing them, helped you to understand this idea being “trained” and “ready for” the “little and hidden things”?

“Wisdom, like a good parent, is patient and supportive, gives us freedom, and encourages and empowers us to work things out as best we can. ... To live by faith — to live wisely — means living with an ever-increasing awareness of the hidden things ... [it requires] a deep knowledge of *ourselves*, a true self-awareness of what money is doesn’t to *me* ... *right now*... we have to get used to the fact that God’s presence comes not when we find the right passage, but when we embrace with courage ... the way of wisdom.”

III. God's Laws: Evasive and Fidgety Little Buggers (Chapter 3)

A. A Lack of Clarity ... and Working Through It - Comparing more mundane examples (from taking a care of pets to training our kids), Peter laments that biblical laws are not very clear... "they work as general guiding principles, sure, but when God says 'Thou shalt not' you're really hoping for for some specifics". But Peter also goes on to say that discerning how laws are to be obeyed is an act of wisdom.

1. What did you think of Peter's example of the Sabbath? Do you agree that at first blush, it seems clear, but when digging deeper it gets a bit more complicated?

2. At what point does the act of discernment become problematic? Or does it? By slicing and dicing the word "work", do we eventually neuter the laws original intent?

3. Do we still technically even practice the Sabbath or engage in the discernment of what is "work"? What happened there? What principles are at play in the commands regarding the Sabbath?

B. Principled Discernment vs Strict Legalism - According to Peter, "[s]trict legalism is a myth." And "[w]hen handled with a humble rather than anxious heart,, laws drive us toward healthy community — not a tribalism geared toward insider-outsider thinking, but a community of faith where we can call upon wisdom as we deliberate and even debate how to live faithfully."

1. What does Peter mean by living "faithfully"? Is that the way you look at it? How does that compare to "mindlessly tick[ing] off some boxes and call[ing] it 'obedience'"?

2. What about Peter's point that the ambiguity in biblical laws tell us something about the Bible's purpose?

3. When you think about the ways in which biblical laws and God's salvation plan in general, in what ways do you see "anxious hearts" as opposed "humble hearts" among those in your faith communities as they have navigated the path of discernment? Do you think "humble" is the right word there?

C. Wisdom as PIN Code - Peter talks about ancient Jews saw wisdom and law as working together as a sort of PIN code ... and that this act was required in order for laws to be “justly and fairly administered”. “Ben Sira writes that the Law overflows with wisdom.”

1. As you think about Ben Sara’s point, that the law, not just wisdom, was there all along (back to the very beginning of creation), how does it change your understanding of biblical law? What about social or political laws?

2. In what ways does fear sometimes subsume wisdom or discernment in biblical or legal interpretation? What about the fear of disappointment? What about the fear of imprisonment? What about the fear of being cast out?

3. What about the desire to obtain and maintain control? In what ways does the separation of wisdom from the law, allow for some to oppress others... even on a large scale? In what ways did it impact the victims of the lynching era? What about Sally Gary and her friends?

D. And Now, Gun Control and the NRA??? - Peter is not shy about his disdain for the NRA. And although our point here is not to decide the merits of his view, it is interesting to look at the Second Amendment of the US Constitution as a sort of case study on the need for laws and wisdom to work together.

1. What do you think of Peter’s point that times change and laws from the past may not make sense in our present time? What about the idea that the fact that amendments even exist contemplates that laws are changing and evolving?

2. How does wisdom come into play when interpreting the US Constitution? Have you thought much about legal process as you think about interpretation, wisdom and outcome? What about differing governmental and social bodies or organizations and groups?

3. What can we learn about ourselves, about God, and about our present situation by recognizing that laws are ancient and ambiguous? In what ways are better equipped for the exercise when fear and oppression aren’t in the mix?

E. And Now, About God - Peter spends some time discussing the various passages in the Bible that permit or condone slavery. Exodus seems to have a harsher

view than Deuteronomy, but both seem ok with it, even if they derive from same divine source.

1. What does it say about God that the Bible can be read to support an institution like slavery? What does it say about God that human beings are left to make that determination?

2. What about the other laws that Peter points out that seemingly contradict themselves? Why would God allow for that to happen? What is going on here?

3. What does Peter mean when he says “circumstance change, and wisdom is needed to keep the divine-human conversation going?”

“We are seeing wisdom at work — rethinking older laws for new situations, bringing together the ancient and revered tradition with the ever-changing, real-life circumstances of God’s people over time. ... The Bible’s very design gives us full permission to work out how to bridge the horizons of then and now for ourselves precisely because we too want to hear God’s voice.”

IV. Wisdom = Time + Diversity (Chapter 4)

A. What is “Wisdom” Anyway - As we have seen, Peter spends quite a bit of time talking about the Bible (both the old and new testaments) as a book of wisdom. He talks about our “sacred and biblical responsibility to walk daily the path of wisdom rather than looking to hitch an easy ride”.

1. What do you think Peter means when he says “the path of wisdom”? How is what Peter is talking about different than what anybody else talks about, including those with more fundamentalist views about the Bible?

2. How is what Peter is talking about more reflective of “approach” or “lens” than it is about substantive conclusions? What is the difference? Is Peter really saying that there aren’t any rules?

3. What are some concrete practices that we can put in place in our lives as individuals and churches that lead to the path of wisdom as opposed to the path of easy answers?

B. The Importance of Diversity and Adaptability - *“The Bible (both Old and New Testaments) exhibits this same characteristic of the sacred past being changed, adapted, rethought, and rewritten by people of faith, not because they disrespected the past, but because they respected it so much they had to tie it to their present.”*

1. What do you think of Peter’s comment that the Bible doesn’t reflect a single point of view, but a conversation or debate over time?

2. Can this idea help us better understand and answer the questions above? What are some examples in your life of people or churches believing that in order to be relevant the Bible needs to be “timeless” (meaning fixed and impervious to change)? What kind of “timeless” is Peter talking about?

3. What does all of this say about God... that we are left to come up with answers, to rethink concepts and ideas about God and about our faith, in order to tie to our present?

C. “Inspired” by God - In thinking about this diversity concept, the more we talk about the fact that the writers of the Bible were human beings who lived within the context of their own place in history, the more we begin to wonder what it means for the Bible to be the inspired word of God.

1. Assuming that is how you have always viewed the Bible, what does it mean for the Bible to be the “inspired word of God”? Do you agree with Peter that it is a tough nut to crack?

2. Have you thought of inspiration as something happening at the moment of the Bible’s writing? What about the inspiration that happens at the time of its reading? If the Bible was truly fixed and unchangeable, would there be room for inspiration at the back end of the process? What about inspiration during its compilation? What about during its many translations? What does that mean, either way?

3. In what ways does a double or multi-sided inspiration process help us to better reconcile the Bible with our reality? In what ways does it make the Bible (and God) suddenly seem all the more inspiring and brilliant?

D. Examples! - As Peter says, let's "dip one or two toes into the exciting, star-studded, never boring, sexy, and lucrative world of biblical scholarship"!

1. Let's start by talking about the example of diversity in Deuteronomy as over and against Exodus. Firstly, did your head explode, as mine did, when trying to read through all of the ways that these two books are dated by biblical scholars?

2. Second, what did you think about the fact that the writer of Deuteronomy so willingly without hesitation updated older laws for newer situations (scientific, social, political, etc)? Do you agree with Peter that the writer saw it as his or her updating of God's laws for his or her time and place? Does that idea give you heartburn?

3. What about Deuteronomy 5:1-5? Do you agree that the book models for us that God keeps speaking? How does that make you feel about the Bible... about God? In what ways is seeing God and the Bible as "unchanging" more about ourselves (and our own self-centeredness) than it is about God or the Bible?

*"Hear, O Israel, the statutes and ordinances that I am addressing to you today; you shall learn them and observe them diligently. The LORD our God made a covenant **with us** at Horeb. **Not with our ancestors** did the LORD make this covenant, **but with us, who are all of us here alive today**. The LORD spoke **with you** face to face at the mountain, out of the fire. (At that time I was standing between the LORD and you to declare **to you** the words of the LORD; for **you were afraid** because of the fire and did not go up the mountain.)"*

4. So we've established that Ezekiel is not the guy to bring to the church fundraiser. When you think about the disconnect between Ezekiel (that each person will be treated as they deserve) and Exodus (that the punishment for worshipping false gods will run through the third or fourth generation), what grabs you? What about Peter's example of passing down the bad habits of his parents to his own children? How does that fit into the story, especially when he tells his kids not to worry and that they are writing their own script?

V. When Everything Changes (Chapter 5)

A. National Narrative in the Midst of Crisis - Sound familiar? It's uncanny, the proximity of this particular chapter to the 20th Anniversary of 9/11 (and TLR's sermon about the way Luke kicks off the story of Jesus' ministry). The power and importance of narrative to contextualize national tragedy can be seen throughout history ... at times used to convey a truth about the people that are a part of the story; at times for more nefarious means; at times with perfect clarity; and at others, less so.

1. How would you describe our national narrative coming out of 9/11? What about early on... say in the first 5 years? What about more recently... say in the last 5 years?

2. How has the narrative been used to convey truths about who we are as a people? How has it been used for more nefarious means?

3. How does that narrative fall on the people who hear it today? Those who weren't in New York City on that fateful day? What about those who weren't alive at the time?

4. Have you ever been in the midst of telling a story or a narrative and had the sense that those listening to it were emphasizing the wrong parts or missing important aspects of context? Do you suppose that has happened at times in the story of Israel's narrative?

B. The Belly of the Whale (or big fish) and What About Santa? - In describing the story of the Ninevites, Peter juxtaposes Jonah's version over and against Nahum's version. In Jonah's version, the story is primarily about Jonah and whether he will answer God's call. And when he does, even reluctantly and half-heartedly, it is a great victory for God and the Ninevites, when they turn from their wicked ways and return to God. Nahum's story goes in a different direction, that of the destruction of the Ninevites and the perceived joy of the outsiders who witnessed it (including God, apparently).

1. What are some of the factual differences in the two stories (outcome, timeline, etc)? Had you thought before about the possibility that the story of Jonah was not historical, but allegorical?

2. Do you agree with Peter that Jonah is not intended to convey history, but to depict a truth about God and human nature in the context of a story that may or may not have actually happened exactly as described? If it makes you uncomfortable to think of biblical stories in this way, what are some of your fears and hesitations about it?

3. How can we best discern the important points that writers of the Bible are trying convey in their story telling (or, better, that God is trying to convey through them)? In other words, how do we avoid missing the point?

4. How does Peter's depiction of the Judahites' familiarity with the Babylonians post-exile help explain Jonah's perspective on the story, relative to Nahum's? How does the story of Santa Clause help us to understand all of this?

C. Recognizing Our Own Limitations - One of the great things about this book... why I recommended it to all of you ... is Peter's willingness to recognize his own limitations and biases as he approaches biblical interpretation (and he, of anyone, has reason NOT to do so, given his training and background).

1. Which God, as depicted of the stories of Nineveh, do you relate to most (the one depicted by Nahum or Jonah)? Which story, as between the two, have you heard told more often? Why do you suppose that is?

2. How do you think all of that has affected your understanding of scripture in a larger context? What did you think of Peter's acknowledgement that his understanding of God is based on his own place in history and his own life experience and culture? How should we go about biblical interpretation in light of it?

3. How are you doing at this stage of the book in terms of knowing the difference between "rules", as Peter describes them, and the "wisdom" that Peter is talking about? Does it help to think of the two paradigms more in terms of purpose... or, in other words, why we read the scriptures (i.e., to learn the "rules" vs to grow in "wisdom")?

D. The Act of Reimagining God ... and History - I love this idea! But at the same time I'm a little frightened by it. Peter does a brilliant job of both unpacking and contextualizing 1&2 Samuel, 1&2 Kings and 1&2 Chronicles; and pointing out that Chronicles should really come at the end... as a book that retells the same story at a much later point in history and from a much different perspective.

1. Imagine for a moment (or recall if you know them) the story of 9/11 told right after it happened, as compared to the story of 9/11 being told today (with the history that has followed since... a 20-year war in Afghanistan, a pandemic, five presidential elections, Gitmo, Osama bin Laden, etc). What are some ways that the same story would be told differently? How might you tell the story differently today than you would have 20 years ago? In particular, what does the story of 9/11 say about us as a nation?

2. Now, what about the story of Israel, told in the book of Chronicles several centuries after the stories told in Samuel and Kings? Why do you suppose the Bible works this way? Why do you suppose God works this way? In what ways are we seeing in real time, the act of “wisdom” that Peter is talking about ... in the retelling of ancient stories, with the benefit of history and the lens of culture and experience?

3. Getting into specifics, as you think about the story of the Ninevites and the story of Manasseh, in what ways do you see human interpretation of horrible acts, as over and against a description of who God is? In what ways do the writers of later times provide a different perspective on that point? Had you ever thought of the events of 9/11 as something God did or did not allow? Do you know others who have? What do you believe about that now?

4. Who did you blame for the Babylonian exile? The people? Manasseh? God? How do you understand that story in light of what you have learned so far in this book? How is that different, if at all, than how you had understood it before? Does this have broader implications, like for instance, when we are thinking about how the scriptures should be read to inform us on how to think about same sex couples?

5. As we think about all of this (Jonah, Manasseh, 9/11, Santa Clause, etc), what does it mean, as an act of wisdom, to transpose the past to our present?

“Like that of the biblical writers themselves, our sacred responsibility is to engage faithfully and seriously enough the stories of the past in order to faithfully and seriously reimagine God in our present moment. The Bible doesn’t end that process of reimagination. It promotes it.” - Pete Enns

VI. What God is Like (Chapter 6)

A. Understanding the Universe - Peter talks about how his understanding of God is shaped to a large extent by his understanding of the universe. And, notably, this understanding is vastly different than people in ancient times, who for example thought that the earth was flat and that the heavenly realm was somewhere above them.

1. What is it about the universe that you suppose is so overwhelming to Peter... the size, the duration, the empty spaces? Have you thought about it that way before?

2. How did you react to his 1-year universe timeline... where our lives take up approximately one-tenth of a second? What about the distance and how long it would take to travel from one side to the other? How does allegory help us to contextualize all of it?

3. Are you freaked out, like Peter? Or are you more like David, in awe and wonder?

B. Seeing God in the Universe and the Contradiction - Peter spends a good amount of time describing the ways in which the writers of the Hebrew Bible attempted to help us to understand who God is, but explaining God in the context of destruction and calamity. In particular, he is describing the disconnect he feels when God is described as the one to bring destruction and calamity, while at the same time being with us as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. He goes on to say: "No one should underestimate the force of this dilemma or the stress and pain it creates for people trying to believe. Those who have a hard time with the God of the Bible can't be dismissed as faithless rebels against God's word. Some want to have faith—but they also want to have integrity. They live here and now, not there and then, yet they have this ancient Bible and a Christian faith bound fast to it, and the way forward feels like walking on a razor's edge between two options—belief in the absurd God or belief that the idea of God is absurd."

1. What was your reaction to all of this? Do you think that faith (at least in the traditional sense) is incompatible with integrity?

2. Can you think of a paradigm that can help us with all of this? What should be our starting point in thinking about all of it? Intuition or literalism?

3. What about Peter's notion that this is an act of wisdom... and embracing the sacred responsibility of asking ourselves what God is like? What conclusions can we draw about who God is from the contradictions that Peter describes?

4. What about is idea that the stories in the Bible are not about what God is like, but what God has imagined to be like by the generations that preceded us?

"The sacred responsibility I've been talking about is really a call to follow this biblical lead by reimagining God in our time and place."

VII. What God is Like (Chapter 7)

A. The Ancient Devine Realm - At the beginning of Chapter 7, we learn about the Moabites and the way in which a child sacrifice may have actually worked to save them from an invasion by the Israelites. And Peter points out that the story of Mesha (the Moabite king) occurred as far back in time for us as the year 4900 CE would be forward in time.

1. What do you believe about the story of Mesha and his sacrifice? What about all of the other gods of the Iron Age? Do you believe they exist or that they existed at some point?

2. What did you think of Peter's point that the important take-away from the story is not whether or not it happened or what happened, but that the writer of the biblical narrative accepted it without hesitation and didn't feel the need to correct any misconceptions about it?

3. Circling back to our points above, how does that change (if at all) your view of allegory as we talked about last week? What about "unintentional allegory"? In other words, to what extent are biblical stories sometimes human beings' best attempt at understanding their circumstances?

B. The Exodus - Peter spends a good portion of Chapter 7 explaining the specifics of the Exodus... in particular, how many of the plagues were direct challenges to the other gods that people of that day worshipped. He also talks about how the Israelites and

the writers of the Bible assumed that these other gods existed, and explained God in the context of them, rather than to try to convince folks that there was only one God.

1. What was your reaction to Peter's point that we need to avoid two extremes in response... to characterize the biblical narrative as simply "wrong", on the one hand, and characterizing it as "timeless and correct" simply because it is in the Bible?

2. Do you agree that they represent the "genuine experiences of God" in their place and time and that we should try to "understand why they would describe God as they do"? How does that look for you?

3. What does it mean to "reimagine" God for ourselves in our time in light of what we read in the Bible? What do we learn about God by understanding both how the ancient writers "imagined" God and at the same time understanding the world in which they were writing about that? In what ways is Peter describing process as opposed to substance?

"We follow the lead of these writers not by simply reproducing how they imagined God for their time, but by reimagining God for ourselves in our time."

C. "God's" Violence - As we read this book and as we think about biblical stories, it's impossible to ignore the violence in our world that has been attributed to God. As Peter notes, it compels to ask ourselves "is this what God is like?" But, as Peter also notes, it is "superficial to label these violent portrayals of God as either 'wrong' or 'right'."

1. Why do you think God is depicted this way? Do you think that the violence in the Bible that is attributed to God was actually caused by by God? Do you think God fights battles with other Gods? What about with people who worship other gods? Does God pass out violent retribution on those who don't follow commands or worship properly?

2. How have these types of issues (violence in our world and the Bible's tendency in many instances to attribute it to God) affected your faith? How do you suppose it has affected the faith of others?

VIII. Interlude: Jesus and All That (Chapter 8)

A. The Act of “Reimagining” - At this point, we’ve heard Peter speak quite a bit about the idea of “reimagining” God for our here and now... and how that is our sacred and ancient responsibility. He goes on to say that this is what the writers of the Bible and all Jews and Christians have been doing since the very beginning of the Judeo-Christian faith. And he talks a fair amount in Chapter 8 about how even Paul did this in order to understand and explain Jesus.

1. What do you think about this idea of reimagining God? Does it trouble you or do you find it hard to see the Bible in that way? If so, why do you suppose that is?
2. Are there other words you would use to describe what you believe Peter is trying to articulate? Is he talking about reimagining God? Or re-thinking how we use and think about the Bible?

B. Behavioral vs Relational Theology - Going back to our discussion while reading the Sally Gary book, let’s spend some time thinking about these two models or frameworks in how we view God and the Bible.

1. In what ways is the need to reimagine the Bible in the first place born out of our tendency to view the Bible as a reference guide in how we are supposed to behave? How should we think about that?
2. Do you think it would be easier to contextualize this concept of reimagining God if your views of God and religion and the Bible weren’t shaped as much by how one is supposed to behave and were instead were shaped by how one is supposed to relate to God, to others and to the world around us?
3. How do we strike the right balance in all of this and is Peter right that we all do it anyway? Is it possible that our entire framework in terms of appropriate and inappropriate behaviors is born more of our (or our predecessors) having reimagined God (or the Bible) in a way that works best for them?

“Don’t we all go beyond what the Bible says and imagine God for ourselves? Whether we realize it or not, isn’t that happening all the time?”

C. God’s Act of Self-Sacrifice - Peter says that Jesus’s crucifixion represents a major reimagining of God. This is because, for example, people of that time viewed God as being the one to whom sacrifice should be made. So the idea of God making a sacrifice for humans was something that was hard for people of that time to understand. He also says that the resurrection meant that people had to reimagine God because it was utterly and completely unexpected.

1. How did you react to this? Do you struggle, as I did, with the notion that this was a “reimagining” of God, as Peter describes it? Why is that? Is this situation different than reading about the stories of the Old Testament that we have studied up until now?
2. Is it because in this story, it is God that is acting, with human beings describing what happened? As opposed to the other stories, which were human beings acting and either attributing the outcome to God or assuming that God was somehow involved by allowing or blessing certain actions and outcomes?
3. Do we need a different word than “reimagining”? Does the idea of “relational” vs “behavioral” models of understanding help us? If so, how?

D. God as a Social Activist - Peter points out that our views of God as a champion for women and other oppressed peoples is not likely supported directly by the Bible... or, at least, that the hook is brought in after the fact to support those ideas.

1. Do you agree with Peter on this? Do you believe that our evolving views of God’s role as an advocate for social justice is “reimagining” God? Or is it simply part of our becoming more aware of who God has always been?
2. As we think about Peter’s model of reimagining God, how does one avoid making “God” into simply a reflection of what serves us best? Do you believe in the same God that Peter does?

“This is the God I choose to believe in, the one I imagine, a God who is quite aware of the fact that we cannot help when and where we were born, but remains with us just the same and encourages us to accept the challenge of owning our faith here and now rather than relinquishing that sacred responsibility by expecting others to have done it for us.”