

Week 4 – How can Jesus welcome me in?

The Bible – a whole book

A Dictionary of Foreign Words, published by the Soviet government last century, defined the Bible as:

A collection of different legends, mutually contradictory and written at different times and full of historical errors, issued by churches as a ‘holy’ book.¹

Today, many in the West might agree.

A few years ago, I listened to a conversation on the radio where two people discussed the Bible. A well-known radio and television personality made the following assertion:

I feel strongly against any religion that accepts the Bible as the correct work by which to live your life. I find the Bible a total pick and mix of ideas and I have read it extensively.

Someone else concurred:

I quite agree with you, a complete mish mash.

For me, it was a frustrating conversation to listen to. I could only conclude that these people had never in fact, read the Bible much at all. I have been a Christian for over twenty years and in that time, as I’ve read the Bible, I have been amazed at the incredible unity of the book.

¹ As quoted in Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament: Promises Made*, Crossway, 2006 p23

I have tried to convince you that the Bible has the answers to the questions that really matter – what is life all about? what is wrong with the world? The Bible answers these questions and more, but not through a series of ‘sayings’. The Bible is made up of histories, poems, stories and letters. For convenience, I have deliberately limited us mostly to the gospel of Luke, but, the Bible was written as God worked through real people, over a 1500-year period. Some of these people were great kings, whilst others were lowly fishermen. Each wrote from their own unique circumstance. That the book really is ‘God’s Book’ is seen in the unity of its message. Although the writers were sometimes separated by hundreds of years, each writer wrote in his own way about Jesus Christ. Some looked forward to his coming. Others wrote of his life and others looked forward to a future day when he would return. The climax of the Bible is the death and crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

I have already mentioned a lady called Rosaria Butterfield. She was the church stalker on page one. As an English professor at an American university, she read the Bible as part of a research project. She was a whole-book specialist. Her job was to weigh up a book in terms of its integrity and examine whether the parts made up the whole. She went into the task with pre-conceived ideas of what the outcomes would be. Instead, what she found turned her life upside down.

When I started reading the Bible it was absolutely undoing to me to discover that the Bible was a unified revelation.²

I want you too to notice the incredible unity and wholeness of the Bible.

In her book, she describes her Christian conversion like this:

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cc8wPOHksYs>

Conversion overhauled my soul and personality. It was arduous and intense.³

Elsewhere she writes,

Every aspect of my life came under the scrutiny of my new Christian worldview. It was like someone turned the searchlight on and I couldn't dim the intensity.⁴

She has described it as her 'train-wreck' conversion. The Bible was true and therefore she had to repent – she had to turn around the whole direction of her life. That's hard! But, if the Bible really is 'God's Book', then it should, indeed, it must, change everything.

So far...

So far we've seen that Jesus, the Creator and Ruler of the Universe, came into the world because people are lost. All people experience a sense of 'lostness' and that's because we were made to know God. It's our sin that's made us lost. We are rebels who reject God's blueprint for life in this world. In the *Parable of the Prodigal Son* we saw that there is both obvious rebellion as well respectable rebellion. However, God welcomes all rebels to his celebration when they repent – that is, when they change direction and return to him.

However, God's welcome of lost rebels has come at great cost. That cost is the Bible's main story. Central to the Christian faith is the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is central to the Bible. It's there that we see its wholeness and unity.

Jesus' road to the cross

³ Butterfield p34

⁴ p33

The cross is the climax of Luke’s gospel. Luke records how Jesus spoke of it again and again. Jesus said:

The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.⁵

Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men.⁶

See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise.⁷

It’s in Luke 23 that we finally read about the crucifixion itself and the death of Jesus.

It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun’s light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” And having said this he breathed his last.

The curtain

I want you to see that in the Bible, the cross of Christ is the climax of everything that’s come before. In Luke’s account of Jesus’ death, we read about the curtain of the temple being torn in two. Let’s focus on that detail as an example of how the Bible hangs together as a whole book, climaxing in the cross.

⁵ Luke 9:22 ESV

⁶ Luke 9:44 ESV

⁷ Luke 9:31-33 ESV

We've mainly focused on Luke's gospel, but now we're going to have to look at things written many years before. We're going back to the Old Testament.

Many Christians shy away from the Old Testament. My hope is that you will come to love the Bible. I really hope you'll start to read it. However, I wouldn't necessarily advise you to start in an Old Testament book. Much of the Old Testament seems far removed from our lives today. But bear with me...

In the Old Testament book of Exodus, God instructs the Israelites to build a Tabernacle. The Tabernacle was a tent that would be God's dwelling place for the people of Israel. It was central to their worship of God and would later be replaced by Jerusalem's temple, constructed by King Solomon. The Tabernacle taught the people some important lessons.

There is something nice, when you're out and about on a dark, cold, winter's night – and you see lights and televisions on in people's houses. You're out in the cold, but you're reminded of a place called home and you look forward to being there. The Tabernacle was in the middle of the Israelite camp and being in the middle reminded them of something comforting. It reminded them that God was with them.

However, the Tabernacle also reminded them of something painful. The Tabernacle was made up of various sections. One section was called the Holy Place. But there was also an inner section called the Most Holy Place. The Most Holy Place was the place of God's presence. Separating the Holy Place from The Most Holy Place was a curtain. The curtain was there to remind the people that they were sinful and God was holy. God has moral purity that means we're lost from Him. Remember – Jesus came looking for the lost.

The curtain taught the people that sin is a big problem. It is because we are sinful, that God must keep us out. God was with the people and yet, they were shut out from Him.

1665 and 1666 were plague years for Britain. You might be familiar with the history of Eyam, a village in Derbyshire. In the mid-seventeenth century it had a population of only 360, but from the first death in September 1665, by the middle of the summer in 1666, over seventy villagers had died from plague. Led by Revd William Mompesson, the villagers agreed that rather than spread the infection around the whole Peak District, they would instead shut themselves up in the village. For over a year, Eyam shut itself off from the rest of the world. In total, 260 of its 360 inhabitants succumbed to plague. Today, it is thought that such self-sacrifice could have been avoided had infected clothing simply been destroyed. However, you get the picture...plague, infection and disease separated them.

The structure of the Tabernacle taught the people that sin is like a plague that must be kept separate from God. There had to be a total separation. The curtain itself was embroidered with details that told the people to 'keep out.' In Exodus, God gave Moses the following details for making the curtain:

You shall make a veil woven of blue, purple, and scarlet *thread*, and fine woven linen. It shall be woven with an artistic design of cherubim. You shall hang it upon the four pillars of acacia wood overlaid with gold. Their hooks *shall be* gold, upon four sockets of silver. And you shall hang the veil from the clasps. Then you shall bring the ark of the Testimony in there, behind the veil. The veil shall be a divider for you between the holy *place* and the Most Holy.⁸

Let's focus on one detail. The curtain had embroidered onto it 'an artistic design of cherubim'. Cherubim appear in various places throughout the Bible. They are

⁸ Exodus 26:31-33

heavenly, angelic beings. Why would the curtain be decorated with cherubim? Was it just a nice religious pattern? To understand, we need to go back further still. The people were being reminded of something that happened long before. Let's go back to the very first book in the Bible – Genesis.

In the first two chapters of Genesis, we read about God's Creation. Everything is good. God makes everything and this planet was made perfect for people. We're told about a special place called Eden, where the first man and woman would have all they needed. We're even told that God walked in that place "in the cool of the day."⁹ That's the first two chapters.

By the time we get to Genesis chapter 4, the world has become a very different place. We read about Adam and Eve's children, Cain and Abel. Cain murders his brother Abel. When God asks Cain where his brother is, he lies, denying any knowledge of his whereabouts. The world is no longer the paradise of chapters 1 and 2. It's a place of murder and lies. In fact, it's the world we recognize. It's the world as we know it now.

In 1952, John Steinbeck's novel *East of Eden* was published. The novel, set in California, parallels the story of Cain and Abel. Major themes in the novel are depravity and self-destruction. You see the significance of his title – the bad, sad world is the world outside of God's perfect paradise. Our world is east of Eden.

How did the world get like this? The answer is Genesis chapter 3. Genesis 3 is the 'bridge' between the perfect world of chapter 2 and the depravity of chapter 4. Genesis 3 explains how things got so bad – and importantly, how we got so lost. Like

⁹ Genesis 3:8

The Parable of the Prodigal Son it tells us about a rebellion. It tells us about the first ever rebellion.

The first man and woman rebelled against God by doing what He had forbidden. God had told them not to eat of one tree in Eden. They did. Instead of lovingly embracing the command of God who had given everything good to them, they rebelled. At the heart of the rebellion was the rejection of God's authority over them. That's at the heart of all human rebellion. We object to the authority of God over us. Take a look again at that quote I gave you from a radio programme:

I feel strongly against any religion that accepts the Bible as the correct work by which to live your life. I find the Bible a total pick and mix of ideas and I have read it extensively.

I hope by the end of this chapter to have at least convinced you that the Bible can't simply be described as "a total pick and mix of ideas." However, if you were simply to say the first part of the sentence to me (**I feel strongly against any religion that accepts the Bible as the correct work by which to live your life**) I would not be surprised. That's the rebellion that has infected the whole human race like a disease since the very first man and woman. Adam and Eve rejected God's authority – and every subsequent human being has too.

At the end of Genesis chapter 3, after the rebellion of Adam and Eve, we read that God drives them out of Eden.

He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.¹⁰

¹⁰ Genesis 3:24 ESV

The tree of life was a tree in the garden that was symbolic of the life that came from God. However, Adam and Eve's relationship with God was now spoiled by their rebellion. Therefore, God prevented them going that way again. The message was clear – your rebellion and pollution means you are separate and lost from Me.

The language in Genesis is forceful. Sometimes, when my children's friends are at our house, after a few hours play, I look forward to them leaving! The house is messy, it's getting late and bedtime's on the horizon. I drop polite hints like, "I think your mam's expecting you home now" or, "Is that the time? We'll see you tomorrow." That's very different to the language in Genesis. God does not politely ask Adam and Eve to collect their things. He **drove** them out.

You cannot read the Bible without seeing that God is angry with sin. To bar their access to the garden and to the tree of life, God put cherubim and a flaming sword to guard the way.

Every time the Israelites looked at the curtain in the Tabernacle, separating the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place, the embroidered cherubim would remind them of Genesis 3. God has driven all men and women away. The curtain taught the lesson – you're separated from Him.

We are lost because we've walked away from God in rebellion. But we're also lost because God has driven us away. We are lost because of God's action in separating us from Him.

The Day of Atonement

The Tabernacle in the middle of the camp was a comforting thing. It reminded Israel that God was with them. But it was also a painful reminder as its structure, design and curtain reminded the people they'd been separated.

However, there was one day on the calendar each year, that God had given the people to teach them an important lesson. It was called the Day of Atonement. It taught the people that God reconciles. As a teacher, I spent many long hours attempting the work of reconciliation. Pupils would fall out with each other and I'd do my best to work reconciliation and restore broken friendships.

You can read the details of the Day of Atonement in the Old Testament book of Leviticus. It's in chapter 16. Again, it will seem strange to 21st Century eyes. There's a lot of blood! On the Day of Atonement Israel's High Priest would be allowed to pass through the cherubim covered veil. He would need to first offer animal sacrifice for his own sin and then again, for the sin of the people. But then, he would pass through that curtain!

Are you beginning to see how the Bible hangs together? The Day of Atonement pointed forward to a future day.

The cross

God is seeking lost people, but He's also angry with sin. He is the God who barred Man and Woman from entering the Garden by placing cherubim and a flaming sword at the entrance. He is the God who reminded Israel of humanity's separation by putting a curtain in the Tabernacle and Temple. The Bible tells us that we can't simply get away with our rebellion. Let me give you another of Jesus' parables that wouldn't make him popular today:

“There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores.”¹¹

Jesus' story encourages a reaction. That's not fair – a rich man living in luxury whilst a destitute man sits at his gates. This parable is another that encourages us to think before it's too late, but it also shows us justice is done. We're angry at the injustice of the story. The rich man gets away with his self-indulgent uncharitable life. But Jesus shows us that justice will come in the next life.

The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.’¹²

All of us know what it's like to be angry. We all have a sense of justice. Remember again the Roald Dahl strategy of writing. Why is it that “Children enjoy it when bad things happen to nasty people.” It's because we have a sense of justice within us that says wrong should be punished. So it is with God. God is just and sin must be punished. Therefore, if God is like the father in *The Parable of the Prodigal Son* then He must do something with His anger.

¹¹ Luke 16:19-21

¹² Luke 19:22-26

And that's where Jesus comes in. Jesus, the Creator and Ruler of the Universe came "to seek and to save the lost".¹³ In order to find them and bring them back, He needed to go to the cross. At the cross, God's anger is poured out upon Jesus. Jesus takes all of God's anger for sin upon Himself. It was because of that "the curtain of the temple was torn in two". God's justice was satisfied. Jesus paid the price and punishment for sin. Rebels can now go through the curtain.

It might be convenient to think of the Bible as a collection of myths and legends. But it's a remarkably whole book with one message – Jesus saves. It's because it's a whole book that Rosaria Butterfield said "it was absolutely undoing to me." In other words, if this really is 'God's Book', what are you going to do about it? We're lost and Jesus calls us to turn our whole lives around. But he's also made it possible. Sinners deserve the wrath of God, but Jesus came and took that wrath upon Himself. God's justice was satisfied and sinners can walk free.

¹³ Luke 19:10 ESV