

Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

# Orcutt Christian Church

A Grace Driven Church for Grace Needing People!

"Come As You Are ... Leave Changed!"

## Burning Questions 03

*Why Do We Have the Specific 66*

*Books of the Old and New*

*Testaments?*

**Hebrews 1:1-3**

**Jan 22, 2017**

Communion: Marilyn Currier

Care Calling: Marilyn Currier

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Saturday 1/21 Clean Up: Robert Domingos

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### Hebrews 1:1-3 (NASB)

**<sup>1</sup> God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, <sup>2</sup> in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. <sup>3</sup> And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power.**

You provided me with over 30 questions to which you wanted answers.

I ranked them according to the number of requests, and this is the third burning question that was asked.

How were the books of the Bible chosen?

Why do we "Protestant" folk have exactly 66 books in our Bible?

Our text today may very well have been a hymn sung by early Christian communities to celebrate God speaking through His Son, our Savior, Jesus the Christ.

And, do we not believe that God, our Savior, speaks to us through what we call the Bible?

And, as last week, I recommend you go to our church website, and download a copy of François Louis Gausson exelent book:

**Theopneustia: The Plenary Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures**

However, if you prefer helping support Orcutt Christian Church, you can go to Amazon via the link on our website.

**<http://www.orcuttchristian.org/page29.html>**

and purchase Gausson's book there.

There is a story about a Protestant minister who spent a lot of time at the racetrack gambling.

And he began to observe that there was a priest who was down at the racetrack and who blessed certain horses.

And whenever those horses were blessed, they won.

So he thought to himself, "All that I have to do is to keep track and look at that priest and see what horse he blesses, and then I'll put my money on that one."

So that's what he did.

He saw the priest bless the horse.

The Protestant minister decided to put all of his money on that horse, and it ran about a hundred yards and fell over dead.

He was pretty upset because he lost a lot of money.

And he found the priest and he said, "I don't understand it. You blessed horses, and every horse you blessed won the race. You blessed this one and he died."

And the priest said, "Well, you know, that's the problem with some of you Protestants. You can't tell the difference between a blessing and last rites."

Well, when it comes to the Bible, we do have differences.

Our Old Testament has 39 books in it, but the Jews only have 22 in their Old Testament.

And, you say, how could that be?

Our bible has 66 books, but the Catholic bible has 73 books.

And, you say, how could that be?

Well, the Jewish bible combine books, that the Christian separates.

And, the Catholic bible has 73 books because they add what we call the Apocrypha, and they call the deuterocanonical books.

Roman Catholics use the term deuterocanonical rather than apocryphal to refer to these books.

They understand this to mean "**later added to the canon**" (the prefix deuter- means "second").

To help us understand these "whys", I want to take a brief look at just ---

## **I. What is Canonicity**

The word used by students of the Bible to describe the Bible as THE COLLECTION of books deemed to be God's word to us is **Canonicity**.

The word **kanon** is used both in Hebrew and in Greek, and signifies a rule or standard.

Paul speaks of this in

**Galatians 6:16 (NASB)**

**16 And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy *be* upon them,**

And, again in  
**Philippians 3:16 (NASB)**

**16 let us keep living by that same *standard* to which we have attained.**

And, while there is no reference to the Bible in these two passages of Paul, the word **kanon** is given as a technical term to the books of the Bible the early church accepted as inspired.

An official collection of books is clearly implied in the expression "**the Scriptures,**" as employed by Jews in the NT

**Matthew 21:42 (NASB)**

**42 Jesus said to them, "Did you never read in the Scriptures,**

**John 5:39 (NASB)**

**39 "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me;**

**Acts 17:11 (NASB)**

**11 Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily *to see* whether these things were so.**

**Acts 18:24 (NASB)**

**24 Now a Jew named Apollos, an Alexandrian by birth, an eloquent man, came to Ephesus; and he was mighty in the Scriptures.**

So, Canonicity is the study of what makes up the Canon, the rule or standard of what we consider God's revealed word to humanity.

So, the Canon refers to the books that were thought to be inspired Scripture.

And, you know that there are differences between Protestants, Anglicans, and Catholics.

And today, because of the nature of the subject, we're going to have to talk about those differences in a spirit of love, and a spirit of sensitivity.

Think about that old riddle: "Which came first? The chicken? Or, the egg?"

That riddle is like the difference between Protestant denominations, and those who follow the Anglican and Catholic tradition.

Now listen carefully.

Did the New Testament give birth to the church, or did the church give birth to the New Testament?

You say, "Run that past me again."

Well, here's the issue, you see.

If the New Testament gave birth to the church, then the New Testament has primacy, but if the church birthed the New Testament, then the church has primacy, and it is first not only in time, but also in authority.

Let me put it for you a little bit more clearly perhaps.

The Catholics and Anglicans say that the Bible alone cannot be our authority because the Bible does not tell us which books are authoritative.

Therefore, the church, and not the Bible, is the final authority.

And that's why church tradition is elevated above the Scriptures.

For example, if you ask a non Protestant why he or she prays to Mary when it's not found in the Bible, your friend will say "I do not base it on the Bible. I base it on the tradition and the teaching of the church because the church has primacy over the Scriptures."

I hope that what I have to say today will be accepted in a spirit of acceptance and recognition that there are these differences that we simply cannot avoid in this sermon on the question of the Bible being the Word of God.

Now, today we have a lot of territory to cover.  
And I hope that you will hang in.  
So, with that introduction let's begin.

## **II. How Did We Get The Old Testament**

Now, let's begin by talking first of all about how the Bible came to be, and we'll start with the Old Testament.  
How did the Old Testament come to be?

Well, when God inspired Moses and told Moses the words of the Lord, the Scripture says that Moses wrote down all these words in a book just as God commanded:

**Exodus 17:14 (NASB)**

**14 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write this in a book as a memorial and recite it to Joshua,**

And, then God tells Moses

**Deuteronomy 31:26 (NASB)**

**26 "Take this book of the law and place it beside the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, that it may remain there as a witness against you.**

So, the Jewish Canon began with those first five books we call the Pentetuch.

And as you study the history of the Old Testament you discover two things -

1. various books were added, and
2. they were revered.

They were recognized to be the Word of the Lord.

And throughout the Old Testament you have that expression, “The Word of the Lord came to me.”

231 times the OT refers to "the word of the Lord."

Now, to be fair, we have to understand that there were some books that were included then in the Canon as it was developing, and there were those who were uneasy and wondered whether they should be in the Canon.

For example, some people said that the Song of Solomon is too sensual.

They read the book of Esther and discovered that the name God does not occur in the book, and they wondered whether or not the book of Esther should be in the Old Testament.

But by and large, they were convinced that what they had was the Word of God, and there was widespread agreement that the books that were included and revered were Scripture.

Now not all the books that were written during that period of time were included as Scripture.

Moses refers to an old book in

**Numbers 21:14 (NASB)**

**14 Therefore it is said in the Book of the Wars of the LORD,**

Remember the story of the sun standing still?

Where did it come from?

**Joshua 10:13 (NASB)**

**13 So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, Until the nation avenged themselves of their enemies. Is it not written in the book of Jashar? And the sun stopped in the middle of the sky and did not hasten to go *down* for about a whole day.**

And then there is

**1 Kings 11:41 (NASB)**

**41 Now the rest of the acts of Solomon and whatever he did,**

**and his wisdom, are they not written in the book of the acts of Solomon?**

**1 Kings 14:19 (NASB)**

**19 Now the rest of the acts of Jeroboam, how he made war and how he reigned, behold, they are written in the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel.**

**1 Kings 14:29 (NASB)**

**29 Now the rest of the acts of Rehoboam and all that he did, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah?**

The Books of the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah and Israel are two sets of royal annals, mentioned but subsequently lost.

The historian of Kings refers to these works as his source, where additional information may be found.

These references show how the historian of Kings used extensive sources selectively.

We don't know what happened to these books.

All that we know is that they were not included as Scripture, and so far as we know, they have passed from history.

What's important for us in this message is to realize that the Canon that Jesus had refers to the books that were thought to be qualified and inspired Scripture.

Actually, the word Canon originally was a reed or a measuring rod, and so it became applied to those books that made the grade, so to speak.

But what is important for us to realize is that all of the books that we have in our Old Testament, all 39 in content, were identical to the Old Testament that Jesus had when He walked the face of this earth.

The Hebrew Bible and our bible are different in the number of books.

For example, our Old Testament has 39 books.

The Hebrew Bible has only 22.

But the reason is because they combined certain books.

For example, in the Hebrew Bible there is no 1 and 2 Samuel, or 1 and 2 Kings.

It's simply Samuel and Kings.

And other smaller books were attached to other larger ones, so you have 22 books, but the content is the same.

The second thing we discover is that the arrangement of the books is different.

Would you believe that in the Hebrew Bible the last book is Chronicles.

We call it Second Chronicles, and that's the last book of the Old Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament.

Now, with that background, I want you to take your sermon notes and look at Matthew 23.

This gives further incidental proof of the fact that when Jesus was on earth, the Canon of the Old Testament, the 39 books we have, though arranged differently and grouped differently, was exactly the Canon that is in the Hebrew Bible today, which is our Canon.

Notice in Matthew 23:34,35 that Christ said

**Matthew 23:34-35 (NASB)**

**<sup>34</sup> "Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city, <sup>35</sup> so that upon you may fall *the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.***

And, you are asking, are you not, what is interesting about that?

The first murder in the Old Testament is that of Abel.

Did you know that in 2 Chronicles, chapter 24, in our Bible is the last book of the Hebrew Canon?

And in the last chapter of the Jewish bible you have the murder of a prophet by the name of Zechariah?

**2 Chronicles 24:20-22 (NASB)**

**20 Then the Spirit of God came on Zechariah the son of Jehoiada the priest; and he stood above the people and said to them, "Thus God has said, 'Why do you transgress the commandments of the LORD and do not prosper? Because you have forsaken the LORD, He has also forsaken you.'" 21 So they conspired against him and at the command of the king they stoned him to death in the court of the house of the LORD. 22 Thus Joash the king did not remember the kindness which his father Jehoiada had shown him, but he murdered his son. And as he died he said, "May the LORD see and avenge!"**

His father's name is different because sometimes in ancient times the grandfather and the father were sometimes used interchangeably, but it's the story there of how he was murdered in the temple.

Think about the expression "**from A to Z.**"

What Jesus was saying is, "From Genesis to Revelation, from the beginning of the Canon to the end of the Canon, all the righteous blood that was spilled from A to Z..."

You notice that Jesus clearly shows that the Canon that He is accepting is that of the Old Testament ancient Jewish Canon.

Did you know that there never was a commission or a committee or a council that met together to determine what books were going to be in the Old Testament?

They never gathered and debated the issue and said, "Well, I vote for this one," and "I don't vote for that one," and they never duked it out, so to speak.

That never happened any time in history.

It was the people of God who discerned that certain writings were of God, and they accepted those writings, and they rejected others, and soon the people of God, the Jews of the Old Testament, accepted a certain body of literature as having come from God, and they all believed that prophecy ended, the miracle of inspiration ended for them with the prophet Malachi 400 years before the coming of Jesus Christ, and they subscribed and they agreed that this collection of books was the Word of God.

There existed a consensus on the content of the Old Testament in the first century AD which was already ancient at that time.

And I see in that the providence of God.

A basic feature of most liberal theories of the Old Testament canon is an alleged council held at Jamnia about AD 90 which is supposed to have canonized or at least finalized the Writings or Hagiographa, the third division of the Hebrew Old Testament.

Now, it's true that there was a council of Rabbi's that met and looked at the already accepted Canon of the Old Testament, and said "Yes, we agree," but they were actually ratifying what the Jews had already done hundreds of years earlier without a formal council.

So, please, keep in mind that the Canon of the Old Testament was never determined by a council but by the people of God.

That's the Old Testament.

### **III. What About the Apocrypha?**

Our bible has 66 books, but the Catholic bible has 73 books. The Catholic bible has 73 books because they add what we call the Aprocrapha, and they call the deuterocanonical books.

Apocrypha means "hidden."

Bruce Metzger is widely considered one of the most influential New Testament scholars of the 20th century, and he says "scholars

are not sure why this word came to be applied to these writings."

Where did those books come from?

Let me give you a little bit of history.

And, by the way, there are in total 15 apocryphal books, 11 of which have been accepted as Canonical by the Roman Catholic Church, four of which are combined with other Old Testament books, and of that 15 apocryphal books, they include 7 in their bible.

Why this difference?

Come with me to the city of Alexandria in Egypt about 250 years before the time of Christ.

These scholars decided to take the Old Testament and translate it into Greek.

They came up with a translation that became known in history as the **Septuagint**.

It simply means 70.

There is a story that it was done in 70 days by 70 scholars, and that's where it got its name from.

This became a very popular translation.

In fact, it was used in the Greek speaking world.

The New Testament writers quote the **Septuagint**, and it is a very important link in the history of religion—the Jewish religion and the Christian faith.

About 750 years after that group of 70 scholars translated the Hebrew into Greek, the books that we call the apocrypha were added.

What I'd like to do is to tell you that if you've never read the apocrypha, it is worth your time to read these books that are like devotionals.

Many of these books give some interesting history regarding the intertestamental period.

Others of them, are properly disputed.

Let me give you some reasons why Protestants have never accepted the apocrypha.

Interestingly, the Catholic Church officially recognized these books as scripture in A.D. 1546, only 29 years after Martin Luther criticized these doctrines as unbiblical.

That is simply a record of history.

Why don't Protestants accept these books?

So, let me give you some reasons why Protestants have never accepted the apocrypha.

**1. The Jews never accepted the Apocrypha as scripture.**

**2. The Apocrypha never claims to be inspired.**

**1 Maccabees 9:26-28 (Good News Translation)**

**26 These men hunted down the friends of Judas and brought them all before Bacchides, and he subjected them to torture and humiliation. 27 It was a time of great trouble for Israel, worse than anything that had happened to them since the time prophets ceased to appear among them.**

There was no "thus said the Lord," because inspiration had ended with Malachi the prophet.

But when the Bible says, "Thus says the Lord," or "As it stands written," often that quotation, that phrase, is found in the New Testament, but it is never a quotation from the apocrypha.

**3. The Apocrypha is never quoted as authoritative in scriptures.**

Some liberal scholars suggest that in Hebrews 11:35-38 Paul alludes to historical events recorded in 2 Maccabees 6:18-7:42. However, if you use your study bible, and check the references, you'll see Paul is reflecting on the Old Testament.

**4. Jesus implied that the close of Old Testament historical**

**scripture was the death of Zechariah (400 B.C.).**

This excludes any books written after Malachi and before the New Testament.

## **5. They were never a part of the Hebrew Old Testament Canon.**

That's perhaps the primary reason.

The apocrypha was never written in Hebrew.

It was Greek, and as a result, when in the 5th Century A.D. it came into the Septuagint, it was debated, and some people thought it should be a part of Scripture.

Some of them thought that it shouldn't be.

Some of the Bible translators said, "We will translate it and we will set it apart because we don't believe that it is Scripture, but nevertheless it is beneficial to read."

## **6. The Apocrypha was opposed by the early church fathers.**

Many of the early church fathers did not regard the Apocryphal books as being canonical either.

They considered them to be helpful for the *edification* of the church, but they did not see them as authoritative.

Three examples of the early church fathers will help us understand the churches rejection of the Apocrypha.

In the 2nd century, A.D., In the opening of his "**Proof of the Apostolic Preaching**," a handbook for teaching converts, Irenaeus of Lyons said Christians must adhere strictly to the "**canon of faith**" because it linked the churches of his day back to the apostles.

He also called this simply "the preaching," "the faith," or "the tradition."

In a.d. 367, when the great church leader **Athanasius**, bishop of Alexandria, wrote his Paschal Letter, he listed all the books of our

present New Testament canon and all the books of our present Old Testament canon except Esther.

He also mentioned some books of the Apocrypha and said these are “not indeed included in the Canon...”

After some early Latin translation efforts, **Jerome**, in A.D. 382, was commissioned by the bishop of Rome to translate the scriptures.

His translations became the unofficial standard text of the Bible throughout the Middle Ages, and was known as the Latin *Vulgate*. At the Council of Trent (1546-63), the Roman Catholic officially made it the standard text.

Jerome, who translated the Latin *Vulgate*, which became the standard Roman Catholic version of the Middle Ages, acknowledged that the Apocryphal books were not to be regarded as either authoritative or canonical.

Jerome did not like the Apocrypha, and only translated it when directly ordered to by the bishop of Rome.

And so that explains, I think, why it is a very quick overview as to why we have this divergence of opinion regarding these books called the apocrypha are not accepted by Protestants.

## **IV. What About the New Testament**

Now, let me talk briefly about the New Testament.

How did it come to be?

Early on as God inspired the New Testament writers, they began to write the Word of God.

But notice the difference now.

Think this through.

The ancient Jews could take these writings to the Temple.

They could put them in the Ark.

They could accumulate them like a library, but the Christian church was scattered abroad.

It was everywhere.

You had congregations throughout Africa, Europe, all of Asia Minor, so as the Apostle Paul began to write a letter to one church, one church knew about that letter, but not necessarily the other church.

The Apostle Paul said:

**Colossians 4:16 (NASB)**

**16 When this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter *that is coming* from Laodicea.**

Unlike the Jews, there was no central depository for all of the books being written by the Apostles or their designees.

Consequently, as these books were written there were some lists of books that might have included some and excluded others.

So there was a period of development as the Canon began to come to be.

I think for the Early Church one of the most important questions to authenticate a book was: "Is it either written by an Apostle, or someone who would authenticate the Apostle?"

For example, Luke was not one of the early Apostles, but he was a companion of the Apostle Paul, so in that sense Luke had apostolic blessing, even if not apostolic authority.

Now, as these books began to be written, they were accepted again as the Word of God by the Christian church.

Notice how quickly they were accepted as Scripture.

Look at your sermon notes at

**2 Peter 3:15-16 (NASB)**

**15 and regard the patience of our Lord *as* salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, <sup>16</sup> as also in all *his* letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand,**

**which the untaught and unstable distort, as *they do* also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction.**

Here Peter comments on the writings of Paul, and gives us some encouragement and hope.

We all admire Peter.

While he was not the first pope, nevertheless admire his writings. He was one of the apostles, highly valued, and this is he says he struggles with some of the things that Paul wrote.

But, it is important to see that Peter recognized the writings of Paul as being Scripture.

Already in that first century they again saw that what was being written was indeed the Word of God.

And by the end of the first century, you have all 27 books.

They were known and they were largely accepted.

Occasionally, there was debate over books that some of the churches weren't acquainted with.

We see the hand of God in the wide spread acceptance of our 27 books of the New Testament.

There was no council that ever met to debate what book should be in the Bible, accepting some and rejecting others.

That never ever happened.

Once again there was a council that met centuries later that ratified the list of 27 books of the New Testament, but they were only doing what the Christian church had already done centuries before, namely to accept these books as the Word of God, and therefore, it was as if God superintended what was happening, and the people of God themselves recognized what books were to be received.

And that is why we have the New Testament Canon today.

Now that needs to be emphasized because sometimes you get the impression that there are people who, like the Jesus Seminar, cast their little black and white rocks to decide what books are going to be in the Bible.

That did not happen.

We believe that God superintended the process in such a way that the Christian church recognized those books that were of God, and rejected those which weren't.

There was some debate, yes, but it was never done by a council that rejected or accepted a list of books.

## **V. Did the New Testament Give Birth to the Church, or did the Church give Birth to the New Testament?**

If you look at our website, you'll see these words:

**no book but the Bible**  
**Where the Bible speaks, we speak.**  
**Where the Bible is silent, we are silent.**

And, here is where we differ from our Catholic friends.

You see, we believe that the church is fallible, and the Bible is infallible.

The church can make mistakes but the Bible has none.

We believe very strongly that ultimately the authority of the church must be limited and must bow before the authority of Scripture.

The church is fallible.

Scripture is infallible.

God entrusted infallible Scriptures to a fallible church, a church that can make mistakes.

We believe that the only thing that the church can do is to recognize authority.

It cannot confer authority.

You can't get people together and say that if enough of us agree we can make something to be that which it is not.

**Right is right, even if no one is right.**  
**Wrong is wrong, even if everyone is wrong.**

We believe that the Bible alone is authority.

Tradition cannot be trusted because tradition sometimes contradicts itself and certainly church history has shown that not only can it contradict itself, but many traditions also can contradict that which is in the Scriptures.

And therefore our emphasis always is the Bible, and the Bible alone!

Luther who, at the Council of Worms, said, “My conscience is taken captive by the Word of God. I cannot, and I will not recant.”

Luther recognised that popes and councils had contradicted one another.

So let’s emphasize the fact that the Bible alone is God-breathed.

### **2 Timothy 3:13-17 (NASB)**

**13 But evil men and impostors will proceed *from bad* to worse, deceiving and being deceived. <sup>14</sup> You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned *them*, <sup>15</sup> and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. <sup>16</sup> All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; <sup>17</sup> so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.**

**Paul says: “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; <sup>17</sup> so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. ”**

Now, that can’t be said about decrees that are made by church councils.

Church councils are not God-breathed.

The Bible alone is.

Furthermore, those who have the office of apostle in the early church are seen to claim an authority equal to that of the Old Testament prophets, an authority to speak and write words that are God's very words.

You see, Jesus equipped the apostles so they would convey all truth.

**Luke 24:44-45 (NASB)**

**44** Now He said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." **45** Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures,

Peter encourages his readers to remember

**2 Peter 3:1-2 (NASB)**

**1** I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, **2** that you should remember the words spoken beforehand by the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior *spoken* by your apostles.

Dan Brown in The Da Vinci Code claimed,

"More than eighty gospels were considered for the New Testament, and yet only relatively few were chosen for inclusion—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John among them."

And, that is a flat out lie.

Only four gospels were ever acknowledged by the early church.

But, still, some want to add more books to the Bible.

I would think twice before I opened the Bible to insert some other book in it.

Have you ever noticed, by the way, that all false cults have their additional book?

They have the Bible and then they always bring another book written by somebody else that they bring along with them.

And the reason is because the things that they believe are not found in the Bible, but they are found in this book, and so they spend the rest of the time trying to show that what's in this book actually does not contradict what is in the Bible.

The Apostle John gives God's response:

**Revelation 22:18-19 (NASB)**

**18 I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; 19 and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book.**

Why was the Bible written?

**John 20:30-31 (NASB)**

**30 Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.**

When you read the Bible you need to understand that from Genesis to Revelation it has one unified message.

It has to do with Christ.

And I would not want to be here today and to preach a message like this without remembering, in the words of the song:

**Break Thou the bread of life, dear Lord, to me,  
As Thou didst break the loaves beside the sea;  
Beyond the sacred page I seek Thee, Lord;  
My spirit pants for Thee, O living Word!**

**Bless Thou the truth, dear Lord, to me, to me,  
As Thou didst bless the bread by Galilee;  
Then shall all bondage cease, all fetters fall;  
And I shall find my peace, my all in all.**

**Thou art the bread of life, O Lord, to me,  
Thy holy Word the truth that saveth me;  
Give me to eat and live with Thee above;  
Teach me to love Thy truth, for Thou art love.  
O send Thy Spirit, Lord, now unto me,  
That He may touch my eyes, and make me see:  
Show me the truth concealed within Thy Word,  
And in Thy Book revealed I see the Lord.**

The Bible was written that it might lead us to God through Christ.  
That's the whole purpose, and there could be some of you here  
who have never believed in Christ for yourself.  
You've never come to saving faith in Him.  
And today you can do that.

## **Prayer and Invitation**

## January 22 Lesson 8 **Praise God the Creator**

Devotional Reading: [Psalm 8](#)

Background Scripture: [Psalm 104](#)

PSALM 104:1-4, 24-30

**1** Praise the LORD, my soul. LORD my God, you are very great; you are clothed with splendor and majesty. **2** The LORD wraps himself in light as with a garment; he stretches out the heavens like a tent **3** and lays the beams of his upper chambers on their waters. He makes the clouds his chariot and rides on the wings of the wind. **4** He makes winds his messengers, flames of fire his servants.

**24** How many are your works, LORD! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. **25** There is the sea, vast and spacious, teeming with creatures beyond number— living things both large and small. **26** There the ships go to and fro, and Leviathan, which you formed to frolic there. **27** All creatures look to you to give them their food at the proper time. **28** When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things. **29** When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. **30** When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground.

### KEY VERSE

*How many are your works, LORD! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.—**Psalm 104:24***

### Introduction

#### A. Recycle vs. Renew

Do you recycle? No one asked this question 40 years ago, but now it is common—and frequently accompanied by moral judgment. In certain ways, ecological awareness and practice has become the new morality. We are urged not to judge people regarding just about everything, but this seems to be a big exception. Filling the Internet with moral filth is OK, but filling our landfills when we could be recycling is deemed unacceptable.

Recycling programs in some cities have gone from voluntary to mandatory, and efforts have expanded far beyond the mere saving of aluminum cans and glass jars. Manufacturers are now very conscious of the packaging they use, designing such materials to be easily recyclable.

The point at which this “green” emphasis does more harm than good (if ever) is a debate best conducted elsewhere. And whether or not we choose to participate in those debates, we must keep in mind that God planned his creation to be capable of more than recycling. He intended it to be continually renewing.

There is no word in the Bible for *recycle*, but *renew* is an important theme. Renewing, from the Bible's perspective, is both part of the plan of God and a process that is dependent on God. Whether it is a renewal of the earth or a renewal of the human spirit, it cannot happen without God's blessing and power. The God who renews is the focus of the celebration that makes up our lesson this week from Psalm 104.

## **B. Lesson Background**

Psalm 104 falls within Psalms Book IV, the bookends of which are Psalms 90 and 106. At least one scholar sees enough similarity among Psalms 8, 33 (see lesson 5), 104, and 145 to categorize the four as "Songs of Creation."

Psalm 104 also is often paired with Psalm 103, since both feature material drawn from Genesis and both are hymns of praise (note their similar beginnings and endings in that regard). Because of these similarities, some scholars propose that the named author of Psalm 103, who is David, is also the author of Psalm 104, which bears no designation of authorship.

Whether or not David wrote Psalm 104, its original concept apparently came from a pagan source: Pharaoh Akhenaton's Great Hymn to the Sun. This praise of a fictitious sun god is traced to Egyptian mythology of the fourteenth century BC. The fact that the pagan sun-hymn came first means that the writer of Psalm 104 would be the borrower. Yet the two are different in vital ways! Their conclusions, the focus of their tribute, and Psalm 104's dependence on Genesis 1 assured the ancient Hebrew that there would be no confusion between the two compositions.

Even so, we may wonder why the psalmist would borrow from the Egyptian sun-hymn in the first place. Perhaps it was because his culture was already familiar with it. That possibility may lead us to theorize further that Psalm 104's praise of the Creator is an intentional jab at the Egyptian hymn's praise of a part of creation. We should not find such a procedure surprising. The apostle Paul, for his part, used pagan sources in his sermons and letters to uphold Christ (see Acts 17:28; 1 Corinthians 15:33; and Titus 1:12).

Regarding tone, Psalm 104 has more of the personal element than other praise psalms. The fact that it switches in speaking of the Lord with personal address ("You") and narrative ("He") makes it seem suited for both public worship and personal reflection. Vividness is enhanced by the psalmist's use of the technique called *parallelism*. That feature, common in Hebrew poetry, involves saying the same thing (or nearly the same thing) with different words (see discussion in lesson 5).

Our lesson today focuses on verses from the beginning and the end of this great psalm, but students should read the whole thing. In so doing, many phrases used in our worship songs will be detected. This testifies to the

richness and the eternal value of this hymn of praise.

## How to Say It

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Akhenaton Ock-*naw*-tun.

Leviathan Luh-*vye*-uh-thun.

Pharaoh *Fair*-o (or *Fay*-roe).

### I. Greatness of God

(Psalm 104:1-4)

#### A. Clothed in Majesty (v. 1)

##### 1a. Praise the LORD, my soul.

The book of Psalms feature the highest relative occurrences of the Hebrew word translated *praise*. In that regard, the psalmist begins with a command. The wording is intriguing, for the soul is the essence of a person. Is he telling himself to do something?

Yes! The psalmist's comments serve as a reminder not to forget to give *the Lord* his deserved praise and blessing. This is a great start to a time of worship, whether group or private. Let's focus on God, not ourselves.

##### 1b. LORD my God, you are very great; you are clothed with splendor and majesty.

We give the Lord the praise due him as we recognize his exceeding greatness. The psalmist's word picture for this is God's clothing as *splendor and majesty*. This describes a glorious king. In Psalm 21:5, these qualities are bestowed on a human king by God; it is as if God lends the man a share of divine glory temporarily. But in the verse before us, we see far more than a tiny derivative of glory, for God wears his majesty like a robe. We are reminded of words of the cherished hymn "How Great Thou Art."

*What Do You Think?*

How can we make sure our praise comes from the depths of our souls?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

In light of Matthew 15:8

In light of Matthew 21:16

In light of James 3:10

Other

#### B. Served by Angels (vv. 2-4)

##### 2. The LORD wraps himself in light as with a garment; he stretches out the heavens like a tent

The word picture is extended. The Lord not only wears a robe of majesty, but this *garment* is made of pure *light*. It is as if God takes the light of the sun and bends its rays to serve as a glorious cloak for himself (compare Revelation 12:1).

This idea of God's using the mighty elements of his creation as fabric goes one stage further when the psalmist sees God stretching *out the heavens like a tent*. This is an insight into the immensity of God, as if he covers the entire sky from the eastern to the western horizon with a stupendous bolt of heavenly cloth. God wraps himself in glory, and he brings his glorious touch to earth itself for us to experience.

### ***GOD'S "CLOTHING" AND OURS***

Current culture is less formal today than it was a few generations ago. One way this is seen is in the attire worn on various occasions. An older generation of men still wear coat and tie to weddings and funerals, while younger adults may prefer jeans.

A generational divide is also seen in what people wear to church. The senior saints, who often prefer the traditional worship service, will wear their "Sunday best." It is not uncommon to hear them complain that wearing anything less would fail to show proper respect for God.

The younger folks, on the other hand, may wear cutoffs and sandals to their preferred contemporary worship service. When concerns are voiced about their attire, they might respond that God is more interested in what is in their hearts than what they are wearing.

When we read how God is "clothed," is anything being implied regarding our own attire in approaching him? And does our choice of attire for worship say anything about the level of our regard for him? Perhaps the broader question, which includes the issue of attire but many other issues as well, is this: *How can we demonstrate our highest regard for God at all times and on all occasions?*—C. R. B.

### **3. and lays the beams of his upper chambers on their waters. He makes the clouds his chariot and rides on the wings of the wind.**

The psalmist continues his praise of God's wonders by expanding the idea of the skyward presence of the Lord. This imagines *the beams of his upper chambers* to be posted in the deep waters of the earth. This is a picture of gigantic pillars driven into the seabed to support the structure of Heaven.

In his sky abode, God rides *clouds* as his personal, kingly *chariot* and walks or rides around by using the *wind* as we would the earth's ground (compare [Isaiah 66:15](#)). These powerful, poetic expressions of God are saying, "He is not like us. His ways are far above ours. He is glorious beyond our comprehension."

*What Do You Think?*

What word pictures have you found to be effective when explaining the nature of God?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

When conversing with a child  
When conversing with an unbeliever

#### **4. He makes winds his messengers, flames of fire his servants.**

The proper understanding of this verse is difficult, since some words have more than one possible meaning. First, the Hebrew word for *messengers* (see also Numbers 24:12) can also be translated “angels,” as it is in Genesis 32:1. Indeed, a function of angels is to bring God’s messages to humans. Hebrews 1:7 clearly identifies Psalm 104:4 as “speaking of the angels.” Thus angels are to be identified with both *messengers* and *servants* since the latter two stand parallel to one another (compare Hebrews 1:14).

The Hebrew word for *winds* also presents an uncertainty, since it can be translated “spirits,” as it is in Zechariah 6:5. The psalmist may be using this fact to depict the heavenly servants as being somehow like winds (compare Revelation 7:1). If so, a couple of things are implied.

First, angels are powerful, for the wording here does not describe light breezes. This is a description of moving weather at its extreme, which can be violent and destructive. Second, these powerful beings are, like the wind, invisible to us (unless God chooses to make them visible). The psalmist truly understands and believes there are angels among us, and this is a humbling and comforting thing for him. We see him awestruck in his description of these heavenly beings as *flames of fire*, another way of indicating the power of God’s angels. This is not the small fire of a candle, but the powerful fire of Heaven (compare Psalm 97:3).

## **II. Greatness of God’s Works**

(Psalm 104:24-26)

### **A. The Abundant Earth (v. 24)**

**24. How many are your works, LORD! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.**

We see parallelism here as the phrases *your works* and *your creatures* reflect one another. The word *creatures* carries the idea of many different animals and the diversity of the earth’s biosphere. Passages such as Psalms 8:3, 4; 66:3; and 92:5 also marvel at the complexity and scope of God’s creation.

The psalmist also introduces here a concept that may be less familiar to us: that creation itself is a testimony to the *wisdom* of God. Our universe is not self-explanatory or self-ordering. Its beauty and balance are the result of God’s perfect wisdom. We are best able to appreciate the value of our natural world when we rely on the wisdom of God. This comes full circle when we realize that our awe or fear of the Lord is the beginning of our own pathway to wisdom (Psalm 111:10). Human reverence for God and human wisdom

are two sides of the same coin.

*What Do You Think?*

How can our congregation best use God's great works in nature to bring people closer to him?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

For the spiritual growth of fellow Christians

For evangelistic outreach to unbelievers

## **B. The Expansive Sea (vv. 25, 26)**

### **25. There is the sea, vast and spacious, teeming with creatures beyond number— living things both large and small.**

In turning his attention from the dry land to *the sea, vast and spacious*, the psalmist speaks as one who has spent time on ships personally. Or perhaps he has conversed with others who have. Those who have spent time at sea have the greater appreciation of how vast the oceans are. The experience of sailing out far enough to lose sight of all land can be overwhelming. When no landmarks are visible, the rolling seas seem endless.

The psalmist is also knowledgeable regarding *creatures* of the sea. He knows that the sea has many *living things both large and small*. All this contributes mightily to the author's spirit of amazement and appreciation for the Creator.

### **26. There the ships go to and fro, and Leviathan, which you formed to frolic there.**

The psalmist continues expressing wonder at the size of the oceans. There is plenty of room for all *ships*, works of humans that seem puny by comparison to the works of God. The vastness of the ocean means that even the *Leviathan* is not cramped for space. *Leviathan* is a transliterated Hebrew term, and Isaiah 27:1 describes it as a "serpent" of some kind. This may refer to an eel-like sea creature that is able to curl and contort itself.

The lengthy treatment of *Leviathan* in Job 41 has led to different conclusions, however. Some see a reference to a mythological dragon that no longer exists. Others identify the Leviathan variously as a crocodile, a seagoing dinosaur, or a whale. At any rate, the Leviathan was a huge animal of the sea (see Job 41:1). We should not get so distracted by trying to figure out Leviathan that we lose sight of the psalmist's main point: that of an ocean so spacious that even a creature such as Leviathan seems like a minnow within it.

## **III. Goodness of God's Works**

(Psalm 104:27-30)

### **A. Feeding the World (vv. 27, 28)**

**27. All creatures look to you to give them their food at the proper time.**

The phrase *all creatures* refers to animal life, including the sea creatures just mentioned. The psalmist solemnly notes that every single creature, from humans to fish, depend on the Lord himself to feed them. The Lord does this indirectly through the earth's systems of production, systems he created. Both humans and sharks may catch fish to eat, but ultimately all food comes from the self-renewing system that continues to operate by God's power. The earth God created in the first place, he continues to sustain to this day.

**28. When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things.**

The fact of our dependence on God's provision for daily food is put in beautiful, basic terms. We *gather* at harvest because God gives. We are *satisfied* (nourished) because of the Lord's open *hand*.

Since most of us purchase our food in a store or a restaurant, we are far removed from the basic elements of food production. Farming takes work, to be sure, but we should still marvel that an empty field of dirt can fill with tall stalks of corn in a few weeks. We should pause in wonder that nets can be dipped into the vast sea and come up full of fish. We should never take our daily bread for granted.

*What Do You Think?*

What more can our church do to demonstrate the open hand of God? How will you help?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

In meeting physical needs

In giving spiritual and emotional support

Other

**B. Allowing Death (v. 29)**

**29. When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust.**

As the psalmist considers the cycle of animal life, we see parallel thoughts that interpret each other. When the Lord hides his *face*, the creatures *are terrified*. What does this mean? The next line explains: when the Lord takes *away their breath, they die*. Thus the poetic expression of God's hidden face is a way of saying that the time of death has come.

Animals are *terrified* when death looms because of their instinct for survival, an instinct placed in them by God himself. We too have such an instinct, but he does not abandon us at the time of our death. Our relationship with him helps us overcome the fear of death. It gives us the courage to "walk through the darkest valley" (Psalm 23:4).

*What Do You Think?*

At what times other than death does God seem to be hiding? How do we

cope?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

When things seems centered on one person (example: Job)

When a wider group is affected (example: Joshua 7:1)

Other

To *return to the dust* is the common result of death. All living things—from trees to tigers to toddlers—are largely composed of the same foundational ingredients of hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, carbon, and phosphorus. When organisms die, they begin to decompose almost immediately. Eventually the components of what once was a living body become part (again) of the earth's elements—*dust* in Bible language.

The temporary nature of our current physical existence is a reminder of our mortality (see Genesis 3:19). We are not gods, and our bodies are not invincible or immortal (see Psalms 103:14). As we traditionally say at funerals, “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”

### **C. Renewing Life (v. 30)**

#### **30. When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground.**

This is not the end of the story, however. God continually renews the life of his earth. He never intended the animal or plant life to be a single generation. All plants and animals are created with the capability of reproduction, but that does not happen without God's life-giving *Spirit*. This is one of the wonders in the Genesis 1 account of creation: that each order of plant and animal reproduces according to its kind. In this way, God's creatures multiply and renew *the face of the ground* continually (see Genesis 1:22).

#### ***CIRCLE OR CYCLE?***

*The Lion King* is the popular 1994 animated film from Disney studios. The song “Circle of Life” sets the tone for the presentation of a newborn lion cub to the pride's rulers. The scene is reprised at the end of the film as a cub from the next generation is presented.

Some think the phrase *circle of life* is useful to describe what happens in human families as well: as those of the older generation die off, members of the next generation step up to take their place as leaders. Infants are born to keep the circle going.

We should be cautious, however, about haphazardly grabbing phrases from culture and using them uncritically in Christianity. A close look at the lyrics of the “Circle of Life” song reveals elements that are at odds with Scripture.

The self-renewing feature of life on planet Earth, as designed by the Creator,

might better be called the *cycle of life*. The self-renewal is not endless, however. The power God uses to create and sustain, he will use again to destroy and create anew (2 Peter 3:10-13). In the meantime, we remember that what we do with our portion of the cycle of life will influence the generations that follow. We are at our best when we embrace fully and firmly the service to which God calls us. It starts with our praise.—C. R. B.

## Conclusion

### A. It Didn't Just Happen

Many Christians believe that science is an enemy of faith. This does not need to be so. Some elements of Psalm 104 are the ancient version of scientific observations, but these observations drive the psalmist and the reader to greater faith in God, not less. Science has done a fantastic job of documenting the intricacies and interrelated nature of things. Science increases our knowledge of our world daily. As the ancient psalmist marveled at what he could see on the ocean's surface, today we look in awe at the life-forms on the deepest ocean floor.

As with the psalmist, however, a modern person should pause and ask, "Just how did all of this happen?" The explanation that our complex earth and its ecosystems simply developed through random chance over billions of years just doesn't ring true or seem plausible to most people. For example, why do plants and animals reproduce? Science can help us see *how* this happens, but cannot answer the basic question of *why*. Even if just one single-celled life form developed from unplanned processes, why did it develop with the capability of reproduction, which even amoebas have?

Since scientific observations offer no answer to this question, we are driven to the conclusion that there must be intentionality undergirding our world. We cannot help but see the hand of the transcendent Creator, who is greater than and distinct from his creation. May we, like the psalmist, recognize God in his mighty power to create as we offer praise and thanks of his care for us.

### B. Prayer

O Lord, you created us, each and every one. You know us better than we know ourselves, from the number of hairs on our heads to the many memories of our hearts. We owe our existence to you. We owe our daily sustenance to you. May we never forget how truly dependent we are on you, on your grace and mercy. We pray this in the name of your Son, Jesus. Amen.

## **C. Thought to Remember**

**Before God was Redeemer,  
he was Creator.**

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