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Church

...to make and mature more followers of Christ

*Authority and the Bible*

Psalm 119:1–16

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*series: Base Camp: Tools for the Journey*

As a father of three kids, I learned early on that my kids know how to manipulate me. They know who really has the authority for different things. Before you look disappointed at my kids, remember your kids are probably no different and you did the same thing to your parents! Here's how it sometimes goes; maybe this sounds familiar in your home: "Hey dad, I want/need this..." or "Can I do this or that?" Since my wife is so much smarter and nicer than me, I learned quickly that I was being set up by my kids. I would say, "Oh yeah, sure!" But, most often, they already asked mom for this or that only to come to me after mom says no. Sometimes they come to me first, but depending on my answer, they go back to mom. But, I am older and wiser now and I know how it works, so I learned to ask the trump card question when it comes to authority in my home: "What does your mom think?" or "What did your mom tell you?" I've learned from my mistakes! Most often I usually answer my kids, "Go ask your mom!" My amazing wife runs the Hall household well and since I am at work most of the day, she knows what's really going on.

The Christian life isn't much different. After we become a follower of Jesus, the biggest question is, Ok, now what? What should I expect? Where should I go? Who do I ask? What should I believe? What do I do? Who do I trust? Who has the final say? Even if you are not yet a follower of Jesus, we all have and look for sources of authority to guide our lives. Sometimes it's our reason and intellect. Sometimes our source of authority is our emotions or experiences. Often times we listen to our best friend, our parents or a trusted counselor. Sometimes we even look to Google for wisdom. But often those sources will crash into each other. Reason, emotions, experiences, friends, parents and counselors can and will let us down and even contradict each other. So, where do you go for authority in your Christian walk? Who has the final say?

We are starting a new teaching series for the summer called Basecamp, where we are looking at some of the basic tools for the Christian journey. Things like the gospel, faith, the Holy Spirit, prayer, community, money and several other things. And today, we are going to briefly consider the importance of the Bible. If you are going to follow Jesus, you must become a student of the Bible, what we call His Word. Why? Because the Bible is the supreme authority for our lives. This is hard to believe and live out because the Bible is so countercultural. It can be hard to understand and interpret. It can be even harder to obey in the Bay Area because of all the other messages of the culture. It

doesn't always feel right or socially acceptable to place the Bible as the primary source of authority in our lives. I get that. But, do we believe God knows what's best for us?

My goal today is not to pass on information about the historicity and authority of the Bible; that's important. But my hope is that you will walk away inspired and encouraged to get into this book (Bible) and get this book into you. There is really nothing more important to the life of a follower of Jesus.

### **What is the Bible?**

Before we jump into our passage, I don't want to assume we all know what the Bible is. With 5 billion copies of the Bible sold, it is the most read book in the world today. But, the Bible is actually a collection of 66 books, written by 40 different authors. These writers came from a variety of backgrounds and occupations including shepherds, fishermen, a tax collector, a doctor, and a military general for example. At least four of the writers lived in the royal household of Israel—there were kings, a prime minister and a cupbearer. Only a few of them—Paul, Luke, and Moses—received the finest education of their time; the rest were normal people.

The Bible was written in three different languages. The Old Testament was written mostly in Hebrew with some Aramaic, a language similar to Hebrew. The New Testament was originally written in ancient Greek. The Bible was written on three continents—Africa, Asia, and Europe—over a time period of roughly 1500 years. The Bible also consists of a number of different literary forms. It is a collection of letters, sermons, law, poems, narratives of historical events, prayer, praise, practical sayings, and the warnings of the prophets. And yet, what is so compelling is that when you put all that together, you have one big story from beginning to end. It's God's big story of Creation, the Fall, redemption, and restoration.

While the Bible is a story, it is also a kind of instruction book on how to live. It teaches us God's will for our lives. It's called God's Word because it is how God has chosen to speak to us. Listen to how the New Testament letter to Timothy, written by Apostle Paul, talks about the Bible, "*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work*" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). The Bible is "God-breathed," which means it is inspired and authored by God himself. That means that every word in the Scriptures are exactly

what God wanted to write. And God used those 40 men who were carried along by the Holy Spirit to give us what we have today. More than any other book, the Bible is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness. That means if you want to know how to live right, if you want God's wisdom, if you want to be equipped at Basecamp, then the primary authority for our lives is the Word of God.

Let's now look at a beautiful poem in the Old Testament to help us understand the place of God's Word in our lives. Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible with 176 verses in 22 stanzas, one stanza for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In these verses, we'll continue to see how the Bible is the supreme authority for our lives.

**Blessed are those whose ways are blameless,  
who walk according to the law of the Lord.**

**Blessed are those who keep his statutes  
and seek him with all their heart—  
they do no wrong  
but follow his ways.**

**You have laid down precepts  
that are to be fully obeyed.**

**Oh, that my ways were steadfast  
in obeying your decrees!**

**Then I would not be put to shame  
when I consider all your commands.**

**I will praise you with an upright heart  
as I learn your righteous laws.**

**I will obey your decrees;  
do not utterly forsake me (verses 1-8).**

### **Knowing God's Word is the Path to Blessing**

A little over a year ago, my best friend from high school and I planned a 20-mile overnight backpacking trip in Big Sur. It was amazing and lots of fun. But, we had to prepare. You don't hike 20 miles, with 50 pounds on your back without some training. So, to prepare, we did two long hikes—one in the East Bay and one off Skyline Drive. One of the first things we realized is the importance of a good map. Not only did we need a map to know where we were going, we needed to learn how to first read a map. The topography of the map was especially important. And sure enough, on both trails we got lost because we did not know how to read the map. We got so lost off the Skyline Drive hike that we had to hitchhike back to our car!

The Bible is the map for our lives. It tells us the path we should be going. Later on in Psalm 119:105 it says, *"Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path."* At the opening of this Psalm and all throughout it, the writer, who we call the Psalmist, is consistently and poetically teaching us about the primary source of

authority and blessing for our lives—God's Word. All throughout the Psalm he uses several different synonyms that refer to the Word of God:

- Law
- Statutes
- Precepts
- Decrees
- Commands
- Word
- Your ways
- Path

One scholar notes that in almost every single verse of Psalm 119, there is a reference to the Word of God.

The Psalmist says first, knowing God's Word is the path to blessing. We all want to be happy. In the Bay Area the pursuit of happiness is found in our work, our success, how much financial freedom we have, where our kids go to school, if we have a summer home, where we go on vacation, and where we eat. Those are not bad things, but they will not lead to true happiness. The Psalmist tells us that the path to true happiness, what he calls "blessedness," is knowing and following God's Word. The blessing of God rests on those who know God's Word. So, we are told to "walk in it," "keep it," "obey it," "learn it," "live it," "meditate on it," and "rejoice in it." More than just an intellectual knowledge of God's Word, the idea is to orient your life around the Bible. And we cannot live by the Bible unless we know it well.

The Psalmist then describes the results of living by the Bible. We will be "blessed," we will "not be put to shame," we will not be "forsaken," and we will "stay on the path of purity." But, one of the reasons why we are not happy, why we feel shame, and why we struggle is because we sin. You are the source of most of your problems. I am the source of mine. One of the reasons we sin as much as we do is because we don't know the Bible well enough. We are not immersed in it, so we don't have enough ammo to fight temptation and live a godly life. And that's why I love how the Psalmist is honest about his struggles to obey God's Word. In verse 5 he admits, "Oh that my ways were steadfast in obeying your decrees!" Like all of us, he is a work in progress.

The more I read the Bible, the more I realize how sinful and messed up I am! The Bible should humble us and show us how big and holy God is and how small and far we have to go. But, this is why we keep going to God, seeking him in his Word. Disciples are made, not born. It takes a lifetime to learn and live the Bible. I've been a Christian for 23 years, went to seminary, and I still feel like an immature rookie when it comes to knowing God and His Word! That's because this book is unlike any other.

While knowing God's Word is important, it's not enough. There are many people who know the Bible really well; some even have a Ph.D. in its study. But, you can know all about the Bible and be far from God. That's why the Psalmist encourages us to not only know it but obey it and delight in it. Listen to how the Psalmist puts it in verses 9-16:

**How can a young person stay on the path of purity?**

**By living according to your word.**

**I seek you with all my heart;**

**do not let me stray from your commands.**

**I have hidden your word in my heart**

**that I might not sin against you.**

**Praise be to you, Lord;**

**teach me your decrees.**

**With my lips I recount**

**all the laws that come from your mouth.**

**I rejoice in following your statutes**

**as one rejoices in great riches.**

**I meditate on your precepts**

**and consider your ways.**

**I delight in your decrees;**

**I will not neglect your word.**

### **Obedience and Delight in God's Word is the Path to Purity**

In verses 9-16 we see how obedience and delight in God's Word is the path to purity. In order to know and follow Jesus, we must first give ourselves to God's Word as the supreme source of authority for our lives. That means we learn it and live it. So the question becomes, "Great, when should we start?" Our society says, "Hey, go live your life, sow your wild oats, have fun when you are young, and then when you get older, get married and have kids, settle down and become a little religious." But God says, if you are going to live for me, start at the earliest possible moment, without hesitation, when you are young.

If you are a recent high school, college graduate or a young professional, the Psalmist is talking to you. The decisions you are making and will make from high school, through college and into adulthood will impact the rest of your life. Every decision you make form habits that will guide you or hurt you. If you are going off to college, make it an absolute priority to find a good community of Christians and a good church. Start forming the habit of reading the Bible, prayer, fellowship in a small group, and going to church on Sundays. You won't be perfect. You'll make lots of mistakes. But, God wants to use you for greater things than you can even ask or imagine. That will only happen if you determine to live for him in the little things right now.

### **What Should We Do?**

After you make the Bible a priority, what do you do next? Psalm 119:9-16 teaches us three things: what we should do to live for God, why we should do it, and how to do it. Let's start first with the **what**. What should we do to live for God? The Psalmist says, hide God's Word in our hearts. More than reading the Bible, he talks about hiding it in our hearts. That means we should study it, meditate on it, and even memorize it. This is why we encourage everyone who calls CPC their church home to find a small group where they can immerse themselves in the study of the Bible. Circles are better than rows. This is why we take preaching God's Word so seriously as we do because the pursuit of God's Word is the pursuit of God himself. That is why he links verse 10 with verse 9, "I seek YOU with all my heart (v. 10)...by living according to your word" (v. 9). The goal of the Christian life is the pursuit of and devotion to Jesus Christ, God in the flesh.

### **Why Should We Do It?**

Now we should ask **why**. Why should we devote our lives to God's Word? First, it's the way we come to know God. It's how he's chosen to reveal himself to us. That's important, but it seems to me that the Psalmist is zeroing in on the power of God's Word in living holy lives. He says I've hidden your word in my heart, so that I "might not sin against you" (v. 11). We live in a world and in a culture where anything goes. If it seems right, feels good, and doesn't harm anyone, it's ok. But is that God's way? The Proverbs say, "*There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death*" (Prov. 14:12). What helps us deny temptation? What strengthens us to live a godly life in the midst of our decaying culture? Only the Word of God, the Bible, which we must devote to study, meditation, memorization, and obedience. I can't tell you how many times God has used His Word to correct me, cleanse my heart from sin, and encourage me. That's the why.

### **How Can We Do It?**

Finally, **how** can we understand and obey the Word? First, we need to find a place, a time and have a plan to get into the Bible. But, more than that, God has given us help. He has given us himself in the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Verse 12 says, "Praise be to you Lord, teach me your decrees." Yes, we should use our God-given mind to study the Bible, but as followers of Jesus, we have supernatural power available to us. One of the roles of the Holy Spirit is to help teach us what is in the Bible. Without Him, the Bible cannot come alive in our hearts. That's why it's so important to pray and ask for His help as we study and read the Scriptures. God is our teacher and it is God Himself we are seeking.

Before I came to Christ, I read bits and pieces of the Bible, but it just seemed like an old, confusing book. But, after I placed my faith in Jesus and started following Him, as a 17-year-old, God

gave me a hunger for his Word. Every single day, for weeks and months, I'd wake up early in the morning to read, study, and pour over the Bible. It literally was changing me and changing my life. It gave me the strength to fight sin, it gave me the encouragement I needed as a young man, and it gave me a love for God and for people. That habit continues today. And I had no idea back then that God would one day give me the honor to preach and teach His Word as a pastor. Honestly, I would preach today for free because I love to study and teach God's Word. I only get paid for what I have to deal with Monday-Friday!

The passionate words the Psalmist uses for God's Word challenged me this week. He uses the words blessed, delight, love, and rejoice. That's what got me thinking about those early days as a new follower of Jesus and how excited I was to spend time with Him. I practically destroyed the first Bible I got because I used it so much. But, over the years, the passion has waxed and waned. There have been times of dry desert-like pursuit of God and plenty of passionate faith filled moments in God's Word. So my prayer for myself and for us is that God's Word would become a source of joy and an object of delight once again. Joy,

not obligation! Delight, not drudgery! Because the love for God's Word is a love for God. I pray He would give us all that same hunger. That hunger to wake up early or before we go to bed and sit alone with God. To read. Study. Meditate. Memorize. Pray. You will not grow closer to God without it.

As a follower of Jesus, the best place to be is under the authority of the One who loves you and made you. He knows what He is doing. He knows what is best. Why would we seek anything or anyone else? George Mueller, an evangelist and missionary in the late 1800's, put it so well, "I tell you so affectionately. For the first four years after my conversion I made no progress, because I neglected the Bible. But when I regularly read on through the whole with reference to my own heart and soul, I directly made progress. Then my peace and joy continued more and more. Now I have been doing this for 47 years. I have read through the whole Bible about 100 times and I always find it fresh when I begin again. Thus my peace and joy have increased more and more."

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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