

“The Bible’s Profitability”
2 Timothy 3:10-17
December 6, 2009

INTRODUCTION:

There are two or three well-known passages in the Bible where the Bible talks about the Bible. Our passage this morning is probably the most well-known and significant of those, because it makes the claim that the Bible is the inspired word of God. Since it is the word of God, Paul says that it will be profitable to us. The context of this claim demonstrates its practical benefit. Paul wasn’t writing a theological treatise when he penned these words about the Bible. He was writing a letter to his friend, Timothy. He was writing to encourage Timothy as he faced several hardships, one of which was Paul’s expectation not to make it out of prison alive. Paul had been serving as Timothy’s advisor as he confronted these many problems in Ephesus, and the thought that his advisor would no longer be available to him was a frightening one. So Paul reminds Timothy that he has a resource far more valuable than Paul’s counsel; he has the inspired word of God.

Timothy faced a more general threat than Paul’s death, a threat brought by the presence of evil in these last days. Paul writes of this evil in the first nine verses of our chapter, saying that **“in the last days there will come times of difficulty”** (v. 1). Almost all commentators and theologians agree that these last days are the entire era between Jesus’ ascension and his return, not just a brief period of time before the end. With the death and resurrection of Jesus, Satan was dealt a death blow. He knows the game is over, even though there is still time left on the clock. His situation is similar to that of the German army after D-Day. Their defeat was certain, but not yet fully achieved. But instead of giving up, the battle only becomes more fierce and dirty in these situations. That’s the situation faced by Timothy, and by us as well. Paul points us to the resource we have in the Bible. It is designed of God to be profitable to us, especially in times of difficulty.

I. The Profitability of the Scriptures

When something brings a profit to us, it means that we get more out of it than we put into it. If you invest \$1000 in a business and in a year get back \$1,100 when you sell your share in that business, you have made a profit of \$100. You have received more than you put into it. The Bible provides a significant return to us because it is inspired by God. I like the way our translation puts it. **“All Scripture is breathed out by God.”** Many translations read “inspired” by God. That’s not a bad translation, but it could be easily misunderstood. When we talk about something being inspiring, we mean that it has a positive, uplifting effect upon us. That’s not what is meant here. It means that the words of Scripture have their origin in God. They have come from his mouth as much as one’s

breath comes out of the mouth. But the Bible is also human in its origin. Paul wrote this letter that we are studying in a process just like you and I might write a letter. He didn't strive to get himself into some trance through which the Holy Spirit would channel divine oracles. Nor did the Holy Spirit dictate what Paul was to write. Paul and the other human writers composed these 66 books in our Bible. But God chose to speak through the human authors so that the words of the Bible are both fully human and fully divine. That's what is meant when we speak of the inspiration of the Bible. Theologians often use two words to describe inspiration—verbal and plenary. Verbal means that we believe the words themselves are inspired, not just the thoughts. So Paul in the book of Galatians can quote the Old Testament and base a theological argument on the fact that a word is singular rather than plural. And we believe in *plenary* inspiration, which means that all the Bible is inspired. Numbers 3:16 is just as inspired as John 3:16.

One of the issues that arises in the discussion of inspiration is that of inerrancy. This is the idea that the Bible is without error because of being the inspired word of God. I know that some of you have some very good questions about inerrancy. I don't have time to get into the details of this, but let me simply say that there are different varieties of inerrancy. I believe in the inerrancy of the Bible, but it's not a simple issue. For a very good discussion of this, I would refer you to a lecture by Mike Williams, a professor at Covenant Theological Seminary (see reference at the end of this sermon for information on finding this lecture).

The Bible is profitable precisely because it is the word of God, designed by him to bring profit to us. God's word has the power to bring about what he speaks. So when he says, "Let there be light," there is light. It is by the word of his power that he created the entire universe. He spoke it into creation. So when the Bible says that his word is profitable, God is doing more than giving a description of its profit. He speaks the profit into our lives. There are four areas where he designs it to be profitable: **"for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness."** The first and last of those are positive in nature, while the middle two are negative. The Bible is profitable for teaching, directing us to objective truth. I like the way John Piper talks of this.

I love the Bible the way I love my eyes—not because my eyes are lovely, but because without them I can't see what's lovely... Without the Bible I could not know that I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior. I love the Bible because it gives the wisdom that leads to salvation, and shows me that this salvation is nothing less than seeing and savoring the glory of Christ forever, and then provides for me inexhaustible ways of seeing and knowing and enjoying Christ.

The Bible also corrects and reproves by pointing out what is wrong in our lives. It is like a test for the presence of cancer, bringing healing through pointing out the wrong. The word brings this profit **"that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work"** (v. 17). One of the lies of the devil is that if we follow the Bible, we become less than what we would be if we followed

our own instincts and longings. The exact opposite is the case. To follow the Bible leads to our improvement, to being equipped for every good work. We become more fully human as this word of God does its good work in our hearts.

It needs to be pointed out that the Bible is not designed to be profitable to us in every area of life, but in the area of making us **“wise for salvation”** (v. 15). The Bible is not a Swiss Army knife, designed to do whatever we need it to do. Its purpose is to do the one thing that is our most urgent need—to reconcile us to God and save us from ourselves. Someone asked me once what I thought about investing in a stock from a company that planned on drilling for oil in the Middle East, after those running the company had discovered a secret code in the Bible that told them where to drill for oil. I told the one inquiring of me that I would invest my money elsewhere. The Bible’s purpose is not to tell us where to drill for oil, but to give us the wisdom that leads to salvation. Its purpose is not to give us tips on successful living, so that we approach it merely to make us successful in childrearing, money-management, and marriage. It will, of course, help us in many of these areas, but not in isolation from its central purpose. Its central purpose is to restore the brokenness of our relationship with God, not to make our lives successful whether or not that relationship is restored.

II. Profiting from the Scriptures

How is it, then, that we can profit from the Scriptures? We don’t profit from the Bible by putting it under our pillow at night. We don’t even profit from it merely by reading it. Paul mentions those in verse 7 who are **“always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth.”** Learning the facts about the Bible, even memorizing it, won’t of itself bring to us the profit the Bible is designed to bring. Let me summarize like this what Paul teaches in answer to this question. We profit from the Bible as we believe it and continue in it with the whole person in the whole community. There are four components to this statement.

The first and most important part of profiting from the Scriptures is to believe. Paul tells Timothy to **“continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed”** (v. 14). And then he says that the Scriptures are able to make you wise for salvation **“through faith in Christ Jesus”** (v. 15). Until there is faith in Jesus, the Bible won’t make much sense. It’s like the far-sighted person putting on reading glasses. For about the last seven years, I have required reading glasses in order to see small print. If you were to put a small-print book in front of me in dim lighting, without my reading glasses I would not be able to derive any benefit from the things written in that book. It may be that the book contains some of the most glorious and sublime literature ever written. But I would not be able to enter in simply because of my sight limitations. But if I were to be given a set of eyeglasses to use, everything in the book would then become accessible to me. Faith in Jesus is like the eyeglasses, making everything in God’s word accessible to us. Before believing in Jesus, our hearts can’t see properly. Consider just one

example. We will read the many statements about the judgment of God and will hate them or feel condemned by them. But through faith in Jesus, we read those same statements of God's holy and complete judgment upon sinners, and we grow in our love for God. We say, "This is how far God was willing to go in order to love me. Jesus took this judgment that I might be free."

Second, if we are to profit from God's word, we need to continue in it throughout our lives. There is a contrast between the verb "go on" in verse 13 and this verb "continue" in verse 14. The evil people "*go on* from bad to worse," and the word could be translated "advance." The word "continue" is the opposite of advancing. Many people embrace something just because it's new. They advance and make progress, but it's the wrong kind of progress—progress in evil. Christians continue in that which is found in God's word. They aren't bothered by its lack of novelty. There is a certain repetition involved in this word "continue." We should not be bothered by reviewing well-known teachings of the Bible. But we should seek to apply them in a fresh way to our lives.

Third, we profit from God's word in community with other believers rather than by ourselves. If you really want to profit from God's word, the way to do that is not to go off by yourself and study the Bible for ten hours a day. Timothy didn't learn the Bible that way. We see in verse 10 that he learned it from Paul. **"You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness."** And he also learned it from his mother and grandmother. The Holy Spirit helps us learn the Bible in community with other believers. The Protestant reformers fought on two fronts to preserve this truth. First, they rejected the position of the Roman Catholic Church which said that only the interpretation of the Church on the Bible's meaning was authoritative. That's why Martin Luther got into such trouble when he said that Church councils could err in their attempts to interpret the Bible. But the reformers also resisted the other extreme that elevated private interpretations of the Bible to infallible truth. They believed that the Holy Spirit led the Church to the correct grasp of the Bible, but not without some missteps being taken that needed correction. We profit from the Bible as we learn from one another in community. Talking about the Bible with other Christians is a great way to profit from it.

Fourth, we profit from the Bible as we grasp it with our whole person—mind, will and emotions. We must seek to receive the Bible with our minds, laboring to understand it in the same way we would try to understand any personal communication. That means that we have to pay attention to context, word meanings, figures of speech, grammar and everything true of any verbal communication. We must ask of any scriptural text, "What does it mean?" But we can't stop there. It is possible to be **"always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth"** (v. 7).

The Bible must also be received with the will. That means that it must be applied to our lives through submission of our wills to its commands. That's part

of what Paul means when he tells Timothy to continue in what he's learned. He must continue to obey what he has been taught. So as we read the Bible, we need to ask not just what it means, but also what changes are needed in my life if I am to obey it.

But we're not done until we receive the Bible into our hearts and lives in such a way that our emotions begin to be transformed. What I mean by that is that we begin to love that which is truly beautiful. One of the evidences of our fallen nature is that we love the wrong things. Paul talks about that at the beginning of our chapter, where he describes the misguided love of people. They love themselves, money and pleasure, but don't love God and that which is good. It is significant that first in the list of things wrong with people in the last days is this quality of self-love. It pervades everything else in the list. What's wrong with the world is that people love the wrong things. Fallen human nature results in a loss of appreciation for what is truly beautiful. So as we read the Bible, we must not only ask what it means and how it applies to our lives, but must also ask what it says of God. He is the one who is truly beautiful. And since Jesus is the perfect revelation of God's character, Jesus is the essence of true beauty. One of the things we do when we worship God is to allow God to train us in learning to value and praise what is truly beautiful. We are made to praise that which we find surpassingly beautiful. To be restored to our original glory as God's image-bearers means, among other things, that we value true beauty. And since God is the sum of all true beauty, one of the key results of our reading and studying of the Bible should be a growing appreciation for his beauty.

CONCLUSION:

In a lecture he gave on the Bible, I heard Mike Williams talk about the persecution the Romans brought against the early Christians. One of the ways the Romans learned to identify the Christian leaders was to look for Christian literature. For a Christian to have such literature in their houses would make them liable to arrest and execution. So the Christians had to decide what literature they would be willing to die for. There were many different gospels in the second century, far more than the four we recognize as part of the Bible. But in the face of persecution, these other gospels were not judged by the church to be worth dying for. The consensus developed around the books that comprise our New Testament, that these were worth dying for. They are worth dying for because they tell of the beauty of a God who has died for us. Let me suggest to you an application. Will you take up the challenge to develop some regular plan for reading and studying the Bible in 2010? We will be providing some helps toward that end in the next few weeks.

For a PDF or MP3 version of this lecture, go to www.covenantseminary.edu. Then follow the link to Worldwide Classroom and select the class *God and His Word*. You will be required to set up an account in order to get access to this, but there is no cost for doing so. The inerrancy lecture is the sixth lecture.