# **“How Do I Understand the Bible,**

# **If I Don’t Take It Literally?”**

# **2 Timothy 3:14-17**

## A sermon by Bill Gordon

### June 26, 2016

Rainer Maria Rilke, in his book, *Letters to a Young Poet,* writes:

“...I would like to beg you dear Sir, as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.”

Love the questions. Live the questions. That’s what we’ve been doing through these past five weeks. Today the question: *“How do I understand the Bible, if I don’t take it literally?”* This is such a good question—a challenging one, to be sure, but one that I was happy to take on, when Jenny asked me. There is so much that can be said in answer to this question, much more than one sermon alone can contain. But I’ll do my best to try to get to the heart of the question.

Before I do, though, I do have one little bit of postscript to add to the sermon I preached a month ago, *“What Can We Do About Global Warming?”* Because someone posted a very good question on the wall here behind the Lord’s Table. The question is: “If we are to be concerned about global warming and being good stewards of the planet—shouldn’t we be concerned about the over-population of humans? What does the Bible say about that?’

That is a very good point and a very good question. And the short answer is this: The Bible doesn’t say anything at all about population control. Instead we are encouraged by God to do just the opposite, to “be fruitful and multiply.” Well, we have done just that. Of course, it should be noted that when these words were written in Genesis, there were probably about 150 to 200 million people in the world. Now there are about 1.7 billion. There could be a whole conversation, even a whole session of Bible study just around this issue and the related issues of managing the earth’s resources, caring for human needs, and human hoarding, greed and injustice. But that’s for another time and another setting. I just wanted to acknowledge the question, and give a short answer. There are so many really good questions posted on the wall.

But, to our question for today: *“How do I understand the Bible, if I don’t take it literally?”* (Love the way the sign out front says it, because there just wasn’t room: “What do we do about the Bible?” I’m wondering how many of you came in here this morning just because of that question on the sign???)

Let me begin by asking you this: Can you remember a time when you picked up a book and started reading, and couldn’t put it down? Maybe it was just recently. Or maybe it’s been awhile. Was it a mystery? A western? Was it fiction? Non-fiction?

The first time I remember just such a book was when I was in high school, and I had discovered the science fiction works of Ray Bradbury, especially his novel, *Fahrenheit 451.* But the book, or books, that I really remember not being able to put down some years later was J.R.R. Tolkien’s, *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. I was up to 2:00 and 3:00 in the morning reading those books.

Now, let me ask another question. Is there a book that you once started reading, and no matter how diligently you tried to understand and get through it, no matter how much you wanted to master it, you just couldn’t? It seemed beyond your comprehension. And maybe you finally gave up? For me, it was Stephen Hawking’s, *A Brief History of Time.* It’s not a thick book. It’s not full of abstract mathematical theories. But no matter how hard I tried, I just could not wrap my brain around his concepts. Right now I’ve got several books in progress on my nightstand and on a bookshelf. But one that has been a particular challenge to me, that is similar to Hawking’s book, is one entitled, *A Universe from Nothing.* I’ve been working on about three or four pages at a time for the past two years now. Slow progress. Maybe you’ve had that experience too.

So, which of those two has been your experience of reading the Bible? Whenever you start reading, you can’t put it down? Or, no matter how hard you’ve tried, you just can’t seem to get it? What words best match your experience of reading the Bible: Intimidating? Overwhelming? Strange? Engaging? Enriching? Inspiring?

I love the Bible. I started loving the Bible back when I was a little boy. Does anybody remember the World Book Encyclopedias? My parents bought a set when I was very young. And one of the books in that set, in addition to the encyclopedias, was a hard-bound book of illustrated Bible stories—all the stories of Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Samson, David, Daniel in the lion’s den, and Jesus and the disciples. I read that book over and over again. We didn’t go to church very much as a family when I was very young. We didn’t start attending regularly until I was in high school. Then I became very active through the youth group.

And then I became disenchanted with the church, and stopped going altogether when I was in college. But when my life began to unravel, I began to give a thought to my religious roots again, picked up a copy of C.S. Lewis’, *Mere Christianity,* and picked up a Bible. I started reading the Gospel of Mark. It was like meeting Jesus for the first time, even though I had read and heard all about him in Sunday School. I had lengthy conversations with my hometown pastor about what I was reading in Mark. It was that pastor that put the question in my mind: “Are you hearing God’s call in your life to ministry, by any chance?” I tried resisting the thought, but the next thing I knew, I had switched college majors, switched universities, and before I knew it, I found myself in seminary. My first seminary class?…to begin my whole seminary experience?...at 8:00 in the morning?...Old Testament! Intimidating would be an understatement. But that professor made the Old Testament—made scripture—come alive for me. I had a similar experience with the New Testament professor, his first teaching position after earning his PhD. I loved other subjects too, but I was hooked.

Ever since then, I’ve never tired of the challenge and the insight and formation of my Christian faith and journey that engaging with the Bible has brought me. In my active preaching ministry I preferred to start with a biblical text and live with it all week to hear how God might speak through it to me and our current time in history. I’ve always loved teaching Bible classes. There are still parts of the Bible that I find challenging and difficult to read, and parts that I return to and discover new treasures and insights I hadn’t seen before. And there are also parts that I find disturbing and just plain wrong and would just as soon, like Thomas Jefferson, have removed from the biblical record. But they are all part of the whole story of the people of God as they lived and sought meaning in God in their time and circumstances, just as we do.

The problem for most people, I think, is the way the Bible is too often portrayed these days—that it needs to be read and taken literally as it is written on the pages without question and without challenge. After all, it is said, the Bible is the inspired Word of God—often quoting 2nd Timothy, the scripture we heard earlier where Paul writes, “every scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, showing mistakes, for correcting, and for training in character.” Therefore since God is perfect, God would not dictate an imperfect Bible. Thus the Bible is infallible and without error. You may have seen the bumper sticker, “The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it.”

There are several problems with this stance, and several reasons why it is a mistake to say we must take the Bible literally. First of all, not all of the words of the Bible are actually words spoken by God. The Psalms are a prime example. The psalms are words spoken by people to God, singing and praying and bearing witness to their profound faith in the God who cares about us and our human condition. The letters of Paul and others in the New Testament are words spoken to the early Christian communities about issues they are dealing with. Those letters, even the Gospels, weren’t considered sacred scripture when they were written. They became sacred scripture to us over time. Would Paul have been writing about his own words when he says that “every scripture is inspired by God?” Is he claiming that he is writing scripture?

To say that the Bible is the “Word of God” is not to say that the Bible is entirely the *words* of God. When we say that the Bible is the Word of God, what we are saying is that through our reading and hearing and reflecting on what is written in all those pages we engage with those who engaged with God through the millennia, discovering something of the character and will of God. I would point us to the profound witness of John who begins his Gospel by saying, “In the beginning was the Word (that is, all the wisdom and truth and glory of the universe)…and the Word was with God… and the Word was God…and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” As a wise preacher once said to me many years ago, “We should always remember that the Word became flesh, human, not printer’s ink.”

One more problem with the notion that the Bible must be taken literally. The various books and stories and traditions and utterances that make up the Bible were written over thousands of years by a variety of writers who were writing to their particular time in their particular cultures and in their own languages. The Hebrew Scriptures, what we have called the Old Testament, were written in Hebrew. The New Testament was written in Greek. Even in the New Testament, when the writers quote from what they refer to as their sacred scripture, they are almost always quoting from a Greek translation of the Hebrew scrolls. We are reading our English versions, our English translation from languages and cultures, not our own. How can we be sure that we understand and translate accurately, and in such a way that we in our time and culture understand what the original writers meant?

Finally, this whole notion of the inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible is actually a very recent development. The first notions of the Bible being described as being without error appeared in the late 1600’s. But it didn’t come to full flower in Protestant Christianity until 1910 in a tract that set forth five “fundamentals” that had to be adhered to in order to be a “saved” Christian. Accepting the Bible as inerrant and infallible was the first of those five fundamentals. This was a direct reaction to the ground-breaking work of Charles Darwin in his book, *The Origin of Species,* introducing of the theory of evolution. Biblical literalism, inerrancy and infallibility has never been a proposed part of the Christian reading and understanding of scripture until the 20th century.

So, how can we understand the Bible, if we don’t take it literally? It is often said that the Bible was never meant to be taken literally, but it should always be taken *seriously*.

The first thing I would say is that when we come to the Bible we are invited to bring our intellect, our reason, and our faith.

The second thing I would say is to come with our questions. Yes, it’s not only OK but we are encouraged to bring our questions and our doubts. No, it is not a sin to doubt or reject certain stories of the Bible? That was one of the questions on the board. I can tell you that there are certainly stories and horrific passages that I reject. I measure everything by my faith-relationship with Jesus as I engage with him in the Gospels.

Third, remember that much of the Biblical material is embedded with particular historical contexts, cultures and the scientific understandings of those times. Accept those as a given, without any particular judgment. But do seek to understand those.

Fourth, read for meaning within whatever you are reading. What is the writer pointing to beyond the words? Where do you see yourself in the text? Where is God meeting you and working with you?

Now, another question on the board asks this: “If what the Bible says and what our society says don’t agree, which do we choose?” My short answer to that is that it depends on the particular text, and our prayerful study and reflection in our own United Methodist go about discerning God’s leading. As United Methodists we go about our spiritual discernment employing 4 principle guidelines: (1) the faithful, careful reading of scripture, (2) illumined by the traditions of our Christian faith, (3) examining our own human experience, and (4) confirmed and informed by our reason. More often than not, our conclusions will not end up being either-or, but both-and.

May I offer some helpful advice to reading and understanding the Bible.

1) It is really best done in a group, although I highly recommend your own private prayerful reading and reflection on scripture as often as you can.

2) If you don’t have one, buy a good study Bible, one that will provide historical background and context; telling you who the author is, when book was written, and who it is being written to.

3) Read for more than just information. Read to meet with God. Don’t worry about having a hard and fast discipline of daily reading. Great if you can. But don’t beat yourself up if you can’t.

4) Don’t read for quantity. Focus on smaller segments of scripture to reflect on. But it is important to connect with the whole context—what has come before and what comes after.

5) Always begin with a quiet, clearing of your mind in prayer for the Spirit to speak to your mind and heart through the words you read.

6) You are looking for, and anticipating a meeting with God through your reading and reflecting on scripture. Look for your story in God’s story. Where do you find yourself? What might God be saying to you? Allow the text to draw you in. What questions would you ask of the text? What is being asked of you? What are you being asked to do? How are you being challenged to change?

7) Read the scripture aloud if you can. The Bible is meant not merely to be read. It’s meant to be heard.

There are any numbers of ways to go about reading your Bible. These are just a few suggestions. I know that many of you are already faithful in reading your Bible, and have found ways that are helpful to you in meeting God in its words and its pages. Keep on doing what works for you.

There is just so much more to say about how to understand the Bible without taking it literally. Hundreds of *books* have been written on this question. I’ve made this feeble attempt to do this in a single sermon. All I can say now is to not let anything discourage you. The important thing is to trust yourself, to trust your faith, trust your questions, and trust God. God is always ready to meet us in the scriptures. Of course, God’s love for us is present everywhere. Whether we read the Bible, or we don’t read the Bible, nothing can separate us from God’s love for us in Jesus Christ.

But how rich it is to meet people just like you and me in the pages of the Bible, ordinary people who struggle with doubts and questions, and who yearn for a deeper, life-giving faith, just as we do. When we enter into the Biblical story, we find our story there as well. And when our story meets God’s story—and we read and listen with eyes and ears truly open to see and to hear the Spirit’s leading—our lives are changed from deep within.

All I can say is that reading and wrestling and living with scripture over the years in my life has formed my faith and my life in ways I could never have imagined. I have seen it, too, in so many, many others. I know that many of you here know just what I’m saying.

I still love the Bible. If you have a yearning to study the Bible, especially with others in our church, there are Bible studies going on here every week. If you aren’t already involved, you are always welcome to join one of them. If there’s a class or group you wish we could form around something you’d like to study, talk with Pastor Jenny, or Kate, or Tanya. If you have questions—any question at all about something you read in your Bible, don’t hesitate ask Pastor Jenny. Or, ask me. I love questions.

I believe that it was Martin Luther who once said that the scriptures are the “manger in which we find Christ.” That is my prayer for us all.

Amen.