

2021-09-19 Reclaiming the Bible

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artisanchurch.com

[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Jo Kneezel, reading from Psalm 119:33-40]

- ³³ Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes,
and I will observe it to the end.
- ³⁴ Give me understanding, that I may keep your law
and observe it with my whole heart.
- ³⁵ Lead me in the path of your commandments,
for I delight in it.
- ³⁶ Turn my heart to your decrees,
and not to selfish gain.
- ³⁷ Turn my eyes from looking at vanities;
give me life in your ways.
- ³⁸ Confirm to your servant your promise,
which is for those who fear you.
- ³⁹ Turn away the disgrace that I dread,
for your ordinances are good.
- ⁴⁰ See, I have longed for your precepts;
in your righteousness give me life.

[Voice of Tim Kneezel, reading from 2 Timothy 3:13-17]

So, this is from 2 Timothy, chapter three, and we are going to be reading from The Message today, so a little extra fun.

“Unscrupulous con men will continue to exploit the faith. They’re as deceived as the people they lead astray. As long as they are out there, things can only get worse. But don’t let it faze you. Stick with what you learned and believed, sure of the integrity of your teachers—why, you took in the sacred Scriptures with your mother’s milk! There’s nothing like the written Word of God for showing you the way to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or

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another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God’s way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us.”

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

How many of you heard that scripture in a different translation before, and maybe found some different meaning in it? To say that I'm going to be preaching from that text is somewhat generous, but I do want it to be ringing in the back of your head. [laughter] Actually, to get started, I want you to take a moment and imagine a tree. I’m being intentionally vague about this; I want it to be *your* tree. So whatever comes to mind, let that be your tree. Get as clear a picture as you can with as much detail as makes sense. And we’ll return to the tree in a minute. So, if in the next few minutes you find your mind wandering, you can do that mindfulness thing and just return your attention to the tree. And then maybe you'll find your way back into what we're talking about.

So this is week two of a new series that I'm really excited about. It's called “Reclaiming Christianity.” Kind of a lofty title, I know, but the idea is that we're trying to consider aspects of our faith that have been lost, or maybe even captured or commandeered or kidnapped. By whom? Well, sometimes by fundamentalists of the religious and non-religious variety, sometimes by negative church experiences, sometimes by toxic theology. And we started this last week with a sermon called “Reclaiming the Cross,” and I'll just say quickly that I received more and more intense feedback about that sermon than any sermon I've given in 20-plus years of being in ministry. And that was really humbling. If I’d known that you were going to take it so seriously, I would have worked harder on it [laughter]. No, in all seriousness, I'm very honored that God would use something that I said to connect with many of you and in a way that God connected with you. And I'll tell you the most common response was some version of the following: “I so want this to be true, but it's really hard for me to believe that it could be true because I've been taught to believe that something else is true.”

It's really hard to unwind all of the things that we've been taught. I totally understand. I want you to know that if you're feeling that kind of dissonance right now or if you were feeling it last week, it's okay. You are not alone. There's a whole bunch of people — part of the reason I'm telling you this is not to brag that I gave such a great sermon that may change so many lives, but to tell you there's so many people who are experiencing the same kind of thing that you're experiencing right now. You are not alone. So keep going and take it one day at a time. Many people asked me about resources: What can I read? What podcasts can I listen to? I have a lot of thoughts on that, very few of which I have time to share right now. I am hoping to be able to

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put together this week or next, a resources page that will go with this series, and I may add to it throughout.

But really briefly, if last week's sermon really touched you and if you felt like that is something that you want to go a little deeper with, understanding the cross in a different way, I would start with two books. One is called *A More Christlike God* by Brad Gerson, and if you've been around Artisan for a long time you know that I've recommended that book before. I loaned out my copy of it this week and I'm very much hoping that I'll get it back because it's highlighted in some places that I don't want to lose, so I can't lend it to anybody else just now. But if you want to go get a copy, you can. And if you can't afford a copy but really feel like you need to have a copy, we'll buy one for you, just let me know.

And the other book, which is less about what I talked about last week but which is really important for almost all of us in the room. Looking around, most of us identify as white, and this is a book by James Cone called *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, which makes a direct connection between the crucifixion of Jesus and the lynching of black bodies in American history. And the *More Christlike God* book took my soul and heart apart in one way and this one took my soul and heart apart in a totally different way. And I kind of regret that I didn't incorporate more of this material last week, so I really want to make sure that I at least suggest it as something that you might read on your own. It's called *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. And that book I haven't loaned out, so if you catch me first, you get to have a copy that you can look at. Doug mentioned the group this week. If you want to process this stuff with other people, please be part of that. And if you weren't here last week and don't know what I'm talking about, we do have a podcast that you can go listen to. You can go find the replay of the service on Facebook and you can find the sermon there as well.

But for now, onward. This week we are reclaiming the Bible. "Why would we have to reclaim the Bible?" he said, rhetorically. Let me do this. I'm going to ask you in just a word or two, whether you're going to type it into the Zoom chat or shout it out in the room here: What comes to mind, good, bad or in the middle, when you hear the word Bible? [Voice in crowd] Thumper! [Scott, laughing] Sarah thinks of the rabbit in that Christmas animated special—Bible thumper. Yes, thank you. [Voice in crowd] "Belt!" [Scott] Bible Belt, interesting, or maybe a different belt. [Voice in crowd] "Black and white." [Voice in crowd] "God-breathed." [Scott] God-breathed, from 2 Timothy. Thank you, yes. Oh, someone says "Memorization." Someone says "Ancient." Someone else on Zoom says "The law, or rules." Another person on Zoom says, "Inerrant?" with a question mark. And then of course someone says, "The answer is always Jesus." [Laughter]. Thank you, I've taught you well [laughs].

How many of you might have thought (you don't just show your hands here) but if you thought this, you might not have wanted to shout it out, that you would have thought about the Bible as

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a weapon or a tool that was used to shame you or oppress you. Some of you might have thought the Bible is confusing or contradictory, or bogus. What if we framed it this way? And again, you can give me an answer if you want. Fill in the blank in this sentence with your own opinion or the opinion of someone else who's not to be named. It's a safe place to do this. "The Bible is a ____ for life." [People shouting responses] "Weapon." "Guide." "Tool." "Rule book." "Answer book." Yeah. One I had down was an answer sheet, like the thing that the teacher uses to grade the test. Instruction manual. Atlas, like a map. So we've just in two minutes established a really wide range of opinions and experiences with the Bible, and no doubt we could spend the rest of the service talking about it.

I feel it would be a dereliction of my pastoral duty if I didn't say to those of you who have found yourselves on the receiving end of an attack based on this book, if you have had this book used against you to shame you, to oppress you, to control you—it's not everybody in the room, but there are some of you in the room and I just need to tell you that if that's you, I'm so sorry that that happened to you. And it's a tragedy that should not have happened, but I want to acknowledge that it does. For some of you, the Bible's been nothing but negative. And it's an unfortunate truth. I spent four years in a Christian liberal arts college and almost four more years in a seminary. And I can tell you with a pretty high degree of confidence that the people who know the Bible the best are some of the meanest people I've ever met. Not all of them. Some of them. It's almost like they had the wrong motives for learning about the Bible.

So, if the Bible causes you nothing but pain, if it triggers a traumatic sort of response in you, you don't need my permission, but I'll just tell you that it's okay to set it down for a little while. You know, Christians did pretty well without the written word for about 1500 years [laughter]. It was without the Bible, but they came to church and that's where they received it. I know the church has been just as much of a problem and that maybe they're inextricable for you. There was a season where I had to not read the Bible for a while, and if you need to go into one of those seasons, it's okay. There's not going to be a, you know, nobody checks your reading log when they let you into heaven.

All of that being said, the Bible is a part of our faith that I really do want to reclaim, especially for those of you who had such negative experiences with it. Because I believe that the Bible is so much more worthy, so much more profound, so much more interesting and inspiring and powerful. And yes, I would even say authoritative, probably with a different meaning that it's sometimes been used, but I would say it's so much more of all of those things than most people give it credit for, including and maybe even especially, the people who claim to hold it in the highest esteem. Because what that often has looked like is sacralizing the wrong aspects of the Scriptures, right? Putting the wrong parts of it up on a pedestal and missing out on almost all the good stuff.

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Alright. Let's talk about your trees for a minute. Do you remember the tree that you visualized a little bit ago? Here's a weird question. I don't need you to answer this one, but I want you to know for yourself. How close to the tree were you? Were you close enough to touch the tree? If so, I bet you couldn't see the top of it. Were you far enough away from the tree that you could actually see not only that tree but the whole forest, as the expression goes? If so, you wouldn't be able to count the number of branches and be able to see the veins in the leaves. And also, it probably looked one inch tall. Trees are very big. That's about as much science as I know [laughs].

This is the thing about a tree. You can study it and learn from it and learn about it, rather, from both distances. From close enough to touch and from far enough away to see the whole forest, and from lots of distances in between. But those are two very different experiences of a tree. You actually probably need them both if you're going to understand the tree. The same is true for the Bible. By the way, speaking of trees, you can also rip off some of the bark and take it back to a laboratory 100 miles away and study it under a microscope. And that can be useful, too. Thank goodness that scientists do that kind of thing. That's not quite the same thing as seeing a tree. The scientist wouldn't say, Hey, come look at this tree under my microscope.

Along the same lines, if you wanted to know a specific piece of information about a tree, like how old it is, what could you do? You could cut it down. You could let it fall and then count the rings in the trunk. And you would then become really certain about one aspect of that tree's nature, but you would have killed it. So, if you haven't picked up what I'm laying down, I want you to think about studying the Bible, sort of in the same way that you think about studying your tree. Are you right now in a season with the Bible to see it in close-up detail, or in a season to step back and see the big picture. That might be an interesting way to think about how you approach the Bible in this coming season.

Now hear me out just for a minute here. What if studying the tree isn't the only way to experience it? What else can you do with the tree? [Repeating an answer from the crowd] Climb it. You could climb a tree. What point would that have? You wouldn't know anything about the species of the tree by climbing it. [Repeating] You can sit in its shade. Absolutely. [Repeating] You can smell a tree. That was not on my list, but I like it. [Repeating] You could write a poem about it. [Repeating] You could eat its fruit. The tree could nourish you. If you were dropped down in a strange country, you could be nourished by that tree and not know anything else about it. Isn't that funny. You could use it to build something. In a pinch, you could use it to make fuel for a fire that would keep you safe and alive through a cold, dark night. You could hang a tire on it and swing from the branches. See what I mean by "I'm not exactly preaching 2 Timothy three" right now? But I kind of am.

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Here's the thing. If you have always thought about the Bible, as one of you said, black and white [and as] another of you said, a rulebook, whereas another of you said an answer book or sheet, it may seem utterly absurd to imagine playing with the Bible, or playing in the Bible. It may seem so unproductive to imagine yourself sitting under the shade of the Bible, but try it.

Now, if you were raised in a Protestant church—this is less true in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions—but if you were raised in a Protestant church, you very likely have been taught to have a deep, holy respect, not just for the words of the Bible but maybe even for the physical Bible itself. I saw a pastor once (I'm not going to do this) who was trying to make a point similar to this, and he put it on the ground and he stood on top of it. Like, nothing's going to go wrong. He didn't get struck by lightning. I don't expect that that's going to have any effect on his long term spiritual health or whatever happens after he passes from this world into the next. But for all of us in the room, it was like [deep gasp].

Having that deep, holy, sacred view of the Bible is really good, until it's not. And I promise you, I really need you to know, I promise you: you can release a whole lot of Bible baggage that you have. You can let go of so many concepts that you and I have been taught are *absolutely essential* to understanding, believing, submitting yourself, whatever you might use, the Bible. You can let go of so many of those expectations and still come away with an incredible, holy respect for our sacred scriptures. Doesn't make you less of a Christian, doesn't mean you don't love Jesus, doesn't mean you're “rejecting God's ways in favor of the ways of the world”, whatever that means.

Right, I know that some of you are going to expire soon if I don't give you something more concrete and practical. [chuckles] I told, at our staff meeting this week, I said, “I think I'm thinking about having the service have no scripture at all on Sunday; what would that be like?” Obviously, we didn't go that direction, but I think it would have been okay if we did. This is a sermon *about* the Bible as much as it's a sermon *from* the Bible – in fact, probably much more than it's a sermon from the Bible – But you need to have that kind of background work, I think, right? Some of you can't even can't even bear to open it until you have a little bit of help with some of these ideas.

That being said, I am going to give you something a little bit more concrete and practical, and to make it even more comfortable and fun for you, I'm going to give you some righteous alliterations. [chuckles] How many alliterations do you think I have? [audience members shout out their guesses] [Pastor Scott chuckles] It is neither three nor 12 nor 40; it's four! I have four righteous alliterations for you that I hope are just going to kind of continue to turn this soil over, and no I'm not going to necessarily go back and preach 2 Timothy 3 and put a bow on it, but 2 Timothy 3 is so true. And my goodness, when I read that in The Message this week and read

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that first part – Aaron, can you put that first slide back on the screen because I can't remember exactly how the translator worded it – “Unscrupulous con men will continue to exploit the faith.” [laughs] That's the verse that leads into the, “All scripture is God-breathed and useful,” right? [chuckles] We don't usually hear it set up that way. That would be telling on ourselves.

All right, here's my first righteous alliteration. When you're thinking about the Bible, think of the Bible as a **library of literature, not a litany of literalism and law**. Now, I know that was a lot, [laughter] the later ones have less. [laughter] Ahah hah, “lol”. Oh, my goodness. [chuckles] Think of the Bible as a library of literature, not as a litany of literalism and law, right?

I've said this before; if you've been around Artisan a long time you've heard me talk about the Bible not as a book, but as a library of books. It's a collection of writings that were written down in various different times by various different people, when the people of God were having various different experiences. It's a book that contains many different genres of literature. If you went into a library and just grabbed two books off two completely different, separate shelves from each other, and put these two books down and insisted on reading them exactly the same way, and applying them exactly the same way, you actually hurt yourself doing that, right? The same is true of the Bible. It's a library; it's a collection of books with all kinds of different genres and authors, and if you insist on interpreting every single verse in the Bible the same exact way, you might do yourself some harm, and some others.

So, literal is one of those things, right, that's part of our Bible baggage, some of us. If the Bible isn't literal, can it still be true? [chuckles] Oh, boy. Can it ever?! Oh my goodness, what a lousy world we would be living in if only literal things were true. Oh my goodness. Alright, so, library of literature, not a litany of literalism and law. By the way, Rob Bell says that insisting on a literal interpretation of the Bible is often a way to avoid what it is actually asking of you, which is usually to love your neighbor.

Alright, the next one. The next *righteous alliteration* is a little bit like the first one, but it says this: **look for poetry, not a prescription** – talk about two different types of things you could write down on a piece of paper! Look for poetry, not a prescription. I'm really sorry to tell those of you who didn't like English class, but if you don't know how to read poetry at all, you're really going to miss out on so much of the Bible's meaning. Now, you don't need to go take some college course, but you might need to slightly adjust the way you think about it.

We take a prescription with us to the pharmacy, so that someone can give us medicine that will make us stop being sick. We read a poem and it's not an experience of healing or not being sick, and – well, actually, it kind of is. It's just a different type. By the way, Jesus, not the Bible, is the

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healer of our souls. Also, Jesus is the true and final Word of God; Jesus is what God has to say. You've heard me preach that one a few times. So, look for poetry, not a prescription.

Here's a third righteous alliteration for you. This is so much fun. I don't do alliterations, but I might just start; this is great. **Worry less about contradictions and worry more about context.** Does the Bible have any contradictions in it? Yes. Okay? Yes. Can we please move past that? Yes, it says one thing here and another thing there. Yes, it tells the story this way here and the same story that way there. The expectations that we place on the Bible as modern and postmodern people, when it is an ancient bit of literature – they just don't work. I'm so sorry to tell you that the Gospel writers were not being held to the standards of Western journalism; they just weren't. That's not why they wrote their books; that's not how they wrote. I'm so sorry to tell you that two people living in completely different times worshiping the same God might have a different experience with that God, and with the world around them, and they are going to see the world differently. Guess what? They're both still following God, and you can find meaning and depth and truth from both of them, even if they don't agree with each other. Right?

It's so silly to me that we would insist on the idea that there couldn't be a contradiction in the Bible, and then if there is, the whole thing should just be junked. Adjust your demands. And the context is so important, such an important part of that, right? The context, almost always, doesn't explain away the contradictions, but gives you a framework for understanding why they might be there. But you're not lending Jesus any credibility by insisting in an argument or debate that there's no contradictions in the Bible. Do the harder task; we're here to help.

Alright, I have one more alliteration for you. I want you to, when you read the Bible, **seek out immersion, rather than instructions.** Did someone say “instruction manual”, or did I just add that to the list? I think some of you in the room might have said an instruction manual. Instead, look for immersion. And I'm thinking of a specific type of immersion; are you familiar with, like, an immersion language school, right? Learning a language from, you know, Duolingo; or Rosetta Stone; or French 1, 2, 3, and 4, as I took in high school – How much of it do you think I remember? *Bien*. [laughter] Learning a language immersively is how we learned it as children, of course, and it's very, very, very unsettling to try to do it as an adult. I have spent a little bit of time in countries where English is not the primary language, and it's extremely intimidating, but I learned more Spanish in nine days in Spain than I learned in weeks of trying to do that stupid app before I got there. [audience chuckles] Kudos to you if you have luck with the apps, I just didn't.

Did you notice that immersion is not the opposite of an instruction manual? That's kind of part of what I'm doing here; not everything is a binary situation. Not everything has an opposite that you get to push away. I want you to think, instead of going to the Bible looking for instructions

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on “What should I do next? What should I do next? How do I handle this situation? Who do I take to the prom? Uhhh, dear Lord, please tell me.” [Scott pages through bible looking for random passage; audience chuckles; Scott reads random passage:] “Rejoice, young man, while you're young, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth.” That actually worked pretty well! [laughter] But it could have gone real bad! [laughter]

If, instead of insisting on getting instructions for your next step in your spiritual walk, you sought out an experience of being totally immersed in the inspired Word of God, and allowing that to have whatever effect on you that it will have, well, I can't promise what would happen, which is why it's not usually preached. I would love it if your experience with the Bible is more like a language immersion and less like algebra. Algebra is super cool, by the way. I know that sometimes I get up here and I start going on my humanities rants and things; just told you you have to learn how to interpret poetry if you want to be a good Christian. [laughter] (I didn't say that. [chuckles]) All kidding aside, math and science, love them so much. I'm not as good at them as I am at the humanities, that's why I keep emphasizing this, but also I really just think it's a different domain. I'm not joking when I say that reading the Bible is more like language immersion than like algebra, and it's just because that's what I believe is true. (My goodness, I'm going so long.)

When you reclaim the Bible and reorient yourself to it, you may find that you experience the stories that are in it so much differently, so instead of debating whether or not the first creation story in the Bible means that all life on Earth had to have appeared in the six 24-hour day periods, you might instead find yourself comparing that creation myth to the creation myths of other ancient Near Eastern cultures, for example, the Babylonian culture, which is where the Israelites were, in exile, when that was codified and edited and written down. And you might see, whoa, the Babylonians have a very violent creation myth, and the Hebrew people have a very peaceful one, and that might unlock an entirely different category of meaning for you in that text.

Instead of being horrified that God instructed Abraham to lay his son on an altar and sacrifice him – which, let's be honest if you're not horrified by that idea, there might be, you might want to become horrified by it before you go much further in life – but instead of only feeling that, if you're to imagine the context of the situation and how that how that experience must have sat with Abraham, himself, who had lived for decades in a society where child sacrifice was a normal part of worshipping one of the gods. Horrific, but quite normal. And then to have gone all the way up the mountain and started the process, only to be told by God, “No, that is not how *this* religion is going to work. By the way, there's a ram stuck in the ticket.”

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Instead of trying to imagine where could Noah have put all of the elephants' food [chuckles] – I mean, I know what a cubit is, and that's definitely not what happened. [laughter] Elephants eat a lot of food, and it was 40 days and 40 nights, and there weren't enough cubits for all that food! [chuckles] Or instead of rolling your eyes at the genetic disaster that it would have been to restart every single species with only two. [laughs] Maybe instead you could think about all of the other ancient Near Eastern religious stories that include floods, and again, much as with the creation stories, compare them to each other, and find out that in this one what might be unique about it is that some of the people were saved. And none of the other deities put a ranged weapon, sparkly and colorful, in the sky, pointing at themselves. It's a *rainbow*; did you catch that?

Instead of grinding toward the one right interpretation of every difficult passage, you might do what Rabbi Lawrence Kushner did, and write a whole book about one passage where every chapter is a different interpretation, some of which are mutually exclusive. By the way, and I'll close with this, the rabbis are so much better at scripture than the pastors. They're so much better. In the Jewish interpretive tradition, it's common to talk about Torah, the scriptures, as a gemstone, a jewel, with 70 different sides, with 70 facets. And you can keep turning and turning and turning it, and letting it catch the light at a different angle each time you turn it, and have an ongoing, profound experience with the God of the universe, who inspired these texts without insisting on any of the baggage that you and I might bring to the text otherwise.

So, I want to leave you with that image. I want to encourage you to hold the jewel of scripture up to the light, and if it frustrates you, turn it; and if it inspires you, turn it; and if it rebukes you, turn it; if it teaches you, turn it. Turn it. Turn it. I love the Bible so much more thinking about it this way than I ever did thinking about the other way – so much more. My wish and prayer for you is that you, for the rest of your lives, will turn the jewel so many times that you never stop growing and learning. Now that is a pretty high view of scripture, I hope. May it be true for you.

[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](https://www.ArtisanChurch.com).