

Read the Bible

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[0:00] If you've got a Bible, you're going to need two fingers this morning. The first finger is going to go to the Old Testament, to the book of Nehemiah, chapter 8.

And then the second finger can go to the New Testament, to 1 Timothy, chapter 4. I'm going to read from verse 1 of chapter 8 in the book of Nehemiah in the Old Testament.

It actually starts a little bit into the back end of chapter 7 there. But when the seven months came and the Israelites settled in their towns, all the people came together as one in the square before the water gate.

They told Ezra, the teacher of the law, to bring out the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel. So on the first day of the seventh month, Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand.

He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the water gate. In the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the book of the law.

[1:36] Ezra, the teacher of the law, stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattathiah, Shemah, Ananiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Messiah.

And on his left were Pedadiah, Mishael, Malachijah, Hashem, I don't know that next one, Hashpadana, Zechariah, and Meshulam.

Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them. And as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the Lord, the great God.

And all the people lifted their hands and responded, Amen, Amen. And then they bowed down and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. The Levites, Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akab, Shabbetai, Hodiah, Messiah, same guys in the previous list.

Kelita, Azariah, Josabad, Hanan, and Peliah instructed the people in the law while the people were standing there. They read from the book of the law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.

[2:56] Then Nehemiah, the governor, Ezra, the priest and teacher of the law, and the Levites who were all instructing the people, said to them all, This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep.

For all the people had been weeping as they had listened to the words of the law. Nehemiah said, Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks and send some to those who have nothing prepared.

This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. The Levites calmed all the people, saying, Be still, for this is a holy day.

Do not grieve. Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

Then go forward in your Bibles to 1 Timothy chapter 4. 1 Timothy chapter 4, and we're going to look at verse 11. Down to verse 16.

[3 : 58] The Apostle Paul writes, and he says, Command and teach these things. Do not let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity.

Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching, and to teaching. Do not neglect your gift which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you.

Be diligent in these matters. Give yourself wholly to them so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and your doctrine closely. And you persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

This is the word of the Lord. Let's pray. Let's ask for God's help as we study. Gracious God, won't you open your word to us? Won't you teach us truth this morning?

We come needing the words of life, and the words of life are found in Scripture. And so we want to see into Scripture clearly. We want to understand it.

[4 : 58] We want to treasure it. And we want to be changed by it. So won't you meet with us in your word? By the power of your spirit we pray for Christ's sake. Amen. So you're not getting rid of me just yet.

We've still got probably just over another month, which means we've got a month to finish our series on the doctrine of worship that we've been doing, made for worship. That's what we've been walking through.

I think we've done four sermons in that prior to the little break we did, and now we're continuing in this. What we've done, just to fill you in in case you're coming in sort of in the middle of the series, is we have defined what worship is.

We have looked at the necessity not just to worship God with all of your life, like Romans 12 says we should do, but to actually gather for specific times of worship on the Lord's Day, like you're doing right now.

We've seen that it's our Lord Jesus Christ who makes our worship acceptable. That we're able to come as sinful human beings and worship with the creator God of this universe is because Christ is the great high priest who mediates that coming to God.

[6 : 02] And then we've seen that what we do in worship when we gather should be regulated by Scripture. We talked about something called the regulative principle, that we don't just do what we feel like doing when we gather, but we do what we see Scripture telling us to do when we gather.

Now, we're sort of left with that big overarching principle, that what we do in worship must be governed, must be regulated by Scripture. We only do in worship what is clearly commanded in the Bible, or what can be, and this is the language actually of the Westminster Confession of Faith, can be deduced by good and necessary consequence in our reading of Scripture.

So it doesn't mean you always have an exact verse that says do this, but you can read the rest of the Bible and go, oh, it's probably important that we do this because of the way the rest of the Bible talks about this particular subject. Now, the obvious reality, though, as you think about that, and maybe you had this thought when we did that particular sermon, is that Scripture doesn't explicitly speak about every single part of what makes up an ordinary worship service.

I mean, like, is there a verse that you can find that tells you what language I should speak in when I preach on a Sunday morning? Should I preach in the vernacular, or should I preach in Greek, ancient Greek, when we're studying the New Testament, because that's what it was written in?

Should I preach in Hebrew, when we're studying the Old Testament? In fact, there's a tiny little part in Aramaic, I don't even know anything about Aramaic. Should I preach in Aramaic when we do that part as well? How long should a sermon be?

[7:34] Now, I know lots of you got opinions about that, but can you find a verse? Should we sit, or should we stand for the duration of worship?

How loud, how soft should the instruments be? Should we use projection? Should we have a hymnal in our hands? Guys, there are countless questions that you're not going to find an explicit verse to address.

And so in this series, as we move into the particulars of a worship service, which is really what the rest of our series is going to be, we have to come up with some sort of method, some sort of approach for answering those questions, so that we can, with a clear conscience, truly say that our worship is governed, is regulated by Scripture.

And we're not just doing a thumbsuck here. Now, what the Reformed tradition has done, the tradition that the Presbyterian Church comes from, and that really helps us here, is they've distinguished between, and you might want to remember these categories, they distinguish between what they call elements, forms, and circumstances.

Elements, forms, and circumstances. So elements are clearly prescribed sort of constituent parts of the worship service. The things we are definitely supposed to do, that we know we're definitely supposed to do when we worship, and then if we're not doing them, well, then you're really not a biblical church.

[9:00] You're not really following what the patterns in Scripture. Elements. Come one step over. Forms are the ways in which we do the elements.

The way we carry out the specific elements. Now here, we're guided by the Scriptures. We must be guided by the Scriptures, but it's not always a one-size-fits-all. Sometimes we can do things in different ways, and so there's a level of wisdom that needs to be applied here.

Biblical wisdom, and almost expediency as well. Then come over another step, and the orders, the liberator, elements, forms, come over another step, you get circumstances. Circumstances are incidental matters that we need to make decisions on, because we just have to, functionally.

But they aren't expressly dealt with in Scripture. And so here we have to use human prudence and a measure of pragmatism around these sorts of things. So let me give you an example of this to try and flesh it out for you.

Let's think about preaching. Okay? Often go to a worship service, you hear someone preach a sermon. Preaching, I would argue, and we are going to argue in this series, preaching is an element. We have clear commands in Scripture that tell us that the preaching of the Word is a constituent element of an ordinary Christian worship service.

[10:11] You have to have it. If it's not there, then it's not really a biblical worship service. If you're going to a church and no one ever preaches from the Bible, you're going to go, you're doing something, but it's not really biblical worship as the patterns are set out in Scripture.

But how should I preach, for example? Should I go verse by verse through a particular passage, what some people might call expository preaching?

Or should I rather pitch a theological idea to you, a biblical theological idea to you that comes from Scripture, and then go to all the different passages in the Bible that speak to that idea, and unpack all of those for you, a little bit of what we're actually doing today?

That's what some people call topical preaching. Well, those would be what we call forms. Choosing when to preach in an expository way or when to preach in a topical way requires a level of biblical wisdom to be applied.

And it might actually change from time to time depending on the circumstances, like whether we're doing a series in the book of Acts where we're just moving from one chapter to the next chapter, like we've been doing in our bigger series, or we're doing a topical series like this where we're talking about worship.

[11:17] It makes a difference how we preach. And so that's where the category of forms comes into play. Then, again, moving over in the three circumstances.

A circumstance would be something like, should I stand down there in the middle of the aisle while I preach? Or should I come and stand up on a stage behind a pulpit?

I grew up in a church where in the evening service the minister would go and stand in the middle of the aisle just to kind of eyeball you when he was telling you off about something in the passage. But that's a circumstance.

We've got to figure it out and say, what's going to make the most sense? Stand up here, stand down there. We apply prudence, we apply pragmatism to that sort of a, I've got to stand somewhere where I teach.

Now you'll see the roots of this actual distinction in our confessional statement. So in the Westminster Confession of Faith, right near the very beginning, chapter 1, paragraph 6, it says, There are some circumstances concerning the worship of God and the government of the church common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence according to the general rules of the word, which are always to be observed.

[12:25] So there are going to be things that are fixed. You get that in that passage? They're going to be fixed in Scripture that you have to obey. It's in the Bible. God said it. Do it. And then there are going to be things that are left to what they call the light of nature.

Use your brain is what the divines are saying. They're like, use your brain and think carefully about this and apply wisdom to this. And then there's actually a whole other stuff in the middle, which is basically the forms. And there are degrees on all of those to some extent.

So that's the first thing I want you to put in your brains as we go into this whole second section of the series. This is a bit of a longer introduction today than normal. There's one more thing I want to say, though, about the relationship of the Bible to worship before we look at the individual elements.

And that is, not only should Scripture steer our worship, but it should saturate our worship. So it shouldn't only steer our worship, it should saturate our worship.

And what I mean by that is, not only should we look to the Bible to regulate what it is we do and don't do in worship, but we should also want to see all the different constituent parts that make up a worship service filled up with the content of Scripture.

[13:32] Saturated, full, like a sponge, full of Scripture. Filling every part. We want the divine voice of our Creator God, our loving, saving Creator God, to permeate everything that we do as we gather together as His people.

And so it must steer, that is regulate, and it must saturate. So those two ideas, keep them in your mind as we go through this next section. So what are the constituent elements of worship?

Well, a really easy way for you to remember this is not mine. I didn't come up with this, it comes from Dr. Ligon Duncan, who preached at our church a number of years ago. He teaches the subject of worship at Reformed Theological Seminary, where he's also the Chancellor in the U.S.

And he's got this really great little way of thinking about it. He says, when we worship, this is what we do. We read the Bible, we preach the Bible, we pray the Bible, we sing the Bible, and we see the Bible.

And by see, that last one's a bit confusing. He means the sacraments, where we see the visible word displayed for us at communion and baptism. So read the Bible, preach the Bible, pray the Bible, sing the Bible, see the Bible.

[14:40] You want to know if you're in a biblical church, you want those things present in your worship service. Today we're going to look at the first one. Read the Bible. Here's where we're going to go.

I want to do a brief overview of what the Bible says about the public reading of Scripture in their assembled, gathered worship. Then I want to talk about the how, how would we actually do it, and how do we do it here in this church?

And that's where we sort of deal with the forms. And then finally, I want us to reflect on the why question. Why is this such an important part of our worship? Why is it a constituent element of worship? So let's start by overviewing what Scripture says about the public reading of the Bible in a worship service.

So you're going to go to that passage that we had in 1 Timothy chapter 4 there. Timothy is a young minister who's been charged by the apostle Paul to give care to the ancient church in the city of Ephesus.

Now Paul is writing to him because there are some issues in that church that he wants Timothy to sort out. But he also is trying to clarify his ministry priorities and say these are the things you've got to do as a young minister in this church.

[15:44] And in verse 13, what we get is we get a very clear, very explicit statement about the activity of ministers, that ministers should really give themselves to. So if anyone is aspiring to the ministry and you want to know what you're going to be giving yourself to, chapter 4 is a pretty good place to go.

So let me read from verse 12, but then particularly verse 13. Paul says, Now here's the important part.

Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching, and to teaching. See the first thing on the list there? Devote yourself, that is, the word there is give special attention to, give concentrated attention to, the public reading of Scripture.

Now what does Paul have in mind there? Does he want Timothy to go down to the corner of the city of Ephesus and start just reading the Bible out loud? Maybe he wants Timothy to do that, but I don't think that's what he means here.

The language that he uses is exactly the same language that you find in other parts of the New Testament that describe the public reading of the Old Testament in Jewish synagogue worship.

[16:59] So you go back and read Luke's Gospel, for example, and you'll see a time where Jesus goes to the synagogue. And he reads the scroll of Isaiah in that moment of synagogue worship.

And the same phrase is used there. So we know Paul is not just referring to some sort of generic public reading of Scripture. He's referring to a common worship practice, publicly reading Scripture when God's people assemble for worship.

But we actually have an earlier precedent for this as we're trying to understand what's going on here. And that is we have really clear instructions in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, for Scripture to be read in the assembly when God's people gather.

So here's Moses speaking right towards the very end of the book of Deuteronomy. chapter 31, verse 11. He says, It says, So right at the very outset of God covenanting with this new nation, the people of Israel, and about to send them into the promised land, he tells them, Listen, guys, I want you to give yourselves to assembling.

And when you assemble, I want you to give yourselves to the public reading of Scripture in those assemblies. So it's right there at the beginning of the history of the nation of Israel. It's actually right there at the end as well. The passage we read in Nehemiah.

[18:49] Now, Israel, after a long, convoluted, very sad history, part of which resulted in them ending up in exile in Babylon, far away from the promised land.

They come back to the promised land. They rebuild the temple. They build the walls around Jerusalem. And then when that's all done, they assemble for worship. Here's the description of that assembly.

We read it just now, but I'll reread the section of it again from verse 2. Nehemiah 8. On the first day of the seventh month, Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand.

So you can hear Deuteronomy 31 there. He read it aloud from daybreak until noon. Some of you are wondering how long sermons should be. As he faced the square before the water gate, in the presence of the men, women, and others who could understand, and all the people listened attentively to the book of the law.

Ezra, the teacher of the law, stood on a high wooden platform, so maybe we are supposed to have full firs, built for the occasion. And beside him on his right stood all those people with the complicated names.

[19:56] On his left were some more people with complicated names. Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them. And as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the Lord, the great God, and all the people lifted their hands, and they responded, Amen, Amen.

And then they bowed down and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. The Levites, and there's some more people with complicated names, instructed the people in the law while the people were standing there.

They read from the book of the law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read. You can also make a case that we should be preaching in a vernacular there with the whole clarity concept coming up over and over again.

So throughout the Old Testament, key feature of the people assembled for worship is the public reading of Scripture. That gets taken up in synagogue worship, which becomes the dominant form of Jewish worship after the end of the Old Testament, basically.

And it's the backdrop in Paul's mind as he says to Timothy, listen, Timothy, as a young minister, I want you to dedicate yourself to the public reading of Scripture.

[21:06] So you take all of that into account, it's pretty clear from the Bible, from Scripture itself, that we are supposed to be giving ourselves to the public reading of Scripture when we gather for worship.

You go to the confessional statements of the Reformers, you go to the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 21, when the Westminster divines there are describing the key components of a worship service, they write this, and I quote, I say, that's got to be there.

It's key. So that's the first thing I want you to see. That's the sort of overview of the public reading of Scripture in worship. Now what about the how? How do we actually do that? What form should that take?

How do we read Scripture in worship services? And this is where we start to now move into the more forms territory, and even into circumstances a little bit. But let me say a few things here.

Number one, it would seem to me that following biblical wisdom and the examples that we see in Scripture, like those in Deuteronomy and Nehemiah, and we could have gone to several other places actually, that there should be quite a lot of Scripture reading in a worship service.

[22:21] that a worship service shouldn't be like a Christian coffee mug, with just a verse on it. That there should be periods given to longer chunks of the Bible being read as we gather.

I preached in a large church a number of years ago. Service was about an hour and 15 minutes long. The only time that Scripture was read in that entire worship service was when I got up to preach, and I read the passage I was going to preach on.

I don't think that kind of worship service can be squared with the examples that we see in Scripture. Now that doesn't mean that I think we should read the Bible for half a day, like Nehemiah, but Scripture reading in different formats should be spread, I think, across the service.

In traditional Reformed and Presbyterian churches, maybe you grew up in one of those traditions, there would often usually be an Old Testament reading and a New Testament reading. They would talk about reading from the law and reading from the Gospels.

Now we generally don't do that, although today we actually did do that, but what we do do is we intersperse Scripture all the way through the different parts of the service. So if you come to a worship service here on an ordinary Sunday, we'll obviously have the longer reading of the Scripture just before the sermon is preached, but besides that, the call to worship that we do at the beginning of the service is almost always the reading of a part of a psalm.

[23:50] I always start the prayer of adoration with a segment of Scripture that I read back to you in prayer before leading you in prayer. Most of our confession prayers and our assurances, words of assurance that follow the sermon are direct Scripture.

At communion we have the words of institution, which is direct Scripture. And then even in the end, the benedictions are good pronouncements from Scripture that we pronounce over each other as we leave this place of worship.

So I think there should be a lot of Scripture in the worship service, direct Scripture. Not just allusions to Scripture, but direct Scripture in the worship service spread throughout. So that's why I think you're in the forms territory.

I'm not going to fight people on exactly how, whether you have to do a law and a gospel reading, but what I would want to say is you have to have a lot of Scripture in your worship service. First thing. Second thing.

I think ministers, and this maybe is going to be the most controversial thing, and it's probably something I've changed my mind on the most, I think ministers, elders, or ministry candidates should do the more formal reading of Scripture in worship services.

[24:57] Throughout the Old Testament, only four groups of people ever read the Scriptures in the assembly. Priests, Levites, which is the tribe from which the priests come, prophets, and then very occasionally kings.

And that is, it seems that only authorized leaders read the Scriptures publicly in worship. And that pattern follows when you get into the New Testament.

Timothy, the minister, is the only one expressly told to give himself to the public reading of Scripture in the worship service. Now here, we are getting a little bit into what I might call form territory.

That is, I wouldn't say that a worship service where someone other than an ordained elder or minister reads the Scriptures, that they're necessarily disobeying the Bible. There are some examples in ancient synagogue worship of lay, what we might call lay people reading the Bible.

And even later in the early church of non-ordained people reading the Bible. Although what happened in the early church was they actually created an extra office called the reader or the lector.

[26:07] And that person had to be specially trained to read. And that starts to occur like in the second and the third century in the early church. So I don't want to bind consciences here more than Scripture.

But it does seem to me that ordained officers of the church should carry out the bulk, particularly of the formal reading of Scripture in a service. And that if you are going to have an unordained person do that, they should at least be gifted and trained to stand up and to do that in front of the assembled church.

Now that might sound a bit weird to you, especially if you come from a more broadly evangelical background like I did, where everyone kind of takes a turn to read the Scripture before the pastor preaches. So it took me a while to get my head around this.

But I think the purpose of this, and I think the pattern in Scripture, is not to say, oh well ministers are like priests in the Old Testament. But the point here is to give weight to the reading. To get us to actually stop in that moment to say, this is not just any old casual activity that we're doing.

It's like, can we just get that reading out of the way so we can get to the sermon? This is not any old activity. This is the Word of God. We are here to listen to our Creator speak directly to us from Scripture.

[27:26] That's where His most direct speech is coming in this worship service, when we open these pages. That's the second thing to think about. That is not to say that we shouldn't be reading our Bibles all the time in all sorts of other places.

I really think we should all be reading our Bibles in all sorts of places, but I'm talking here specifically about gathered worship. Third thing, and this leads on from the previous consideration, but I think our reading should be done with a holy, reverent fear almost, and a deep resolve to obey what we hear.

So you listen to that passage in Deuteronomy, where Moses speaks to the people about the public reading. This is what he says in chapter 31, verse 12. He says, Assemble the people, men, women, and children, and the foreigners residing in your towns, so they can listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and follow carefully the words of this law.

So the point of the public reading, Moses says, is that the people might learn to fear God and obey His law. That is a call to reverence, I think.

That is, we shouldn't be flippant when it comes to the reading of Scripture in worship. We should set the appropriate tone around it. There's a reason why at the end of every formal segment of public reading here in the worship service, we say, this is the word of the Lord, and the congregation responds, thanks be to God.

[28:57] That is there to remind us, hang on, this is our God's word. This is not a book club. It's not a bunch of us getting together to talk about the latest Dion Mayer novel.

It's not even an academic seminar where we've got some distinguished professor coming along and taking his new journal article that he's now going to read before us. This is what's happening here when we read Scripture in worship.

This is the lowly creature coming to hear the all-powerful Creator's voice. This is the people who hunger and thirst for righteousness, coming to feast on the bread of life, to drink from the fountain of living water.

In many ways, if you conceive of worship as communion with God, which is what I think it is, then perhaps the most direct act of worship that we engage in, before we pray back to God or we sing back to God, declare his praises as we listen to him speak.

And so we don't want to take the reading of Scripture and sort of relegate it to something that we've just got to get through when we get to the real stuff we want to do, singing and preaching.

[30:23] There's nothing more frustrating than having a conversation with someone and they just keep cutting you off and you barely get to get a word in the conversation. When we go light on the public reading of Scripture and our worship gatherings, that's exactly what we're doing to God.

We're cutting them off. We don't actually want to listen to you speak. We want to speak. It's like, can you open your Bibles? We're going to read a whole chapter. Everyone groans inside. We want to get on to the other stuff.

We want to hear the sermon. We want to sing the songs. We're just cutting them off in conversations, that's what we're doing. He's trying to speak life and hope and forgiveness into our troubled lives and we cut them off.

So those are some thoughts on the how, how we should think about the public reading of Scripture and worship. Now the why. And we started to allude to this, but why would the public reading of Scripture be such a key element of worship, that without it you're not really worshipping God?

Well, why come with fear and reverence and submit ourselves to this ancient book? In many ways, that's our culture's pushback, one of our culture's biggest pushbacks against Christianity.

[31:39] It's like you weird, deluded people. You are gathering here, while everyone else out there, very smart people out there are doing all sorts of fun things today. You are here with a book that was written thousands of years ago by people who don't have all the advanced things that everybody else has there, and you're submitting yourselves to this book.

Like, how weird are you? How crazy are you? Our culture pushes back against that idea, that we would come and we would submit ourselves to this ancient book.

And maybe your own heart, as you gather here this morning, pushes back a little bit there. We're not big at surrendering ourselves to higher authority. We're suspicious. Why should we reverently place ourselves under this book?

I think a lot of our skepticism comes from what we perceive as the human nature of the book. So just in today's sermon, I've quoted Paul, I've quoted Nehemiah, I've quoted Moses, in fact, I've quoted Ezra as well, because we read a section where he talks.

These are all people in history writing down their experiences of God. Why are they trustworthy? Why are you devoting yourselves to what they said?

[32:48] If you read Scripture, you're going to come across this time and time again. You're going to see all the hallmarks of it being written by people in history. Their historical situations come through. Their backgrounds come through.

Their personalities come through. Why submit your life to that? Why hang on to a collection of human documents?

And the reason is because as Christians, we have always believed, based on really good internal evidence within the Bible, and testimony of the Bible itself, we've always believed that these documents that make up what we have today in our Bibles, while written by people in history, are divinely inspired.

They're breathed out by God. It's a divine text. It is God's Word. This is the doctrine of inspiration. Paul speaks about this in his second letter to Timothy.

2 Timothy 3.16, famous verse. All Scripture is God-breathed. All Scripture is breathed out by Him. All this human writing that you're reading is breathed out by Him.

[33 : 55] The words that we have written in our Bibles are the words God wanted to communicate with this world. He uses human authors with all their personalities, with their background, with their history, with their learning, but He breathes out His Word through the things that they write.

I'm by nature a fairly skeptical person, so when I'm being asked to believe something, I would generally try and play devil's advocate on something and try and figure it out.

One of the things as I've spent now, what, 16, 17 years in ordained church ministry, is one of the things that has really convinced me in the trustworthiness of the Bible is what I would call the internal coherence of the theology of Scripture.

One of the things that makes me go, this, Paul's right when he says, this is breathed out by God. I mean, just think about it. Think about how remarkable this is.

The Bible is written over a period of more than a thousand years, written by more than 40 different authors, probably, human authors, in three different languages, probably on three different continents, and yet it teaches one coherent, overarching narrative, from Genesis to Revelation.

[35 : 15] God's covenant dealings with his people, fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now, friends, you would expect a human document written over such a long period of time by multiple different authors who didn't even meet each other, sometimes didn't even speak the same language as each other.

You would expect a document like that to be an incoherent mess. I mean, even if I got all of us to collaborate on a document, it would probably not be that coherent, and we all live in the same space, speak the same language.

And yet here we have this volume of books with one big story, the same story, connecting, interconnections, the most amazing, mind-blowing interconnections between them.

God's fingerprints are all over it. The confession, the Westminster Confession, speaks of the heavenliness of the matter in Scripture, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole, which is to give glory to God, the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies in the entire perfection thereof, and here's what they conclude, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the word of God.

He's like, just read it, and you'll see this is divinely inspired. It's like no other piece of literature. In fact, that's the very thing C.S. Lewis, a person trained in the study of literature, said about the Bible.

[36 : 48] He said, in most parts of the Bible, everything is implicitly or explicitly introduced with, thus saith the Lord. It is not merely a sacred book, but a book so remorselessly and continuously sacred that it excludes or repels the merely aesthetic approach.

You can read it as literature only by a Twitter force. It demands incessantly to be taken on its own terms. It will not continue to give literary delight very long, except to those who go to it for something quite different.

I predict that it will, in the future, be read as it always has been read, almost exclusively by Christians. So he's basically saying, if you go to the Bible and you try and read it like any other piece of literature, it will not let you do that.

Its divine nature will keep reasserting itself. It'll get in your face, and you'll go, this is not normal literature that I'm reading. In fact, he makes that hint there at the end.

He says, in the future, I suspect it'll be exclusively be read by Christians. What he's saying is, if you keep reading it long enough, you're going to become a Christian. For 2,000 years, people have been reading these scriptures, and longer, even with the Old Testament, and been transformed by these scriptures.

[38 : 04] For 2,000 years, it has shaped nations and philosophies, institutions, law systems. It is not an ordinary book. The book that you have in your hands, or in your app sometimes, is the word of the transcendent creator of the universe.

And the more that you read it, the more you just cannot unsee that reality. But it's not just a human text, and it's not just a divine text.

That would be enough for us. It's also actually a saving text. You know, when the people read the scriptures in Nehemiah, did you see what happens to them?

They weep. Did you see that? They start crying. I haven't seen that happen when I've done the Bible reading. Sometimes, if I got a little bit passionate in the sermon, there's been a slightly soggy eye somewhere.

But not in the Bible reading part of the service. These guys read scripture, and they start crying. It's an outpouring of collective grief, because at that point, they are reflecting back on Israel's failed history.

[39 : 21] Their failure to keep God's covenant. The mess that got them into the place that they are in right there. And as they place themselves under the gaze of holy scripture, their deep inadequacies all start to come to the fore.

And their sins are exposed, and so they weep bitterly in that moment. But then look what Nehemiah and Ezra and all the Levites say to them in verse 9.

They say, This day is holy to the Lord our God. Do not mourn or weep. And then Nehemiah goes on in the next verse, in verse 10, and he says, Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared.

This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is our strength. Friends, at the heart of the Bible is the story of how our grief is turned into joy.

Of how our tears are turned into feasting. You know, in Nehemiah 8, they read the law for half a day.

[40 : 30] Now that must be a really long text that was prescribed to him to read that Sunday. Really, really long text. You know where the shortest verse in the Bible is? And I know verses were only added later, but humor me here.

But you know where the shortest verse in the Bible is? It's in John 11, verse 35. Jesus wept. See, at the heart of the Bible is a Savior who weeps.

He weeps. And if you read the context of that verse, he weeps in the face of human sinfulness, and he weeps in the face of the consequence of human sinfulness, which is death. He weeps because he wants to see his brothers and his sisters, you and me, feasting in joy with the Father, not drowning in the grief of our own sin.

And so it is those tears that then drive him to the cross, where he, God's word made flesh, will allow himself to be horribly, horribly crucified in order to wipe away the tears that our sins have brought and to bring us joy and everlasting feasting with our Heavenly Father.

That's the storyline of the Bible. Friends, I want to read about that. I want us to read about that over and over and over and over and over and over again.

[41 : 55] John Wesley, the great evangelist, put it this way. He said, I am a creature of a day. I am a spirit come from God and returning to God. I want to know one thing, the way to heaven.

God himself has condescended to teach me the way. He's written it down in a book. Oh, give me that book. At any price, give me the book of God.

Let me be a man of one book. Friends, when we gather for worship, let us reverently and in a spirit of willing obedience give ourselves to the public reading of Scripture.

Let's pray together. Father, we are so thankful for the incredible gift of Scripture that you give to us.

We are not left to create imaginations in our own minds about who you are, who you might be, who we are, what we are supposed to be doing with our lives.

[43 : 08] You've opened your heart and your mind to us in the pages of the Bible. And so, Father, we ask that we would never neglect the reading of Scripture, particularly when we gather.

may people who come in here on a Sunday hear direct from you because Scripture is filling up all the different parts of the worship service.

For those of us who come here Sunday after Sunday, Lord, may we still our hearts as we listen to Scripture. May it produce in us that reverence and may we have a willing, obeying spirit as we listen, saying, how do I obey this?

How do I live out the will of my Heavenly Father? And may we never cease to see the center of Scripture, which is your Son, Jesus Christ, His death to turn our tears into eternal feasting.

Father, I pray for any person who sits here this morning who doesn't know Christ, who's never had His death applied to their lives. Who's never known the joy that comes from knowing that they will feast eternally with the Father.

[44 : 19] Won't you bring them to salvation this morning? Won't you cause them to repent and to trust in your Son, Jesus? Father, we thank You for Your Word. In Christ's name we pray.

Amen.