

Bible Special 06-08-15a

This is Tuesday, the 15th of August, 2006. We continue tonight our study, Why the Bible, taking a look at world religions, at cults, at pretty much everything that purports to be competition to God-fearing, Bible-based, doctrine-thumping, Orthodox Christianity. Let's take a moment as we begin our study to do as we normally do, which is to check and ensure that we are in a position to be ministered to by God's Holy Spirit and can take in the truth of God's Word as it pertains and applies particularly to this subject.

Shall we pray? Father, what a privilege it is for us to spend time together in pursuit of a better understanding of your Word, of our relationship to you as it is formally defined in the tenets of Orthodox Christianity and how those truths contrast and conflict with the deceptions and the alternatives that are offered by the world. We ask your blessing on us as we study together. May God the Holy Spirit find us teachable students.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. As I mentioned last time, somewhat enigmatically, we are returning to look at Judaism tonight, but not modern Judaism, which is what we covered last time, looking at the difference between Orthodox Judaism, Hasidic Jews, Reformed Judaism, and so on, modern day equivalents.

I think it would be helpful for us at this point, since we are looking at those things which compare and contrast with Christianity, to look at first century Judaism, because that's really almost an entirely different thing. It has been suggested by our study in the Gospel of John, where we have the introduction of the idea of the Jews as sending representatives to query John the Baptist. Who are you? What are you teaching? What are you doing out here? And so the question becomes, who are the Jews in Jesus' day? What constitutes Judaism? Is it a monolithic, cohesive grouping? And of course we know that this is not the case.

There is in fact quite a fragmentation. It would be sort of like saying, Christians came and questioned Joseph Smith about his discovery of the tablets and the golden glasses and so on. Well, which Christians? Were they Baptists? Were they Catholics? What kind of Christians did they think they were, claim to be? Or actually, what's going on with that? Same thing with the Jews in the first century.

So, first century Judaism. First of all, how did the Israelites become the Jews? Just a quick three minute history of how that took place. Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt, across the wilderness.

Forty years he died. Joshua took them in and they conquered the land over time. You have the period of the judges, then you have the period of the monarchy.

Saul, David, Solomon. Then the kingdom splits. You have the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom.

Ten tribes up north, Judah and Benjamin down south. In 721 BC, the northern kingdom is conquered by the Assyrians and largely deported, their population to be replaced with a bunch of cats and dogs from other countries that the Assyrians had conquered. These people intermarried with what was left of the ten northern tribes to become the Samaritans.

That's where your Samaritans come from. There was sort of a return to Judaism by this mixed bag, mixed blood group of people, but they only claimed the five books of Moses. They didn't recognize the prophets.

They didn't recognize the poetry, the writings. They said, you know, the King James 1611 edition is all I want. So they wanted the five books of Moses, the Torah.

They didn't recognize the Nevi'im or the Ketuvim, and their edition of the Torah was tampered. When you get to the section about the blessings and curses on Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, it doesn't read the same. Without going into a lot of detail, we're not looking at the Samaritans, but you have Judah and Benjamin, which is called Judah, the southern kingdom, persisting for another 150 years, roughly, down to 586 B.C., and we've studied this in great detail recently in our studies of both Ezekiel and Daniel, where Nebuchadnezzar comes down in 603, 597, 593, and finally in 586, he raises the temple, he deports the third group of captives, and pretty much leaves Jerusalem devastated for the next 70 plus years.

This is where your stories of Ezra and Nehemiah come in, because later on, after the time of Ezekiel, after the time of Daniel, Elad, and after the time of Daniel, you have people starting to return to the land, starting to rebuild. By this time, the Babylonians have gone away. The head of gold under Nebuchadnezzar and the next two or three kings have toppled, and you have the Medo-Persian Empire, the uneven shoulders, the hunched rulership of the Medes and the Persians, and this is the time of Queen Esther, and following this, you have the belly and thighs of brass, and the coming in of the Greeks, Alexander the Great, and so on.

Of course, as things turn out, it is during the time of domination by other lands that the Levitical priesthood sort of fades out of sight, and so during the time of the Greeks, you wind up with a real difficulty trying to get the Levitical priesthood cranked back up, and you also have an increasing desire to mix politics and religion in Israel, and you end up with the reforms of the Hasmoneans. This is Judas Maccabeus and all of this. They are not Levites, but they take political control and put themselves in as priests.

It is recognized because we are going to have some priests and no priests. These guys are doing a reasonably good thing and so on. Remember the devastation under Antiochus Epiphanes and so on.

So, you wind up with the Hasmoneans. Herod married into the Hasmonean line, or Herod's family married into the Hasmonean line, and this is his pseudo-claim to legitimacy down into the time of Christ. So, at the time of Christ, as the identity of the Israelites changed with the return from exile and so on, and the development of thought, really the rabbis and most other

people think that the canon of Scripture came to completion under Ezra.

The rabbis will tell you that the communication ministry of the Holy Spirit began with Moses and ended with Ezra. And Ezra is second only to Moses in the minds of these ancient rabbis and a lot of modern rabbis. Because Ezra is considered to be the preserver, the compiler, the editor for the later books of the Old Testament Scripture, determining what was in and what was out and putting the thing together.

And so, at the time of Ezra, you don't have any new inspired Scripture. Now, there's a lot of other writings. You've got apocryphal books.

But they were clearly considered secondary by the early rabbis. And so, books that are written, especially apocalyptic books, such as the book of Enoch and some of the other things, some histories like Maccabees, additions to Esther, Baruch, who was the amanuensis for Jeremiah and so on. A lot of these books were circulating and they were regarded and they were read and they were well known.

But they were not regarded as canonical. They were not regarded as inspired. But they floated around.

And many of these first appeared in Greek. Because by the time they were written, Alexander had come in. The new language was Greek.

When the Romans came in, the Roman Empire, they used the Greek language. Latin kind of fell into second place because Alexander had already spread Greek all through what became the Roman Empire. So, you start talking about the Israelites as Jews in the post-exilic period.

What is called the Second Temple period. They come back, they rebuild the temple. People cry.

It doesn't look anything like what Solomon had built, but it's alright. When Herod comes along to curry favor and to make a name for himself, he pours a lot of money into a rehab on the Second Temple. He gilds it.

He paints it. He enhances it. He expands it.

He builds a lot of courts and walls and things around it. Beautifies it to a great extent. And the second best temple they ever had is Herod's temple, which was standing in Jesus' day.

In fact, there had been a huge construction project. You remember, there's an exchange when they talk about how long it took to get the thing refurbished. When Jesus says, there won't be one stone left on another.

Knock this temple down and in three days I will rebuild it. And they say, you know how long it's taken to build this thing? You're going to rebuild it in three days? Well, this is the milieu. This is a little quick historical sketch that gets us down to the first century A.D., the time of Jesus.

In this Hasmonean period, with the loss of Levitical leadership, the loss of the Levitical high priest, the loss of responsibility before God to maintain fidelity to the Scripture, guess what happened? With the loss of that direct authority and sort of being left to secondary and tertiary individuals, tradition began to play a role and to be regarded as having authority along with the Scripture. Does this remind you of anything? Where tradition becomes increasingly important to the point where it becomes regarded as equal with Scripture. We have Scripture at one hand and tradition at the other.

One doesn't exist without the other. This happened in Judaism, just as it happened in the Church, which became the Catholic Church. Catholicism today regards tradition as equal in authority with Scripture.

And you cannot interpret Scripture without the Church in the Catholic view. We just studied that over the last couple of weeks. Well, this same sort of thing crept in and became a part of Judaism.

So, by the time of Jesus, there were 24 that we know of, 24 different sects of Judaism, S-E-C-T-S, different little denominations of Judaism. But there were three or four that were really prominent. The three most prominent ones, at least, I suspect there may have been some others that were prominent, but from what we know at this 2,000 year distance, the three that were prominent were the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Essenes.

These were the most influential. They are the ones that left the deepest imprint in history. There is the most written about them.

How did this come about? Well, during the period when there was this sort of reform of Judaism and try to restore it under the Hasmoneans, there quickly became a division of opinion about the role of tradition. And the group that was the Hasidim, or the ones who were really anxious to Hasid, these are the ones who are dedicated to the faith. And this is what eventually develops into the Pharisees.

They were really interested in sticking with the text and not deviating from it. So, how do you ensure that nobody deviates from the text? You create a lot of commentary and creed that is definitive. This is our definitive commentary.

This is our definitive interpretation. And we're going to write this down and promulgate it, and you've got to be within these bounds or you're not sticking to the text. Well, this is what becomes the Pharisees.

Push status. And the problem with this is, in the very act of trying to preserve fidelity to the text, they felt the best way to do this was to add to it, to expand it, and to create a traditional structure that would preserve it. Just as the Catholic Church has said, you know, we don't want anybody becoming a heretic and messing up the Scripture, so you come to us and we'll tell you exactly what it means, and anybody else can't tell you what it means, and our tradition is

essential for you to understand.

And you can see that in the very act of trying to be faithful, you wind up goofing it up. This is ever the result of human effort added to God's plan. In case the sound of my voice is starting to lull you here, here's a good memorable point.

It was made a long time ago. I can tell you exactly where and when and by whom, but I won't. But here's a good memorable point.

The plan of God, the purpose of God, is only accomplished in divine power. You cannot accomplish the plan of God in humans. It has to be God's power.

Human energy is never a part of God's plan and purpose. It is always His power. Now, I haven't said this in a while, see if you can dredge it up from your deep storage, your long-term archives.

How does the power of God come into the life of the believer? It's the Word of God and the Spirit of God. No other way. There is no church.

There is no tradition. There is no denomination. There is no creed.

There is no procedure. There is no magic potion. There is no secret formula.

There is no abracadabra. There is no mantra. There is no amount of meditation.

There is no amount of desire. There is no amount of prayer. There is no amount of talk.

There is no amount of accountability and fellowship and discipleship and mentoring. There is no amount of Christian books. There is no amount of searches on the web.

There is no amount of Bible versions. There is no amount of commentaries. There is no amount of human sweat that can get the power of God into the life of the believer.

It only comes through the Spirit of God and the Word of God. It's two parts of the epoxy. The two essential pieces.

You can't even have just the Spirit or just the Word. You can have just the Word and that knowledge is going to puff you up. You can have just the Spirit and you're going to be rolling down the aisles, gibbering and at least you think you have the Spirit.

The Spirit cannot speak if you don't have God's Word. He doesn't speak from Himself. Jesus said when the Spirit comes, all He's going to do is take the words that I have given you and make them meaningful and make them real and make them memorable and make them applicable.

He will not speak from Himself. He will take my words. He will lead you into all truth in them.

So, the power of God is essential. Now, you say, well, maybe I don't want to accomplish the plan of God. What's the big deal? God's going to accomplish His plan.

He's God. He's omnipotent. He wants His plan accomplished.

There's plenty of people around that will accomplish His plan. I think I've got other fish to fry. I've got some other things I want to do.

There's plenty of people that can go accomplish God's plan. I'm not interested. Yes, you are.

Yes, you are. Because God did not go to all the trouble to send His Son to die on the cross, provide the Word, provide the Spirit, do 36 things at the point of your salvation at least, to say, well, if you're not interested, that's okay. Just go do the best you can.

I'll collect you when the chariot arrives to take everybody to heaven. Get on the gospel train. I'm going to take a trip on the good old gospel ship.

When it comes, I'm going to heaven and I don't care about the rest. That's not God's attitude. Think of it this way.

Suppose that you work for the Navy or the Army or the Marine Corps or the Air Force. It's your job to get people in who will be pilots and riflemen and tank drivers and logistics specialists and all the other myriads of things that the military needs. You identify somebody and you send a recruiter out and they talk to them and they say, well, yes, I'll sign up for a three-year hitch.

I'll sign up for an officer program or whatever. And you invest thousands and thousands of dollars in getting this person shipped to a training facility. You buy them uniforms.

You buy them equipment. You get drill instructors. You get classes set up.

You develop a curriculum. You get everything in place so that all this person has to do is show up and do their part and they will emerge at the other end of this training program in eight weeks or six months or four years or whatever the program is as this fully functioning, bright and shiny, government-issue killing machine. That's your goal.

That's why you recruit. Now, suppose that you do all of that and you show up the first day and you start calling the roll. You start going down the muster list and you're calling out names and people are supposed to respond.

And you call out about 50 names. Only about three people speak up. How interested do you think a drill instructor is in making sure all of his recruits have showed up and that all of this money is well spent and all of this effort? Even in the human realm, it's very interesting, right? How much more so do you think God is interested in those who have been redeemed by the blood of His beloved Son and have been entered into relationship with Him and He is now the Heavenly Father.

They have the right to be called sons of God. How interested do you think God is in His child? How interested are parents in their children? Well, you know, I went to Walmart the day before yesterday and I had my little three-year-old, but they wandered off and I haven't really seen

them since. What kind of a parent could have such a cavalier attitude? Women who lose sight of their three-year-old for like three minutes go into hysterical panic and start running up and down the aisles and ringing alarm bells and getting store security and announcements over the intercom and, you know, please report to the front desk and where's my child? How much more so the Lord God? This is not an idle thing.

It's not sort of a happy little option for some Christians who want to sort of be holy and do the religion thing. God is in His heaven. He's the Creator.

He saved us by the blood of His Son and it is a necessity. It is a requirement. And if we do not show up as believers to participate in God's plan and purpose, you can expect divine attention of the negative kind.

This is one thing that Bildad and Zophar and Eliphaz do understand in the Old Testament. If you depart from the plan and purpose of God, you can expect all kinds of negative retribution to fall on your head because whom the Lord loves, He chastens. If you don't show up, He's going to spank you.

And so people who are Christians and who are apathetic and indifferent about their life wonder, why is my life such a train wreck? Why is my life such a set of circumstances that keep kind of driving me to the point of desperation? Well, sooner or later, we get desperate enough, we turn back to the Lord, don't we? Because He is our Maker. He is our Creator. He is our Heavenly Father.

He loves us. And we inherently know that. And like the prodigal, we eventually come back.

Well, this is what I'm thinking. Why waste a lot of time hanging out with the swine if you know God is the Heavenly Father and you know that He has a wonderful plan that will make us happier and more fruitful and more productive and have a greater, more meaningful life than any other option on the planet? Why waste time exploring stupid options? Do we seriously think that we can depart from the plan and purpose of God and find a better happiness than what God can provide? Well, it's nice. But here's the thing.

Human nature is such that we like to add our effort. We want to help. We want to feel that we have justified ourselves in some way.

Why do you think all these religions of the world that we have studied? Think about them. What have we studied? Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism. We have studied Islam.

We have studied Judaism in its modern incarnation. We've studied a lot of these cults. Mormons, Jehovah's Witness, Christian science.

What is the common theme in all of these? Man by man's efforts working himself up to a higher and grander state. The unique feature. This is something you must remember out of this entire study.

What is the unique feature of Orthodox Christianity? It is the one understanding of the way life works that tells us that we can't build the Tower of Babel and get up to God. We can't, by our own efforts, pick ourselves up by our bootstraps and fly to heaven. Fly to Godhood.

Fly to a meaningful life. We're earthly. We're carnal.

We're fleshly. We're conceived in iniquity and born in sin. We can't do it.

We like to think we can. It's fun to believe that we've got the power. But we don't.

Orthodox Christianity is the only understanding that reveals to us that it is God who must reach down and by His power and by His plan and purpose bring us out of the muck and out of the mire. Remember the story of the Good Samaritan? You know what's interesting to me about that story? You know how the story goes. The guy's on his way to Jericho.

He gets mugged. He's beaten and robbed and left in the ditch. A priest comes by.

Another guy comes by. What was he? Levite? Both of them walk by on the other side because they don't want to get contaminated. They look at the guy and they say, And then here comes the Samaritan.

And he takes pity on him. And he bandages his wounds and puts them on his donkey and takes him to the inn and pays the innkeeper and says, Do whatever else you need to do for him and if you spend more than what I've given you, I'll come back and pay you the difference. And Jesus said, Now who was the man's neighbor? And that's the point of the parable.

But this is what I think about as another idea in that parable. The man in the ditch is a Jew. He's Jewish.

The Jews hate the Samaritans. They would go out of their way to go across to Transjordan and go up north and then cut back over into Galilee just so they wouldn't soil their sandals with the dust of Samaria. They hated the Samaritans.

They looked down on the Samaritans. They thought Samaritans were just lower than dirt. So here you are, the Jewish man laying in the ditch.

And you're thinking, Boy, if I don't get some help, I'm going to die. You see some people passing by and they don't help. You're looking through your bulging black bloodshot eyes there and you say, Boy, nobody's helping me.

Here comes a Samaritan and he reaches down. And as soon as he comes within range, you can see that he's a Samaritan. And they have a unique style of dress.

They were easily identifiable. If you want a good analogy, think about some stupid white people in the South. Some really stupid racist white people in the South.

There are people down there who if they found themselves in a similar situation and a black person came to help them, they would say, I would rather die. Don't touch me. Go away.

You understand what I'm saying? There are people who have that much prejudice and that much hate that they would rather die than be helped by somebody that they despise. But that Jewish man accepted that help. Why? He could not help himself.

And he had the humility to accept help from the outside, even though it was from a source that he would normally have probably disregarded or worse. We have to recognize that there is that white Southern cracker racism idea in all of us. All of us like to be self-sufficient.

All of us enjoy looking down on someone else because it makes us feel better. If we can find somebody to despise, if we can find somebody to look down on, this is a lot more fun when you are the looker than when you are the looker. Lots of people like to practice this on us.

I imagine there is not a person listening to the sound of my voice that has not perceived that somebody was looking down their nose and feeling better by despising us for some reason or mocking us or making fun of us for some reason. Well, just remember, that is man's humanity to man. All of us have this element in our nature.

The Jews had it in their nature. And it is the thinking that I am pretty darn good and you are not. This is the essential element in religion.

I can, by my own efforts, do some pretty neat stuff. God will be smiling on me because look at what I am doing that these people aren't doing. This is where first century Judaism came from.

This is why there were 24 different varieties of it. This is why we have got... By the way, I did a recent count. I have got a book with 424 denominations.

The last count there were over 1,200 Christian denominations that have been formally defined and have a name. 1,200. Can you imagine? Out of one Bible? Why is that? We are all as an unclean thing.

We all have this deceptive pride. And so, Orthodox Christianity. What does it teach? You cannot do anything to please God.

You have to accept the help that God provides when He reaches down. And many times our nature wants us to treat the help of God like a Jewish man would treat the Samaritan. Or like a southern bigot would treat help from a black man.

And we have to think our way out of our nature. We have to humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God so that He can exalt us in due time. That's Scripture.

It's a command. Humble yourself under the mighty hand of God so that He can exalt you. If we will allow ourselves to be humbled and recognize that we have to lean on God as believers, God will raise us up.

Who doesn't want to be raised up? Why try a technique that never works instead of letting God do something that always works? We have to pause here and take our break. When we come back, we'll look at the formal nature of these first century Jewish sects.