

A Gift From Heaven

Is the Bible Boring?

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REFORMED
EVANGELISM
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Is the Bible Boring?

Have you ever heard about leaping hills? (*Ps. 68:16*) Or how about valleys that shout for joy? (*Ps. 65:13*) Has God fixed the earth on pillars and does our world, therefore, look like some kind of oil drilling rig out in the ocean? (*Ps. 75:3*) Is it possible that water can call? (*Ps. 42:7*)

As you can see there are quite a number of unusual expressions in the Bible. At times you'll be inclined to think: what am I supposed to make of all this? Reading the Bible demands a good deal of thinking if one wants to grasp what the writers of the Bible meant. Yet, it is not all as complicated or difficult as it might seem. In the Bible God is speaking to us. In doing so He certainly does not forget who we are. Whatever He thinks we ought to know is made known to us in simple human terms. He wants us to understand who He is, what He promises to us, and what He asks of us.

God Speaks to Us in Our Own Language

To tell us who He is, God used different kinds of people. All these people had their individual styles and vocabularies. Sometimes God speaks through a narrative, sometimes through a poem, and at other times through a song or hymn. The Bible also uses figurative or metaphorical language as many of today's poets are still doing. God has adapted His manner of speaking to our powers of comprehension. This makes the Bible's way of speaking very diversified.

On the whole, the Bible is fairly easy to read. Even those with very little formal education are able to understand it and will be able to hear God's voice. The Bible, however, also contains passages that demand more study, yet even these passages are not written for highly educated and talented people only. God demands both our effort and our love when we listen to Him. Then we will also understand Him.

How God Tells Us

God speaks to us using all kinds of people and often the different styles of language in the Bible can be explained by examining whom He used as authors. Writers of different dispositions and backgrounds were employed. For instance, he used David - a poet, Luke - a physician, and Amos - a sheep farmer.

God also speaks to us historically. The historical passages of the Bible tell us about many different events in Israel's history. These historical passages do not treat the history of

Israel as an isolated matter. When you compare the history of Israel, as we know it from general ancient history, with the events mentioned in the Bible, it becomes evident that the Bible omits whole episodes in Israel's history. Some important events are not mentioned at all or are barely mentioned in the Bible, whereas other episodes receive a very full treatment. In short the Bible gives us history, but it does not give us a complete, comprehensive description of the history of Israel.

Also these historical accounts in the Bible show us that God keeps all His promises, in spite of everything. Even though the people of Israel fell into periods of grievous sin time and again, God remained faithful. Even though kings and priests no longer took Him seriously, God remained trustworthy.

The Bible does not shy away from the truth either. In it people are not always presented in the most favourable light. It is striking that the Bible does not keep silent about some of the grievous sins which were committed by the patriarchs and kings. One of the many examples which can be cited is when Judah in a case of mistaken identity thinks that his daughter-in-law is a prostitute and has a child with her (*Gen. 38*). Another example is the case of King David, who commits adultery with Bathsheba (*2 Sam. 11,12*).

The Bible does not sidestep the issues. What is important, however, is that Biblical history teaches us that God remains faithful to His promises. The manner in which God accomplishes this often results in surprises, even in shame. The "prostitute" Tamar and the adulterous Bathsheba are, according to the family tree of Jesus, his "mothers". Similarly the sinners Judah and David are the forefathers of Jesus

Christ (*Matt. 1:3 -6*). What a great letdown He experienced when He was born as a human being!

What this shows you is that even those chapters with genealogies (family trees) are significant. However, in order to see that, God puts you to work and requires that you spend some time studying them. When you get acquainted with the Bible and are able to make the required connections, you will be rewarded for your troubles - even the trouble of studying those dull, seemingly uninteresting family trees.

Metaphorical Language

The Bible often uses metaphors. They are not only found in the Psalms but also in the prophecies. For instance, we read, "In that day will I raise up the booth of David that is fallen, and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old." (*Amos 9:11*) David was a mighty king of Israel who lived in a splendid palace. Yet, Amos mentions a shabby dwelling with cracks, ready to tumble down. This is metaphorical language. What is meant is that the royal house of David has become like a dilapidated shack. A shack made of interwoven branches was a simple affair in which the keepers of a vineyard used to live when the grapes were ripening and being harvested.

Such a tabernacle or shack would not last very long. The figurative language used in this text shows us that the royal house of David has become like one of those huts that is ready to tumble down. In this way the prophet Amos makes it abundantly clear that the house of David has lost its glory and splendour. But at the same time he is also announcing the glorious restoration of that very same royal house. This restoration would be accomplished by the arrival of the great royal son of David: Jesus the Christ.

This is just one of the many times metaphorical language was used by the prophets. It can be found especially in the poetic books of the Bible. The Psalms, for instance, are full of metaphors. The book of Job also contains a lot of metaphorical language. The book of Job has been called one of the most difficult books of the Old Testament, but at the same time it has been called one of the greatest poetic achievements in world literature.

After a description of the suffering that came Job's way (*Job 1,2*), a magnificent poem full of metaphors follows in chapter 3 which tells us about the rebelliousness of Job, his difficult talks with his friends, his trust in God, and what God is telling Job. In the last chapters Job finally realizes his own insignificance over against the majesty of God. This majesty is sung about in a beautiful poem full of natural expressions (*Job 38-41*).

Lessons for Living

Poems about nature like those in Job can also be found in the Psalms. Take Ps. 104 as an example. This kind of poem can be considered instructional. It constitutes a form of education. A different way of teaching can be found in Proverbs. We read: "Answer not a fool according to his folly..." (*Prov. 26:4*) and in verse 5: "Answer a fool according to his folly..." How can such contradictory statements ever be reconciled? Why not turn to Proverbs yourself and discover the answer. Ponder its sayings. Catch their meanings. Gain wisdom.

The parables, which are frequently found in the New Testament constitute another facet of God's Word. They were narrated by Jesus during His stay on this earth. Whoever reads, considers and understands them will learn about God's will about right attitudes and right choices (*Matt. 13*).

Both the Old and the New Testament contain a good number of speeches and addresses. The book of Deuteronomy, for instance, is actually a series of addresses by Moses to the people of Israel. In the New Testament we can find numerous addresses by Jesus Christ himself. Take the well-known Sermon on the Mount, for example (*Matt. 5,6,7*).

God Also Speaks Through Laws

God also makes His will known to us by means of laws. We can find them especially in the books of Exodus through Deuteronomy. By means of His laws God taught the Israelites how He wanted to be served. At that time the Israelites were still in their infancy, so to speak. That is the reason why they received laws for what we would perhaps call matters of minor importance. In the book of Numbers, for instance, God gave directives about the "ark of the covenant". He prescribes in minute detail how that ark was to be carried around; nobody was permitted to see or touch the ark. In this fashion God instructed the people of Israel about the greatness of His holiness (*1 Sam. 6:19*).

God wants us to obey Him unconditionally. He also wants us to trust Him totally. We do not learn that exclusively from the books of the Old Testament, however. The New Testament proclaims exactly the same message. Paul instructed his pupil Timothy how members of the congregation of God, that is the Church, should conduct themselves (*1 Tim. 3:1-15; Rom. 12,13*). Paul repeatedly confronts the readers of his letters with the law of God. In the epistle of Jude a clear warning is given that those who are living in sin will be judged by the Lawgiver in accordance with His law. It is surprising then that the same law of God is also a law of freedom. The letters of the New Testament are, therefore, a form of education in right and pure living which is freedom. They focus our attention on resisting temptation and serving God faithfully.

God uses different types of language in the Bible so that He can teach us. The whole Bible speaks to us about the Creator of all things, who made Himself know "as a Father who is

busy teaching His people". He wants to teach us about Himself, His will and His promises. Is the Bible boring? Only

an insensitive person could make such a statement. It is full of life, variety, and instruction.

Is It Difficult to Serve God?

Article 1

To live as children of God is a gift. At the same time, however, it is a task. Jesus commanded the children of God to seek the Kingdom of God first (*Matt. 6:33*). Of course that does not mean that you should try to find a spot somewhere in the world where God reigns. His Word, will, and law can be heard all over the world. To seek the Kingdom of God means you must ask yourself what God's will is for every day of your life; you must ask yourself what His law requires of you. Seeking the Kingdom of God also means you must commit yourself to do His will and to do what He expects of you. When Jesus came to earth, His arrival was announced as "the coming of the Kingdom of God" (*Matt. 3:2; Mark 1:15*). God the King demands of His subjects that they serve Him. Serve God! (*Rom. 12:11*)

There Is So Much To Be Done Already

The word "serve" does not connote a happy life. A life of servitude is not something to long for. We already have to obey so many orders every day. Everyone looks forward to his holidays because then he is totally free-boss of his own time. We imagine the ideal life as being completely free, always doing our own thing. But the gospel of salvation asks for an obedient service to God. Happiness in the Bible is to serve Him "in holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life" (*Luke 1:75*).

The Deep-Rooted Misconception

There seems to be a competition for our lives. On one side there is the Bible proclaiming that the redeemed life of man consists of serving God with gladness and obediently doing what He asks of us in His law (*James 2:8*). On the other side is our human heart telling us that serving is a form of oppression and servitude. Which is right?

It is very human to find fault with everybody except ourselves, but if we are honest, nine out of ten times, the fault lies within ourselves. It is the same here.

Our human nature contains a deep-rooted and great misconception. We live with the illusion that if we acknowledge God as our Creator and want to serve Him we

are no longer free. The exact opposite is true. By serving God, we are set free, freed from the bondage of sin and the devil.

The misconception is almost as old as mankind itself. In paradise Adam and Eve listened to the deceitful suggestion of the devil: if you listen to God and do His bidding, you will not be free and independent, but if you do what God has forbidden and take things into your own hands, then you will be like God, just as independent as He is (*Gen. 3:4-6*).

That lie caused Adam and Eve to fall into sin. That lie has found support within our heart. It finds support in the heart of the revolutionary and the materialistic business man, in the heart of a rebellious child and in the heart of his parents and also in your own heart. A man only feels happy when he is free, autonomous, boss of his own life.

However, God made something very clear immediately after creation. His message to Adam and Eve was that man will only find true life in love and obedience to Him. The deep-rooted misconception in our heart is entirely false. You can only find real freedom in the love to God. His law does not restrict our lives, but rather His law is "the law of liberty" (*James 1:25*).

Man imagined that he could do it himself. But even then God remains King. A King who condemned His subjects justly, and gave them up to the power which they had chosen: sin, death and the Devil (*Rom. 1:28*).

Good News For Man

God does not hesitate to punish a guilty man, but He also gave His gospel, the good news. God made it possible to be saved from the power to which we subjected ourselves. Through His Son there is redemption and forgiveness of sins for us (*Col. 1:13,14*). The King is willing again to use His power to give us true life. He started with the nation of Israel. Out of mercy He began to rule that nation and taught them to serve Him.

The law which God taught Israel and which still applies in the Kingdom of God today is called "the Ten Commandments".

In each Reformed Church that law is read every Sunday morning in the worship service. God spoke the Ten Commandments when only the people of Israel were His people. Israel was liberated. They were liberated to serve God in freedom. In order to serve Him properly the people received His law (*Ex. 20:1-17; Deut. 5:6-21*). The words which are used in the law suited the time in which God issued His law. Consequently, some aspects which were easily understood by the Israelites and were very normal for them, have to be explained to us now. But God has not substituted the wording of His law with another formula. The Ten Commandments are still read in those words in the church. And whoever knows the Old and New Testaments can deduce what God demands from us with His commandments for life today. The Heidelberg Catechism, an ancient church textbook which you can find in the Book of Praise, contains all the commandments of God's law and also explains them comprehensively. You should read it sometime (*Lord's Day 33-44*).

The Law Of Liberty

The law of God begins with words of deliverance. "I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (*Ex. 20:2*). The significance of this introduction to the law was evident for the Israelites. God had delivered them. This heading is very real for us as well. God has delivered us, not from the power of the Egyptians,

but from the power of the devil. That is the full significance of that first sentence of the law of God for today.

God gives His commandments to delivered men. They depict, as it were, how a delivered life should be lived. "I have redeemed you, now live a redeemed life." His commandments enlighten the way of people who are allowed to learn how to live in freedom with God (*Ps. 119:105*). James, one of the authors of the Bible called the law "the royal law" and later on also, the "law of liberty" (*James 2:8-12*).

God Requests Love - Is That Difficult?

The most important characteristic of a redeemed life is love. God is love and gives love to people who made themselves His enemies and who have only to thank themselves for all their misery. He grants His mercy in love. He becomes their King and rules their lives so they are free from sin. All He asks in return is love.

Jesus once received a question about what was the most important part of the law. In answer He summarized all the commandments into a double command of love. "And he said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets'" (*Matt. 22:37-40*).

With the last sentence of this answer Jesus meant to say, that each commandment of God is not a separate entity. Each commandment is a partial realization of all-enveloping love. Through His commandments God shows you how to love Him and your neighbour.

To serve God means to love Him and your neighbour as yourself. Is that difficult? Yes it is, if we should try it in our own strength. But that is not necessary. For by His Word and His Holy Spirit, God gives His children the strength to be able to serve Him. He gives us a new heart and new life which we can use in His service. Read about it in *Matt. 11:28-30; John 15:5,6; Eph. 2:1-10; Phil. 2:12-15*.

God Fulfills His Promises

Genesis 18-19

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (*John 3:16*).

You might call this one of the most fundamental texts of the Bible. God shows His love and His mercy by delivering people from the power of sin. He wants to call man back to Him through Jesus.

Ultimately, that was what God had in mind when He gave His promise to Abraham and Sarah. When God charged them to travel to the foreign land that He showed them, God began something new. This new beginning was meant for all the people on this earth, not just Abraham and Sarah. God had said that the descendants of this childless couple would become a blessing to all people. God was, in fact, pointing forward to the birth of Jesus Christ (*Gal. 3:16*).

The Promise for All Nations

By means of His covenant with Abraham God was laying the foundation for a people who would live for Him and put their trust in Him. While He let other people go their own way He generated faith in Abraham and Sarah. He gave them His promises.

That raises the question, "What about the promise God had made to Adam and Eve about a future deliverer? Was that to be forgotten or superseded?" No, the promise of God to Adam and Eve did not conflict with His promises made to Abraham and Sarah. They compliment each other and build on each other. The first couple is promised a deliverer, the second couple is promised a land and a nation. The first promise realizes the second. For after Christ's resurrection He leaves His disciples with the following charge: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (*Matt. 28:19,20*).

And so the disciples step out into the wide world to tell the glad tidings, the good news to everyone. When Christ is resurrected and ascends into heaven the time has arrived for the fulfillment of the promise God had given to Abraham. He becomes a blessing to all nations through Adam's greatest son.

Only Through Faith

For his part, Abraham accepted the covenant God made with him. This was symbolized by Abraham's circumcision. However, circumcision involves commitment to the covenant. God could cut him off from the relationship of the covenant if Abraham did not do what God told him. Abraham had to surrender himself unconditionally to God. But it took him a long time to get that far. When God informs him that he and Sarah would become the parents of a son, Abraham laughed at the idea (*Gen.17:17*). It was indeed a remarkable promise, but Abraham should have trusted God.

A little while later, God appears in human form to Abraham who receives Him hospitably. During the meal that was served God tells Abraham, and Sarah hears it too, that his

wife would have a son a year from then (*Gen. 18*). Sarah, too, had to laugh at this promise. At her advanced age she did not believe it was possible to have children anymore.

But "is anything too hard for the Lord?" (*Gen. 18:14*). Just like Abraham, Sarah had to learn that nothing is too extraordinary for God. God conquered her unbelief and gave her faith. God's promise could be fulfilled. Abraham and Sarah trusted God's promise and they were given a son. "By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised" (*Heb. 11:11*).

Whatever God promises He will certainly do when His promises are accepted in faith. This story also proves that fact. Here was an old man and an old woman, and they became the parents of innumerable descendants. Indeed, nothing is too miraculous for God.

God's Punishment

The good news for Abraham and Sarah is followed by the tragic, but moving story of Sodom and Gomorrah. God told Abraham that He was going to punish these cities because of the horrendous sins committed by their inhabitants. Just as in the days of Lamech, and the time of Babel, the rebellion and revolution against God had reached a climax. Even among the very decadent society of Canaan, Sodom and Gomorrah stood out for their corruption. You can read the details in *Gen. 19*. God is so astonished by the reports of these cities that He sends two angels to confirm the story. Through Abraham all people of this earth would be blessed, but his offspring would then have "to keep the way of the Lord, by doing righteousness and justice" (*Gen. 18:18,19*). The punishment which God was about to bring down on these wicked cities was also a warning for Abraham's offspring.

Abraham was greatly shocked when he heard what God was about to do. No doubt he knew that the inhabitants of those cities had committed all those atrocious sins. In spite of this, he pleads with his visitor not to execute His wrath because of the righteous people that might still live in those cities.

When we read chapter 19 of Genesis we cannot help but be touched by the reverence, and, at the same time, the boldness of Abraham's behaviour. But above all, we should be touched by God's great mercy. We see that He is prepared to save the entire city for just a few righteous people. If there are ten who have not participated in all the ungodliness, God would have sufficient reason to save those cities. But there is more. Many centuries later God will manifest His mercy to an even greater degree. Because of just a single righteous one, Jesus Christ, innumerable people will be saved (*Rom. 5:6-11*). The ten people that were righteous and could have saved the cities were not to be found, but for Abraham's sake, God gives his nephew Lot the opportunity to escape the punishment (*Gen. 19:29*).

God is just. The cities that do not want to live according to His commandments are turned into piles of rubble. God is also loving. He gave a son to two people who could have no longer any children. And so Abraham learned to put all his trust in God. Though Abraham, too, had weaknesses and sometimes fell, yet he trusted in God. God remains faithful to the promise He had given Abraham and Sarah.

The promised son is born when Abraham is one-hundred years old and Sarah ninety. The boy's name is Isaac, which means laughter. Certainly, it was an appropriate name. The mocking laughter of the past has now turned into a joyful laughter, the joyful laughter of faith because God has fulfilled His promise. Now there is future. There is perspective. God always keeps His Word, without fail.

Questions 8

Is the Bible Boring?

1. This lesson demonstrates that the Bible gives different forms of instruction through its use of language and stylistic devices. Name some of these different forms and try to give a suitable example for them.
2. In *Eccl. 12:7* you'll find a beautiful series of allegorical images about the process of aging. What do you think is meant by the imagery found in verses 3-6: keepers of the house, grinders, the daughters of music, the almond tree, etc.?
3. Try to tell in your own words what Jesus meant with the parable of the prodigal son (*Luke 15:11-32*).

Is It Difficult to Serve God?

1. What should have priority in our lives? And what then automatically takes second place? (*Matt. 6:25-34*)
2. In *Psalms 116* you can read that the poet wishes to be a servant of God. Why is that his desire and how does he show that he is a servant of God?
3. Why is the preaching of the Kingdom of God a joyful message?

God Fulfills His Promises

1. We read that Sarah laughed on two occasions (*Gen. 18:10-15* and *Gen. 21:6,7*). How does Sarah's laughter differ on these occasions?
2. Why did God permit Lot to leave Sodom before the catastrophe happened? (*2 Pet. 2:6-8*)
3. The sins of the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah were extremely wicked. Jesus tells us, however, that there are sins that will be judged more severely yet. What sins is He referring to? (*Matt. 11:20-24*)