



Bible Matters: Making Sense of Scripture

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“In this relatively short book, Tim Chester has managed to cover comprehensively key issues about why the Bible should play a crucial role in a growing relationship with God. It would probably be helpful to mull over each chapter and seek to put the ideas into practice as you read the Bible. The areas covered in this book will help to enrich your encounter with God as you engage with his word.”

—Elaine Duncan, chief executive, Scottish Bible Society

Hear God’s Voice and Encounter His Presence in Your Bible Reading

Tell me about the book you’re reading. You’re only a few words in, but you already know a fair bit about it. You know it’s about the Bible—the title is a bit of a giveaway. You might remember the author and publisher. You probably read the blurb on the back cover. Maybe you ran your eyes over the contents page. At some point you examined it—perhaps in the store when you bought it or when someone gave it to you. If you ordered it online, then maybe you read some customer reviews. You can see it and feel it. Some people like the smell of new books, so you may even have sniffed it . . . now most of you have. After you’ve read a couple of chapters you’ll have an idea whether you like it or not. And if you make it to the end, you’ll be able to tell other people about it in an informed way.

It’s easy to examine a book and find out about it. You can investigate it and interrogate it.

Now, I don’t want to alarm you, but there are almost certainly some bacteria on your book. If it’s any comfort, they were probably transferred onto the book (or e-reader) from your hands. Can you tell me about the bacteria on your book? That’s not so straightforward. You can’t see, hear or feel them. Hopefully you can’t smell them either, and I don’t recommend trying to taste them. Nevertheless, with a powerful microscope or some chemical tests, you could find out something about them. Like a book, they’re susceptible to scrutiny.

What about God? Tell me about God.

You might have all sorts of ideas about God. But what are they based on? You can’t see God through a telescope or under a microscope. You can’t go and knock on his door to ask him some questions. You can’t discover him in the jungle or on the ocean floor. He’s not like other subjects of study. He’s not susceptible to scrutiny.

For one thing, he’s a spirit. He has no body and therefore no physical presence. Even more significantly, he’s outside our universe. The Large Hadron Collider in Switzerland is the world’s largest machine and largest experiment feeding results into the largest network of computers. The irony of all these superlatives is that it’s designed to detect the smallest things we know about—subatomic particles. It’s detecting the aftereffects of particle collisions. But no apparatus could be constructed to “find” God, because God doesn’t exist within our material world. What would our experiment look for? In 2012 the Hadron Collider found evidence for the Higgs boson, a particle that had previously only been postulated. It was nicknamed “the God particle.” But it wasn’t a “piece” of God or evidence of his existence.

God is beyond our comprehension and outside our field of study. We might postulate his existence as the most likely explanation of effects we can see—things like the complexity of

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creation or answers to prayer. But we could never prove our hypothesis. We can't stick God under a microscope or in a test tube.

So left to ourselves, we would remain totally in the dark when it comes to God. We have no way of bridging the gap between us and God.

So my request that you tell me about God should be an impossible task. The only way we can ever know anything about him is if he communicates to us. God himself must bridge the gap. We can't study him. But maybe he can talk to us.

And God is not silent.

Knowing God is not completely without parallel in our world. Suppose I said, "Tell me about yourself." Here's a subject you do know something about. In fact, arguably you're better informed on this topic than anyone else. The more you tell me about yourself, the more I'll know about you.

But wait a moment. Do you really want to spill the beans to me? After all, we've only just met. It's up to you what you tell me. How much I discover about your dreams, hopes, ideas, beliefs, desires, and plans all depends on how much you tell me. I can't control what information comes my way. Only torturers can force information from people, and even then the reliability of that information is doubtful. In this sense the speaker is sovereign when we communicate.

It's the same with God. We can know about him because he speaks to us. But God remains in control of the process. We talk about "grasping" an idea. But we don't "grasp" God – not even when he reveals himself.

How does God talk to us? . . .

Let's come back to the bacteria on your book. What would it take to ask them to get off? You could try saying, "Please get off my book." Presumably the sound waves would reach them. But bacteria don't have ears. Can they even sense sound waves? And even if they could, what language do they speak? Even if you could find a common language, do they know what a book is? In so many ways the gulf between you and your bacteria is too big to bridge. It's a picture of the problem facing any attempt at communication between God and humanity.

And yet God in his greatness and grace does speak to us. In fact, he speaks in many different ways: in creation, in history, in the Bible, through preaching, and supremely through the person of his Son. People sometimes ask, "If God exists, why doesn't he reveal himself more clearly?" But God is revealing himself all the time. The real question is, "Will you listen?"

– Adapted from chapter one, "The God Who Speaks"