



*“THE BIBLE: LAW”

Biblical Text: Exodus 20: 1-17

*Dr. Michael F. Gardner, Senior Pastor
Old Mission United Methodist Church*

***The Bible – it is the best-selling book in history.** (*Four to six billion in print.*) It’s the source of faith for more than 70% of people in the US and about 1/3 of the world. It has been translated into virtually every language. **But many Christians don’t understand it.**

Studies show that it is true. ***More than 60% of us have a very limited understanding of the Bible.** More importantly, for more than thirty years as pastor, when people talk about their spiritual life, most of them say they wish they knew more about the Bible.

So, here’s the deal... *I want to challenge you to give up fifteen minutes a day for seven weeks. If you do, you’ll end up with a better understanding of the Bible!

That’s it. You may feel like you know the Bible, or you may feel like you need The Bible for Dummies (***there really is such a book.**) Whatever – I promise the next seven weeks will bless you if you give up just fifteen minutes a day. You’ll to know something about each book and where it can be found ... you’ll to see how the Old and New Testaments relate ... and, best of all, you’ll never need to feel **“Biblically illiterate”** again!

***The first thing you need is a Bible.** The first rule of understanding the Bible is simple, **“read the Bible.”** (*Don’t start with books “about the Bible” - but with the Bible itself!*) Almost any Bible will work. If you need one you can have one of mine – I have extras, just ask Ann! ***There also are like a gazillion free Bible apps for your smart phone.**

The second thing you need is the Bible reading plan. You can get the current week’s readings every Sunday in the lobby as you leave, or the office, or ***right now** and every week at oldmission.org. There’s a direct link on the very first page you’ll see.

So, open your ***Bibles.** As you turn to the first book, Genesis, let me tell you why I’m invested in this series. Forty years ago, I went through a spiritual crisis in my life. Fortunately, I found my faith and my way again, and shortly afterward found Ann, but that is another story for another time. Like many new Christians, I decided to read the Bible, from ***Genesis to Revelation.** **But I got discouraged pretty fast.**

I threw my Bible down, and concluded that the Bible was confusing! Then I found two keys that have guided me ever since. **First - The overarching message that runs through the whole Bible is this – *“God made us and wants a relationship with us.”*** **Second,** it helped me to see how the Bible was put together - what parts made up the whole and why they are important. **Once I got that down – the Bible made sense.**

I didn't learn that in seminary. I wish I had. I learned that on my own. Mostly by studying the Bible on my own, and in small groups with people like you. I'll share what I have learned over more than 30 years for 15 minutes so, hold on to you hats!

*Let's start with how the Bible is put together - it really a library with two wings - Old Testament, starting with Genesis; New Testament starting with Matthew. The Old Testament has *thirty-nine "books" written by twenty-eight authors and covering two thousand years. The New Testament is made up of *twenty-seven "books" by nine authors, covering a hundred and fifty years. There are *sixty-six books total.

If you want to understand the Old Testament, the first thing is to understand how our *Hebrew ancestors understood it. There are three major sections, in order of importance to their faith and ours: * **"The Law, The Prophets, and The Writings."** So we'll spend the next three weeks looking at the Old Testament just that way.

Today, we start with ***"The Law,"** properly *The Torah*, often called *The Pentateuch*, meaning **"five books."** You'll recognize the names of the first five books this week - Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Chronologically, the Bible starts at the beginning. In fact, that's the name of the first Book of the Bible in Hebrew. *Bereshit*, meaning ***"in the beginning,"** the same first words we read today.

But, obviously, before humans were created, there was no one around to write this all down. We have in the five books of the Law, a remembered **oral history** of Jewish people who settled Canaan, what we call *Palestine about 1,800 years before Jesus. It's all about their relationship with God Almighty, Yahweh, blessed be his name.

But the first ***written-down** scrolls of **"The Law"** date back to about 700 BC.* After a long period when Israel and their King had turned away from God, King Josiah rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem. A priest discovered, hidden away by an unnamed hero of the faith who risked his life to preserve God's Word, the book that we now call Deuteronomy. (*If you want extra reading, check out the story in 2 Kings 22 and 23.)¹

The rest of the books followed, as oral history was written down. **Genesis** - starting with the story of God's design for partnership with men and women for fruitful productive and happy lives. Sin, where too many start the story, doesn't even enter the picture until chapter three! You'll also find the account of Noah and the ark which some of us remember from Sunday school!

It's here you find the stories of the great heroes and heroines – ***Abraham** - ***Sarah and Isaac** – ***Jacob** – ***Joseph** – ***Moses and Aaron** all of whom are in this week's daily Bible passages. I hope you enjoy discovering or rediscovering their stories.

¹ This section is summarized from Dr. Gardner's mentor's book, [How the Bible was Built](#), by Dr. Charles Merrill Smith (James W. Bennett, editor.) Copyright © 2005 Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. All rights reserved.

Don't waste your time with soap operas or binge watching some trashy series on Netflix – the Bible has lots of stories that illustrate what Pat Conroy called *“our outrageous flawed humanity.”* (And not all of it is “G-rated” - that's all I'm saying.)

What I find remarkable, is that through these ordinary, even deeply flawed, people, God did extraordinary things anyway! And that gives me great hope for us today!

In ***Exodus** and the other three books we find out how Moses was placed in a basket as a baby and in the Nile River to escape Pharaoh's plan to kill all the male children, and how he was rescued by Pharaoh's daughter. We read how Moses eventually led God's people out of slavery in Egypt, and how God parted the Red Sea to help them escape. And how God gave Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount ***Sinai**.

My parents knew that story better from the *** cinematography** of Cecil B. DeMille, and the acting of ***Charlton Heston** than they did from the Bible. It may be the most important passage in the Old Testament. So turn to the text with me.

Exodus 20: 1-17 is the first place the ***“10 Commandments”** appears in the Bible. And Deuteronomy 5: 6-21 is the other. The commandments are foundational.

I wonder how many of you can quote the first commandment from memory? ***You** may have learned it in Sunday School like I did. The first commandment, **“You shall have no other Gods before me.”** But that's not how Hebrew children learn it.

Here are the first words they learn: ***“I am the LORD thy God...”** Here's the verse from our text in Exodus 20:2: ***“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, who saved you from bondage...”**² **All the rest stems from remembering who God is.**

The first four commandments are about relationship with God. ***No other Gods, no idolatry** – not easy in a world of affluence and *“American Idol.”* ***Do not misuse the name of God, remember to give one day a week to God.** (*Not easy in a time of mega-Churches, televangelists, and multiple commitments.*) ***The 5th is a reminder to honor and care for those who gave us life, and the 6th a call back to holding life sacred in a world where life is cheap.** The final four are about our relationship with others. ***Living with Faithfulness, Honesty and Integrity, *being deeply committed to truth, and not yielding to the insatiable desire for “more.”** **We need more of all those things!**

I want to close by giving you the advice of Deuteronomy 6:6-7. ***“Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.”** ***“Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and away...”** Make them a part of you!

I promise you if you let this Word be more a part of you, God will bless your life.
(Pray with me.)

² Exodus 20:2, as paraphrased by the author.