

Unchained Melody

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2 Timothy 3:10-17

Sermon Series:
Kingdom Legacy

“I am chained,” said Paul, “but the word of God is unchained.”

The great evangelist Charles Spurgeon once said, “A Bible that’s coming apart is usually owned by someone who is not [coming apart].” This is the most remarkable book in history, and you are about to find out one of the big reasons why. A couple of weeks ago, Glenda’s sermon on faithfulness was based on the second chapter of II Timothy, in which we read the Apostle Paul’s remarkable words to his son-in-the-faith, Timothy: “I am chained,” said Paul, “but the word of God is unchained.” Paul was in prison, chained and bound for speaking words about Jesus Christ but, as he said, the word of God is unchained. It cannot be bound, cannot be hidden, cannot be constrained. The wonderful life-giving words of our God are the ultimate unchained melody (to use a song title from Elvis and the Righteous Brothers) of our lives, the song of God that is living, active, and sharper than any sword, with the power of fire or that of a falling hammer.

This morning, we see that the apostle Paul returns to this theme of the power and the wonder of God’s words. “How from childhood [Timothy] you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through

faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God” (3:15-16a).

This is one of the most important verses in the Bible when it comes to understanding the nature of the Bible. Just what is the significance of the words of this book, the Bible, and where did they come from? “All scripture is inspired by God,” is how our English version of the Bible puts it. A more literal translation of the original Greek language would be “All scripture is God-breathed.” Now this is a bit of a curious expression, “God-breathed.” Profoundly it simply means God breathed out the scripture. When we talk, each of our words come with breathing out. Have you ever tried to speak by breathing “in?” “I like to go to the beach” are words formed as I breathe out. If I speak them as I breathe in, you hear something like, “Hi ike to oh oo he each!” Which isn’t particularly communicative! So God said through the prophet Isaiah, “My word goes forth from my mouth” (55:11). The words of the Bible are themselves the direct breath of God, the direct words of God.

And whether we find the words of scripture motivating and refreshing or puzzling or disturbing, we suddenly realize we cannot casually dismiss them, because all scripture is the breath of God, the literal, very words of God, the unchained melo-

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dy that God sings into our hearts. God worked through the writers of the books of the Bible such as King David and Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and other human speakers and writers in such a way that their words were at the same time the very words of God. So, when Paul writes to Timothy, his son-in-the-faith, "From childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is God-breathed" (3:15-16a).

It is as if Paul were speaking to Timothy today he might say, Timothy, You may take a college course like English 202–The Bible as Literature—and study the poetry in the Bible, and the stories in the Bible, and the symbolism in the Bible just as you would study those things in other writings such as Shakespeare. But I am telling you, Timothy, there is something profoundly different about the Bible. Its very words are breathed out by God, spoken by God. So take them seriously. Read them. Learn them. Love them. Do them. God means them for your salvation and to prepare you ready to live life.

Given that the Bible is the God-breathed words of God, it is helpful to consider a very significant word in the world of philosophy, the word epistemology. I love the word epistemology, because just saying it makes you sound cultured and sophisticated even if you don't have a clue as to what it means! Epistemology is a branch of philo-

sophy that has to do with the theory of knowledge. Simply put, epistemology means how you know what you know. I know its pleasant outside. Why? Because I was outside. The epistemology of my knowledge of the weather, how I know what I know, is my own observation. If I tell you the earthquakes in China were devastating, the basis for my knowledge, my epistemology, is not my first hand experience but the testimony of others I read in the Washington Post.

Why talk about epistemology (except to give you a great word to drop in conversation)? One day I was talking with a woman about God, when she told me that she believed that God is a God of love and that all religions worship the same God. Now I knew that any serious study of the Bible and of comparative religion teaches you rather quickly all religions do not worship the same God. So, I asked her how she knew that all religions worship the same God. She told me with a completely straight face and obvious sincerity, "I learned it from National Geographic Magazine." OoooKaayyy, the epistemology, the basis for her beliefs about God was National Geographic.

So, how do you know God loves you? How do you know when you are in a tough time that our God is a very present help in time of trouble? How do you know that God so loved the world that He gave His only son that whosoever believes in Him will not die but have eternal life? You know because the Bible teaches these things and is the basis of our

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epistemology, how we know what we know about the nature of God and of reality and of life.

And, since scripture is the God-breathed words of God, we realize that scripture carries an authority, an influence and a clout in teaching us how to live.

One of our greatest challenges today is evaluating the many kinds of information and opinions about life that dominate our culture. For example, the Washington Post carries two advice columnists, Carolyn Hax and Amy Dickenson (Ask Amy) who often give good advice for all sorts of situations. Yet, if you follow them, you will discover they give generally good counsel but at times their advice is not consistent with what the Bible teaches. So which is right? If the God-breathed words of God are the basis for our epistemology, how we know what we know about life, then we respect those who seek to give counsel and modify their ideas according to the teachings of Scripture.

This week I was listening to an interview of psychologist Dan Gottlieb, host of the radio show *Voices in the Family*. Dr. Dan is an exceptionally wise man, a quadriplegic from a terrible accident, who, through his suffering, has much wisdom about life and living. Because his health is not good, the interviewer asked him, "So will you leave this world thinking there is something beyond this world?" He replied, "No. I will leave this world thinking.... I wish I didn't have to leave. I believe I will live on to the extent

that other people carry me with them...." as memory. Contrast that with the God-breathed words of Jesus: "Let not your hearts be troubled. Trust God, trust also in me. In my Father's house are many living places and if it were not so, I would have told you." So which is right? A highly respected therapist or the God-breathed words. They aren't both right! So we respect Dr. Dan and his often good counsel, and modify it as necessary according to the teachings of Scripture.

Clearly, it is essential that you and I know the teachings of this book. Do you know them? Do you own your own personal Bible, and do you make its reading and study a real part of your life? It is the unchained melody of God, and God will sing life to you through His words. I love the story of two long-time friends who got into an argument about who was the most knowledgeable about the Bible. Finally, Friend #1 said, "OK, prove it, you think you know so much. I'll bet you \$50 dollars that you don't even know The Lord's Prayer!" Friend #2 thought for a couple minutes, and then said, "Sure, you're on. 'Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep...'" Friend #1 was astounded. Taking out \$50, "Friend," he said, "You sure surprised me. I didn't think you knew it. You win!" [In case you don't know it, that's not the Lord's Prayer!]

Stephen Prothero recently has published a fascinating book with the title *Religious Literacy – What Every American Needs to Know and Doesn't*. He quotes historian R.

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Laurence Moore, who wrote, "Americans are stupefyingly dumb about what they are supposed to believe." Prothero tells of a religious literacy quiz he gives his Boston University students with questions like:

1. Name the four Gospels. List as many as you can.
2. Name a sacred text of Hinduism?
3. What is the name of the holy book of Islam?
4. Where according to the Bible was Jesus born?
5. President George W. Bush spoke in his first inaugural address of the Jericho road. What Bible story was he invoking?
6. What are the first five books of the Hebrew Bible or the Christian Old Testament?
7. What is the Golden Rule?

And other such questions.

He concludes: "Most of my students flunked this exam. The results, however, were not entirely discouraging. Almost everyone was able to associate Adam and Eve with the Garden of Eden, and nearly nine out of ten knew that holy book of Islam was the Quran. But most students could not list the four Gospels, only one out of eight could name the first five books of the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament, and only one in four could name a single Hindu Scripture (which I couldn't do either). National surveys have shown that most Americans cannot name five of the Ten Commandments, my students averaged four. They were

equally unfamiliar with what may be the most important piece of oratory in Western Civilization; only one in six knew that Blessed are the poor in spirit, is a quote from the Sermon on the Mount."

He goes on to say:

- A majority of Americans wrongly believe that the Bible says that Jesus was born in Jerusalem.
- When asked whether the New Testament Book of Acts is in the Old Testament, one quarter of Americans say yes. More than a third say they don't know.
- Most Americans don't know that Jonah is a book in the Bible.
- Ten percent of Americans believed that Joan of Arc was Noah's wife.

Don't merely own a Bible. Read it, learn it, love it and do it. Let the word of God work its work in you, for as Paul wrote, "¹⁶All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work." The fact is, this book is the unchained melody of God-breathed words of God, but unless we know those words, they will have little life-changing impact upon us. That is why I am so excited that this fall, with the visit of Dan Allender, that will help you consider God's work in the story of your own life; and, with the beginning of many new Bible studies this fall, you and I will have the opportunity

Billy Sunday understood the Bible as the God-breathed words of God and had allowed this word to mold what he believed and how he lived.

to really engage the teachings of this God-breathed book known as the Bible (II Timothy 3:16-17).

Billy Sunday was a great evangelist of the early part of the last century, some one like Billy Graham in our day. He was a professional baseball player before he professed faith in Jesus and became an inspiring evangelist, who drew large crowds. One of the stories of his work is told by Wallace Byrd, who was vice-president of a bank in Pennsylvania. "I was head teller in the bank when Billy Sunday came to town to conduct his crusade. Huge crowds gathered to hear him, but I did not attend. I wanted no part of religion— especially that of traveling evangelists. I thought they were just out to get money from those of little means. As it happened, Billy Sunday arranged for an account for the offering received to be set up in my bank. Day after day, I watched Billy Sunday's account grow and as it grew so did my irritation with him.

"On the Monday after his crusade ended, Billy Sunday came into the bank to settle his affairs. Among the checks from the previous night's collection was one for five dollars. That gave me a chance to let loose some of my resentment. 'Sir,' I said, 'we can't honor this.' 'Why not?' Sunday asked. 'The woman who wrote this check has less than five dollars in her account,' he replied. 'She is a widow, and very poor.' Implying Sunday was squeezing the poor out of what little they had. Sunday frowned at the check, and I saw the

opportunity for an extra harpoon. 'Actually, sir, we are holding a mortgage on her home for fifteen hundred dollars (that was a lot of money in those days). We'll have to foreclose very soon.'

"That, I thought, should hit this money-grabber where it hurts! Sunday responded by tearing up the widow's check. He pulls a personal checkbook out of his suit pocket. A moment later he laid a slip of paper in front of me and said, 'Will you honor this one?' I looked down to see a check for \$1,500. 'For the widow's mortgage,' Sunday said. 'Why are you doing this?' I asked. 'Wallace,' Sunday answered, "have you never read in the Great Book what a person of means is supposed to do about orphans and widows?"

"After the evangelist left, I was shaken. Again and again, I thought about what had happened. I began to wonder how many other times Sunday might have done something similar, and I began to revise my thinking about Sunday. I thought, too, about the widow. Had she, by giving in faith out of her tiny possessions, been rewarded by this gift?"

That was the turning point in Wallace Byrd's life, the event that led to his decision to believe in Jesus and to follow him. As Wallace Byrd was later to say, he never heard Billy Sunday preach from the pulpit. Sunday's only sermon to him was a signature on a personal check.

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part of your daily life.

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