

Not in the Bible

March 20, 2022

Do you know what the #1 most checked-out book at a library is? The Bible.

#1 most owned book in America? The Bible.

#1 most stolen book in America? The Bible.

#1 least-read book in America among those who own it? The Bible.

The Christian Post. "Poll: Americans Own Many Bibles, But Rarely Read Them. March 21, 2012. <https://www.christianpost.com/news/poll-americans-own-many-bibles-but-rarely-read-them.html>

There is a lot of hearsay about the Bible and what's in it. You hear a lot of, "you know what the Bible says, don't you?" There's almost a gossip about the Bible.

Today, I'd like to set a few things straight. I'd like to share a few things are often quoted as being in the Bible and are very much NOT in the Good Book.

First, the name of God: Jehovah. We do hear God's name today, and we'll get to that, but it's not Jehovah.

Second, not in the Bible, "God never gives you more than you can handle." We hear something close to that in our reading from 1 Corinthians, but definitely not that.

And finally, my personal favorite... and I'm aware that you might disagree with me on this, and if you do, you and I can talk at length sometime... it does not say in the Bible, "Everything happens for a reason." And in fact, in addition to being unbiblical, I believe this saying to be simply false.

So let's take a look at these misconceptions. Keep your bulletin handy, because our readings today address these common misconceptions. We begin with the name of God.

Moses, in our reading from Exodus, has a divine encounter with God through a burning bush. God often appears as fire (which we heard last week in the story of Abraham and God's appearance as a flaming torch). God tells Moses that he will go down to Egypt and rescue the Israelites from their lives of slavery.

Moses is a little unsure about this whole process and figures he might encounter a little resistance. One of his objections is that if people ask the name of the God who sent him, Moses wouldn't know what to say. So God gives his name to Moses.

It is YHWH (there are no vowels in ancient Hebrew). We say "Yahweh," but we don't know if that's actually how it's said. We do know that YHWH is almost identical to the Hebrew verb "to be." So God tells Moses, "My name is 'I am.' I am who I am; tell the Israelites that 'I am' has sent you."

Here's where the story gets odd though. Most Jews do not speak the name of God, because it is so holy. To even say the name is to limit and profane God. So whenever a Jewish person would read this story of Moses and the divine name, or any of the Hebrew Scripture, instead of

speaking God's name, the reader would simply say, "The Lord." And in fact, we have continued that tradition. You'll see in your bulletin, we don't write, "Yahweh;" it says, "The Lord" (usually you see it in capital letters).

But sometimes, in ancient days, Jewish folks might slip up and accidentally speak God's name when they read it. So Jewish scholars, scribes, and rabbis came up with a plan to prevent that. They combined some of the letters from God's name and some of the letters from the Hebrew word "Lord" to make a nonsense word. So whenever a reader saw that nonsense word, they would be reminded to say, "the Lord" instead of "Yahweh."

That was all well and good, until a couple hundred years later, when non-Jewish religious scholars got a hold of the Hebrew scriptures. They didn't know that there was this nonsense word in the scriptures that replaced God's name. They thought that actually was God's name. So they started using that nonsense word as the name for God! That nonsense word? Yehovah.

And it's in our hymns. It's in our lore, like in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, when Indy has to spell out the name of God, and it's "Jehovah." I'm not gonna be the one to break that news to the Jehovah's Witnesses. But that word "Jehovah" is not in the Bible. It's a nonsense word created to prevent people from accidentally speaking the name of God.

I think that's pretty interesting.

The other 2 statements that people claim are in the Bible are a little more pertinent. First, let's look at "God won't give you more than you can handle."

The basis for this platitude can be found in our New Testament reading, 1 Corinthians. Paul writes, "God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it." That makes it sound like, "God will, for example, make you sick to test your faith, but it will only be enough sickness that you can handle it."

For starters, that's not a great translation. The NIV Bible uses a better word: "God will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear." Tempted, not tested. Like Jesus was tempted (or tested) in the wilderness.

Second, I don't know that that's the best image of God. Remember, it's not God, it's the devil, who tempts or tests Jesus in the wilderness. God does not test or tempt us.

To say that "God won't give us more than we can bear" implies to me that God is causing us trials and temptations. It's as though God acts as puppeteer in our lives, controlling all the events in our world, or God is a master chess player, controlling the 8 billion pieces that are people's lives, added hardships in an effort to strengthen our faith. I don't think that's a helpful image of God.

It's not in the Bible, and to boot, I don't buy into the belief that God only gives us what we can bear.

And, in a similar vein, I don't buy in to the follow-up: "Everything happens for a reason." Again, you may disagree with me; you may believe that I'm wrong, and that's okay. We can chat about that.

But I'd like to look at the Gospel lesson today. Jesus today talks to a crowd about 2 recent disasters. First, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor was known for his ruthlessness, has had Jewish people executed while they were at worship. And second, a tower fell on several people and they were killed.

Now the common belief in Jesus' day was that if you were suffering, God was punishing you for something you did wrong. If Joe leaves church today and trips and falls as he walks out, that's a sign that he did something to make God mad.

And actually, we see that reasoning in 1 Corinthians, going back to Paul for a second. Immorality, Paul says, led to 23,000 people dying in one day. Testing Christ led to people dying in the wilderness.

And even today, we have the remnants of this. We talk about karma catching up with us. Or a bad person getting their come-uppance. We want to believe that bad things happen to bad people, and good things happen to good people.

But Jesus today says, "That's just not true. Those people who perished were not terrible sinners. It was simply a tragedy." In other words, God didn't pull the puppet strings to make that tower fall because he was punishing people. That's not how God works.

How does God work? If that's what God is not, tell us what is God like? Well, come back next week, when we hear the parable of the Prodigal Son and the Loving Father.

This week, though, we get a glimpse in the second half of the Gospel. A fig tree (a common reference for the faithful people) isn't bearing fruit. Someone wants to cut it down, but the gardener intercedes for that fig tree. The gardener tends to the tree, nourishes it, offers it some loving care, gives it another chance. That gardener is an image of God (which we know from the garden of Eden, from John's resurrection account).

God is not a puppeteer, making all the events of our universe happen, dealing out trials to test us because there's a goal in the long run. God is there with us, alongside us, nourishing us, reminding us of his love. And that is a wonderful gift in difficult times. Praise Jehovah.

Amen.