

The Work of the People *The Bible Tells Me So*

7 Films on the Bible with Pete Enns

Introduction

If you're anything like me, your relationship with the Bible is "complicated." My Evangelical fundamentalist upbringing taught me that the Bible is the inerrant, infallible and literal Word of God. As a teenager, I pictured Paul writing his epistles the way Trinity was programmed to learn how to fly a helicopter in 'The Matrix' in three seconds. Sure, Paul's hand was writing the letters, but the Holy Spirit was moving his hand or whispering in his ear or something like that.

What's interesting to me is that most Christians don't have much of a problem with Jesus' humanity, yet the humanity of the Bible makes many squirm. I get it. I used to be there.

Pete Enns and I were having a conversation late last year and I was describing my empathy for people who view the Bible as God's static and final word for all of us. I told him I get it because the Bible is this physical object we can hold in our hands and God is not. It's something we can open up, see the words and all agree that they're there. It's a tangible thing. Pete responded; "What you are describing is an idol."

It hit me hard, but I instantly knew he was right.

As a Protestant, I grew up pointing my finger at Catholics for worshipping the pope. Yet I, and many other Protestants, were busy worshipping an idol of our own - the Bible.

Two years ago, I was right in the middle of a deconstruction of my Christian worldview. And it all started with the Bible. Many of the questions that had popped up over the years had returned all at once and it was too overwhelming to ignore:

Who wrote the Bible?

What do we do with all the contradictions?

What about Science? Evolution?

Why is Jesus so graceful and loving in the New Testament when God appears to be a violent and wrathful bully in the Old Testament?

What about LGBTQ+ people?

Are women really second class citizens?

Is the Bible pro-slavery?

Etc. Etc. Etc.

My entire belief system unraveled - largely to do with my hermeneutic and unseen addiction to certainty.

I hit rock bottom and became an agnostic who was flirting heavily with atheism. It was confusing, isolating, lonely and absolutely terrifying. Oh and by the way, I was a pastor at the time, which made things way easier.

A number of friends and acquaintances had recommended Pete's book, *'The Bible Tells Me So,'* over the course of the year, so out of pure desperation I started reading.

Words cannot describe what this book means to me. It literally changed my life. As you read the book yourself and watch the films, my hope is that it will have a similar impact on you as well.

I am honored to be pondering these questions in this discussion guide with you. My prayer is that they stir something in you, get the juices flowing in your head and heart and make for good discussion with those you are in community with. I hope this study is impactful for you. I hope it brings you some comfort and clarity and opens you up to the mystery of God in new and exciting ways.

I hope your trust in God is deepened. I hope the Bible come alive in new ways.

I hope new things in you get stirred up. And I hope the conversations surrounding the book and films with your community are beneficial to you and those around you.

Never stop asking questions. Never stop wrestling with new ideas.

Keep searching and never forget that, although the Bible is incredibly important, its job is to point us towards Jesus, not take Jesus' place in our lives.

- Andrew Hill // *Discussion guide writer*

A Suggested Practice

You may find it helpful to say this prayer below to open or close a session. Think about it and ponder it. Contemplate any words or phrases that may stick out to you.

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”

This series includes 7 sessions:

SESSION ONE // I'll Take Door Number Three

SESSION TWO // God Did *What?!*

SESSION THREE // God Likes Stories

SESSION FOUR // Why Doesn't God Make Up His Mind?

SESSION FIVE // Jesus Is Bigger Than The Bible

SESSION SIX // No One Saw This Coming

SESSION SEVEN // The Bible, Just As It Is

Series on The Work of the People here:

<http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/bundle/the-bible-tells-me-so>

Peter Enns is the Abram S. Clemens Professor of Biblical Studies at Eastern University. Pete is the author of many books and commentaries, including *Inspiration and Incarnation*, *The Evolution of Adam*, and *The Bible Tells Me So*. His most recent book is *The Sin of Certainty: Why God Desires Our Trust More Than Our "Correct" Beliefs*. Learn more about Pete here: www.peteenns.com

Andrew Hill is a pastor, theologian, photographer and blogger/podcaster. Learn more about Andrew here: www.andrewpaulhill.wordpress.com.

SESSION ONE // I'll Take Door Number Three

Intro

It's OK to struggle with the Bible.

I'm going to say that one more time, just to make sure you heard me:

"It's OK to struggle with the Bible." It's more than OK actually. It's expected.

The Bible itself tells the ongoing story of the people of Israel's inspirational relationship with God. And do you know what "Israel" means? It means "to wrestle" or "to *struggle*".

How cool is that? That's God giving us the permission to work it out. And it doesn't have to be overnight. I can pretty much guarantee you it won't be.

I don't know about you, but I have felt guilty for struggling with the Bible in the past. I thought that I needed to figure everything out and if I didn't, I wasn't smart enough or I didn't have enough faith or something. Can you relate?

Thankfully, I don't feel that way anymore. And my hope is that you wouldn't either. If God is loving, patient and kind, and the Bible points us to God, than surely God can handle our struggles with a collection of books that were written thousands of years ago by many different people in many different cultures, places and times.

The Bible isn't always going to behave the way we expect or want it to. And why should it? Jesus wasn't exactly known for behaving, so why would the Bible?

Watch Film

<http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/ill-take-door-number-three>

Questions for Reflection

1. Describe your relationship with the Bible.
2. What definitions or names for the Bible have you heard? (i.e. rulebook, instruction manual, cookbook, etc.) Do any of them resonate with you? Do any of them bother you? If so, why?

3. Do you think the Bible is worth reading? Why or why not?
4. Are there certain genres, sections, books or passages of the Bible that seem to consistently resonate with you more than others? If so, which parts do? Which parts don't?
5. Pete talks about the worry of "getting the Bible right" when reading it. Have you experienced this worry before? If so, feel free to elaborate.
6. Have you ever felt the need to defend the Bible? Why or why not?
7. Do you resonate with Pete when he talks about the "messiness of the Bible"? Are you comfortable with the Bible being "messy" or do you feel the need to try and help "tidy it up"?
8. Do you feel like the Bible is more of an answer book or a question book? Explain.
9. Have you faced any problems when reading the Bible? (i.e. contradictions with itself, contradictions with science, supposed character traits of God, etc.) If so, explain.
10. Have you ever experienced any "beach ball moments" like Pete did? If so, explain what that was like for you.
11. Do you feel comfortable and/or free taking a break or "detoxing" from the Bible if it felt necessary in the long run? Why or why not?
12. Do you find it easier to trust the Bible or to trust God? Do you see them as the same? Explain.
13. How does it make you feel to have questions about the Bible in relation to your relationship with God? Do you think God can handle your questions?
14. Do you have any pastors, leaders and/or friends that you can go to when you have questions about the Bible? If so, how do they make you feel when you talk to them?

SESSION TWO // God Did *What*?!

Intro

This might be my favorite chapter in the book. One of the biggest reasons why I became an agnostic was because of the supposed violence of God in the Old Testament. Have you ever had a difficult time thinking about this? It just didn't make sense to me.

If the Father and the Son are one, how do you reconcile the Father saying, "kill everything that breathes - including women, children, and livestock. Leave nothing alive" with the Son saying, "Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your father in heaven. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God"? To me, you couldn't.

So when I read this chapter in Pete's book, it brought me to tears. It provided me with a new way of believing which was still orthodox and perhaps even more historically accurate.

It's important to keep in mind that that the Bible was written by people in cultures, places and times who were bound by those very cultures, places and times in which they were writing.

Watch Film

<http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/god-did-what>

Questions for Reflection

1. How would you answer the question "what is God like"?
2. Has the depiction of God being violent in the Old Testament ever bothered you? Explain.
3. Have you ever felt the tension between God in the Old Testament and Jesus in the New Testament when it comes to violence?

4. How does it make you feel when Pete suggests that God never told the Israelites to kill the Canaanites, but that that's only what the Israelites believed? Concerned? Relieved? Explain.
5. How does it make you feel when Pete says that biblical archaeologists are about as certain as you can be that the conquest of Canaan did not happen?
6. What do you make of the contrast between the stories of the conquest of Canaan and Jonah and Nineveh in regards to how God deals with rebellious people?
7. Have you ever compared the conquest of Canaan with the European settlements in America? Why or why not?
8. As asked by Pete (page 31), "How can Islam be condemned for promoting a warring God who smites the infidel when the Christian God in the Old Testament does pretty much the same thing"?
9. When thinking about story of the conquest of Canaan, have you always put yourself in the shoes of the Israelites or have you ever put yourself in the shoes of the Canaanites? Does it change your perspective of God at all?
10. Do you believe that God let's his children tell the story? If so, what does this say about God?
11. Do you relate to Pete at all when he talks about how he viewed his father as a kid verses how he views his father as an adult?
12. Have your views of God evolved over the years? Why or why not do you think?
13. It's easy for us to view our relationship with God as a journey, but is it easy for you to view the Bible as a journey - as an unfolding story and in how you relate to it? Why or why not?

SESSION THREE // God Likes Stories

Intro

God let's his children tell the story. Sometimes it's not always neat and tidy - sometimes it's messy.

Us Modern Westerners have our own standards for telling history and the writers of the Bible don't exactly play by our rules. And why should they? They are writing from completely different cultures, places and times than we understand.

One thing I've observed is that most atheists and fundamentalists actually read the Bible the same way: both read it literally. The only difference is the atheist throws the whole thing out, whereas the fundamentalist embraces it all.

I would argue that both of those positions are somewhat immature. Neither takes into account literary device and both are putting expectations on the Bible that the Bible doesn't even put on itself.

Is there another way to read the Bible? Is truth always synonymous with fact? When it comes to the Bible, I would say "no".

At the end of the day, it's good to remind ourselves that our ultimate trust isn't in the Bible, but in God. It isn't always easy, but I think that's faith.

Watch Film

<http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/god-likes-stories>

Questions for Reflection

1. When it comes to the Bible, do you see historical accuracy always being synonymous with ultimate truth? Why or why not?
2. How important is it to you that the Bible gets history "right"? Explain.
3. If the Bible sometimes refuses to play by our history telling rules, does that mean the entire thing should be disregarded? Why or why not?

4. How comfortable or uncomfortable are you using the word “myth” to describe certain parts of the Bible? Explain.
5. Would you agree that it’s good to leave our assumptions at the door when approaching scripture? Explain.
6. Do you notice yourself bringing assumptions to scripture reading? If so, which ones?
7. There seems to be an incompatibility with the story of human origins in Genesis and modern science. What are your thoughts on this?
8. What do you make of the clear differences in the storytelling of Chronicles vs. Samuel/Kings? Have you noticed them before?
9. Have you ever noticed how different the four gospels are from one another? If you have, does that bother you? Why or why not?
10. What do you think about Mark and John leaving out something as big as the virgin birth? Do you think there was a reason for the omittance?

SESSION FOUR// Why Doesn't God Make Up His Mind?

Intro

If you've made it this far (I hope you have), this chapter may address some of your potential frustrations you may be having while reading the book, watching the films and having conversations with your friends.

I had a conversation with my mother, just two weeks ago, about many of the concepts in the book and at one point, she finally said, "Why wouldn't God just be clear about everything? Why does it have to all be so confusing?" These are great questions. And although I don't ask them as much as I used to, I still do from time to time. In many ways, it would be a lot easier if God had of just spelled everything out so clearly. But you don't have to read very much to see that the Bible just doesn't work that way. And that seems to be fine with God. That probably means it should be fine with us too.

It's important to remember that everyone featured in the Bible felt the same way we do now. The Bible itself is the ongoing story of a people who are figuring things out as they go along, becoming more aware of who God is - and who God isn't. This is wisdom.

Watch Film

<http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/why-doesnt-god-make-up-his-mind>

Questions for Reflection

1. Pete talks about how some people view the Bible as a "one-size-fits-all-how-to-grow-up-Christian instructional manual". Have you ever viewed the Bible this way? How does it make sense to you? How does it not make sense?
2. Many people believe the answers to everything are in the Bible. What are your thoughts on this? Do you believe the Bible is clear on everything? Why or why not?
3. If not, why you think God didn't make everything crystal clear to us?

4. Do you tend to gravitate to the idea of the Bible being a manual or a story? Explain.

5. Have you ever noticed the verses in Proverbs 26:4-5 that Pete talked about? What are your thoughts on them?

6. Do you believe wisdom is something that can be given or learned? Explain.

7. If you're a parent, can you relate to Pete's story about allowing his 12-year-old son to watch 'Saving Private Ryan'? Have you had any experiences like that with your children? Feel free to share.

8. How often do you think of context while reading the Bible? Have you ever noticed anyone taking a verse out of context? Have you ever noticed yourself doing this? Feel free to share examples.

9. Have you spent much time reading Ecclesiastes? If so, what are your thoughts and emotions towards the book? Do you notice it to be any different from the other books of the Bible? If yes, how so?

10. Ecclesiastes describes Qoheleth getting angry with God. Have you ever been angry with God. Do you think it's OK to be angry with God? Why or why not?

SESSION FIVE // Jesus Is Bigger Than The Bible

Intro

Jesus is bigger than the Bible.

This statement might make you uncomfortable, but if you disagree, would it be safe to say your Bible is an idol? I would graciously say, “yes”. I’ve been there. And I have the temptation to go back there sometimes. It’s definitely easier to trust the Bible than to trust Jesus in many ways.

Every time we read the Bible, we’re interpreting it, whether we realize it or not. We’re reading it at a certain point in time, with certain contexts, cultures and experiences in mind. Jesus actually did the same thing. When he entered into the human experience, he dove in head first - straight into a specific context, culture and time.

Philippians 2 says, “Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself.”

Yes, Jesus was fully God, but he was also fully human. And he read the Bible like a human too.

Watch Film

<http://http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/jesus-is-bigger-than-the-bible>

Questions for Reflection

1. What do you think about how Jesus used the scriptures? Have you ever thought about this before? Explain.
2. Have you ever thought of the implications when Jesus said, “You have heard it said...but I say to you”? Is it easy for you to understand how this would have deeply offended many of the religious leaders of Jesus’ day?

3. Do you tend to see the Bible as more of a divine book or more of a human book? Is it 50/50? Explain your thoughts and feelings.
4. Do you think “getting the Bible right” and “getting Jesus right” are the same thing? Why or why not?
5. Have you ever felt the need to either “ignore the Bible completely” or “do everything it says and don’t question it”? If so, please elaborate.
6. Do you think some of the ways in which we view the Bible need to change as culture continues to change? Why or why not?
7. Do you ever prefer the idea of God being more distant? In other words, does the humanity of Jesus ever make you feel uncomfortable? Why or why not?

SESSION SIX // No One Saw This Coming

Intro

Jesus was a surprise to the people of Israel, especially when he died. Anyone waiting for the Messiah wasn't expecting him to come in the form of Jesus - a humble carpenter who would be murdered by Roman authorities for insurrection. They expected a mighty warrior king who would overthrow the Roman empire.

When Paul came into the picture, he took it upon himself to re-read the Hebrew scriptures in light of Jesus. He broke many of the "rules", but he believed Jesus trumped everything and had final authority. Things got interesting.

Watch Film

<http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/no-one-saw-this-coming>

Questions for Reflection

1. What do you make of Jesus telling his disciples his death and resurrection was predicted in scripture when it wasn't?
2. What do you make of Matthew's use of Hosea when it's clearly out of context?
3. Do you view Jesus as the creator of a new religion or the fulfiller of an old one? Explain.
4. Try putting yourself in the shoes of a first century Jew. Do you think Paul's perspectives on the kingdom of God would bother you? Why or why not?
5. What do you make of Paul's misuse of certain scriptures to show that Jesus has the ultimate authority?
6. Would you say the Bible is the center of your faith or is it Jesus? Do you think there's a difference?
7. Do you believe the Bible has authority? Explain.
8. Do you think Paul had any idea he was writing "the Bible"?

SESSION SEVEN // The Bible, Just As It Is

Intro

The Bible is what it is and isn't what it isn't. It's important for us to recognize our biases and be aware of them. It's impossible to read the Bible without biases, but if we're aware they're there, it might make it a little easier for us to be challenged in good ways.

It can be quite a terrifying thing if you're used to putting all of your trust in the Bible to shift that trust to a God we cannot see, but I think that's the point of faith. If we believe that the Bible is God's final word, we're more or less putting the Spirit out of a job.

Above all else - above getting the Bible "right" and having all the answers - I think God desires our trust, regardless of what we "know".

Faith isn't about being certain; it's about trusting in spite of our doubts.

Watch Film

<http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/the-bible-just-as-it-is>

Questions for Reflection

1. Whenever you think about how big the universe is and how we'll never know everything, are you ever tempted to just give up on the Bible or on God out of pure frustration? Why or why not?
2. Do you think God is bound by the Bible? Why or why not?
3. Are there any other ways in which you experience or learn about God besides the Bible? If so, what are they?
4. Have you ever seen someone use the Bible as a weapon against someone else? Have you ever been guilty of this? Explain.
5. Pete says, "An unsettled faith is a maturing faith". Do you believe that is true for you? Explain.

6. How much time do you spend in fear of being wrong about the Bible or about God?

7. If we can never be right about everything, why try?

8. If you're a part of a spiritual community, how welcome do you feel to figure things out slowly?

9. Do you feel like no matter where your faith is at that you're a valued member of your community or a problem to be solved? Explain.

10. Do you feel like your faith is something that should be held onto tightly or something that's big and expansive? Explain.

11. How comfortable are you in letting the Bible be "just as it is"?

12. After reading this book and watching the films, have your expectations of the Bible changed? Have any of your "problems" been solved? Do you feel more at ease? More stressed? Do you feel more comfortable with mystery?

7. Do you believe the Bible has authority? Explain.

8. Do you think Paul had any idea he was writing "the Bible"?