

THE BIBLE - READING IT FOR ALL IT'S WORTH

WHY AND HOW SHOULD I READ IT?

The Bible is a unique book. It is estimated that 44 million Bibles are sold a year. An article in *The Times* once was subtitled, "Forget the modern British novelists and TV tie-ins; The Bible is the biggest selling book every year"

The writer remarked

"As usual the top seller by several miles was... the Bible. If cumulative sales of the Bible were frankly reflected in best-seller lists, it would be a rare week when anything else would achieve a look in. It is wonderful, weird, or just plain baffling in this increasingly godless age - when the range of books available grows wider with each passing year - that this one book should go on selling hand over fist, month in, month out... It is estimated that nearly 1,250,000 Bibles and Testaments are sold in the UK each year."

In America there is an average of 6.8 Bibles in every household.

To a great deal of people the Bible is an utter mystery and while it has some gripping stories and interesting history in it, seems to be relegated to a dusty shelf for all practical purposes.

To a person who has put their faith in Jesus Christ the Bible can be a source of strength, comfort, encouragement and a delight in their life.

The Psalmist says:

"Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his *delight* is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers"

Psalm 1:1-3

In this section we will look at why and how the Bible can become a 'delight' for each of us.

THE BIBLE IS GOD'S WORD

God has spoken to us through His Son, Jesus Christ. (Hebrews 1 :2). Christianity is a revealed faith. God has chosen to reveal himself through Jesus - He is God's ultimate revelation.

The main way we know about Jesus is through God's revelation recorded in the Bible. God has also revealed himself through the wonders of creation

(Romans 1 : 19-20; Psalm 19). Science is an exploration of God's revelation in creation. (There should be no conflict between science and the Christian faith - rather they complement each other).

God also speaks to people directly by His Spirit. (Through prophecy, dreams, visions, through other people. We will look more at these later).

The principal way that God speaks to us is in the Bible. We ought to use the Bible as our 'benchmark' for every decision and for setting every value in life.

Paul wrote of the inspiration of the scriptures that were available to him:

"All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3: 16-17)

The writer is saying that Scripture is inspired by God - "God breathed". Of course He used human agents but it is inspired by God - it is Him speaking.

Jesus treated the scriptures of his day as the word of God. He quoted from more than 20 Old Testament passages, frequently mentioning the words "that the scriptures might be fulfilled" or "it is written". (see John 24 v 27,44)

IS THE BIBLE RELIABLE?

A frequently held supposition is that with so many contributions to the Bible, that with the passing of time it has become blurred and muddled! Are there mistakes in the Bible? The answer is no. It is important to realise many of the difficulties and seeming contradictions can be resolved by understanding the context. We can be honest enough to say 'yes' there are some difficulties in the Bible. Even Peter found some of Paul's letters hard to understand (2 Peter 3:16) It is important not to run away from the difficulties but to seek, so far as we can, to resolve them to our own satisfaction.

It is very important to hold on to the fact that all Scripture is inspired by God, even if we cannot immediately resolve all the difficulties. If we do, it should transform the way in which we live our lives. When Billy Graham was a young man, several people (among them one was called Chuck) started to say to him, "You can't believe everything in the Bible." He began to worry about it and started to become very muddled. John Pollock, in his biography of the evangelist, records what happened:

"So I went back and I got my Bible, and I went out in the moonlight. And I got to a stump and put the Bible on the stump, and I knelt down, and I said, 'Oh God; I cannot prove certain things, I cannot answer some of the questions Chuck is raising and some of the other people are raising, but I accept this Book by faith as the Word of God.' I stayed by the stump praying wordlessly, my eyes moist ... I had a great peace that the decision I had made was right".

If we accept that the Bible is inspired by God, then its authority must follow from that. If it is God's word then it must be our supreme authority for what we believe and how we act.

The issue is, that while it is questioned and ridiculed the inerrancy (never erring nature) of the Bible has been established by its own continuity and consistency and the amazing insight and authority that stamp this book as being supernatural in its origin, content and relevance to every generation.

Let's look at some of the facts.

Over 1500 year span (over 60 generations) written by 40 authors of all walks of life.

MosesPolitical Leader

PeterFisherman

AmosHerdsman

JoshuaGeneral

DanielPrime Minister

LukePhysician

SolomonKing

MatthewTax Collector

PaulTent Maker

Written in a variety of places e.g. wilderness by Moses, dungeon by Daniel and Paul, David wrote on hillsides and in a palace, John wrote alone on the island of Patmos.

Many of the books were written during military campaigns. It shows a realistic picture of the range of human emotions as life is experienced in all its ups and downs.

The Bible was written in 3 languages. Hebrew (the language of the Old Testament) Aramaic (the general language of the Middle East until the time of Alexander the Great) and in Greek (the language of the New Testament) which was nearly universal by the time Jesus had been born.

The continuity of the Bible is remarkable as its one central theme comes through - God's redemption of man.

The Bible is unique in its translation. It is the first book to be ever translated (Greek Septuagint Hebrew Old Testament to Greek done about 200 BC)

It is unique in its survival. 13,000 copies of the New Testament exist either in full books or portions of books. These have survived from the early Antiquities same dating from the middle of the 1st Century AD. Compare this fact with some of the great works of secular literature (e.g. earliest copy of 'Works of Julius Caesar' date from about 900AD and copies were written first in about 50BC - (1000 year interval exists between the oldest manuscript and copies being written). (10 Copies exist from 900AD).

REGARDING THE OLD TESTAMENT'S ACCURACY...

The 'copyists' (scribes) had incredibly rigorous confines to work within while doing their work - column widths, ink formula, followed authentic copy - no deviations allowed, letters not to be omitted or added etc.

Let's look at specific instances of its insight and relevance to life that give us unshakeable confidence that it is indeed the Word of God.

The apostle Paul tells us that the things that are seen in creation and that we can know in the visible arena are to be signposts to the invisible - to the Creator. (Rom 1:18-21) There are important verses to consider in Colossians 1:16-17

Geological

Mountains and valleys in the depths of the seaPsalm 104 (see v5-8)
.....Habakkuk 3:6 , Jonah 2:6
The Ozone Layer.....Psalm 47:9
Treasures of the snowJob 38:22
Earth a sphere.....Isaiah 40:22
Moisture in atmospherePsalm 148:4

Facts concerning the Universe - mathematical precision

Lunar Phases.....Psalm 104:19
Planets & FirmamentPsalm 19
Remember God's question to Abraham "Can you count the Stars..."

The Sabbath

This is not something binding upon believers - Christ has become our 'Sabbath' our rest.
A day of "rest" as a principal needs careful consideration. Communist experiment with a ten day working week.

Agricultural instruction

Allowing the land to be replenished
Six years work the land - seventh year no cropping. Leviticus 25

Dietary Instruction

Unclean - clean meatsDeuteronomy 14
Not to eat bloodDeuteronomy 12:23
Moderation stressed.....Proverbs 23:20

Health instructions

The Bible talks about the necessity of a 'quarantine' period when infectious disease became apparent. Also touching clothing or belongings of a sufferer to be treated carefully - sanitation laws i.e. washing hands - removal of human waste etc. If Biblical advice had been adhered to the Black Plague would have been a very different historical period.
Consider too, laws regarding sexual conduct. Is the Bible proposing a puritanical, outdated and prudish view of sex and is there a reason for the boundaries?
(Actually the Bible has some pretty erotic things to say about sex within marriage commitment).

A MANUAL FOR LIVING

The Bible is our authority for how to act in every area of life. It tells us how to conduct our day to day lives, how to handle pressure, speaking about resolving conflicts, family relationships, handling money and resources, caring for the poor and disadvantaged along with guidelines or principles for life -issues we encounter.

The Bible has so much to say about wholeness of mind, emotions, spirit that in turn keeps one healthy physically.

“... a broken spirit dries the bones... a merry heart does good like a medicine.”

As we come into a growing relationship with the Lord and find the healing power of salvation at work in our lives so we are in an incredibly advantaged position to be well in our bodies too.

Note: There is a distinct relationship between stress and many diseases people suffer from. “It's not so much what we eat but what eats you!” (See Isaiah 26:3, Psalm 34:19)

The Bible gives us the way to stay healthy by preventing disease-producing attitudes such as envy, resentment, hatred, anger, immorality, self-centredness, anxiety, fear.

The Bible strikes at the cause...

“Those who belong to Christ have put to death (crucified) the old nature.” Galatians 5:24

Some people say, I don't want this rule book. It is too restrictive - all those rules and regulations. I want to be free. But does the Bible take away our freedom? Or does it in fact provide the means for us to be truly free? Rules and 'boundaries' can in fact create freedom and enjoyment. Imagine a game of rugby where some the players decided the rules were too restrictive and the ref. was inhibiting their freedom of expression. These characters proceed to ignore all the sidelines, to wilfully infringe any 'offside' restrictions and basically invent their own game. It would be a disaster! God's rule book tells us what's 'in' and what's 'out.'

Imagine baking a sophisticated meal for the first time. The recipe is there because it works - to decide it is too restrictive is to court disaster.

The Bible is God's revelation of His will for His people. To obey the things which He has spoken means we will be free. His rules are provided for us because He is motivated by love and wishes to protect us from the perils of “doing it our own way!”

A LOVE LETTER FROM GOD

For some people the Bible is never more than a set of instructions. It becomes a 'paint-by-numbers' description of how to live. But this is not how we should treat the Bible. Nor should we treat it as an academic or philosophical text book. It is a wonderful book to study for hours but it is more than this. The main point of the Bible is to show us how to enter into a living, personal, dynamic relationship with Jesus.

In Israel over the years there have been tour guides who needed to know the Bible thoroughly to be successful in their jobs. They have left many Christians "for dead" in their head knowledge of events, places, and general memorising of scripture passages. Yet the astounding thing is that it is possible to possess lots of information and not have received any impartation from the Author himself. In other words it may remain at a very theoretical level.

Jesus spoke to the religious Pharisees and said, “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5: 39-40). The Bible is our 'portrait' of Jesus. We can come to know Him better, more intimately through its pages.

Our relationship with God is two-way. We speak to Him in prayer and He speaks to us in many ways but especially through the Bible. God speaks through what He has spoken. The writer of Hebrews says when he quotes the Old Testament, “As the Holy Spirit says...” (Hebrews 3:7) It is not just that the Holy Spirit spoke in the past. He speaks afresh through what he spoke in the past. This is what makes the Bible so ‘alive’.

What happens when God speaks?

First, He brings faith to those who are not yet Christians. Paul says, 'Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ' (Romans 10:17). It is often as people read the Bible that they come to faith in Jesus Christ.

Secondly He speaks to Christians. As we read the Bible we experience a transforming relationship with God through Jesus Christ. It is an extraordinary fact that we can speak to and hear from the person whom we read about in the pages of the New Testament - the same Jesus Christ. He will speak to us (generally not audibly, but in our heart) as we read the Bible. We will hear His message for us. Spending time in His presence, listening to His voice, brings many blessings. He often brings joy and peace, even in the midst of crises situations (Psalm 23:5). When we are not sure which direction we should be going in, God often guides us through His word (Psalm 119:105). The Book of Proverbs even tells us that God's words bring healing to our bodies (Proverbs 4:22). The Bible also is like ‘food’ for strengthening, sustaining and causing us to grow.

Jesus quoted a verse from the old Testament when He said, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word which proceeds out of the mouth of God.” (Matthew 4:4).

Peter said that Christians ought to desire God's Word in the same way a little baby needs milk to nourish it and satisfy its needs. “Like new-born babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good” (1 Peter 2:1-3).

The word of God has great power.

The writer of Hebrews says,

“The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

It has power to pierce all our defences and get through to our hearts.

It is a remarkable thing how God's Word can speak to us in a very personal way that is specifically relevant to our lives or to situations we may be encountering.

SOME PRACTICAL TIPS

It takes a little while to get to know your Bible. There are two parts to it - the Old and New Testaments. The word "testament" means "covenant", or "agreement", and the Bible contains God's covenants or agreements made with His people.

There are 66 books in the Bible - 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New. To find a book quickly, look up the index at the front of the Bible. Most books are divided into chapters and verses - this helps you to find the right place easily.

There are different translations of the Bible. The Authorised, or King James Version, was translated many years ago. Some people find it difficult to read. However, there are more modern translations that help new Christians understand God's Word more easily. Choose one with which you feel most comfortable. (Some are "paraphrased" versions taken from translations).

Remember, the best way to get to know the Bible - and more importantly what God says in it - is to read it!

It is wise to start with a realistic goal. Don't be over-ambitious. It is better to spend a few minutes every day than to spend an hour and a half the first day and then to give up!

Setting aside ten minutes or so a day to read it and think it through is an important investment. Start by asking God to speak to you through the passage you are reading. Read the passage - a suggestion is to start in John's Gospel. (Some good reading programmes or study helps are available for getting going with your own personal Bible reading programme).

As you read ask yourself three questions:

1. What does it say?
2. What does it mean?
3. What lesson is there for me to learn? How can I apply it to my life - my family, work, neighbours.

Finally we must put it into practice. The Bible is not given to increase our knowledge but to change our lives.

As we read it, 'store' it in our hearts and seek to live it out, God will use His word to produce wonderful things in our lives.