

## The Bible

One of the impressive things about Jesus was the breadth of his knowledge of the Scriptures. He used to quote them regularly. He regarded them as having authority; if the Scriptures said something, there was no further debate (Mark 12:13-37). They were clearly very important to him.

He once said it was meat and drink for him to do the father's will (John 4:34). Judging from his attitude, Jesus believed that in order for the father's will to be achieved, the Scriptures would need to be fulfilled (Luke 4:16-21, 24:44). It was important that everything written about him should happen, even down to a small detail, such as his thirst, which came to the fore when he hung on the cross (John 19:28).

We might say that Jesus paid the closest attention to the written Scriptures, interpreted them with great care, and lived them out in front of his disciples. If this reliance on Scripture was important for Jesus, who had a very close relationship with his father as we have seen, then how much more important it should be for his followers.

Jesus had intimate communication with God at all times. We might think that this would dispense with the need for discerning God's will through Scripture, but Jesus evidently did not think so.

It follows, then, that those who are less good at hearing the father's voice than Jesus would seem to need to spend at least as much time in absorbing the written words of God as Jesus did. Their importance cannot be overestimated.

This raises the manner in which the Scriptures should be read. The natural thing here is to consult those who appear to know. Many books have been written on this subject, and many sermons preached. Some have been helpful, others less so. The difficulty is that however well-intentioned, explanation and comment on Scripture tends to be biased according to the view of the writer. So it is important to reflect carefully on what is offered, and not simply absorb it passively (1 Cor 14:29).

Our aim in this book has been to adopt a similar attitude to the Scriptures that Jesus himself had, namely to take them at their face value. We do well to recognise that when faced by a challenging passage, it is often tempting to introduce complications. I believe we should be cautious before doing this. A useful example of this tendency can be seen at the end of John's gospel itself. It is worth quoting in full. Jesus is talking to Peter about John.

"Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me." Because of this, the rumour spread among the brothers that John would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?"

So when the writer wanted to clarify a misunderstanding that had arisen about Jesus' words, rather than paraphrase, he simply restated what Jesus had said using the original words. It seems, then, that the approximate value of books and sermons relating to the Bible can be tested by the degree to which they allow the text to speak for itself.

Rather than simply stating this and leaving it at that, let us now test our principle. One way to do it is to search for a passage that appears to contradict it. There are several in the gospels. One comes in Mark 4, when the disciples ask Jesus why he speaks to the people in parables. Jesus appears to reply that it is in order to confuse them (Mark 4:10-12). Can this really be right? Why should a teacher aim to muddle his students? This seems to be a parable about parables!

My own view on this is to be cautious about trying to make Jesus' words seem easier than they are. After all, why should I be able to understand everything he said? The remark impresses upon us that we cannot hope to get to the bottom of everything Jesus spoke about. Questions are here to stay.

Another instance may be found in the command that disciples are to hate parents, brothers and sisters, spouses and children (Luke 14:26). Is this to be taken as it appears? I have not heard anyone teach on this subject that I can recall, but presumably instruction could be given on how to hate most effectively. Anonymous poison letters, abusive phone calls and loud-mouthed cursing are all

very well, but with a little thought, believers can inflict much greater damage on their families. For example, one fruitful idea might be to behave so as to create an atmosphere of trust in the home, and then suddenly break it by a brutal, heartless action of some kind, preferably for no apparent reason.

This seems ridiculous. Surely Jesus did not mean his followers, who are commanded to love one another, to reserve different behaviour for their nearest and dearest. Our temptation is to pass over Jesus' words here, and at other difficult places in the Gospels, and ignore them.

The view of this book is that such an attitude will not do. Since Jesus took so much trouble to fulfil Scripture, his followers need to do the same, even for difficult passages. So while the Mark passage may be too much for us to understand this side of heaven, let us consider this instruction of hating family members for a moment, as a way of testing our desire to interpret Scripture helpfully.

Firstly we notice the strength of the command; it is impossible to be a disciple of Jesus if one does not hate family. So we have to ask what 'hate' means here. Other passages in Scripture will help us. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul talks about marriage. From what he says, it is clear that he envisaged marriages breaking up because of the Christian belief of one partner, but not the other (v12-13). This suggests that early believers put Jesus first in their lives to such an extent that a marriage might break down rather than cause compromise.

I once heard a lady say that when she became a Christian, it was touch and go whether her husband would stay with her, but in the end he did. I read recently of another marriage which finally came apart, partly at least because of the husband's refusal to have faith. These stories challenge me. As a pastor, I have become used to thinking that in the light of divorce statistics, marriages must be given every priority and saved at all costs. But I now find Scripture replying, "not at all costs"; if it is a matter of commitment to Jesus or commitment to a partner, then it is the marriage that must be sacrificed.

Looking at another passage of Scripture has helped us interpret Jesus' words in Luke 14, even if we do not much like what we discover. We could look at further passages, for example, Jesus' treatment of his own family. John 19:26-27 records Jesus' words from the cross about care for his mother when he was gone. This action speaks of love and concern. But from other passages, we grasp that Jesus never allowed his family to control him. He was prepared to say words which sound harsh rather than allow this to happen (Mark 3:21, 31-34; John 2:4, 7:3-9).

The theme of this book has been that difficult passages are not to be ignored, but to be understood and acted upon. So when a difficulty is encountered, we do well to search the Scriptures and adopt an attitude of prayer over it, wanting to understand and obey the father's will. A commentary or a visit to the pastor may prove helpful, but let us be suspicious of interpretations which take the sting out of the hard sayings, recognising the human tendency through history to reduce the demands of Jesus to a point where they are emptied of content.

Thankfully, most of the difficulties we encounter are not to do with understanding the text; rather, they are with carrying it out. Given that it is our aim to do so, let us now consider how we may make the best use of the Bible on a daily basis.

Scripture is vital to spiritual health. One of the passages which we did not look at in our chapter on prayer is the so-called Lord's prayer, really the disciple's prayer. In it comes the request, "Give us each day our daily bread (Luke 11:3)." As well as food to eat, the believer needs a regular word from God "to sustain the weary (Isa 50:4)." As with Jesus, knowing and doing the father's will is meat and drink for believers, and this comes through the Scriptures.

Food is best taken in regular meals. Similarly, the Bible needs to be devoured regularly for good health. Again, although it may be possible to survive on nothing but chips, a varied diet will prove helpful. My aunt, who lived well into her eighties, had a policy of eating as varied a diet as possible. So with the Bible, which is described as both milk and meat, it is good to master it all, and vary one's input (Heb 5:11-14). Better to open up the Bible daily and often, even if only in small amounts, than to rely on the occasional binge.

Systematic reading schemes can be helpful in covering the ground. There is a place for commentaries and Bible-reading notes that affirm the text. It is also good simply to read the Bible like a book; Mark's gospel, for example, can be read in forty minutes. Once when I had more time than now, I used to read Genesis in four days as follows; day one, chapters 1-11; day two, chapters 12 to 24; day three chapters 25 to 36, and day four chapters 37 to 50. Then I would start again. After a week or two, I began to become aware of some of the underlying themes of the book. After three months, I began to know the book quite well. This reading of long sections can be carried out with other books. Use your imagination, and work out a scheme that suits you.

However, having said that, I have also found that God will speak through the Bible to me personally, generally through a smaller section. Some months ago, I took to asking God each morning what the passage for the day was, rather than relying on someone else's lectionary or reading scheme. I then read the passage that comes into my mind. Some days, I have had very little idea what I am to read; on other days, it seems clearer. I have also experienced interference in hearing from God; as biblical chapter references float through my mind, I have tried to learn how to distinguish between what comes from God and what comes from my own thinking or from the enemy.

I am still not sure how successful this policy has been; for a while, Psalm 16 seemed to have been the day's passage so frequently that I began to wonder whether I had got stuck in a groove, like a gramophone record. However, it did seem to communicate in different ways on different occasions. Also, it was only after about thirty readings of it that I finally became aware of what God might be trying to say through two of its verses.

A clear grasp of Scripture will help us interpret the world today. It seems that what happened to ancient Israel, and to Jesus, is set down for believers to interpret what happens to them (1 Cor 10:11). Jesus was crucified and rose from the dead just as Israel had been, in its exile and restoration. It seems likely that individual disciples, and the church as a whole, and modern Israel today will go through similar experiences in our turn. This is why in my opinion, the formation of modern Israel in 1948 was such a significant event. This looks

like her resurrection from the dead, in our time (Ezek 37:11-12). To my mind, it is small wonder the nations are currently in turmoil, and the world is in such a state of flux.

This thought brings the media to mind. Many of us absorb the newspapers or listen or watch the news to keep abreast of what is happening. This may be all very well, but sadly, there are a number of charges that can be brought against the media. The level of accuracy in reporting generally seems to be low, which suggests that truth is not a high priority. I say this on the basis of news stories of which I have had a personal knowledge. To give an example, when one of the churches in my charge burnt down three years ago, the front page local newspaper column had five inaccuracies in about five inches of print. This puts

me in a dilemma. I feel I cannot fully trust what we are given for our daily fare, yet what else is there to rely on for information?

Another difficulty is that at present, many of the stories chosen as 'news' have the effect of bringing more fear into our lives. Is it wise to give so much publicity to acts of violence? Again, more and more magazines and newspapers now carry horoscopes, making themselves vehicles for the occult in the process. Another concern is the damage that can be inflicted on private individuals. The media seem to fasten onto certain people and raise them to great prominence, placing them on pedestals as it were by publicising them, and then appear to enjoy tearing them down from those pedestals by exposing their weaknesses.

All this seems questionable at best. While there is much that is good about the media, they seem to be a mixed blessing. Are we at the mercy of the tendencies we have noted, or can we do anything about these concerns?

It is helpful to realise that somewhat like Scripture, the media offer us a daily diet. Once again, we notice that people generally have their daily portion. Diet can be varied, in choice of newspaper. Some prefer the radio or TV news, maybe several times a day. The news is like food. Many people

form their opinions of today's world entirely from what they digest from the media, with virtually no first-hand experience of the events at all.

Because of the concerns we have noted, too great a dependence on the media seems to be a dangerous practice. Part of the answer to it is to master the scriptures. Here truth is of the highest importance (John 8:31-32). Everything of significance about our world is foreshadowed there in some way (Amos 3:7). However convincing a news report may appear, the words of the prophets are described as being more certain, like a light shining in a dark place, since they were inspired by God (2 Peter 1:19-21). Jesus assured his followers that not even the least stroke of a pen would disappear from the law (Luke 16:16-17).

What is written comes to fruition. There is even an antidote to those fear-inducing stories of rape and murder; promises such as those in Psalms 91 and 121 will do much to restore the confidence that is being eroded in our society.

This book has been written on the understanding that God's word is vital. It is as Jesus opens the word of God for us that our hearts burn within us and we are fed (Luke 24:32). We are to obey the commands of God, and so prove that man does not live on bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God (Deut 8:1-3, Matt 4:4).

A proper diet of Scripture is very helpful in maintaining close touch with Jesus. For many of us, a useful place to start would be to see to it that we spend at least as much time with the Bible as with the news media each day.