

## Talk 4 : Why and How to read the Bible

Here are four good reasons to read the Bible:

it is good literature to read;

it is sound wisdom for life;

it gives a unique revelation of God;

it offers a personal encounter with Jesus Christ.

### **The Bible is Good Literature to Read**

Working in Oasis business ministry is full of surprises. On one of my visits, a man welcomed me by telling me that he was an atheist, but he appreciated the visit. A year later when I was visiting, he asked for an extra 15 minutes. This atheist had started reading the Old Testament and wondered if I could answer a few questions.

“Could you help me with the chronology of the Pentateuch?”! (That’s the first five books of the Bible, by the way!) I asked for notice of that question. But I was intrigued as to why he was reading the Old Testament. “Because it is great literature,” he said.

Millions of people agree with him. Over 44 million Bibles are sold in a year - 1 and a quarter million in the UK. A secular publisher (Canongate in Edinburgh actually) recently produced sections of the Bible simply because of the quality of the literature - with controversial introductions by people like Will Self and Richard Holloway.

The Bible is not so much a book as a library of 66 books in two sections - Old and New Testaments - containing, history, poetry, social legislation, subversive social comment, letters.... and a new genre that was invented called “gospels”, accounts of the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

It is a good read as literature, but it is more than that....

### **The Bible is Sound Wisdom for Life**

Back to my chap with the Pentateuch! I suggested that he might want to read that part of the Bible with his eye on a key word - the word “covenant” which means solemn agreement.

The underlying message of the Bible is about a God who initiates relationship with humankind and offers us a solemn agreement. He is revealed as being a promise-making, promise-keeping God.

That led us to talking about what difference it would make to business life if we reflected that kind of relationship in our dealings with each other – promise-making and promise-keeping people. People who could be trusted to make promises and keep them.

At the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century many are wrestling with the implications of the European Convention of Human Rights for our legal, political and moral decision-making.

The Bible offers a different basis of social health that we might call the “Divine Covenant of Human Responsibilities” - summed up in 10 short statements known as the Ten Commandments. These short one-liners (Do not kill. Do not steal. Do not commit adultery, etc.) have yet to be bettered as the basis of social wisdom. And just think of the paper they’d save!

At a very practical level I heard of a man who came to believe in God because he read of the instructions in Exodus to put a parapet around the flat roof of one’s house so that people would not fall off. That man was a health and safety inspector! He reckoned he could trust a God who paid such attention to detail!

Continuing on this tack, you could read the Bible like a *procedures manual* - like “how to maintain your computer”. The Maker’s instructions for life. Imagine, say, a world that followed the instruction: “Never go to bed angry.” I can think of families, business relationships and whole nations that would be very different if anger only lasted a day!

Or you could read it like a series of *love letters*. I had a friend whose three sons lived in different parts of the world. On a Sunday evening he stuck three pieces of paper with two pieces of carbon in an old typewriter. Each night he dashed off a paragraph or two about the events of the day - from the weather, family news, village gossip to political comment. On Saturday he posted the letters - badly typed and crudely written. But he signed them off: “Your aff Pa” – “Your affectionate Father.” Those sons still treasure these letters.

The Bible is signed by “Your aff Pa....”...because....

## **The Bible gives a Unique Revelation of God**

Christians speak of the Bible as being “The word of God” - a book which carries in itself a unique pointer to the kind of God we can come to know in Jesus Christ – our “aff Pa” - an affectionate Father. Jesus often quoted the Old Testament: “It is written...” Paul who wrote much of the New Testament speaks of all Scripture in the Old as being “God-breathed” and Peter tells us that people wrote as they were inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Without the Bible we would have no real knowledge of Jesus Christ. Without the Bible we would have no inkling of a personal God behind the universe. Without the Bible history would have no sense of purpose. The Bible contains God’s unique word to us as a personal and purposeful God.

Let me tell you about a young man who is a graffiti artist. Until recently he had no time for Christianity, but through meeting a group of folk that he could trust, he started to review his position. Last autumn he started to read the Bible.

The Creation story inspired him as an artist. He then turned to the book of Job which is all about suffering, and he found that it connected with his questions about the mess with world is in - and that God has not abandoned us to our fate. Then he started on the Gospels and found the person of Jesus intriguing - a person he wanted to follow and make his role model. Then he told me that he had memorised one of the genealogies of Jesus - it gave him the sense of Jesus being rooted in our life and that through Jesus he too could become a son of God. (That was a first for me! I’d never come across a person who had committed a Bible genealogy to memory.)

That man has found that the Bible opens God up to us...so that....

## **The Bible offers a Personal Encounter with Jesus Christ**

My friend meandered through the Bible and found many points of contact. We for our part suggest that you start with one account of the life of Jesus. We recommend the well-researched account written by Dr Luke – the Gospel of Luke. His little tome lives on in popular memory because of his Christmas narrative of the shepherds watching their flocks and his vivid stories about the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son.

How do we make a start with Luke’s gospel?

### *1. Start at the end.*

Read the last two chapters about the death and resurrection of Jesus sometime in the next couple of days. Easter is more than a spring holiday. It is the crunch of the whole Jesus business.

### *2. Read the whole thing through as a straight story.*

Get an overview of Jesus as a person - his life, teaching, ways of dealing with people and the stories he told. Luke is a good introduction to the Bible as a whole because the stories will be familiar and if you feel a bit out on the edge, then Dr Luke is writing as an “outsider for outsiders”.

### *3. Set aside time each day - 10 minutes in the morning or at lunchtime - to read a short section.*

A. Ask God to help you to understand what you are reading.

B. Ask questions like: What does it say? What does it mean? How may it apply to my life?

C. Keep a journal and note down things that puzzle you, impress you or challenge you to think or act differently.

## **And what’s the pay off?**

Luke ends with a story of two troubled people who bump into a stranger on the road. This is after the traumatic day at Calvary. The stranger – who turns out to be Jesus - listens to their questions and opens up the Scriptures to them. Their hearts “burn within them”. They recognise Jesus. All the old writings make sense!

When we give the story of Jesus our attention, that’s the pay off for us too!