



Using the Bible

The Bible is a unique book. There is nothing quite like this remarkable collection of sixty-six books written over a period of 1500 years by forty men. It's crucial that we appreciate the uniqueness of Scripture. If the Bible is only a collection of old myths, then it would be stupid to give it any authority. But the Bible claims to be much more. It's essential for salvation—'Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God' (Romans 10:17). It's also essential for spiritual growth—'As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby' (1 Peter 2:2).

When we say that the Bible is the 'word of God', we don't mean that God actually wrote it. He is its author, but it was written by men. But these men were not expressing their own opinion—'Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For

prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit' (2 Peter 1:20-21).

These inspired men were guided and directed by the Holy Spirit. This doesn't mean that God dictated everything to them word by word; inspiration is not mechanical. Moses and Paul were not secretaries taking down dictation; they were men 'carried along by the Holy Spirit'. God directed their thoughts not to invent the message, but so that they should give a faithful expression to the mind of God (1 Corinthians 2:13). So Christians can trust their Bible and rely upon it. Jesus said the Scripture cannot be broken (John 10:35), and he confirmed this by the way he himself used Scripture. He used it to deal with Satan (Matthew 4:1-11), to deal with a seeking soul (Matthew 19:16-22), to deal with his enemies (Matthew 15:1-9), and to explain the meaning of the cross (John 3:14).

The purpose of the Bible is to reveal God to us. There are two types of revelation. There is the general revelation of creation that Psalm 19 speaks of. But sin has so blinded man's heart that this revelation will never lead to salvation. So a special revelation was needed, not only to show us the beauty and order of creation, but also to show the ugliness and disorder of human nature dominated by sin. This special revelation is the Bible.

How should we use the Bible?

We will never use the Bible effectively unless we love it. The psalmist set the right example

for us when he said, 'Oh, how I love your law!' (Psalm 119:97). If we truly believe that the Bible is the Word of God then we ought to love and treasure it. Love is more than admiration and respect. Why did William Tyndale give his life so that we could have the Scriptures in English? It wasn't because he simply admired this amazing book, but because he loved it.

Such a love will determine how we use the Bible. If, like the psalmist, we can say, 'Oh, how I love your law!', then, also like the psalmist, we will inevitably also say, 'I meditate on it all day long.'

Several years ago I went to preach at a church in Spain and took two young men from my church with me. One of these men fell in love with a girl in the Spanish church. Their love for each other was obvious, but language was a problem. He couldn't speak Spanish, and she couldn't speak English. As soon as we returned to England, this young man enrolled in night classes to learn to speak Spanish. He had had no interest in Spanish before, but now he loved this girl and wanted to express his love in words she could understand. Love will always motivate action, and will enable the action not to be a burden but a delight. If we love God's Word then we will give time to meditate upon it, not just occasionally when we feel like it, but day and night (Psalm 1:1-2).

The regular daily use of the Bible is crucial. If, as the apostle Peter says, the Bible is spiritual food for our soul and promotes spiritual growth, then daily feeding is obviously necessary. One of the main hindrances to spiritual growth is indwelling sin, and God's answer to this is Scripture—I have hidden

your word in my heart that I might not sin against you' (Psalm 119:11). Meditation implies thought, time, and effort. It's quite the opposite of a casual dipping into the Scriptures. The person who is meditating is serious and not in a hurry. You will never benefit much from a reading of the Bible that is too quick and shallow.

No real Christian would deny the need for a daily use of Scripture, but very often, although the spirit is willing, the flesh is weak. How many times do we make good resolutions to be more diligent in our Bible study, only to revert back to our old ways in a few weeks? How do we combat this? Start by loving God's Word. If you do this, you are halfway there. But you also need to recognize that there are two kinds of Bible use—reading and studying.

Reading

This must be daily and systematic. Don't fall into the trap of reading in a haphazard way—dipping in here and there to your favourite passages. There are many Bible reading systems available—some enable you to read through the whole Bible in a year. But don't be too ambitious. Choose a system you can cope with, or one that you can adapt to suit yourself. If you don't, you can easily fall behind the quota of readings and get discouraged and give up. Set a pace you can handle, and stick to it. It may be a chapter a day, or ten chapters a day. Only you know what you can manage. It's good also, from time to time, to read through some of the shorter books of Scripture in one sitting. Ask your Pastor or an older Christian what system of Bible reading he would recommend to you. A system is crucial. If you fit in Bible reading just when you can, don't be surprised if you find you're rarely able to fit it in at all.

The devil will see to that. When is the best time of day to read God's Word? There's no right answer to this, because it will vary with each one of us. Some people are useless in the morning and others useless at night. When you open the Bible and your mind is alert and eager, that time is the best time for you. The best time will also differ according to your responsibilities, e.g. the best time for a young mother with small children will probably be different from that for a retired person with plenty of time. Find out what time suits you, and stick to it. This does involve self-discipline, but no one ever got anywhere in the Christian life without self-discipline.

Bible reading should always be linked to prayer. Each actually feeds into and flows out of the other.

Studying

This is different from Bible reading and takes more time, so it may only be possible once or twice a week. For Bible study you need more than reading notes; you need a good commentary, a concordance, and perhaps a Bible atlas. Learn how to use these and make them regular tools. But ask your Pastor before you buy—there is a lot of rubbish on the market and you don't want to waste your money.

Some Christians plead that they don't have time for Bible study. Once again the answer to this flows out of love for God's Word. If you have time for your favourite TV programme, you should have time to study Scripture. We would all have plenty of time for this crucial devotion if we used Sunday properly. Using the Bible should not be an arduous task but a daily delight. When we know the Word,

it will really be like a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Our spiritual life will be enriched, and that in turn will strengthen the spiritual life of our church.

*66 books written
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