

The Bible: God's Life Word

Brian Watts

Salt and Light Ministries

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Contents

Foreword	5
Introduction	6
<i>1</i> What does the Bible say about Problems?	10
The Reality of Problems	
The Response to Problems	
The Root of Problems	
The Resolution of Problems	
<i>2</i> What does the Bible say about Solutions?	18
Different Perceptions of Solutions	
Doctrinal Perspective for Solutions	
Divine Perseverance in Solutions	
<i>3</i> What do we do with the Bible?	29
Hearing God's Word	
Reading God's Word	
Studying God's Word	
Memorising God's Word	
Meditating on God's Word	

Foreword

“What is hidden in the roots will be revealed in the shoots.”

This has been one of the lifelong principles by which I have sought to live and build. Experience tells us that what the roots of the plant are like, and what they feed on, determines what sort of fruit grows; where the foundations of a building are shaky, time and disaster will reveal it; where the most simple flaws are not spotted, dreadful disasters can follow – as when a basic defect in the fuel system of the Challenger space craft cost the lives of seven brave astronauts.

So it is with people. What we believe in our hearts will eventually determine how we live, how we build and what we end up with.

This “Roots and Shoots” series is not so much an attempt to define the distinctives of our family of churches, but rather to ensure that all our beliefs and practices are firmly rooted in the Scriptures.

Many people have asked us over the years: “Who are you and what do you believe?” While our structure may appear to be somewhat nebulous, nevertheless the understanding of our common beliefs needs to be clear and unambiguous.

We are a family of churches that believe we are to be “sons of the kingdom” sown into God’s earth. The key that transforms “the word of the kingdom” into “sons of the kingdom” is *understanding* (Matthew 13:23). In the Lord’s first parable of the kingdom (the Sower), the ‘word’ of the kingdom – the seed – when properly received and understood produces fruit. In the second parable of the kingdom (the Weeds), we discover that the fruit has become the seed, and that the seed is “the sons of the kingdom”. The word, bearing fruit, producing seed as sons of the kingdom, planted in the world! That is our prayer for this series of books.

Barney Coombs

Introduction

I have just received a card for Father's Day from my two daughters, Rachel and Caroline. On the outside it says, "Dad, this Father's Day do something totally unlike you..." On the inside, the exhortation continues: "...put something together AFTER you've read the instructions." Their loving comments include reference to the appropriateness of these remarks to their father! They have seen too many examples of D-I-Y projects ruined by failing to read the assembly instructions. But if it is crucial to read the manufacturer's instructions in order to put together successfully a simple wall cabinet, how much more important must it be to read the Maker's instructions to construct a successful life?

We all know the Scripture: "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." (Deuteronomy 8:3; Matthew 4:4). Sadly the comparison between our appetite for bread and our appetite for Bible throws doubt on how seriously we take this verse.

Jesus' Life Support System

That very scripture, about living by God's Word rather than by bread, was a life support to Jesus when he faced temptation. He lived in the good of it as he resisted Satan, and was victorious because of his dependence on it. If he had eaten bread (when the Holy Spirit had led him to fast), he would have died, for the soul that sins surely dies. But because he ate the Word, he lived. Because of his sinlessness, we are told, "it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him" (Acts 2:24).

But how was Jesus able to respond to Satan with God's Life Word? It was because he had hidden the Word in his heart. The Psalmist tells us that this is the key to avoiding sin: "I have hidden your Word in my heart that I might not sin against you." (Psalm 119:11) In his divinity, Jesus was the Word - and as such, he was the author of the book! But he had emptied

himself of his divine prerogatives, taking the nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. It was *as a man* that he now had to respond to Satan, so the author of the Word of Life had to take the time *as a man* to hide the Word of God in his heart.

Luke 2 tells us about Jesus as a twelve year old boy. In a reversal of the movie “Home Alone”, his parents went home alone without him, and he was left on vacation in Jerusalem. But he was not idling away his time. When Mary and Joseph returned to Jerusalem looking for him, they found him in the temple courts “sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions” (Luke 2:46). The Son of God was sitting at the feet of teachers of the Word of God! These teachers were later shown to be wrong on many issues, but they were still sitting in Moses’ seat and were worthy of being listened to in so far as they said what Moses said. Jesus later stated: “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practise what they preach!” (Matthew 23:2-3)

Jesus hid the Word of God in his heart, and so he was able to respond biblically to every eventuality in life. If we don’t know what God says, how can we live, if we’re supposed to live by every word which proceeds from his mouth? Jesus was able to respond with three word-for-word quotations out of obscure passages in the middle of Deuteronomy - which is not part of the Scriptures that we are particularly familiar with as a life-source! But maybe we who face daily temptations would be better equipped to deal with our trials if we had worked our way verse-by-verse through the book of Deuteronomy.

Jesus resisted Satan with the Word by the power of the Spirit. The work of the Spirit is to bring back to our remembrance the Word of God (John 14:26). He can remind us of what we have forgotten, but he cannot remind us of what we never read! In the teaching of Jesus, Word, Life and Spirit are inseparable. “The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” (John 6:63) They not only *should not* be separated; they *cannot* be separated. There is no Life apart from the Word and the Spirit. The Spirit does not operate apart from the Word or without Life. There is no true expression of the Word which is not accompanied by the Spirit and Life.

Mind, Heart and Will

You may have heard of the 'Light Bulb' jokes. For example: How many Californians does it take to change a light bulb? ... Forty-eight; one to change the bulb, and forty-seven to share the experience. How many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb?... Only one - but the bulb must really want to change.

Perhaps we could ask: How many counsellors will it take to change a Christian? How many sermons will it take to change a Christian? The answer to all such questions depends on whether the Christian really wants to change. Change becomes possible when we desire it with our whole being. God wants us to love him with every part of our being; and so in his dealings in our lives, as he works to bring us into conformity with his will, he addresses the whole man - mind, heart and will. Only when each of these is engaged will lasting change occur.

In his book "Spiritual Depression", Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones addresses how the Word becomes Life by the Spirit. He bases Chapter 4 ("Mind, heart and will") on Romans 6:17-18 - "Thanks be to God that though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed (or, obeyed from the heart) the form of teaching (or, doctrine) to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness."

The Roman Christians had radically changed. How was that transformation brought about in them, and how can it be brought about in us? Dr. Lloyd-Jones highlights three aspects of the key to their changed lives. Firstly, they had obeyed: change comes through the will. Secondly, that obedience was from the heart: here we find that the emotions are involved. Thirdly, what they had wholeheartedly obeyed was the doctrine: here we discover the importance of the mind, for the doctrine came to their understanding. It is the Bible affecting mind, heart and will that transforms people who are slaves of sin into people who are slaves to righteousness.

Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones' argument is that real change occurs when, by the power of the Holy Spirit, truth comes to the mind. Having seen the truth by revelation, the believer loves it. If you see the truth clearly, you must feel it. Then you are moved by it: the will is affected so that your greatest desire becomes to live according to that which you see. Jesus' life reflects all these

elements. The climax of his ministry was a matter of the will - “Not my will, but yours be done.” (Luke 22:42) But this was not merely an exercise of will power. It was the culmination of a life-long heart attitude: “I *delight* to do your will.” Its origins went back to childhood times like those in the Temple as a 12-year old boy: “I have hidden your word in my heart.” It was based on a childhood of learning in which even the Son of God needed to ask questions of the teachers of his day.

This is also the emphasis of an excellent book by Peter Lewis, Roy Clements and Greg Haslam called “Chosen for Good: God’s rescue plan for men and women today”. Many of the ideas in this booklet are drawn from the introduction to “Chosen for Good” which was written by Robert Horn. The book reflects a desire to see people understand the truth so that their hearts are set aflame and so that their wills are engaged.

Having reminded ourselves of the Biblical injunction to live by the Word of God rather than by bread alone, let us now consider how, by the power of the Spirit, this Word affects Life.

Chapter 1

What does the Bible say about Problems?

1. The Reality of Problems

I don't need to remind you that we live in a world full of problems. We are constantly confronted by relational problems, administrative problems, financial problems, marital problems, work problems, psychological problems - to mention just a few!

The list sounds depressing - but the encouragement is that there is nothing new under the sun: the Bible is full of the same problems. They existed in the most vibrant congregations in the early church, and amongst the saints of Old and New Testaments who seemed to be the most impressive spiritual giants in comparison with us pygmies. There are countless similarities between our experiences and the case studies of biblical characters and the relevant teaching in Scripture addressing those problems. We know that there is no shortage of problems, but how do we respond to them?

2. The Response to Problems

While there are many similarities between modern day problems and their biblical counterparts, there are many stark differences between the way we respond to those problems today, and the way the Bible responds to them.

The Modern Response: "How to..."

The modern church seems well geared-up to tackle all these age-old problems. There is a seemingly endless stream of books and magazines,

cassettes, videos, conferences and seminars claiming to speak relevantly to these issues. Every publishing house has its own list on marriage problems, singles' problems, depression problems, diet problems. There are support groups with 12-step programmes to deal with all kinds of addictions, abuse, and the trauma of sexual harassment. One of the fast-growing support groups in the USA is for people suffering from low self-esteem because nobody has ever sexually harassed them!

This is all seen in the huge "How to..." industry with which we are bombarded in every Christian bookstore. There is a thriving Christian problem-solving industry, which is now part of our wider western culture. There was an interesting outsider's perspective on this in a recent article in the 'China News'. The headline proclaimed: "The American Dream now comes in a Self Help Book". The article described this modern phenomenon:

"Feeling bad, wondering why? Original sin, never a very can-do concept, has very little appeal for Americans today, who prefer to believe that unhappiness can be fixed. Paradise, they believe, is open to anyone - if you can set goals, think positive, and get into training. Adam and Eve: they weren't the world's first sinners; they were the world's first dysfunctional family. What did they feel after being kicked out of Eden? Some grief maybe? Some anger, stress, depression, low self-esteem?"

"There are self-help books for the dim (like "7 Kinds of Smart", or "Other Ways of Becoming Intelligent"); there's self help for the shy, the lonely, the poor, the black, the procrastinating, the anxious, the traumatised, the burnt-out, the first-born, the over-loving, the unloved, the ashamed, the hurt, the guilty, the sad. Have we overlooked anyone? The dead, perhaps, or the comatose."

Plenty of self-help on offer then! But how does our modern self-help approach compare with the way the Bible approaches problems?

The Biblical Response: Doctrine Leading to Practice

Because human nature is unchanged, we may be sure the same problems we face existed in the early church. We know that the New Testament devotes much energy to problem-solving. Most New Testament letters devote half of their space to practical problems in the lives of readers and their churches.

But the approach to dealing with these problems is fundamentally different. Robert Horn describes this approach in "Chosen for Good":

"It is not problem-oriented, though in a profound sense it is problem-solving. It is not difficulty-dominated, though it enables the disciple to overcome. It is not a how-to manual offering techniques, though it does give a way forward. It does not revolve around our felt needs like some counselling sessions, though it knows how to handle our needs."

What is fundamentally different, as we shall see, is that while most New Testament letters give a lot of attention to problems, at least half of their material presents doctrine and theology. Practical solutions follow directly out of this - and have no meaning apart from it. Paul often used the word "therefore" to bridge the gap between theological and practical considerations. It is a crucial link word, taken from the vocabulary of logic, demonstrating that the practical instructions are the logical outworking of theological truth.

The letter to the Romans is a classic example of this. Paul devotes many deep and significant chapters to essential doctrinal truths. He teaches about sinfulness, justification, sanctification, glorification, the mystery of election. Then, after eleven chapters of theology, he builds his bridge across the divide between doctrine and practice: "*Therefore* I urge you brothers, in view of God's mercy (i.e., all the gospel truth that has preceded) to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God..." What follows is practical exhortation which would be meaningless without any of the preceding doctrine.

Notice how this approach fits Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones' analysis which we considered earlier. "Therefore" is a mind word; it assumes an understanding that can logically be applied. "Urge" is a heart word; it is full of the emotions of appeal and exhortation. "Offer" is a will word; we choose to give ourselves over as servants of the Lord. Having addressed their mind with doctrine, Paul appeals to their hearts by means of exhortation, with a view to affecting their wills.

One of the main reasons why our approach to problems has changed is because we now tend to have a different understanding of the cause of the problem. As the article in China News said, "Original sin has little appeal for Americans today." Any doctor will tell you that the correct diagnosis is vital in finding the remedy. Sadly, the patient of modern humanity has been

mis-diagnosed by twentieth century wisdom. So it should be no surprise that there is little evidence of any improvement in our problem-ridden condition.

3. The Root of Problems

The Bible teaches that all problems are the result of sin. That does not necessarily mean that every particular problem you face is a result of some particular sin that you have committed. Nonetheless, the introduction of sin into the world lies at the root of all of the world's problems. Individual men and women also face problems in their own lives which arise out of the root of sinfulness which is at the heart of every one of us.

Paul describes in Romans chapter 1 how the vicious cycle of sin and problems unfolds. In our wickedness, we suppress the truth (v18). This in turn lead to a depraved mind (v28); our thinking becomes distorted as we move further away from the truth of God's Word. It is at the end of this progression that we find ourselves full of the problems that we try to deal with. He lists such things as greed, envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice, gossip and many more (v29-31).

What is interesting about this list of vices is that they are not uniquely the problems of non-Christians. In fact, we read of many of them again a few chapters later where they are dealt with as issues needing to be addressed in the church at Rome. The problems are listed in the early part of the letter; solutions are offered in the latter part. They are the problems you and I are wrestling with all the time.

Much energy in counselling is devoted to trying to solve these problems. But such counselling is doomed to fail unless it takes into account the progression of Paul's argument. We must recognise that these problems, according to Paul, are the result of a depraved mind, or wrong thinking which has suppressed the truth. We may be able to manipulate people's behaviour so that they act in a more socially acceptable way, but it will not solve the real problem.

How, then, does the Bible teach that such problems can be properly and effectively addressed?

4. The Resolution of Problems

When Paul looks at the problem, he sees the root in the fact that in our depravity we have ended up with a darkened mind. When he begins to look at solutions, his starting point is that it is a renewed mind that will lead to restoration.

In the conclusion of Romans (chs.12-15), Paul deals with the same problems that he had listed in chapter 1. There, as we have seen, he had laid a solid theological foundation. Now he comes to the practical solution to the problems, and he begins with his important word: “Therefore...” (Rom 12:1). His theology has led him to “therefore”: he is now going to explain the practical implications of the truths he has proclaimed.

As Paul introduces this practical conclusion, he tells us that we will only be able to be different from the world, and we will only be able to prove in real life what the will of God really is, when we are transformed by a renewed mind. It was a darkened mind that led to our sinful behaviour; it is a renewed mind that will enable us to prove the will of God in practice. Unless the mind is renewed on the basis of the truth, man is not going to be able to practically deal with behavioural problems. That is why Paul spent so much time laying out that truth in the early chapters of Romans. Without that truth, his practical exhortations would have been of no value.

The New Testament puts far greater emphasis on sound doctrine than we do. It recognises that life and doctrine are inextricably intertwined and cannot be set in opposition to one another. Bad doctrine will lead to bad behaviour; good doctrine will lead to good behaviour. So, for example, if we don't teach the grace of God, legalism will abound; if we don't teach the wrath of God, sin will be thought of lightly; if we don't teach the transcendence of God, people will be familiar with him; if we don't teach the immanence of God, people will disregard God altogether.

The Trouble in Ephesus

Paul understood the vital nature of doctrine. When he summoned the Ephesian elders he reminded them that he had taught them “the whole will of God” (Acts 20:27). He then warned that the source of danger was in the realm of false doctrine. Even men from among them would distort the truth.

Remember, these were men personally disciplined by Paul over a 3-year period when he had been living with them in Ephesus. But Paul's solution was clear: "I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (v32). If error can arise from within an eldership personally chosen and disciplined by Paul, we had better watch out!

Paul was concerned for the church at Ephesus. He later wrote to them, desiring that they would grow to maturity. He reminded them that God had given apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers so that they might be built up towards the goal of "unity in the faith". The context makes clear that this unity is doctrinal more than relational, for he goes on to say that we know we have got there when we are no longer tossed about by every wind of teaching (Ephesians 4:11-14).

Sadly the church in Ephesus did not get any closer to this unity of the faith. We next read of them in Paul's letters to Timothy, by which time the church was filled with all kinds of problems. Underneath it all was the fact that Paul's earlier premonition had proved accurate. As we read Timothy, with its catalogue of church problems in Ephesus, three points emerge:

Firstly, Paul sees the root of their problems as false doctrine. That is what he had warned them about, and that is what had appeared. So Paul was adamant: "...command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer" (1 Timothy 1:3).

Secondly, Paul identified their vulnerability to problems as arising from lack of doctrine. There were too many people with insufficient doctrinal foundations to be able to discern or resist error. Those who were most vulnerable were the "weak-willed women" into whose homes false teachers had wormed their way (2 Timothy 3:6).

It was probably such a context that Paul had addressed in 1 Timothy where he had written his controversial statement that "a woman should learn in quietness and full submission" (2:11). His ban on women teaching has a positive side, however. He is not merely saying that women *should not* teach; he is saying that they *should* learn. There was an ignorance that made them vulnerable to deception - and in our day ignorance of matters of doctrinal significance is not such an exclusively female problem! There are many men who should also learn in quietness and submission, for their ignorance of the

truths of the faith makes them as vulnerable to deception as the women Paul referred to in Ephesus.

Thirdly, Paul presented his solution to problems as the reinstatement of true doctrine. “Command and teach these things” (1 Tim 4:11); “Watch your life and doctrine closely” (1 Tim 4:16); “...while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived...continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of...the holy Scriptures which are able to make you wise for salvation...for all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful...so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim 3:13-17)

The Testimony of Kidderminster

Paul's approach has a well-proven track record down through history. In the seventeenth century, Richard Baxter wrote a book called “The Reformed Pastor”. He was not talking about a Calvinistic pastor, which is perhaps how we would use the term ‘Reformed’ today. In his day, the word meant something like our word ‘renewed’; his book was about what it means to be a pastor who is alive in the Spirit. Baxter describes the pastoral responsibility as he saw it. It was a Puritan model for pastoral problem solving.

There were 800 families in his parish in the English town of Kidderminster. Baxter systematically visited each family every year, at the rate of 7 or 8 families per day, 2 days each week. At the end of his ministry, virtually the whole town of Kidderminster was saved, and Whitefield records in his diary 100 years later the blessing of visiting the town and finding the fruits of Baxter's ministry still intact. What was the key to the success of these pastoral visits?

Richard Baxter did not visit and ask people how they were *feeling*; he went and asked them what they *knew*. He writes, describing his method: “I first heard them recite the words of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, and then examined them about the sense, and lastly urged them with all possible engaging reason and vehemency to answerable affection and practice. I spent about an hour with a family. ...I find we never took the rightest course to demolish the kingdom of darkness till now.”

Notice again how the words he uses emphasise the same strategy that we saw Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones propose. Baxter spoke of using “all possible engaging reason” - addressing the mind. He also “urged ...with vehemency... to affection” - which is clearly an appeal from the heart to the heart. This urging was intended to lead to “...practice” - the will was engaged to the point that people’s lives were changed.

Five years after he had moved away from Kidderminster, Richard Baxter returned for a visit. Despite fierce anti-Puritan persecution in the intervening years, he was able to write, “Not one that I hear of are fallen away, or forsake their uprightness.”

Such families were far less sophisticated in their education than we are today; but they were well able to understand the truth. Our modern shift away from objective truth is a serious problem. As Wells has written in “No Place for Truth”, “Evangelicals have failed to see that this shift from the objective to the subjective ...is invariably inimical to biblical and historical faith.” He makes the point: “Feeling is rapid, but learning is slow.” And in a culture that has forgotten how to think, it is just too much hard work to formulate our faith in theological terms. But we will pay a dear price in comparison with the fruit of Baxter’s labours.

Jesus said, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.” Knowledge, in its biblical sense, implies both understanding and experience. There can be no true freedom without both dimensions.

Chapter 2

What does the Bible say about Solutions?

We have begun this booklet by concentrating on what the Bible says about problems, and we have seen that its diagnosis of the human condition is very different to the way we tend to think today. But if the Bible is accurate (as it surely is) in its diagnosis that the root of our problems lies in our sinfulness and the resultant darkness of our minds, what solutions does it propose?

1. Different Perceptions of Solutions

In his introduction to “Chosen for Good”, Robert Horn uses a couple of interesting illustrations to describe how we attempt to solve problems and the contrasting way in which the New Testament responds to the situation. Horn sees the Bible, not “how-to” techniques, as the solution.

Firstly, Horn likens us to climbers embarking on an expedition. Beginners set out with raw enthusiasm; they don’t want to take time to tediously survey the whole mountain range. It is too laborious to set up a base camp with all the supplies and emergency equipment that may or may not be needed. We’ve got what it takes and we want to be on our way. We read a couple of autobiographies of those who did it before, and they made it sound easy. So we set out on a bright sunny morning, and because we make good progress in the foothills, we think we’re doing well. But then the problems start: the mist closes in, the food runs low, we have no compass or charts. Without a base camp, our expedition will come to grief.

Compare this with the New Testament approach. To continue Horn's picture, it assumes that we are embarking on a Christian life that is potentially more demanding than climbing Mount Everest. We must begin by surveying the ground, we must become familiar with the whole terrain. We need to know what we can anticipate further down the road, and how we can avoid different potential hazards. A base camp must be stocked with every item that we may need: food, equipment, maps and instructions, means of communication, emergency services and medical supplies.

Sadly the church does not often equip the saints in this way. They may be well prepared for a Sunday School picnic, but they will need something far more rigorous if they are to survive an expedition up Mt. Everest. Many casualties result from preparing for the demands of the expedition of the Christian life as if it were no more than a picnic.

Horn also likens us to students preparing for a major exam. We are pressed for time and are not on top of the syllabus, still less the whole subject. We know we need help now, so we look for quick solutions. We try to plug the gaps of our ignorance. We look up a few quotations to pad our English literature essay, or we have somebody give us the answer to some difficult maths problems.

It may get us through the exam. But because this approach only deals with a few random parts of the subject we're struggling with, we'll never get on top of the material. Crammed knowledge will soon be forgotten. Without a full grasp of the subject, we will never be able to answer anything other than model exam questions, and we will never be able to put our limited knowledge to any practical use.

Again, the New Testament approach is different. The Bible takes us through a lively and vital syllabus. It may not all seem relevant now, but later on it will enable us to face and answer the questions which the examination of life will pose in each successive test. Jesus probably did not get goose-bumps when he first read and meditated on Deuteronomy 8:3, but having understood it in principle (not in subjective experiential terms) in childhood, he was equipped to pass the real exam in the wilderness.

These illustrations, of the mountain climber and the examination candidate, highlight at least a couple of ways in which our attempts to solve

the problems of life differ from the biblical way. Consider some of those differences:

Short Term versus Long Term Perspectives

The examination illustrates the difference between short term and long term thinking: do I want to understand this information in order to get through tomorrow's problem, or do I want to be prepared for life? In the short run, cramming may get me through the exam, but a longer view recognises that I need to totally master this material in order to be able to build a career.

This contrast may be applied to the ways in which we approach the Bible. Am I going to read the Bible to get a short quick spiritual high? Or am I going to read it with a view to being prepared for what God has for me twenty years from now? Jesus took the latter approach. Deuteronomy may not have seemed very exciting to him as a twelve year old boy, but his familiarity with it saved his life twenty years later in the wilderness.

Think of the breakfast cereal with which you perhaps began your day. There were no goose-bumps over every individual corn flake you ate! They tasted nice, but often you don't even notice you are eating them. But if you are like me, sooner or later other people will know if you did not eat them. When I'm hungry, I become grouchy! Those unnoticed corn flakes are stored away providing an energy resource for later demands - whether I enjoy them or not.

I mentioned earlier my failure to read instructions, which has become notorious in our household. The question is often asked in the trauma in the middle of some project: "Why didn't you read the instructions?" There is another question that my long-suffering family also has occasion to ask on a regular basis. They gently say: "Do you want something to eat?" Their remark is based on an observation that there seems to be a certain grumpiness about me, and they know me well enough to know that it may be due to the time that has elapsed since I last ate. The energy levels are running low: dad needs to be topped up.

In relation to our approach to the Bible, the two questions almost amount to the same thing. Many of our problems would be solved if we heeded the warning implied in "Why didn't you read the instructions?" and "Do you

want something to eat?” The instructions and the food are the guidance and energy source that God’s Word is to be to us.

Sometimes a delicious tasty morsel is wonderful, but as a child I learned to eat vegetables because they were good for me, not because they tasted good. Reading the Bible is like that: sometimes it is obviously exciting, but more often it is imperceptibly energising. Praise God for the delicious morsels of revelation that from time to time leap from the pages of the Bible. But praise God too for the daily manna. The Hebrew word for manna could loosely be translated “whatchamacallit”. We don’t really know what it is, but it does us good. It is a kind of no name brand, no taste, bland food, but it gets us through the wilderness.

Preachers like to sparkle with special revelation every Sunday and make the congregation feel spiritually deformed because they don’t see the same exciting revelation in every verse. Some of us remember the great preaching of Ern Baxter, when he used to take off in sentences of excitement that would soar to the heights in a great crescendo of seemingly endless revelation. Feasts like that are great from time to time, but we live on manna. We need a daily diet of strength from God as he helps us to understand who we are, who he is, what he has done, how he expects us to live, what happens when we do and when we don’t.

Zoom Lens versus Wide Angle Lens

Think about the same issue another way. We can have a narrow focus on the immediate problem, or a wide angle awareness of the whole panorama. Most of us are better at the narrow focus. Most people can quote isolated Bible verses to address problems. For example: Worried? - “Cast all your anxiety on him for he cares for you.” (1Peter 5:7); Prayerless? - “In everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” (Philippians 4:6); Guidance? - “He guides me in paths of righteousness” (Psalm 23:3).

These are wonderful Bible verses. But what God has given us is more powerful than a helpful promise box of pithy sayings; it is more than truth communicable by bumper stickers. Those texts are far more glorious in their context, where they are splendid but small details in a vast panorama of revelation. We need to be able to take in the whole plan of salvation, the

breath-taking view of “the hope to which he has called (us), the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe” (Ephesians 1:18-9), the marvellous vista of being able to survey together with all the saints “how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ” (Ephesians 3:18).

You won't get that in a few proof texts. Jesus did not say you shall know a few Bible verses and the Bible verses will set you free. He said you will know the Truth - the whole panoramic landscape of total reality - and the Truth will set you free. He wants us to be thrilled over the vast resources that he has stored up for us at base camp which are guaranteed to be adequate to enable us to complete the climb to the summit. But we get preoccupied with a single can of beans!

So we have seen that there are different perceptions of the solutions that the Bible offers. Some see the Bible as a quick fix to get a spiritual high, or a way of looking for an immediate proof text to answer the felt need of the moment. But how does the Bible portray itself?

2. Doctrinal Perspective for Solutions

Jesus revealed to us what the Biblical approach to problems should be. It is not Bible verses but, as Jesus said, Truth which sets us free. That Truth is contained in those Bible verses. Truth is another way of saying doctrine. The great truths of the Christian faith taken together become the Truth.

Robert Horn uses his introduction to “Chosen for Good” to describe the chapters that will follow in the book. They are essentially doctrine, presenting, as he says, the beauty of the Bible picture of God and his purposes in history. “Each chapter sets out some of the divine truths which our human minds need, and some of the heavenly resources which our earthly route will require. There are no ‘problems-solving’ chapters, though they will, I think, answer lots of questions. But they do give wide angle vision. They offer the framework of biblical understanding to enable us to see where our questions and problems fit in. They set up a base camp to equip and encourage us to go higher up and further on with God.”

He highlights some of these great truths: the sovereignty of God, the sinfulness of man, the person and work of Christ, God's grace at work in our lives and the hope to which we are called. These are amazing truths.

Horn writes: "The truths set out here have been the inheritance and delight of believers down all the centuries. They have been rediscovered in each generation - they have to be because they get obscured by the natural mind (which does not like them) and the devil (who hates them). They are not in the least new in themselves, though they are ever-new. They have made strong Christ-centred Christians out of weak self-centred mortals ever since the days when they were first revealed. By God's Spirit they still have that power."

Contrast that with the spirit of the age, prevalent in the church today. David Wells ("No Place for Truth") describes the change that has occurred in recent years: "Evangelicals, no less than liberals before them whom they have always berated, have now abandoned doctrine in favour of 'life'. Evangelicals today only have to believe that God can work dramatically within the narrow fissure of internal experience; they have lost interest (or perhaps can no longer sustain interest) in what the doctrines of creation, common grace and providence once meant for Christian believers - and even in those doctrines that articulate Christ's death, such as justification, redemption, propitiation and reconciliation. It is enough for them simply to know that Christ somehow died for people."

All of this is as Paul said it would be. He warned Timothy: "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear." (2 Timothy 4:3)

David Wells continues to develop this theme: "Within the church, strong winds are blowing from a range of religious consumers who look to the churches and ministers to meet their needs - and who quickly look elsewhere if they feel those needs are not being met. Basically these consumers are looking for the sort of thing the self-movement is offering; they just want it in evangelical dress. A genuinely biblical and God-centred ministry is almost certain to collide head-on with the self-absorption and anthropocentric focus that are now normative in so many evangelical churches. The collisions take place in the soul of the minister and at the expense of his career."

In this context, it is refreshing to see an author like Robert Horn writing with enthusiasm in a book that is essentially on doctrine: “Yes, there is excitement in these pages, though it is not the froth and bubble variety that recedes when the tide of events goes out or when our fun bubbles burst. It is the excitement of being chosen for the expedition, of setting out to climb the heights.”

Theology at Work

I remember hearing John Kelly teaching on prayer some time ago. He was describing a school of prayer that he had been working with in the church he leads in Bangor, Northern Ireland.

John did not start with the sort of guilt trip with which most motivational exhortations to pray begin. He began with theology. He expounded the truths of Revelation 4 and 5: the Lamb on the throne, opening the scroll as the prayers of the saints ascend to the throne. He discussed this in terms of the sovereignty of God as the over-riding reality of the universe, balanced with the human responsibility of secondary causes. For me, two things stood out powerfully from John's teaching.

Firstly, he made reference to the death of his first wife, Barbara. His solution to the problem of his tragedy came from his theology: he came to understand his situation in the light of the Lamb who unfolds the scroll of his perfect will. Once we see that the Lamb has taken the scroll, we have a solid foundation to cope with everything that comes our way. There is nothing in life that was not first written in the scroll of his purposes (“All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be” - Psalm 139:16). Then we realise that whatever life serves up, we have to receive as from the Lord.

John acknowledged that his response (and ours) has to be the same as that of Jesus: “Here I am - it is written about me in the scroll - I have come to do your will, O God.” (Hebrews 10:7) We pray for grace to enable us to walk through whatever his will entails. No matter what hurts I face, I must see a higher hand on the scroll.

This is so different to the modern approach. We are surrounded by the cult of victimisation in which we always see ourselves as the victim of somebody or another. Sometimes we are; but as Joseph had to realise, whatever

his brothers had done to him, “God intended it for good” (Genesis 50:20). John’s testimony concerning the grief of losing his wife was that his peace was found in his understanding of God’s purpose. Because he was rooted in the Truth of Scripture, the doctrine of God’s sovereignty which had been built into his understanding over the years, enabled him to stand in the hour of testing. He shared in his teaching in this context: “No amount of prayer for inner healing will compensate for a wrong theology.”

John was touching on something very important. He was answering the question of how to help people cope with the problem of grief. Our response must obviously be with the Bible. But that does not mean we merely respond with a few isolated pick-me-up, make-me-feel-good verses. Rather we must share the panoramic vision of God’s sovereign purposes in history. As Larry Crabb has said, “When we place a higher priority on solving problems than on finding God, we are being immoral.” It is not enough to solve people’s immediate grief problem by helping them to feel better. We have to help them to find God; and when they come to know him as the sovereign Lord of the universe, they have the perspective with which to approach their own life.

The second thing that helped me in John’s teaching related directly to the subject he was dealing with. I have always struggled with an inadequate prayer life, despite hearing dozens of motivational talks and reading many “how-to” books filled with good tips on techniques. The theology that John taught enabled me to pray. The Truth set me free - with this revelation of the Lamb on the throne and the mystery of human responsibility, and the privilege of being able to pray, “Your will (the scroll) be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

The theology gripped me to the point that my will was engaged so that I would act on what I had understood, in this case in the realm of prayer. The three elements that Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones highlighted all came into play. I obeyed (by praying more and better) because I understood the truth. That truth had gripped my heart, to the point that I wrote a hymn that expressed the deep-felt convictions that had gripped me out of John’s teaching. The words of that hymn are recorded here as an illustration, not necessarily of fine poetry, but of truth that has gripped a heart. My testimony is that it has spilled over into the realm of action.

With wonder we approach your throne,
O God, the sovereign Lord of all.
For it's as Father you are known
To us who've heard your gracious call.
Amazed we take our privileged place
In heavenly counsels round the throne
With Son and Spirit. By your grace
We're free to speak. Such mercy shown!
Heav'n is your throne, your dwelling place,
Above the schemes of earth and hell,
Where angels all behold your face.
And we're invited there to dwell!
So from this glorious vantage point,
Our cry goes up: "Thy kingdom come!
The Son and Spirit now appoint
To see your will on earth be done!"
In heav'n we see your perfect will;
Within your scroll, your wise decree.
Stretch forth your sceptre now until
The earth displays your victory.
Our faith is strong, your Word is true;
The contents of the scroll are sure.
The rule and pow'r belong to you,
Your glory shines for evermore.

The hymn is full of truth - and it is doctrine that has gripped the heart to the point where the will is moved to action. As we conclude this chapter, we shall see that it is only such truth that has the power to enable us to complete the expedition.

3. Divine Perseverance in Solutions

It is doctrinal truth that equips us for the long run - long after the motivation of exhortation has faded. God's solutions are not a quick fix; they are geared to the needs of the long haul. They enable us, to return to the analogy of the mountaineer, to keep going until we reach the summit.

So, Robert Horn writes: “The future is still future and therefore unknown. None of us has yet climbed the peaks that lie ahead. That’s why we may not see immediately the relevance to the expedition of everything the Leader has said or supplied. Some information seems to make no sense now; we even think we know better. Some maps seem too detailed, some directions seem odd. But all that he has said and provided will come into its own as we go on. When we finally arrive, we will know that all he gave was absolutely vital to our survival and well-being.

“[At times] ...we may think that some of the Bible’s assertions are totally irrelevant: why must we bother with doctrine? Why can’t we leave that to academics and get on with life? We may even think some biblical teaching to be thoroughly objectionable. At such times we simply recall who gave us its teaching: it was the One, the only One, who knows the route - all its contours and crevasses, all its gorges and glaciers. He knows it for two reasons: he made it and he travelled it. ...We must keep close to him, to listen and learn.”

We must read the instructions; we must regularly have something to eat. We cannot make it successfully to the summit without God’s Life Word. It alone provides the resources of a base camp from which we can complete the expedition.

Charles Spurgeon was a man who understood the importance of the truth of God’s Word being established deep within us. He expressed this conviction with passion in his autobiography. He wrote:

“Oh, that you and I might get into the very heart of the Word of God, and get that Word into ourselves! As I have seen the silkworm eat into the leaf and consume it, so ought we to do with the Word of the Lord; - not crawl over its surface, but eat right into it till we have taken it into our inmost parts.

“It is idle merely to let the eye glance over the words, or to recollect the poetical expressions; but it is blessed to eat into the very soul of the Bible until, at last, you come to talk in Scriptural language, and your very style is fashioned upon Scripture models, and what is better still, your spirit is flavoured with the words of the Lord.

“I would quote John Bunyan as an instance of what I mean. Read anything of his, and you will see that it is almost like reading the Bible itself. He has studied our Authorised Version, which will never be bettered, as I

judge, till Christ shall come; he had read it till his whole being was saturated with Scripture; and, though his writings are charmingly full of poetry, yet he cannot give us his Pilgrim's Progress - that sweetest of all prose poems - without continually making us feel and say, 'Why, this man is a living Bible!' Prick him anywhere; and you will find that his blood is Bibline, the very essence of the Bible flows out of him. He cannot speak without quoting a text, for his soul is full of the Word of God."

May such things be written of us as we rediscover the truth that we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

But what can we do to get more of this Word into us? It is to this that we turn in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

What do we do with the Bible?

God is like a doctor who fully understands the sickness of the human condition. In his plan to make us whole, he has a perfect prescription for us: the Bible has wonderful medicinal properties. But as we said at the start, we must read the instructions carefully.

When a doctor prescribes medicine, the pharmacist makes sure that clear instructions are on the bottle. Failure to use the medicine properly will mean that it will not work as the doctor intended. In fact, it may even be dangerous! The same may be said of the Bible. It must be used according to “the doctor’s” instructions. I am not suggesting that if you miss one day’s dose of Bible, you will fall into an irreversible spiritual coma. However, there are many blessings that flow from regular, appropriate use.

Imagine a patient with a skin complaint on his head. To ease the irritation, the doctor prescribes some medicine to be taken three times a day with food. But the patient decides that he knows best. His throat is not bothering him, so why should he waste good medication by pouring it down his throat! It’s his head that is sore, so the obvious solution is to rub it into his scalp. Two weeks later, the bottle is empty, but the problem remains. The medicine has to be applied in the prescribed way.

So it is with our approach to the Bible. It must be *applied* in the right way. It comes complete with instructions about the proper application. We are told what to do with it. We saw some of these instructions earlier in this booklet. Now we are going to highlight them, to make sure that we make the

most of the healing power of God's Word - and avoid some of the dangers of misusing it.

A vapour rub has to be rubbed on the chest. A throat lozenge has to be sucked. Antibiotic medicine has to be drunk. What do we do with the Bible? Let's look at a few of the biblical instructions on the label stuck to the medicine bottle.

David said, "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you." (Psalm 119:11) That's where the medication is supposed to go: in our hearts! It will then result in a change of behaviour as we determine to set our wills against sinning. How do we get it into our hearts so that it will affect our will? We noticed earlier Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones' description of the process in Romans 6:17. There Paul speaks about obeying (using the will) from the heart the form of teaching to which we have been entrusted. The medication comes in the form of teaching, or truth, which we take into our mind. From there it has to be digested into our hearts so that it can filter down to affect our wills. But what does this actually mean in practice? How can we apply the Word of God to our minds, hearts and wills?

The Navigators is a Christian organisation which has a very helpful way of approaching the question of how to properly feed on the Bible, of how to take our 'medicine'. They call it *the five-finger approach*. If you want to pick up your Bible, you need to use the five fingers of your hand. The Navigators use this analogy for getting hold of the Bible metaphorically; each finger represents a different aspect of how we are to fill ourselves with God's Word.

Their five ways of receiving God's Word are: hearing, reading, studying, memorising and meditating. These are God's instructions for how to take the medicine. Or, put another way, if we approach the Bible with a balance of these five ingredients, we will have a fully nutritional diet as God's Life Word becomes the bread by which we live. We shall consider each of these ingredients in turn.

1. Hearing God's Word

God's Word must be listened to. There is much that we can and must do alone, but we start by noticing that there is a dimension to our understanding

of the Bible that comes from listening to other people. There is a richness in what we can learn from others. There is also safety in God's provision of the Body of Christ which corporately is "the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15).

From the very beginning of the church's history, believers gathered to listen to the Word of God. They devoted themselves to (among other things) the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42). They wanted to learn, and like Jesus as a boy in the Temple, they sat at the feet of those who could teach them the truth. One vital ingredient in our diet of the Word of God is that of listening.

We noticed in an earlier chapter that the church at Ephesus began to have some serious problems. Part of Paul's solution was in this important principle of listening to God's Word. Among his instructions to Timothy about handling the situation, he said, "Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching" (1 Tim 4:13). Paul hoped that some of the problems in the church would be solved as the believers again listened to sound biblical doctrine.

That was no more popular in Paul's day than it often is in ours! Paul warned Timothy that it would actually get harder to encourage people to listen. But Timothy was to preach anyway, in season and out of season - whether people wanted to listen or not! "Preach the Word!" Paul wrote, "...For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires...they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth..." (2 Tim 4:2-4).

Independence: why we don't listen

Why is it that people don't want to listen? To answer that question, we probably have to go back to the Garden of Eden. It was there that man first *heard* the Word of God. Adam and Eve decided they did not want to listen to God's instructions. Instead, they chose to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That meant deciding for themselves what was right and wrong rather than listening to what God had said. The same attitude is prevalent today. We are fiercely independent: we want to decide for ourselves what is true. We don't like to be told and we don't like to listen.

It is easy today to fall into the trap of believing that we can determine for ourselves what is true. In the early days of the church, the form of the apostles' doctrine was clear. There was only one church in Jerusalem. Soon, however, various heresies and schisms emerged. But still, in the early centuries, as different errors arose, there was at least a consensus as to the nature of truth. Historic councils met to thrash out the great creeds of the church.

Today no such consensus exists. There are as many creeds as there are churches - and there are certainly many churches in most towns. It is easy for my itching ears to find something that they want to hear. And if, perhaps, I cannot find such a church, then I can start my own! After all, I do have a Bible, don't I? Surely I can figure out for myself what it says.

Here we are confronted with a mystery. The Bible is simple enough that a child can read it and understand what God is saying to him. Yet it is complicated enough that the greatest minds in the church have been wrestling with it for centuries and have still not been able to agree on some of its significant teachings.

God designed it this way. The Bible is wonderfully personal so that, in the privacy of my own thoughts, I can understand something of the mind of Christ. But I have not been created an isolated individual, so I am never going to be able to understand all of God's truth on my own. It is only "together with all the saints" that we will be able to grasp the magnitude of the love of Christ (Ephesians 3:18). My knowledge of God will be one dimensional if I don't hear God's Word in a corporate context.

Interdependence: why we should listen

The reality is that, while God can certainly speak to me privately out of the Bible, I will never understand as much as he wants me to, apart from the wealth of understanding that has been deposited in the church over the centuries. I may be tempted to think that I do not need to devote myself to listening to God's Word being taught. Why can't I just figure it out for myself, sunbathing on the beach with my Bible in hand on a beautiful Sunday morning! But, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you'" (1Corinthians 12:21).

Paul is talking here of our interdependence in the Body of Christ. This principle is as relevant in our approach to the Bible as to any other area of the

Christian life. God has designed the Body to be made of many different members who each have a unique contribution to make to one another. Included among these members are teachers. Although we can read the Bible on our own and benefit from it, we cannot say to the teacher, “I don’t need you.”

Why do we need teachers in the Body of Christ? One of the main reasons is that we don’t all have as much time or ability as we would like to study the scriptures in depth. God understands that. And while all of us must diligently apply ourselves to God’s Word, he has gifted some people with an aptitude for digging out the truths of the Bible and presenting them in a readily understandable form.

A preacher may take ten hours of preparation for one hour of teaching. Then, in that one hour, several hundred people can benefit from all those hours of preparation. They were freed up from spending that time in study in order to get on with fulfilling their calling - evangelising or serving in ways that the Bible teacher would never have been able to do as effectively. Everybody is expected to study the scriptures for himself - but all may benefit from the special depths to which the teacher can go.

It is naive to assume that we can figure out for ourselves all that we need to know. The Bible was written in a culture that was very different to our own. It addressed historical issues that most of us know little about. Its writers originally wrote mostly in Hebrew or Greek, which are languages that we don’t speak. All these things are very significant in understanding what the Bible is really saying.

There are some practical things that we can all do to improve our level of understanding, and we shall be looking at some of those later. But in reality, we are not all going to take time to learn Hebrew. Somebody may say, “I know a little Greek.” But he is usually referring to the owner of a restaurant in town!

So we should acknowledge our interdependence within the Body of Christ. We should draw from those whom God has called to equip us to better understand God’s Word. It is pride that makes us think we can know it all for ourselves. We can benefit from teachers in the Church, both in the present (in person and on tape) and from the past as the results of their labours are recorded in books.

This does not mean that we ourselves should not study. Nor does it mean that we should unquestioningly believe everything that is preached just because the preacher sounds like an expert in Greek. The Bereans were commended for their eagerness to examine the Scriptures to see if what the preacher said was true (Acts 17:11). But it does mean that we should “not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing.” (Hebrews 10:25) It will only be as we sit under regular, clear biblical teaching, especially expository teaching, that we shall get the most out of the prescription that God has given us for our health - and avoid the dangers of error in which distortions of the truth actually become harmful.

2. Reading God's Word

It is important that we listen to God's Word, as it is read and taught. It is also important to read the Bible. That may sound like stating the obvious: we are talking about what to do with God's Word, and what else can you do with a book but read it! Surely we can assume that we all know that the Bible will do us no good if it just sits on the shelf.

But we do need to talk a little about the importance of reading the Bible. What we mean by that is the practice of just sitting down and reading whole chunks of it. Not picking out a couple of verses at random. Not looking up all the cross references tracking down all the occurrences of a single word or theme. Just simply reading. And with the shorter books at least, reading the whole book from beginning to end at a single sitting.

Our modern versions make it hard for us to read the Bible with that kind of simple continuity. They are usually broken up into chapters and verses, so we tend to read in small sections according to those divisions. But that is not how the books of the Bible were originally written. It was not until the thirteenth century that Stephen Langton arranged the chapter divisions in the manuscripts of the Latin Bible, divisions we still have today.

Some chapters really do stand in their own right. For example, you can read a Psalm without worrying about how it fits into a wider context. You can even pull out isolated verses in Proverbs. But most of the Bible was written to be read in a systematic, orderly way in order to follow the flow of thought. Much of the New Testament is in the form of letters that were intended

to be read from beginning to end. Yet few of us ever read those letters in such a way, preferring to read them in tiny ‘chunks’ over several days - even though we would never dream of doing this with a letter from a friend!

As we have said, the Bible needs to be understood in our minds if it is to move our hearts and wills. That understanding comes in part from reading; and it is *the whole book* that needs to be read, not just chosen tiny fragments of it. It is amazing how many people there are who would say that they are willing to lay down their lives for the truth of God’s Word who have never actually read it all! We may never understand it all, but we should at least be able to say that we’ve read it.

Keep it in context

Preachers talk a lot about context - and so they should. We have already seen that Paul’s practical teaching at the end of Romans is built on the foundation of his doctrinal teaching in the early chapters. You cannot understand the one without the other. As we saw, Paul links the two sections with the word “therefore”. The later ideas flow on as the logical outworking of what has gone before.

It has been said that whenever we see the word “therefore”, we should ask what it is there for. It is a signpost pointing us to look at the material in the light of the context, showing us the connection between all the thoughts that are written. The Bible has a number of such words that keep pushing us back into the context. The little word “and” tells us that what follows is a continuation of what has gone before. Similarly “but” tells us that the next section is in contrast with what preceded.

The Bible has some wonderful “buts” in it! For example, Hebrews 2:9 says, “But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour...” What a great description of the majesty of the ascended Lord Jesus. But is that what the writer to the Hebrews is talking about? To find out, we must see why he begins the verse with the word “but”. He is writing to contrast what has gone before.

Up to this point he has been talking about the irony of the fact that man had been created with such high hopes of ruling the world on God’s behalf, but we see him wallowing in a fallen condition unfit to rule anything. Hebrews has just told us that at this time we do not see things subject to him. It is in

contrast with this apparent despair that we are interrupted with this big “But...”. The point of the verse is that Jesus was a man - also created to rule, also made a little lower than the angels (despite his essential deity). And as a man, Jesus has ascended to a throne of government. His glory is described there not merely so that we would wonder at his majesty; it is presented as the basis for our hope that we too may reign with him. He has gone ahead to blaze a trail to bring many sons to glory.

It is only as we look at this verse in context that we see the writer's real point. It is easy to memorise the verse about seeing Jesus. We even sing about it, for that verse has been set to music in a number of choruses. But it is actually about *us* as much as about *Jesus*! Jesus is being described as the representative Man: the one who has gone to his Father's house to prepare a place for us, to get some thrones ready for us! But failing to see the verse in context leads us to miss such a wonderful truth.

Too often we see the Bible as just a collection of unrelated texts. We approach God's Word as if we can pull any out at random and use it as we want. I'm sure all of us have had times when a text has jumped out of the page and seemed to be speaking directly to us. I certainly do not want to doubt that God *can* speak to us that way. But it is not the way that we should *usually* approach the Bible.

Dangers of ignoring the context

There are a number of serious dangers in approaching the Bible as a random set of texts, primarily for use in personal guidance. His Word is a lamp to our feet, but usually in the sense that it gives us clear instructions about how to live, and the Holy Spirit gives us wisdom to use that understanding to make wise choices based on God's principles for living. We do not need a text for every decision; we need to know how God wants us to live our life.

(i) A text for every decision

I know young men who can quote a Bible verse to legitimise every girlfriend they have ever had. One of them was even sure that God intended him to develop a relationship with a girl that he had just met because he read the instruction: “Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some

people have entertained angels without knowing it.” (Hebrews 13:2) When the relationship broke up it became clear that the girl had not been that sort of angel! And it was certainly not that sort of entertaining that Hebrews was really talking about! The context is about practical hospitality and caring for those in jail, not romance.

Picking Bible verses at random to justify a certain course of action can be dangerous. The story is told of one man who wanted to know the will of God. He opened his Bible, trusting God to guide his eye to an appropriate text. He chanced upon Matthew 27:5 - “...then [Judas] went away and hanged himself.” That did not seem to speak to his situation, but he promised God that he really would obey whatever came at the second attempt. Unfortunately the next verse that he randomly came to was Luke 10:37 - “Go and do likewise!” Promising God most sincerely that he would definitely obey this time, if only he would guide him, he turned the pages once again and came to John 13:27 - “What you are about to do, do quickly!”

The practise of reading texts to get guidance can become little more than a Christian version of reading horoscope - something we are forbidden to do! The Bible must be read with a view to understanding the *ways* of God, upon which foundation we will be able, by the Holy Spirit, to make wise choices for life.

(ii) Overlooking the bits we don't like

Another danger that arises when we fail to read the books of the Bible as a whole, is that we tend to only look at the bits we like. “Promise boxes” used to be very popular. They were often beautifully packaged, and came complete with tweezers with which to pull out the tiny scrolls stored within them (again at random). On each scroll was written a promise from the Bible which was your blessing for the day. The same principle is at work in calendars which have a text for every day.

Now, these texts are undoubtedly the pure Word of God; but they are carefully chosen to give us the verses we would like to hear. A popular verse in such selections is Matthew 11:28 - “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” That certainly provides great comfort at the start of the day. But you won't find many selections containing Matthew 7:23, which is equally the Word of God: “Away from me, you evildoers!”

It is only as we read the whole of Matthew's gospel that we are confronted with the fact that Jesus says both "Come to me!" and "Away from me!" We will have to read the context to know when each saying is applicable. But we will have an incomplete understanding of Jesus if we only see him saying "Come" without recognising the seriousness of him saying "Away" too.

If we read the whole of Scripture, we are confronted not only with blessings, but also curses. We see the love of God, but we have to reckon with the wrath of God. We get a glimpse of heaven, but we are also faced with the fearful prospect of hell. Reading the Bible systematically forces us to hold all of these aspects of the truth in balance.

(iii) Missing the point

There is another danger of reading parts without understanding the whole. Sometimes it is only a later passage which explains the meaning of an earlier one.

For example, you can read the book of Job and find all kinds of interesting insights in the responses of Job's friends to the terrible suffering he was enduring. There are many chapters of attempts to help him understand his trials. We could take any one of these chapters to try to help somebody we know deal with their situation, or perhaps we could try to glean some solace for ourselves.

But if we do not read the whole book, we are setting ourselves up for trouble. It is only if you can persevere to the thirty-eighth chapter (and how many of us keep up our reading of a book to make it that far?) that you will find God's statement about all those attempts at comfort. There God finally stops the story with his assessment of what they have been saying: "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?" (Job 38:2). In other words, they don't know what they are talking about!

So finally, in chapter 38, we discover that most of the previous 37 chapters have been nothing more than hot air! Of course, those chapters are the Word of God. But they are not the Word of God in the sense of being God's definitive answer to the problem of suffering. They are the Word of God as an infallible record of the best answers that man apart from God can come up with. You will save yourself a lot of wasted time in studying the early chapters of Job if you take the trouble to read it right through first!

A plan of action

How, then, can we get into this habit of reading the Bible? Well, of course, there are many ways of doing it; but the system which I have been using for many years involves keeping up a reading program in three different parts of the Bible at the same time. I start out in Genesis 1, Psalm 1, and Matthew 1. Each day I try to read one or two chapters (at least a whole unit of material) from all three sections and I keep a marker in my Bible at each place. When I get to the end of Job in the first section, I start again - and so too with the other sections.

In this way, I am constantly reading through *the whole Bible*. I don't stop to study or to meditate. I may jot down something that strikes me as worth pursuing in more depth, but basically I just keep reading. Spending about 20 minutes each day doing this will enable you to read through the whole Bible in a little over a year. Because the New Testament section is shorter than the other two, you will get through that more often.

This sort of system ensures that on any given day you will have a good mixture of different material. I find it exciting to see how often they complement one another, too. It helps me to see how the Bible fits together as a consistent whole. The flow of history and the development of ideas makes sense of all the details that we can spend more time studying in depth on other occasions.

Of course, this is only one plan of action. There are lots of other similar approaches you could follow, many of them published in various forms. Your elders or home group leaders should be able to suggest an approach that is particularly suitable for you.

The historian Trevelyan wrote: "Education... has produced a vast population able to read but unable to distinguish what is worth reading." We certainly spend a lot of time reading superficial material. But the education that we have been privileged to receive can offer no higher benefits than the opportunity to read God's Word.

3. Studying God's Word

The third ingredient if we are to get a balanced diet of Bible is the *study* of God's Word. We have talked about the need to read it in a general way, but

it is also important to study the Bible, looking at specific passages or themes in greater detail.

Studying is primarily a mental activity. Sadly, the importance of the mind is often neglected these days. We have made it clear that the Bible must also touch our hearts and wills; but that cannot be to the exclusion of the mind. Studying the Word of God will require us to get our brains in gear.

God's Word is our spiritual bread, the staple diet of our spiritual life. Our society is preoccupied with food; but when it comes to food for thought, most people seem to be on hunger strike for most of the time! The writers of Scripture are constantly exhorting us to apply our minds in order to gain the nutrition we need to live.

One example of this is in the letter to the Hebrews, which was written to a group of believers who were in trouble. They were Jews who had become Christians and, after the first flush of excitement in their new faith, pressures were beginning to mount. Persecution was becoming more commonplace, and many of them were in danger of backsliding.

Think or Swim

To counteract this problem, the writer of the letter had a clear strategy. Somebody has said that when you are up to your ears in trouble, start using the part that isn't submerged! That is in essence what Hebrews says to this group of people in danger of going under. Look at his appeal in chapter 3.

The passionate exhortation to the sinking saints is to "fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess." (Hebrews 3:1) The word used here is a strong one: it means to thoroughly think about something so as to arrive at a full understanding of it. It is like we were discussing earlier. Our approach to the Bible is not a matter of cramming for an exam; it is more like striving to gain mastery of a whole subject.

In this instance, the subject which we are to fully understand is Jesus. A maths student should try to have such a grasp of the whole subject that he is able to solve any problem that the examiner may throw at him. Similarly, a Christian should so understand who Jesus is, that he will be able to apply that knowledge to any problem which life throws up.

The problem facing the Hebrews was whether they wanted to persevere with Christianity, or slip back to their Jewish roots. So what was it that was going to keep them from backsliding into Judaism again? It was thinking seriously about Jesus. When they really understood who he was as Apostle and High Priest, there would be no way that they would want to go back to the inferior apostles and high priests of their old way of life.

This is relevant to us. We may not face the temptation of defecting from Christianity to Judaism; but for all of us, the world that we came out of is often alluring. How can we stand firm in the faith? By considering Jesus.

If we think it through to the point of understanding that Jesus is the ultimate apostle, we will never leave him. He is the “sent one” (which is what the word apostle means). He is the one sent from God to reveal the truth. In fact, he is the Truth! If we understood that, why would we listen to what anybody else would say? As the disciples came to realise when Jesus asked if they too were going to fall away: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” (John 6:68)

If we understand what kind of High Priest Jesus is, we will have no option but to stay with him. Other religions, like Judaism, have their rituals to try to deal with the problem of sin. Modern religions try to forgive your sins by saying you don’t have any. But when we consider Jesus, we know that they are not true and they don’t work. He is the only High Priest that anybody in their right mind would cling to.

So Hebrews is giving us an antidote to backsliding. It is summed up in the simple phrase, “fix your thoughts on Jesus!” The next few chapters give us some things to get our minds around to help us understand what it means to say he is the great apostle and high priest. If we think it through properly, we will come to the conclusion that he is the greatest, and we will never want to leave him.

A serious Bible Study on the person and work of Christ could prevent many people from falling away. That is not to say that our salvation is dependent on an academic exercise. It is, of course, the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit which keep us close to the Lord. But God uses means of grace - and studying the Bible like this is one vital means that he uses. The Holy Spirit applies the wonderful truths about Jesus to our hearts and activates our wills to say, “I never want to leave him!”

Jesus recognised what enables people who hear the gospel to stick with it to the end. The parable of the sower (Matthew 13) addresses the issue of different kinds of responses. There are some who fall away, and others who continue to bear great fruit. What is it that makes the difference? Let's look at what Jesus says. He likens some people to the path in the field that receives the seed, but the birds come and eat it up. Jesus describes them like this: "When anyone hears the message about the kingdom, *and does not understand it*, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart." (Mt 13:19) In contrast, "the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word *and understands it*." (Mt 13:23) This is the man who bears much fruit. The difference is in the *understanding*.

I trust you appreciate by now that it is vital to study the Bible in such a way that we think it through to the point of clear understanding. Don't be caught among the people who get through thinking before they get through thinking things through! Let us now look at some practical ways to get down to this important task of studying.

Let's get down to study

In a small booklet like this, we can do no more than scratch the surface of the vast subject of how to study the Bible properly. All we can do is give some pointers to get us started. But if you are serious about studying the Bible, one of the best books to read is "How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth", by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart. In this book they make an important statement which is a good starting point in discussing how to understand what the Bible is really saying. They speak of "the tension that exists between [the Bible's] *eternal relevance* and its *historical particularity*." What do they mean by that?

"Historical particularity" means that everything in the Bible was written at a particular time in history: it was written for specific people in their specific circumstances, so its meaning always fits that context first. However, in the wisdom of God, the Bible also has "eternal relevance". That means, it speaks to us today, whatever our circumstances, as it has spoken to people in every time and place over the centuries.

These two ideas must be held in balance. So in order to properly understand a passage, we must ask two questions about it. First, what did it

mean to *them*? Then, second, what does it mean for *us*? In answering the second question, we must recognise that it cannot mean something for us that it did not mean for them - no matter how good a message or blessing we feel we can get out of it! The second question focuses our minds on the devotional and practical relevance of the passage here and now. But in studying the Scriptures, we must always seek to understand that in light of the first question: what it meant there and then.

(i) What did it mean to *them*?

We must be aware of some of the factors which help us to understand the original intent of the writer. With so many good Study Bibles available today it is relatively easy to find the basic information about the historical context of a passage. Commentaries are important for anybody who wants to embark on serious in-depth study, but the essential information can be found in the introduction to each book in a good study Bible. Take the time to read it: for while the introduction is not God's Word, it will help you to understand God's Word.

Having read such an introduction, you should then be able to answer the following questions:

- Who wrote the book?
- To whom was it written?
- What was the occasion and purpose for writing?
- What was the historical and cultural setting in which it was written?

With these questions answered, we are ready to study the passage we want to look at. Remember, as we begin to look at it, our *first* task is to ascertain what it meant to *them* - that is, how the original readers were intended to understand it. The key rule to remember here is: a text cannot mean now what it never meant then.

The original readers were intended to understand it in the plain sense of what was written. So don't try to look for some deep hidden truth; just try to understand the plain meaning of the words. That is sometimes not as easy as it at first appears. To do the job absolutely thoroughly would require a knowledge of the languages in which the Scriptures were originally written.

But since few of us will ever be experts in Greek and Hebrew, there are, thankfully, resources available to help us.

Commentaries are one such invaluable help. Most good Christian book stores have a reasonable selection of commentaries that are geared for use by the average Christian. These books are the works of scholars who have studied the text and have written to help us understand its meaning as precisely as possible. But even if you don't have access to commentaries, a comparison between various different modern translations will often help you get a fairly accurate understanding.

Understanding words according to their plain meaning must not lock us into a foolish literalism, of course. Some ideas are expressed in poetry, or allegory, or apocalyptic language; and we must take this into account. For example, we all love Psalm 23. But how many of us can say that the Lord forces us to lie down on the grass? But we all know what the poetic symbolism means, for we have experienced the ways in which he has brought us to a place of peace and rest. We can enjoy that without literally lying down in green pastures.

However, we must be careful with symbolic meanings. The Bible often uses adultery as a symbol for the unfaithfulness of God's people in their relationship to him. But that does not mean that we can read such symbolic meaning into the word every single time - for example, when the Ten Commandments forbid adultery. The context of the literary style makes clear the boundaries between literalism and figurative speech.

(ii) What does it mean for *us*?

Having discovered something of what the text would have meant to its original readers, we are now ready to ask what it means for us. Here, the first thing to bear in mind is that we, unlike the original readers, now have the complete Word of God. They only saw a part of the picture; but we have the whole panorama.

This is especially important in our understanding of the Old Testament. We can now see the fulfilment in Christ of all that was anticipated there; so we can interpret the passage through the lens of what we now know about Jesus. We will never be able to properly understand Leviticus without studying Hebrews. Isaiah won't make real sense without the Gospels.

We need to look at every passage in the light of the whole Bible. No single text can speak the full truth on a subject, so we want to find out as much as we can about how that subject is dealt with in other scriptures. Our basic tool here is a concordance. A concordance lists all the various occurrences of every word used in the Bible. There are useful lists in the back of many Study Bibles, but a full concordance is better, especially if it gives detailed meanings of the different words.

As we compare the various verses on a subject, we interpret the obscure scriptures by the ones that speak more clearly on the subject. We interpret the incomplete passages by reference to those that deal with a subject more fully. And we always keep in mind that truth must be held in tension. For example, the passages which speak of the sovereignty of God must be balanced with those speaking of human responsibility. We may not fully understand how, but we must believe that both are true, because the Bible teaches both!

Fee and Stuart tell us, “The key... to a more intelligent reading of the Bible is to learn to read the text carefully, and to ask the right questions of the text.” We have tried to point out some of the most important questions to ask of a text, and we are now in a safe place to make those questions more personal. We can move from the objective toward the subjective, without ever stepping outside the boundaries of the original intent of the passage.

Our study of the Bible should then lead us to ask some personal and penetrating questions. Here are some to start with:

- What does this passage tell me about God?
- What does it tell me about the person and work of Christ?
- What does it tell me about man? And about me?
- How did the people in the story respond to these truths? And how were the original readers of the story supposed to respond?
- How should I respond myself? What does God expect me to do with what I have just read?

If we follow such an outline, it will prevent our study from falling into either of the two main pitfalls. The first is the danger of being so subjective that we make the Bible mean whatever we want it to mean. (Remember the young man who wanted confirmation that he could go out with the girl!) Always bear in mind that each writer had a specific purpose in mind. If you

find some unique hidden meaning, then you are probably wrong! The second danger is that of a dry objectivity, of learning the exact meaning of the text but without any relevance for life today. The Bible originally spoke to *them*, but it also speaks to *us*. And it speaks so that we might become doers of the Word, and not merely students or hearers.

4. Memorising God's Word

We saw earlier that when Jesus was being tempted in the wilderness, he was able to overcome by being able to hurl back a relevant Scripture in response to every temptation. He had committed to memory Old Testament scriptures which proved to be God's life-word to him under pressure. He fulfilled the words of Psalm 119:11 - "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you."

Many people complain that they have bad memories, but usually it is only that they have *untrained* memories. We don't "have" to remember the Bible like other generations and cultures. Many of them could not read, or if they could, did not possess their own copy of the Scriptures. They wanted to remember everything they heard, knowing that they would not be able to just look it up later. In the days of the Communist oppression of Eastern Europe, believers without their own Bibles were able to memorise huge amounts and feed on them. Does that mean that such people have better memories than us? No! It simply means they were sufficiently motivated to train their memories. Their situation was more akin to Bible times when families would not all have had their own personal copy of the Scriptures.

The Bible itself contains some good hints on how to improve our ability to memorise Scripture. If we take the time to hide God's Word in our hearts, we too will be well equipped when temptation comes.

Memory aids

One good way to memorise the Word is to sing it. Most of the Psalms were written with this in mind, and those which have been set to music and are regularly sung in our churches have become familiar to us. The proliferation of choruses which enable us to worship with Scripture in song has been a great aid to God's people.

We also tend to learn more thoroughly what we have written down. How many books have you read, of which you later had no recollection? But when you are studying a book, taking notes as you go, you remember far more of what you have read. Writing it down helps to commit it to memory.

It was with this in mind that Moses gave clear instructions for all the kings of Israel who would reign in subsequent generations. Every new king was required to write out a copy of the Scripture in his own hand, so that he would then be familiar enough with God's Word to be able to govern based on that understanding (Deuteronomy 17:18-19). I remember having to take an exam on John's Gospel during my theological training. The most helpful single thing that I did in preparation for that exam was to write out the entire gospel by hand. After that, the contents were fixed firmly in my mind.

Another helpful aid to memory is speaking. Educators tell us that the amount we learn by listening is minimal. The retention rate improves when we are actively involved in responses such as writing and practising. But the real increase in learning occurs when we have to teach the material we have been listening to. The act of speaking it out fixes it more firmly in our own minds than the minds of those we speak to!

Moses saw the dynamics of this. He wanted the commands of God to be firmly rooted in the hearts of Israel. To that end, he gave them specific instructions: "These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the door-frames of your houses and on your gates." (Deuteronomy 6:6-9)

Notice the verbs describing what they were to do in order to hide God's commands in their hearts. Moses spoke of writing them - as we have already considered. He also spoke of talking about them. Verbalising is a great aid to memorising.

Moses recognised that we need aids to memory. The Jews were told to tie symbols on their hands and foreheads. They wore special tassels on their clothes. They were told: "You will have these tassels to look at and so you will remember all the commands of the Lord" (Numbers 15:39). Does that mean we have to wear strange tassels? No! But we should respond to the

instruction to do whatever we need to do to make sure we remember God's Word.

In our day, we have different aids to memory. Some people tie knots in handkerchiefs. At the end of many church meetings, I go home with notes written all over the back of my hand so that I don't forget the various things people have said to me. In the realm of Bible memorisation, one of the most helpful system of aids has been developed by The Navigators.

The ministry of The Navigators

The Navigators was founded by Dawson Trotman. His vision was to generate a multitude of disciples by the one-on-one approach whereby a soul-winner would become a teacher of a newcomer who in turn would also become a reacher and then a teacher. As part of the approach to discipleship, Trotman developed a system of Bible memorisation that would enable people to be equipped both to share their faith and then to help people resolve life issues.

He started out with great personal resolve. He wrote, "I learned my first one thousand Bible verses by just having a goal to learn one a day ...every day for one thousand days." Having made it part of his own lifestyle, Trotman and The Navigators became world-renowned for the Topical Memory System which they developed to help believers with less personal motivation than Trotman himself started out with. Their publishing house, NavPress, has continued to publish updated and revised versions of this for many years.

The essence of the system is a set of small cards of Bible verses, topically organised around major life issues. Their teaching makes it clear that whatever is memorised must first be read thoroughly in its full context. Then the participant is encouraged to carry a card with a particular text with him at all times. He can read it in every spare few seconds (for example, waiting at a bus stop, or at traffic lights) throughout the day. That scripture will also be with him as a basis for meditation or prayer as the events of the day unfold.

Once a scripture is learned, a new card is taken out, but the old ones are regularly reviewed to make sure that what has been learned is not lost while concentrating on new verses. Trotman's testimony, and that of many others, is that it is possible to memorise scripture verses on a daily basis.

Another key ingredient in making such techniques effective is accountability. In our local church, we have one man who, having been nurtured in his early Christian life in The Navigators, is particularly enthusiastic about Bible memorisation. He prepared some teaching on the subject for all our House Groups, and made the Navigators Topical Memory System cards available. Many people started carrying cards round with them, memorising Scripture as they went about their daily lives.

But as part of his teaching, Larry introduced a measure of accountability into the house groups. Those who were involved could approach one another at any time, and just say, for example: “Colossians 3:16!” The other person was expected to be able to answer back immediately, “Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom ...” In this way, those who were memorising Scripture were accountable to one another for those Scriptures they were learning. It was exciting to hear many people firing Bible verses back and forth at one another. The real joy is that they were able to speak those same verses both to their own souls and to other people when they met them in their need.

Of course, you do not need to use The Navigators system. You could make up your own, centring around things God has been teaching you, or your home group could produce one on a particular theme you are looking at together.

The benefits of memorising Scripture

There are many benefits to be derived from a memory filled with Bible verses. As we saw in Jesus’ life, it gives us a vital weapon in our desire to have victory over sin. As an evangelistic tool, it is invaluable in our attempts to “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” (1 Peter 3:15) Similarly, it provides a resource base as we seek to give counsel and encouragement to other believers.

Bible memorisation works alongside all the other forms of handling the Word of God that we have been considering. It is a great aid to Bible study as we are able to cross-reference ideas and themes out of the scriptures that we have become familiar with. It provides a vocabulary and motivation for both prayer and worship. It provides the mind with a constant source of material to chew over and feed on. We shall be talking about that in our next section,

on meditation. Taken with all the other approaches to feeding on the Word of God, it is an essential ingredient of our devotional life.

There are many exhortations throughout the Bible telling us to remember. We are told to remember God's acts on our behalf, and are warned of the dangers of a generation growing up which has forgotten all that God has done in the past. We are also told to remember what God has said. Solomon pleaded with his son: "Do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart." (Proverbs 3:1) He promised that this would be the basis of a long and prosperous life.

5. Meditating on God's Word

How would you like to prosper in whatever you do? This is one of the Bible promises given to those who meditate day and night on God's Law (Psalm 1:2-3). Remember, this is a Psalm; it is written in the form of poetry, which means, as we have seen, that we must be cautious about understanding the passage literally. So there is no guarantee here of becoming an overnight millionaire! But it certainly promises great blessing.

We have talked about approaching the Bible with a clear *mind*. But the Bible is food for our *souls*, as well as food for thought. The art of meditation is a vital means of feeding ourselves in this way. When Dawson Trotman of The Navigators developed the five-finger approach to handling the Word of God, he likened meditation to the thumb. He said, "You will never grasp the sword without the thumb."

Campbell McAlpine has written an excellent book on meditation for those who want to know more. It is called "The Practice of Biblical Meditation." He gives us this definition of meditation:

"The devotional practice of pondering the words of a verse or verses of Scripture, with a receptive heart, allowing the Holy Spirit to take the written Word and apply it as the living Word to the inner being."

We need to be careful to note what biblical meditation *is not*, before we discuss what it *is*. It must be distinguished from types of meditation rooted in eastern mysticism which have become popular, as practised in such things as yoga and Transcendental Meditation. The focus in such counterfeit meditation is on *emptying* the mind; the goal is arriving at a mental state of being free

from thought. But to the Christian, an empty mind is a dangerous void! Rather than emptying our minds, we are seeking to *fill* them with God's Word. Rather than focusing on our inner *self*, we are setting our attention firmly on *God*. Biblical meditation fills our mind with his Word, and so feeds us in the depths of our being.

The Psalmist knew that the benefits of prosperity that he spoke of in Psalm 1 depended on meditating day and night: he had to take his food at least twice a day!

Aids to digestion

So how do we take in this food? As we saw in McAlpine's definition, it is a matter of pondering Scripture with a receptive heart. Somebody has described meditation as "the digestive faculty of the soul." It is the process of chewing over and over some morsel of truth to squeeze the goodness out and to break it down into a form in which it is easy to digest. This was what Jeremiah did with God's Word. He wrote: "When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight." (Jeremiah 15:16)

The analogy of eating is the best way to understand the practice of meditation. We speak of it colloquially as "chewing the cud." This refers to the way that some animals bring back food from their first stomach into the mouth and chew it at leisure. It is interesting that the Hebrew word translated *meditate* in Psalm 1 can also be translated *mutter*. This is a repetitive jaw motion that privately verbalises something over and over again.

Let's see this in action by working through a real example. Let's meditate together on Psalm 46:1 - "God is our refuge and strength." If we were studying the scriptures, we would need to look at the whole Psalm. But for meditation, there's lots of goodness to be obtained just from this one tasty morsel!

God is our refuge and strength. Consider the two words which are used to describe God. Turn them over in your mind and see what kind of picture they are intended to convey. A refuge: that sounds like some sort of external protection, a place where we can run and hide. Strength: that seems to speak more of an internal power, the ability to stand even if there is nowhere to run and hide. God is both of them to me!

I wonder where the Psalmist got the picture of a refuge from? Perhaps he was out in the field one day when suddenly a great storm broke. The

heavens opened and he ran for cover, and found a cave in the hillside where he could shelter from the torrential rain. As he sat in there and waited, it occurred to him that God was his refuge.

There is a huge storm raging which all men must face. That storm is the wrath of God. Noah saw the force of the storm in the flood, and he also found a refuge - in the Ark. Unless we find such a refuge, the storm of God's wrath is going to destroy us, and righteously so. The wonder of his grace is that he himself becomes our refuge!

When the Psalmist was in his cave, or Noah was in his Ark, the storm did not cease. The rain kept beating down, but Noah and the Psalmist stayed dry. The amazing thing about a refuge is that when the rain comes, the refuge stands out there and gets wet - it bears the brunt of the storm on our behalf. We stay dry, but the refuge gets soaked!

So that is how God becomes our refuge when the storm of his wrath is raging! Jesus bears the brunt of the storm. He was "...stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed." (Isaiah 53:4-5) Jesus was God's way of becoming our refuge.

What about "God is our strength"? There are some times when a man should not be running away from a storm of adversity. But how can we stand against such apparently overwhelming odds? We acknowledge that we cannot do it - but God is our strength!

In fact, Psalm 46 goes on to say that even if the earth gives way and the mountains tumble into the sea, we will not fear. Why? Because (note the word "therefore" in Psalm 46:2) God is our strength, an ever present help in trouble.

Feeding on that truth, I can walk confidently into my day. Even if my world falls apart, God is with me. Whatever trouble I face, he is with me. I will not fear. Fed and nourished, I am a man who will not wither in the face of adversity, because as one who has meditated on God's Word, I have become like a tree planted by streams of water (Psalm 1:3).

Do you see what we have done? We have taken a simple phrase of Scripture and chewed it over. We have thought about what it means: what it

must have meant when it was originally written, and then what it means for us. We have looked at it from different angles. We have compared it with other Scriptures. And most of all, we have derived goodness from it as we have fed our soul on the delicious truths of God's Word.

Sitting down to eat

We must learn how to feed on God's Word. We are again wrestling with truth in tension. On the one hand, God's Word is "living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword it penetrates..." (Hebrews 4:12). It has the power within itself to cut us to shreds; it does not need our permission to pierce us through.

Yet on the other hand, we are told to take it and eat it. Sometimes it waits, apparently powerless, until we take it up. It is not that it does not contain the power within itself, but God graciously wants to involve our wills in the process. So he invites us to eat.

One of the beauties of meditation is that it enables us to unleash the power that is inherent in the Word of God. The Bible speaks of revelation: that is what happens when the truth of God's Word penetrates into the darkness of our being and we exclaim: "I see it!"

David put it this way: "The unfolding [or, entrance] of your words give light" (Psalm 119:130). Until that revelation comes, in some respects God's Word remains a closed book, even to those who have read it.

Consider Jesus' disciples. Most of them had been raised with the privilege of familiarity with the Old Testament scriptures. Then for 3 years they sat at the feet of the greatest teacher who ever lived. He was constantly expounding the scriptures to them.

Yet when we get to Luke 24, they still have no revelation. Even after the resurrection, they had no idea what was going on. Luke's account highlights the darkness in which they were living. The women found the tomb empty - but all that Luke says is that "they were wondering about this" (v.4). They were thinking it over, not knowing what to make of it. Similarly when Peter saw the folded grave clothes, we are told, "he went away wondering to himself what had happened" (v.12).

The two disciples on the road to Emmaus were no better, even though they had heard about the empty tomb. Jesus drew alongside them and “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (v.27). But still they thought of him as no more than a stranger walking with them down the road. If an exposition of the entire Old Testament by the Risen Lord himself does not get through to them, what hope do we poor teachers have today?

But finally we read: “When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened...” (v30-31). Then they understood all the Old Testament Scriptures they had been raised on, all the things that he had spoken to them on the road. At that time, they knew that their hearts had been burning within them - but now their eyes were opened.

Notice who took the initiative in all this. It was Jesus who took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. It was he who opened their eyes. But it was important that they had pressed him to stay and invited him to sit at the table with them. If they had let him walk on, they would have remained in the dark - in spite of listening to his wonderful exposition of all the Old Testament Scriptures.

This is what we are looking for when we are meditating on the Word of God. We posture ourselves at the table with the Lord, asking him to open our eyes as he feeds us with the living bread. We pray as the hymn writer wrote:

Break thou the bread of life, Dear Lord to me
As thou didst break the bread beside the sea.
Beyond the sacred page, I seek thee Lord;
My spirit pants for thee, O Living Word.
O send thy Spirit Lord, now unto me,
That he may touch my eyes, and make me see.
Show me the truth concealed within thy Word,
And in thy book revealed I see thee Lord.

May this be the prayer, and experience, of all of us as we approach the Scriptures, that they may truly be God's Life Word to us!

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