

Growing an appetite for the Bible

Sunday, 6th November, 2011

A few hundred years ago Britain was the most powerful nation in the world; one of the main reasons for this was because it had the best ships and the best navy in the world.

One of the problems that all sailors had was a disease called scurvy, an illness caused by lack of vitamin C. This caused your gums to bleed, your teeth to fall out, you bruise, get a fever and then die.

In the 1700's a Scottish doctor called James Lind found the link between scurvy and eating fresh fruit and realised that if sailors were given fruit and vegetables, they would stay healthy. So if the sailors ate the fruit, they would have the edge over other navies.

So the British navy decided to make a rule that all sailors had to eat fruit (lemons or limes) every day.

But there was a problem; the ship's captains knew that this would save the men's lives, but the sailors didn't like being told what to do and they rebelled and refused.

So the captains pushed harder to get the sailors to obey, and the sailors dug their heels in more and refused.

In the end, one clever captain solved the problem by putting up a notice that said that only the officers were allowed to eat fruit – not the sailors.

This made the sailors angry; they said it wasn't fair and they demanded to the right to eat fruit too!

Some of us hate eating certain types of food and if you ask why, we'd say "I was forced to eat my vegetables when I was young and it put me off."

Now that I'm a parent I know this battle! I know that broccoli has really good vitamins and iron in it and if you eat it, it will keep you healthy, help your body fight off sickness and be good for your blood and skin.

And I love my boys, so I try to make them eat broccoli, because it's good for them.

But the more I push them to eat vegetables, the more they lose their appetite.

When I became a follower of Jesus, lots of people cared for me and loved me and really wanted me to grow – and so some of them started to tell me what I needed to do every day to be a healthy Christian.

I remember one man saying “Every day a word to Jesus; every day a word from Jesus and every day a word for Jesus” – in other words, pray, read the Bible and tell people about Jesus.

This was good advice and it was given by someone who loved me and wanted the best for me.

But over time, the effect it had on me was that instead of loving the Bible – as a new Christian, I read it through cover to cover several times; it started making me feel that reading the Bible and praying was a ‘job’ or a duty, rather than being the things I loved doing, bursting out of a heart that loved Jesus so much.

Over the next year, our prayer is that, as a church, we will dig deeper into the Bible; to love it again (if we've lost some of our appetite) and through that, to be changed and mature and grow.

Now I'm a bit older (and more mature?) I understand that eating healthy things is a good idea and I do it because I understand that it will probably mean I'm healthier, not so fat and will live longer.

And I understand some more about why it's good for me to know and regularly read the Bible.

But I think if we eat because we should or if we just read the Bible because we should, then we end up eating without enjoying and we can also end up reading the Bible without knowing the joy of it.

If I know I'm going out for a meal I love (Duck in Plum sauce at Cafe Rouge) then I look forward to it all day and my mouth waters.

And when I love and enjoy the Bible, I find myself looking forward to times when I can get some quiet and get my Bible open and enjoy it.

Our aim for this morning and as we look into next year is that our appetites for the Bible grow; today I want to try to get us all hungry!

So instead of telling everyone that we should read the Bible, I want to talk a bit about how amazing it is.

I don't want to leave anyone feeling guilty about the how long it is since you picked up your Bible or how much dust there was on it; let's draw a line here today!

But my hope is that as we look again at the Bible, any loss of appetite will fall away

PRAY

So now I want to say a few things that will hopefully stir our appetite for God's Word – and I want to try to get through the whole morning without using the words “you should” once!

1. The first thing I want to remind us of about the Bible is that it reveals God to us

God is eternal and Infinite and Holy and Perfect, We're not; He is The Creator; we're His creation; He is the Potter; we are just clay; But amazingly, through the Bible and through Jesus – God with us; we can know Him!

The Qur'an says that it is impossible to know Allah – it says that whatever we think he is like, he is not like that. The closest it is possible to get to knowing Allah is knowing his will and knowing what he is not like.

But through the Bible, we can actually get to see God – not in all His full Glory, but still a true picture of Him.

A few years ago, there was a partial eclipse of the sun and all the TV coverage said that it was dangerous to look directly at the sun, but if you got some 'eclipse glasses' then you could look through them and see the eclipse safely.

Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face.
Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.
(1Corinthians 13:12)

Although we can't see God fully yet – one Day we will! – God has revealed Himself through the Bible and through His Son.

As we read the Bible, God makes Himself known accurately.

So many times I've had conversations that have gone "I think God is like this..." or "My idea of God is..."

We need to be careful that we're not just trying to make God like we think He should be.

God made us in His Image; we're not meant to try to make God in our image!

And reading and knowing the Bible protects us from this; it's what God reveals about Himself.

When I became a follower of Jesus in my teens, without anyone really explaining this, somehow I got it. I so wanted to know Him more that I couldn't wait to read the whole Bible.

I was so excited that there were pages that said more about what He is like; words that He had said; things that He had done; promises that He had made; and I had to know them!

And 26 years on, I'm still so excited about the Old and New Testaments – every book, and God is still speaking through His Word and affecting my through it – probably more now than ever.

It's not a big long list of stuff we've got to do or not do; it's a True Picture of the God who loves us!

2. Secondly, the Bible changes us.

I don't think it's possible to read the Bible without being changed by it.

Jehovah's Witnesses (a cult that is not Christian), although they 'believe in the Bible', teach their followers not to read the Bible for themselves.

What they have found is that JW's who read the Bible usually stop being JW's and in their language, "fall away" (meaning they turn away from JW's and towards Jesus!)

As we spend time reading the Bible, it gets hold of us and we are changed by it.

For me, some time before I became a Christian, I started reading the Bible, and there were times when what I was reading became 'alive' and I knew God had spoken to me; but much more than this, as I read the Bible, over time the way I looked at everything changed.

In Hebrews 4 it says:

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

What this is saying that God's Word gets into us – to the deepest parts of us; and it changes us.

I think it's worth talking about our expectations here;

There are times in my life when I have read a passage that has been exactly relevant to a situation I have been facing and I was left in no doubt that God had spoken.

I have a friend called Tracy Evans who was a nurse in the Philippines. One day she was travelling on a ferry to a different island when it exploded and gallons of fuel spilled out into the sea then caught fire. She had to jump through the flames and then swim underwater to get clear of it.

As she pulled herself up onto the beach, she remembered that the passage she had read in the Bible that morning was from Isaiah 43:

When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.
For I am the LORD, your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour; (Isaiah 43:2-3)

There are times when God speaks unmistakably through His Word, but there are also times when He doesn't seem to.

I think there's a danger in approaching the Bible wrongly; expecting that every day will be an amazing encounter. And I think maybe some of us have tried reading the Bible hoping for that, and we have come away disappointed and have given up.

As we read the Bible, we get to know God – and the more we dig, the more we can find; but it's more like a growing relationship with God than occasional exciting headlines.

The Bible does change us, but, certainly in my life, much of the change has been gradual.

Pray for people who have had 'wrong' expectations.

3. Finally, God's Word prepares us

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”
(Matthew 7:24-27)

We all go through storms in our lives – some of us are in them now.

The way through storms is by making sure our foundations are right – we do that by hearing the Word and putting it into practice.

I heard someone preach once about “Preparing our boats for the storm.” What the preacher said is that good sailors don’t wait until they’re in the middle of a storm before they start fixing the leaky parts of their boat; if they are wise, they use the calm times well and work hard, and then when the tough times come, they are ready.

Both builders built houses that were fine in good weather, but when the storms came, all the hard work of digging down through the hard earth to find a good foundation was worth it.

We all go through temptations at different times; sometimes for long periods of time. The way to be strong for temptations is to have God’s Word in us:

*I have hidden your word in my heart
that I might not sin against you. (Psalm 119:11)*

I know in my life, there have been seasons when I’ve read the Bible regularly, and there are times when my Bible has got a bit dusty – and I know what difference it makes.

I remember times when I have re-opened my Bible after times of being a bit less keen – and I have known God’s Strength to resist temptation and be godly come back into me.

Sometimes there is a crazy lie that we fall for; we feel a bit distant from God, and so we feel a bit guilty when we come back to Him to pray or read the Bible – and that guilt can make us feel separate from Him and can stop us coming to Him.

It’s time for some of us to draw a line and move on.

Pray

John Jones has had a real desire to help people get more into the Bible and for us as a Church to get stronger.

He has lots of ideas to help us with that – maybe pairing up or getting into a small group to help us; maybe just knowing where to start.

Some of us maybe feel we're not very good at it or we've tried so many times and haven't got anywhere.

We want to encourage everyone – let's press in more than we have before; let's become more obsessed with the God who loves us.

Let's allow God to change us through His Word.

Let's use the good times well to dig deep so we know where our Rock is when the storms come.