

## Sermon

### ***The Inspiration of the Bible***

**2 Timothy 3:15 – 4:5**

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#### **Operation Pearl**

Last week, a Christian hero died: Brother Andrew died aged 94. He obeyed a call of God when he was 24, to take Bibles to the persecuted church. So he smuggled Bibles into closed countries – firstly behind the Iron Curtain.

In 1981, his ministry, Open Doors, smuggled a million Bibles into mainland China. The Bibles weighed 242 tons. It involved a major operation with the purchase of an ocean-going tug and a specially-built barge. The barge was designed so it could partially submerge and the pallet-loads of Bibles could be floated ashore. The shipment was landed on a beach and met by many local Chinese people who rapidly distributed those books to the illegal house church movement where there was a desperate need for Bibles.

They risked their lives to smuggle Bibles into China. The Chinese who received and distributed them similarly faced life imprisonment or death from their government. Why would they take such risks to distribute some books? Would any other book be valued so highly that these risks were considered reasonable? Would any other book cause such opposition from its enemies?

#### **Epistle Setting**

Today's Epistle reading is from a letter from Paul to Timothy. It was written as he was imprisoned under the persecution of Nero, awaiting execution. His words are all the more poignant since they are his last message to this young leader Timothy.

The letter centres on the importance of the Gospel. We heard Paul give a charge to guard the gospel against distortion and if necessary, suffer for the gospel. In the last chapters, Paul urges Timothy to continue in the gospel and to preach the gospel. He closes, signing off his ministry and his life's work, with those famous words, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." <sup>1</sup>

#### **Centrality of the Bible**

Central to living and proclaiming this gospel message is the Bible. The Bible is so important because it is the primary means by which God speaks to his people. It is the only authoritative basis we have for faith outside ourselves.

Timothy was the son of a Greek man and a Jewish Christian woman. He had been raised with the knowledge of the Jewish scriptures – our Old Testament. And Paul says these "...are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." <sup>2</sup> The dominant message of the Bible is of God's salvation plan for mankind. Not man reaching out for God, but God reaching down to man. That is true of the Old Testament as well as the New Testament.

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Timothy 4:7

<sup>2</sup> 2 Timothy 3:15

The 39 Articles are the foundation statements of belief for the Anglican Church worldwide which the Anglican Reformers considered vitally important. Article 7 starts:

“The Old Testament is not contrary to the New; for both in the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to mankind by Christ, who is the only Mediator between God and man, being both God and man. ...”

The Scriptures can bring us to a knowledge of salvation which is only through Jesus Christ - and that is the truest wisdom we can find. Article 6 reads:

“Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation. ...”

In other words, Holy Scripture is the authority for the teachings on salvation. Their particular concern was about extra man-made additions. It continues by listing the accepted books of the Bible. The Bible is not just the Jewish Bible. The true writings of the Apostles and those very first church leaders came to be recognised as inspired by God as well.

Did you hear I said “came to be recognised as inspired?” The Church did not make writings inspired. It only recognised the fact that they were inspired. Although not formalised until the end of the fourth century that recognition started much earlier. By the mid-200’s the list was in practice generally agreed.

Even within the Bible we see an acceptance of Paul’s letters as inspired. Peter’s Second Epistle refers to Paul’s letters in these terms:

“Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote to you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.”<sup>3</sup>

The letters are written with “God’s wisdom.” They are put on a level with “the other Scriptures.”

Saying that the letters are written with God’s wisdom brings us to Paul’s statement that the scriptures are God-breathed. That is a very literal translation of the Greek word although it might be more accurate to say “breathed out by God.” Again, 2 Peter comments helpfully,

“Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>4</sup>

It is not that God spoke and men took dictation - not at all! It is that God inspired the words they wrote so that what he wanted was written, yet through the character and thoughts of the human writer. The personal style of each separate writer is apparent in the Bible yet there is a unity across the writings from the earliest to the last and across different cultural settings (Aramean, Hebrew, Egyptian, Chaldean, Greek) and the languages (Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek).

They were, as Peter wrote, “carried along by the Holy Spirit.”

Paul says that the scriptures are useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness. Here are two pairs of opposites.

## **Belief – Teaching & Rebuking**

The first pair is to do with our beliefs. The Bible teaches us what is true and provides rebuke when we are astray from the truth. It is unchanging and provides the means for God to correct us when we are deluded or going astray. If we were reliant only on human memory or perception, there would be a huge risk of drift and distortion.

In the latter part of the reading, Paul prophesies that a time would come when people would gather teachers to tell them what they want to hear. They would refuse to hear what did not suit them.

We are in such a time. There is an assault on the Bible’s message. Parts of the Western Church refuse to hear anything other than the culturally acceptable ideas. But those ideas will not lead to salvation. They will not stop us from falling from God’s ways. We need to be like those Chinese Christians who gladly received the Bibles smuggled into their country; we must value the Bible and use it as the standard which teaches us and when necessary, rebukes us.

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<sup>3</sup> 2 Peter 3:15-16

<sup>4</sup> 2 Peter 1:20-21

We need to hold on to the truths which God reveals to us in scripture.

## **Behaviour – Correcting & Training in righteousness**

The Bible is also important in developing our behaviour. Our behaviour needs training and correcting.

Many people want to position themselves above the Bible – they think they can judge the Bible and accept or reject it in whole or in part as they wish. What they don't understand is that the Bible reads them and holds them to account! The Apostle James wrote:

**James 1:23-25** For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it. [New Living Translation]

There was a time in London when the Vicar had asked me to start a prayer team. I prepared a notice to be given out at church and brought it along on a Sunday. The service leader overruled me saying the notice had not been cleared with her and could not be given out. We were relatively new in the church and I had not known that they had definite rules about approving notices before they were issued. At the time, I was hurt and resented her behaviour. But the following week, I read in my quiet time:

Hebrews 13:17 “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

As I read that, I was challenged about my attitude and unwillingness to submit. It brought me to forgive her heavy-handed action and ask God to bless.

If we want to grow into the people God intends us to be, we had better learn from his book. It is, if you will, the Manufacturer's Handbook for our lives.

When we buy a car, there is a handbook and a maintenance schedule with it. If you ignore that information and use the wrong fuel it will damage the engine slowly if it is the wrong octane or very quickly if you use put diesel in a petrol engine! You don't have to read the Bible before you operate your life, but why wait for a disaster before you open it? You will do better if you follow it.

We would do well to read, learn and inwardly digest it.