

Truth for Today

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The Believer's Resources: The Word of God

Can you imagine life as a Christian without possessing a Bible to read? Yet a recent Bible Society TV advertising video showed believers, mainly in Asia, in this very situation - without this vital resource. The video finished with the words of the Lord Jesus Christ, who, in His first temptation after forty days in the wilderness answered the Devil: "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'", Matthew 4:4 (New King James Version). Yes, the word of God is that necessary resource which gives a believer spiritual life, and sustains it. For these very reasons we place it first in this series of talks entitled "The Believer's Resources", and without it, we wouldn't know about the other resources God provides for believers.

The first fact about the Bible, God's written word, is that it equates to His spoken word. Remember creation was simply spoken into being. For example, "God said, 'Let there be light; and there was light'", Genesis 1:3. The Psalmist admonishes us: "By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host ... [therefore] fear the LORD ... stand in awe of him! For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm", Psalm 33:6, 8-9 (English Standard Version). What an almighty powerful resource we have in the word of God!

The first action of the word of God towards believers is to effect regeneration, which is necessary for our conversion. James says: "of His own will He brought us forth by His word of truth", James 1:18 (English Standard Version). 1 Peter 1:23-25 explains that new birth occurs through the word of God in the preaching of the Gospel. At the same time, Paul says that the word of God also engenders faith: "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God", Romans 10:17 (New King James Version). Therefore the word of God is an all-sufficient resource to employ in evangelistic activities. When I started preaching the Gospel as a teenager, I was advised to use and quote the word of God because of its inherent potential to cause spiritual awakening. The Lord Jesus Christ Himself said: "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears My word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life. [And] does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life", John 5:24 (English Standard Version). Have you heard the voice of the Lord Jesus in this way? Have you experienced being born anew? (John 3:3) Can you say that you possess new life in Christ?

Let's consider further the word of God as the essential resource for evangelism. In the parable of the sower (Luke 8:4-15), the Lord Jesus interprets the seed sown as: "the word of God", Luke 8:11. Our primary responsibility is to spread abroad the word of God by preaching and teaching it. We're told in the parable of the various responses of the hearers of that word; but we must pray that the seed will fall on the good ground and bear fruit for God. And God can work even with hard-hearted atheists for: "'Is not My word like a fire?' says the LORD. 'And like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?'" , Jeremiah 23:29 (New King James Version). However, in Mark's Gospel the parable of the unseen, slow but successful, growth of the seed follows the parable of the sower; see Mark 4:26-29.

This reminds us of two important facts:

First, humanly speaking we don't know, and can't always see, what effect the word will have; and second, God's word will germinate in His own time, as and when He has determined. God has told us that He uses His word to bring people to Himself: "Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways', declares the LORD. 'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that [which] goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it", Isaiah 55:6-11 (English Standard Version). In this respect, I am very impressed with the new initiative of UCCF (Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship) to get individual Christians to engage in one-to-one, or small group, Bible reading with their fellow students who are not (as yet) believers.

The second action of the word of God is to cause new believers to grow as Christians. The word of God is the essential resource to feed and sustain our spiritual lives. I vividly remember a man who had a great thirst for the Scriptures as soon as he was converted. He was described by a friend of mine (who later became his wife) as "a lovely baby Christian". Yes, as babies cry to be fed, he kept us on our toes with his many questions about God's word.

Peter encourages us to be: "like newborn infants [and] long for the pure spiritual milk [of the word], that by it you may grow up into salvation - if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good", 1 Peter 2:1-3 (English Standard Version). Of recent years, the unique value of breast milk has been verified by food scientists. They've discovered that it contains all the constituents needed for healthy growth. The Scriptures are described as "wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ ... the doctrine which is according to godliness", 1 Timothy 6:3 (New King James Version); and they provide food for healthy spiritual growth.

But babies must grow and be weaned, then fed solids to grow into children and, in time, become adults. As I was writing the script for this talk, my wife was busy downstairs with two small siblings she child-minds. The elder (girl) grew very quickly when she was breast-fed as a baby but then stalled because she didn't want anything else! However, her younger brother is the exact opposite - he not only has a big appetite for solids now, but he also wants to feed himself; and he's only eight months old! Oh that we had such an appetite for the Scriptures! There's that ever-present danger of stunted spiritual growth that concerned the writer to the Hebrews: "For though by this time you ought to be grown up, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a babe. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil ... Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God", Hebrews 5:12-14 and Hebrews 6:1 (English Standard Version).

So the question arises: how often should I take a spiritual meal by reading Scripture? The answer is as regular as eating food. Job said: "I have esteemed the words of His mouth more than my necessary food", Job 23:12 (King James Version). And the answer to the question "Why is it so important to read Scripture?" is found in words the Lord Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy 8:3, where God Himself said: "Man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of God", (Matthew 4:4, English Standard Version). Now, I'm not suggesting a four times-a-day diet. But I would recommend at least a daily reading - as illustrated by the provision of manna to the children of Israel in their forty years in the wilderness.

The Lord Jesus said: "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world ... I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst", John 6:32-33, 35 (English Standard Version). The food analogy is obvious. For Christians, Christ Himself is the essential manna we require to sustain our spiritual lives as we pass through a hostile world to heaven, our Promised Land. First of all, He gives us spiritual life and then He gives the means for us to sustain it: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Unless ye shall have eaten the flesh of the Son of man, and drunk his blood, ye have no life in yourselves. He that eats my flesh and drinks my blood has life eternal, and I will raise him up at the last day: for my flesh is truly food and my blood is truly drink. He that eats my flesh and drinks my blood dwells in me and I in him. As the living Father has sent me and I live on account of the Father, [the person] also who eats me shall live also on account of me ... he that eats this bread shall live for ever", John 6:53-58 (JN Darby Translation).

Yes, Christ is the essential Person for spiritual life; and we find out about Him, and the things concerning Himself, in all the Scriptures, see Luke 24:27 and 44-45 and John 5:39 and 47.

Every Christian should have what is commonly known as "a quiet time", that is, time alone with God to hear Him speak to us through His word; and for us to speak to Him in prayer. This enables us to feed on Christ and to receive daily guidance - how to live for Him as His disciples. But Christians should also study God's word to continue steadfastly in the faith for: "... the [Scriptures] ... are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God breathed and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work", 2 Timothy 3:15-17 (English Standard Version). Let's look in more detail into these six gains we get from the Scriptures:

1. **They make us wise unto salvation.** Not only do they open our spiritually blind eyes to see the way of salvation in the Gospel, but also they show us the safe way to live as believers in a difficult ungodly world, where there's much opposition and many dangers. Furthermore, they explain how to be saved from the present power and practice of sin. Finally, they give us the hope of the salvation of our souls when the Lord comes again.
2. **They teach us about the faith** - they reveal and explain the whole truth of God by enlightening our renewed minds "The entrance of Your words give Light", Psalm 119:130 (New King James Version).
3. **They reprove us** - they show us when and where we go wrong. That is, they give us a conscience about any sin in our lives so that we may confess it and restore our communion with God.

4. **They correct us** - they're able to put us right and to point us in the right direction when we have strayed. Then they'll keep us in the right path: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. You make known to me the path of life", Psalm 119:105 with Psalm 16:11 (English Standard Version).
5. **They train us in righteousness** - they give us instruction in all matters of Christian doctrine and practice, both as individual disciples and as churches. They also prevent us falling into sin.
6. **They thoroughly fit us for discipleship** - such that there'll be nothing lacking in our service if we follow them. New King James Version renders 2 Timothy 3:17: "that the man [or woman] of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work". According to Ephesians 2:10, when God saved us and created us anew, He'd already prepared good works for us to walk aright. By studying the Scriptures we find out what things we are to do.

The Scriptures have the potential to accomplish all of these six things for us because they come out of God's mouth and contain that same power by which He spoke the creation into existence. These two aspects of God's word, of His power to create and of His power to change people are brought together in Psalm 19.

Psalm 19:1-6 state that the glory of God is continuously proclaimed by the silent witness of the heavens; and that this witness reaches to every corner of the world.

Psalm 19:7-9 explain the actions of His written word: "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether", (English Standard Version). These verses amplify 2 Timothy 3:15-17. But notice Psalm 19:7: "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving [or restoring] the soul". As we pass through an increasingly desperate and depressing world, we need spiritual refreshment for our souls. That's provided by the word of God, as the hymn puts it: "There's love, and life, and lasting joy, Lord Jesus found in Thee".

So far, I've concentrated on the word of God as a resource for the individual believer. But the Scriptures are also a vital resource for church meetings. 1 Corinthians 14 gives us directions about what should happen when Christians meet together in church. The chapter highlights the priority which must be given to prophecy, that is, the preaching and/or the teaching of the word of God. In the Old Testament the prophets proclaimed: "Thus says the LORD", and New Testament prophets follow this practice by speaking from the completed (written) word of the Lord. That's why a sermon usually begins with the reading of Scripture. In church, the preacher presents the unchanging absolute truths of Scripture but he also practically applies them to the contemporary situations found both in the church and in the world. How otherwise would Christians know what the truth is in a world system based upon tolerance and relativism, unless they are constantly reminded of what God has stated be the truth? How would believers know the right way to live unless they know what the creator God defines as right and wrong?

Just how important a resource the word of God is in church meetings is stated in 1 Corinthians 14:3: "he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men" (New King James Version).

- **Edification** means building up the individual members of the church as well as the church itself; and it's mentioned again in 1 Corinthians 14:3-5, 12, and 17. According to 1 Corinthians 14:6, first of all the speaker himself must have learnt or imbibed the truths of Scripture so that he can give them out to the benefit of others.
- **Exhortation** is a ministry of encouragement, challenge, or admonition, which would stir up the congregation into practical Christian living.
- **Comfort** or **consolation** is that necessary part of preaching which addresses the deep needs of the people of God as they pass through difficult circumstances or as they experience sorrows, illness and the like.

Edification impacts my mind, giving me knowledge of the truth and of God Himself. **Exhortation** reaches into my heart to change my will into His will. **Comfort** arouses my affections and emotions so that I experience the healing and strengthening effects of the grace of God in the ups and downs of life. In reality these are achieved by presenting Christ from the Scriptures for: "The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy", Revelation 19:10.

According to 1 Corinthians 12:4 and 7, church meetings function by the operation and power of the Holy Spirit: "there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit ... To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good". In Ephesians 6:17, the word of God is called "the sword of the Spirit" (English Standard Version) and explains why 1 Corinthians 12:8 says: "For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of

knowledge according to the same Spirit". If based upon the Scriptures, the preacher's words are used in a living way by the Spirit for edifying, exhorting and comforting his listeners. The living word of God is the vital resource in these demanding requirements of preaching. So the question arises with those of us who have the responsibility to serve in church as preachers, are we making full and proper use of the Scriptures, the resource that God has given us? A corollary question arises: do our hearers discern the Lord speaking through our messages? 1 Corinthians 14 sets out three criteria to measure these issues:

1. 1 Corinthians 14:1-6: are we trying to show-off how good we are at preaching or are we speaking for the profit (edification) of our hearers?
2. 1 Corinthians 14:7-13: are our sermons straightforward messages?
 - With clear meaning, the 'distinct notes' of 1 Corinthians 14:7?
 - With sound warnings, the 'trumpet' of 1 Corinthians 14:8?
 - In simple, uncomplicated, intelligible language, 1 Corinthians 14:9?
3. 1 Corinthians 14:14-22: have our hearers understood us?

Preachers should always remember Paul's injunctions to Timothy:

1. "Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have ... [and] keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers", 1 Timothy 4:13-16 (English Standard Version).
2. "Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfil your ministry", 2 Timothy 4:2-5 (English Standard Version).

I finish my talk by asking you to realise afresh just how valuable a resource the word of God is to believers for every aspect of Christian living. Each of us must honestly ask the question: "Am I willing to be searched and changed by it?"

"For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account", Hebrews 4:12-13 (English Standard Version).

It's fitting to finish with a prayer using Psalm 19:10-14 (English Standard Version):

"[Your words] are to be desired more than gold, even much fine gold; [they are] sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults. Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me! Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart [upon Your word] be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer". Amen!

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