

“THE GOOD BOOK – 1 (Introduction)”
2 Timothy 3:10-17

They say, don't they, that when people take delivery of a new appliance or piece of equipment, men just get on and try to put it all together and women sit down to read the instruction booklet from cover to cover before even opening the box. In my experience, even the men who try to sort it all out first of all end up having to get the Users' Guide before they've finished. Some of these sets of instructions are very basic – a series of simple diagrams with odd phrases that appear to have been translated from the Japanese into English by an illiterate Spaniard. Others are thick volumes that contain far more than you think you'll need to know (until you've thrown it away, that is, then you're desperate for the note that appeared at the bottom of page 113 which explains exactly what to do when a particular component fails – and that happens about three minutes after they've emptied the green boxes).

If you do actually take note of the Users' Guide, though, it makes things an awful lot simpler in the long run. Nowadays I do take time to read the instructions first – I think it's part of my feminine side coming through. But wouldn't it be great if there was such a Users' Guide to life in general? Of course, we couldn't read it before we started off – unless we were an unusually precocious young embryo – but it would help to be able to refer to such a guide as life went on, especially when things happened that we weren't too sure how to deal with. Well, there is such a Guide. Paul refers to it in the passage we've just read from the Bible. We read part of a letter that Paul wrote to his young protégé Timothy, an inexperienced pastor who needed encouragement and advice in his new ministry. And Paul talks about “*the holy Scriptures*”, the Bible itself – it is, in effect, God's Users' Guide To Life.

Just like any other Users' Guide, we ignore its contents at our peril. Timothy has obviously been reading from the Scriptures already, but Paul reminds him not to neglect it. For many of us it may well be something that we take for granted, more or less. We read bits out of the Bible each week and then the preacher tries to make it all appear relevant and useful – and that's it, really. The trouble is, we only ever read a short passage and it's difficult sometimes to get the overall picture. We tried to look at the bigger picture when we read through Mark's gospel recently, but we don't often look at the Bible as a whole.

Over the next few weeks we're going to have a look at this amazing book and try to get a rather more comprehensive overview of it – and of what it can do for us. It was interesting that in the census that we took a couple of weeks ago, around a third of the people who worship here regularly do not look at the Bible from one Sunday to the next. They're missing out on an awful lot! This is undoubtedly the most amazing book ever compiled. The world's best seller, translated into more languages than any other book, available in more versions, more quoted (the majority of our proverbs in English come from the

Bible), more influential, more exciting, more effective than any other book. It's got poetry, history, adventure, wisdom, doctrine, worship, complaining, sex, violence, stories, parables, riddles, visions, dreams – you name it, it's got it. And on top of all that, it's inspired by the Holy Spirit of God, so it is the best Users' Guide To Life that you could ever find. It's effectively been written by the designer, manufacturer and service engineer all rolled into one.

As I say, most of us here this morning will have had some experience of reading the Bible, even if it's only listening to bite-sized chunks of it read out here each week. Some of you, I know, read it far more extensively than that (because you're always asking me about obscure bits of it that you can't quite make sense of – and nor can I, most of the time). But however much we have read the Bible, we still need to be reminded that it is vital to pay attention to its contents and to read it not only regularly but frequently. You won't get far as a human being, let alone as a Christian, if you take no notice of it at all.

Why? Well, Paul points out to Timothy that the main purpose of the Bible is “*to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.*” The Bible, in essence, is an instruction booklet about human life – how it came to be, how it got like it is and how to escape from the worst consequences of sin and evil. It is not a scientific handbook, so you can't use it to find out exactly how or when the earth was created, or how miracles happened. It is not some high-brow work of learning that you can use to win arguments. It is not a history book so that everything recorded in its pages is historically and factually correct. It is not a work written in a code so dense and esoteric that you need to have read *The Da Vinci Code* to get anything out of it. But it is inspired by God. It is truth. It does explain the only sure-fire way to find peace with God and the assurance of eternal life.

It does that in all kinds of ways, as we've said – poetry, history, proverbs, stories, laws and so on. But just as you don't treat every book on your bookshelf the same way, so you can't treat the various parts of the Bible all in the same way when you're trying to work out what's what. You wouldn't, for example, read a book of poems the same way as you'd read a book of rules for playing rugby. You wouldn't read a book of short stories the same way you'd read a book about the history of the British Empire. You wouldn't read a book of philosophy the same way you'd read a biography. Therefore, you need to distinguish between what's being said in *Psalms* from the laws in *Leviticus*, Jesus' parables from the books of *Chronicles*, the observations of *Ecclesiastes* from the four gospels. [If you really want a good book to help you along with all this, try and get hold of *How To Read The Bible For all It's Worth* by Douglas Stuart and Gordon Fee (published by Scripture Union).]

Anyway, Paul tells Timothy that the Bible is useful for certain things. John Stott, the great preacher and writer, says that these things concern “*our creed and our conduct*”, or, if you prefer, our belief and our

behaviour. The things that are contained in the pages of the Bible help us to understand God and also to live in the way he asks of us, the way in which we can really get the best out of life now and have a sure hope for the life to come. As far as our belief goes, the Bible teaches the truth and rebukes error. As far as our behaviour goes, it corrects our faults and trains us in right living.

1. TEACHING THE TRUTH

It is only in the Bible that we can really discover what the plan of salvation is. No other book or set of writings can point us towards God. All that is written in the Bible is true in the sense that it helps us to make sense of our world and of our lives. People may debate at great length whether the story of Jonah or Job is historically true or a parable. But they cannot dispute the truth that it teaches us about God's judgement and mercy. Other people may spend fruitless hours arguing over whether the world was created in seven days or over a much greater period of time. But there is no arguing with the truth that God made the world and created it perfect in every way until sin came along to spoil it. Yet others may spend all their time arguing about all the details of John's apocalyptic vision in *Revelation*, pinning down exactly who the Antichrist might be and which of today's powers are depicted in the various pictures of the evil empires, but there is no getting away from the fact that one day God is going to bring things to a spectacular and mind-blowing climax – and we need to be ready for it.

When people start looking for meaning in their lives amid all the confusion and dissatisfaction of their daily existence, then only place to discover the truth about what they are seeking is in the pages of the Bible. The truth may sometimes be unpalatable – sin is at the root of our restlessness, and we are all affected by that – but it is the truth nonetheless. There is more uplifting truth as well, though, when we find that Jesus died to make possible our reconciliation with God and to make sure our eternity with him in heaven.

2. IT REBUKES ERROR

On the other hand, the Bible not only describes the truth, it also shows up error, it points out those things which are wrong. In that sense it is like a yardstick, which shows how far short of the truth other ideas come; or like a mirror which highlights everything that is not of God; or, as the prophet Jeremiah saw, like a plumb-line which demonstrates how far we have diverged from the way of God. God's revelation of himself and his love and work in the pages of the Bible serves to expose as a meaningless sham anything that is not of him.

The weird ideas of the cults, of other religions, of the wackier fringes of Christianity cannot claim any foundation in the pages of God's word and so they are exposed by the light of Scripture. Their errors are rebuked by the words of the Bible – errors made by twisting the words of the Bible (as the Jehovah's Witnesses do), by adding to Scripture (as the Mormons or Muslims do), by over-emphasising certain parts of the Bible to the detriment of others (as the Prosperity preachers do), by ignoring the parts of the Bible that don't fit in exactly with their chosen lifestyle (as, in fact, most of us do).

You see, it's not only other groups of people whose errors are rebuked by Scripture – often we ourselves find that things we hold dear are shown to be wrong by the words of the Bible. That's why we need to be so careful to keep reading the Bible systematically and regularly, why we need to listen to the doctrine and teaching of the Bible as it is interpreted by the Church, why we must never wander away from the truth of God's word.

3. IT CORRECTS FAULTS

Not only does the Bible help to put us right in what we believe, but it is also a help to our behaviour. We must always be aware of those things that the Bible teaches about our conduct and the way other people see us acting. After eighteen years in the ministry I am not quite so shocked now as I used to be by the things people in the congregation say to me, but I am still taken aback from time to time when someone says, "O surely there's nothing really wrong with that?" when it's clearly not consonant with the teaching of the Bible – be it some kind of sexual immorality or using blasphemous language or stealing in some form or other.

And there are plenty of things which we all do which we almost take for granted and don't even begin to question because we don't really think the Bible's got much to say about them. There's more in the Bible about arrogance, pride and gossip than there is about sexual immorality. There's more in the Bible about covetousness, greed and oppression than there is about stealing. The Bible has a relevance to every part of our daily lives: we can look into its pages to diagnose our faults and see how they should be corrected.

4. IT TRAINS IN RIGHTEOUSNESS

The problem with saying things like that is that we can easily give the impression that the Bible is little more than a negative list of rules and regulations which is so often how others caricature it. But the Bible

is an overwhelmingly positive book (or collection of books). It has a certain amount to say about how **not** to behave, but considerably more to say about the right way to behave. Jesus' own teaching is certainly more positive than negative, as is Paul's' (despite the common misconceptions about him). Even the law of Moses is a positive, life-affirming and humane code – far more so than other contemporary law codes.

Looking into the pages of the Bible is a real help to us as we try to find out how we should be acting from day to day in the various situations which life throws up for us. Of course, we need to interpret and apply what it says, but following its guidance really is the best way to ensure that we are doing what God wants us to. That's why Paul goes on in his advice to Timothy to say that this is all for a purpose – *“so that the person of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”*

The Bible isn't some old book that we read just for the sake of it, like a Mills & Boon pot-boiler, or the works of George Eliot, or the complete oeuvre of Marcel Proust. The reason we read those is to entertain ourselves, to pass exams or to show off! The reason we read the Bible is so that we can become familiar with the Users' Guide to our human lives. God made us and he wants us to function in the best possible way – that is, as he sets out in the Guide.

There's no point assembling your computer or home cinema system or multi-programme washer and dryer and ignoring the instructions from Mr Sony or Messrs Hewlett & Packard as to how you get all the various functions to work. You wouldn't get anything like the best out of the products. So with God, there's no point in our ignoring the advice that he gives us in the Bible, or we can never hope to get the full benefit from our bodies, our minds, our world: we will never really get to enjoy what Jesus called *“Life in all its fullness.”*

Just as Paul advised young Timothy, *“continue in what you have learned”*. Get the best out of life by reading the Bible eagerly, frequently, systematically. If you don't know how to go about that, why not use a daily Bible reading plan which will help you to get some sort of structure to your reading and offer some guidance on interpretation – have a word with me or with Pat Cartmale who organises the daily reading notes. Join a house group where you can read and discuss together. Get the best out of your life by getting the best out of the Bible – and we'll look a bit further into that over the next few weeks.

"THE GOOD BOOK – 1 (Introduction)"
2 Timothy 3:10-17

The Bible is really a "Users' Guide" to life, inspired by the one who created life and who knows exactly how to get the best out of it. That's why Paul recommends it to his young pastor friend Timothy in this passage.

The Bible is the most amazing book ever compiled. It has all kinds of writing and all kinds of advice in it. Reading it regularly and frequently can be a great help to us in our Christian lives – indeed, in our human lives. The main purpose of it, according to Paul here, is *"to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus."* It is important that we know how to read it and how to interpret it so that we can get the most out of it.

It is useful for our *"creed and conduct"* (John Stott), so that we know what to believe and how to behave. In *v16* Paul gives four reasons for reading and studying the Bible.

- **It teaches the truth.** It is only in the Bible that we can really discover what the plan of salvation is and why it is needed. Whatever our views about the way in which the Bible is put together, there is no doubting the truth of what it teaches.
- **It rebukes error.** The Bible shows what is wrong with our lives and with the other attempts to suggest an answer to the questions of life. Cults, sects and others have their deceptions exposed.
- **It corrects faults.** There are all kinds of things which the Bible teaches about the way we should live our lives. We need to take it seriously and allow it to influence our lives.
- **It trains in righteousness.** The Bible is not a book of "thou-shalt-not" teaching. It has far more that is life-affirming and positive. We need to interpret it and apply it, which means careful reading and study.

Questions for discussion

1. Do you read the Bible frequently and systematically? Why/why not? How do you do it?
2. What are the greatest hindrances to reading the Bible regularly?
3. What are your favourite parts of the Bible? Why?
4. What are your least favourite parts of the Bible? Why?
5. How would you attempt to persuade someone to read the Bible?
6. What do we mean when we say that the Bible may not all be factually accurate but it is all true?
7. What difference does the Bible make to your life?