

God's Life Giving Word

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Preacher: James Ross

[0 : 00] Now, we have two readings. Now, as I said, we're going to read in Isaiah 40, and then we'll be back in 1 Peter chapter 1 and into chapter 2, and we'll see Peter make use of Isaiah 40.

So let's read the first 11 verses of Isaiah 40. Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice of one calling, In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low, the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain, and the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

A voice says, cry out, and I said, what shall I cry? All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall because the breath of the Lord blows on them.

[1 : 26] Surely the people are grass, the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever. You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain.

You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout. Lift it up, do not be afraid. Say to the towns of Judah, here is your God. See, the sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm.

See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. He tends his flock like a shepherd. He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart.

He gently leads those that have young. And then in 1 Peter, chapter 1 and at verse 22, let's again hear God's word together.

Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth, so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.

[2 : 41] For all people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.

And this is the word that was preached to you. Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander of every kind.

Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

Amen. Now, let's turn together to 1 Peter, chapter 1 and into chapter 2.

So our theme, the letter, 1 Peter, the theme is Stand Firm and Stay Joyful. Well, here today, Peter wants to make clear to his readers and to us that God's word is vital for our faith.

[3 : 48] So I have really one aim today, and it's a bold aim, I think. And my goal is to transform our view of Bible reading.

Following Peter in this section, I want him to help us to see that God must work through his word to make us Christians and to cause us to grow and to be transformed, that those things do not happen without God's word, the Bible.

So the Bible is vital. So I want to see one truth, that God's word is life-giving, and we're going to think about that. I want to see two effects of that that Peter introduces, that this new life that comes through hearing the word about Jesus brings new love, and it brings new longing.

And then because the Bible is so important, I want to identify three approaches to reading God's word. And all the way along, recognising this reality, Bible reading must be a supernatural act.

In other words, God must give us eyes to see, must give us the ability to see the glory and the worth and honour of God, of our Saviour Jesus, if it is to have its proper effect.

[5 : 12] So I want to transform how we think about the Bible and how we read it. Let's begin with that one truth then, God's word is life-giving. So just to remind ourselves of the context, the first 12 verses of 1 Peter have really emphasised for these struggling, scattered Christians their new Christian identity.

And then section two, from verse 13 down to where we've just read, the emphasis is on be holy, live out that true identity. As God has set you apart for him, live that way.

And to be holy, Peter now is going to say, to live those set-apart lives for God, you need God's word to give life. God's word is the fuel for that engine of faith and holiness.

So there are three ways we can think about that. First of all, God's word gives life. verse 23. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.

John Piper says, where God's word is at work, God is at work. And here, Peter says, you are born again, as God works new life in you through his word. It's put slightly differently in verse 22.

[6 : 32] Now that you've purified yourselves by obeying the truth, so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply from the heart. God's word of truth has that purifying feature as it is obeyed.

The language of being washed clean, the image of having a new heart and new life, and all that to say that being born again is a miracle of God.

So we don't cause, do we, our own physical birth. Neither do we cause our own spiritual birth.

Rather, we need the seed of God's word in us to bring life, to bring new life into our hearts. So you cannot be a Christian without God's word at work.

And so, every Christian that you will ever meet, that I will ever meet, they have a unique testimony, a unique story of how God has changed them.

[7 : 35] But there is always going to be a common factor. And let me say, if you're not a Christian, it might be an idea, if you know people who are Christians, to talk to them, find out their story. And the common factor is that faith comes by hearing God's words, God's word of salvation.

That's all about Jesus coming as fully God, fully man, taking our place, dying for our sins, to give forgiveness in new life.

So some people, they hear that message through being in church on a Sunday and the word is preached and they believe. That was my story. Now, other people, they will be reading the Bible at home and the truth will hit them and transform their lives.

That might be your story. Others, I know, were in a course, like a Christianity Explored course. And over those weeks, as the truth, the central facts of the Bible were made clear, people came to faith in the Lord Jesus.

Sometimes, it might be a one-to-one chat over many years' discussions, perhaps with a family member or a friend. But in every case, what brings life is the word that's all about Jesus.

[8 : 50] Jesus. What is that life-giving word? It's interesting the way Peter uses Isaiah 40 to draw attention to it.

So remember when, often when New Testament writers use the Old Testament, they use a verse or two, but we're intended to think about the bigger, wider section. So what have we read about in Isaiah 40?

Well, it's a message to exiles. It's a message of comfort to exiles. And remember, the people in 1 Peter are described as God's elect exiles. And that comfort that comes is that God's word of promise, of salvation, of restoration, that will be kept.

That beyond the difficulties, beyond the enemies that they face, there is something stronger and more permanent, the word of God. That the Lord was going to come, that his glory would be revealed, that he would come bringing salvation, that he would be that shepherd who would care for them.

And Peter is announcing to his audience and by extension to us, that promise, that comfort is fulfilled in the coming of Jesus. So the life-giving word is the message of the gospel, the message which is all about Jesus, who is the word of God.

[10 : 08] So God's word gives us life. God's word is our food. Peter says this as well. Chapter 2, verse 2, he continues the new birth image.

Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk so that by it you may grow up in your salvation. So when a baby is born, what does it need and what will it scream for?

For food, for milk. And Peter says, as Christians, we need a constant supply of spiritual milk in order to grow.

That we don't cause ourselves to grow. And spiritually, we need the work of God by his word if we are to have spiritual growth and maturity.

And notice that Peter says spiritual growth is necessary for salvation. So we need to grow and develop. But there's good news.

[11 : 11] We grow in obedience with the grace that God supplies. So we're not left to our own devices to try and grow in obedience. Rather, God supplies grace. God gives his word.

God gives his spirit so that we might grow. I'm sure we've heard the expression, you are what you eat.

Well, if we apply that to the church, the message is that Christians must be Bible people. We must be consuming God's word, digging deep into it so that it would become who we are.

Or as Edmund Clowney, another Bible teacher, says Christians must be addicted to the Bible.

That's a striking image, isn't it? Here's the one addiction that is both good and life-giving.

We must be addicted to the Bible. So God's word, it gives life and it is our food. God's word also brings fellowship.

[12 : 16] That's one aspect of life, brings fellowship. Verse 3, continuing the thought of verse 2, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

So they've tasted the Lord's goodness, personal experience of the living God, relationship with God, knowing Jesus as Lord and Saviour. What's the sweetness in the Bible?

It's that we get to know and enjoy God and his words. Again, to borrow from Edmund Clowney, coming to the words, coming to the Bible, is coming to the Lord's.

We read the Bible to know God better. Think about that. Think about God's grace in this book. This is God's revelation to us. You want to hear God speak?

Then we do that when we read the Bible. But think about it too in terms of an invitation. This is an invitation to us as sinful people to enjoy hearing from God, being in the presence of God, receiving life from God.

[13 : 22] It's a wonderful invitation. So when it comes to Bible reading, we're not reading to tick a box in our daily Bible reading planner. We're not reading the Bible to learn some morality, to become a better version of ourself.

We're not doing it simply to explore its doctrine or truth. God's desire in his word is to reveal his love to us, to reveal his character to us, to reveal his saving grace, to show us the wonder of Jesus so that we would enjoy him more.

So two implications to recognise in the fact that God's word is life-giving. One, we must be a Bible teaching, a Bible-believing church here in Becloot. The Bible must be central to our public worship and central to our private worship as well.

Whenever we gather, we want to be in God's word. Another implication of that is we must submit to all of its truth. We must hear the whole counsel, the whole wisdom of God and be willing to submit to it.

We want to be a people who delight in the gospel. We see it as truly good news for us and we must be those who would teach it to others, whether that's formally, officially, or whether that's in our families, parents.

[14 : 33] Are we passing our faith on to our children? Are we reading the Bible with our children? Whenever we share our faith with others, as we tell them about Jesus, we're finding a way of sharing the word with them.

So we must be a Bible teaching and believing church. And secondly, we must personally be Bible people. not just skimming the surface, not just giving an occasional glance when it's convenient, not simply admiring it from a distance for its form or for its poetry, that we would feast on it, that we would soak in it, that we would pray that it would be for us the bread of life, that when people cut us open aspergencies, we would bleed Bible, that we would read because we want to enjoy friendship with God.

That like the disciples, we say to you, where else would we go? You alone have the words of life. So there's that one truth. God's word is life-giving.

Now let's see that one truth and how it has its effect. There's two effects of God's word described here. New love and new longing. So remember our context.

The context is, how will suffering Christians live holy lives and how will God's word help them in that? So let's see that connection between living holy lives, set apart people for God and how God's word helps.

[16:05] Two main commands. First command in verse 22, love one another deeply. Let's read verse 22 again. Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply from the heart.

And his point in this section all the way from verse 22 to 25 is this. As people who have been loved by God, as people who have received God's love in his sending Jesus to be their saviour, people loved by God should love one another.

So he goes to Isaiah 40. We thought about Isaiah 40. Remember Isaiah 40, promised salvation has come. The connection is that as we have received this promised salvation in our lives, that should fuel then our love for others.

Peter wants to get at that in the way that he's already written. In the early verses, he talks about God's people having been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father.

Our salvation is not an afterthought. God, before we were ever made, chose to save us and he chose to send his son to be the saviour. Peter has told us in verse 18 and 19 that we are redeemed, that we are set free from our slavery to sin, our fear of death and the judgement of God.

[17:37] We're redeemed with the precious blood of Jesus. Now we're told in verse 2 that the Spirit has sanctified us. We've got this washing, we've been set apart from God and all of this is an example of God's perfect love that he shows to his people.

And the Bible then, it functions as a mirror in the sense that the love that we discover, the love that we enjoy as we read is then to be reflected to those around us and especially he has in view to our brothers and sisters in the church.

It's a picture of life in a church. We are to be a family that is sharing God's love as the one thing we have in common is that we are sinful people who've been saved by a loving God through the precious gift of his son Jesus as the sacrifice to pay for our sin, to take God's anger from us onto himself, to give us new life.

As we have that in common, we should share that love with one another. And this letter in part is going to say remember what a powerful witness that can be to the world when they see the love of the church.

Especially think about it in our own day, never mind pandemic, but think about how divided the world is. And think about how many people live very lonely lives.

[19:20] We offer a community that is marked by self-giving, sacrificial love. And that's a wonderful thing. That's an attractive thing. Peter is saying how does that love come?

Love for one another? How does it come? It comes from hearing and believing God's word. How does that love remain? As we remain in God's word. So there's the first command, love one another deeply.

The second command is in chapter 2, verse 2, long for pure spiritual milk. But before he gets there, there's a therefore.

In light of having received the word of the gospel, he says, rid yourselves of. And then there's that list. Rid yourself of everything that's countered, that's opposed to love. And so there's that list.

There's malice, ill will towards someone else, deceit and hypocrisy, which is fake love, false rather than sincere love, envy and slander, which ultimately is self-love because we want the good for ourselves over against someone else.

[20:20] And those qualities are so destructive in any community and they're so destructive in a church. And so Peter says, get rid of those. Now, how do we get rid of them? And remember, we're gospel people.

So he says, it's not through self-effort and hard work. No, it's a supernatural work of God through his word. changing our desires.

Verse three, we've tasted the Lord is good. Now we've got a longing for more. We want more of God, not more of those unloving ways. We've received that spiritual milk that's brought life and we want to crave it, to long for it, that we have a changed appetite.

We recognise that this spiritual milk is what sustains life. It's what will bring spiritual growth. And so God's word creates this new longing within us and that longing for what is good and pure and true causes us to get rid of what is false.

Holiness comes as God's word transforms what we long for so that we get rid of the old ways that we put on the way of love because our heart is filled with what is good and true.

[21 : 34] Now, pause to reflect. If you've ever changed or tried to change your diet, ease your heart. We know the answer, don't we? Training our bodies for a new appetite can be a battle.

We can find that we can, you know, have a will to read the Bible, but we can become distracted so easily. We can find the time dragging on.

Now we can find it hard to maintain our desire. This new longing to be in God's word and to be changed by it, it's going to take discipline. To take time to be reading thoughtfully.

We're going to face temptation. There's going to be more comfortable choices to switch on the TV or to go on our phone rather than make time to be in God's word. But we need to pray that he'd give us that desire and that he'd give us that will.

Again, before moving on to make our last point, let me just emphasise again that you and I need God to do a supernatural work in us by his word if we are to be transformed.

[22 : 48] So, if you're not a Christian, God must open your eyes to see your need, to recognise that before God you are a sinner, that you are under his judgement, that you deserve condemnation.

We all deserve by nature condemnation in hell. Open your eyes. God must open your eyes to see his great love that he has sent Jesus to be your saviour, to take your sin, to face the just anger of God in your place, to remove your guilt, to give you forgiveness and eternal life.

God must open your eyes to see that you must trust Jesus as your saviour. So, ask him to do that for you. Read and listen, asking that you would experience his power and love as you do so.

And for those of us who are Christians, remember, God must work in us to change our appetite for him and for holiness. So again, we must ask him and we must work with him and we must be resisting that temptation towards what is opposed to God with his help.

Now, having recognised with Peter that God's word is life-giving, that from the beginning to the end of the Christian life we need the word of God, as we've recognised that God's word has transforming power to shape our love for others and our longing for holiness, let's think about three approaches to God's word that I hope we'll all find helpful.

[24 : 34] That as we see how much we need the Bible, that we would also have a greater longing to enjoy God in the Bible and that these three approaches might help us.

One, when we read the Bible, read humbly. Remember that coming to the word, coming to the Bible is coming to the Lord.

It's not a casual thing, it's a remarkable thing. So we need to pray to prepare our hearts, to prepare our minds. Also, read humbly, recognising this privilege, our creator has revealed himself, our creator invites us in.

This is a gift of his love and his grace. Read humbly, too, in being willing to submit and to obey, to recognise God is God, Jesus is Lord and that his word is true and must be obeyed whether we like it or not.

That we would let the Bible shape us rather than have us trying to shape the Bible to what is convenient for us. Read humbly. Secondly, read hopefully.

[25 : 45] Pray like the psalmist, open our eyes to see wonderful things in your word. Pray that before you read. Pray that as you're reading. Stop what you're reading.

When the spirit speaks something to you, stop and pray about that. After reading, pray so that the truth wouldn't be lost in the ether as soon as we shut our Bibles.

Read hopefully with a sense of expectation because remember, the spirit who inspired the Bible, what does the spirit want to do? The spirit wants to show us more of the glory of Jesus, more of the glory of God our Father.

That's his delight and so he'll use the word to do that in us and for us. Read hopefully too, recognising that by God's grace, with the help of the spirit, you can change.

Peter has said God's word brings new life. It brings heart change. It brings appetite change. It brings moral change. So we can change. We don't have to be stuck in the same patterns, the same patterns of sin and disobedience.

[26 : 48] So be willing to listen, be willing to confess sin, be willing to obey as we're led by the spirit. So read humbly and read hopefully and thirdly, read hungrily.

Never outgrow our most basic need, that desperate need we have for God to speak to us, for God to teach us more of himself and more of how we are to live, to ask God to lift our eyes to see the

hope that we have, the inheritance that we have, the identity that we have as those who are belonging to God through the work of his son, Jesus.

Read hungrily and make this our regular diet. You know, as well as I do, there are not many things that both taste good and are good for us.

It tends to be very much an opposite. If it tastes really good, it's probably really bad for us. Not so with the Bible. The Bible is the ultimate example of something that tastes sweet and is life-giving. So let's not starve ourselves. let's not limit ourselves. Rather, let's enjoy God in his word, asking him to change us, to shape us, to transform us, to meet with us every time we read.

[28 : 22] Whoever you are, wherever you are, whatever your story up until this point, I can say with confidence, not being able to see anybody, you need to meet with God as your most basic and you need God to meet with you.

And both of those happen through his living word. So let's take it and let's read it and let's find life in it and from it.

Let's find Jesus, the one who is the way and the truth and the life in his word. thank you so much and please and as I I you you