

Grasping the goodness of Scripture

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[0 : 00] For a moment we would go back to Romans chapter 7 and see if there were any questions that had cropped up from that because I thought it's actually quite a quite a passage.

! I would not have known what sin was except through the law. I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said do not covet. But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire.

For apart from law, sin is dead. Once I was alive apart from law, but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death.

For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me and through the commandment put me to death. So then the law is holy, the commandment is holy, righteous and good.

Did that which is good then become death to me? By no means. But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.

[1 : 30] That's the bit we looked at this morning. I'm quite happy just to go straight on to something else, but I wondered if there were any questions. I'm just going to read verse 9.

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We're dead to sin through Christ's death. We are dead in sin without. And he seems to be talking of something, maybe something different again.

He says, without the law I was alive, but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. So perhaps he's talking about yet another form of death.

I don't know, I don't know. I don't know. I don't want to get into deep water. I think also it's that comfort to us in a sense of, you know, even the greatest possible thing.

[3 : 15] You know, what I want to do, I do not do. I don't want to do what I'm doing. Yeah. I think that's right.

Yes. Yes. the interpretation of this passage which is about I wouldn't have known sin unless the Lord told me what sin was that's okay but I think the really difficult bit is getting my head around this idea what it is about when God makes a command that makes us more balanced it says when the Lord came when I realised what the Lord was I became even more sinful something actually happened it wasn't just a recognition I actually became even more of a rebel that's what the word says when you put the two things together there is a multiplication and he's keen to say that the law isn't to blame for this so the law is not the guilty party it's sin but nevertheless when you put the two together you do get this multiplication yeah

I was trying to think in an autobiographical way people call breathing out slaughter for the Christians the fastest road experience he meets the Lord and prepares at that point he's turned around but the speaking I think puts the terms here so something must have happened almost subsequent to that experience where he became more aware I don't know but it there's nothing particularly in his own biography that seems to speak of this experience no no no and therefore one is very reticent to try and pin this on people and to say you need to have a law work before you come to the gospel for example where the Puritans might have gone down that road a bit I wonder whether we could include in this sinfulness the sinfulness of pride because that is one of the effects of the law it makes people proud and hard

I'm not quite sure how I can completely square this with the passage but if you think in terms of people like Paul the Israelites like Paul the sin that was prevalent in the nation was the sin of pride and self-righteousness which is the very thing that resulted in Christ being crucified and that was in

Paul wasn't it because he persecuted Christ and I wonder I'm not quite sure how easy it is to square with the wording here but the idea of if he hadn't been a Pharisee of the Pharisees he wouldn't have been the chief of sinners would he if he wasn't so sure of himself and so zealous against Christians then he wouldn't have committed the sins that he committed so I suppose that's saying that sin becomes sinful in its outward manifestation although it's not saying that Paul was conscious of it at the time because he had to have it pointed out didn't he

Saul Saul why do you kick against the goads he wasn't conscious of it at the time I think it's a difficult passage and the passage afterwards is difficult as well he was just stating there about what he says at the time there was that question about doing a couple of water or when did you see the presence of Jesus who did it so I might be used to to do it to me yeah in other words we can do commendable things without being realised at the time that they're commendable, and we can do terribly sinful things without realising at the time that they're terribly sinful.

[8 : 11] Yeah. Although, just coming back to the passage, he does say, no, doesn't he? I would not have known sin apart from through the law.

So that does seem to imply that he did know something. The idea of... the idea of sin being shown to be sin.

I'm just trying to see where it says that. Can't see it. Oh, it's in...

Verse 13. Yeah, that sin might be... I think it's shown, rather than recognised. Okay, well, let's move on, because I don't know the answer to all those questions.

But the fact that we don't know the answer to all the questions does not mean that it isn't useful to look at it and worth the effort of thinking and discussing and etc.

[9 : 34] So let's pray again, shall we? Lord, we pray that you would help us to understand more deeply and in our own hearts and minds and help us to not be strangers to the things of which your scripture speaks where we're supposed to know them in our experience.

And help us as we think together about this business of grasping the goodness of scripture to enable one another to live according to your word. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Well, this is what I thought we could look at this evening. Grasping the goodness of scripture, we looked last time at the idea that what the Bible says is what God says.

So that's the... in a nutshell... the evangelical understanding of scripture. Last time we looked at the objections that this idea was unchristian, that it was unlikely, that it was boring, that it was difficult, and that it was irrelevant.

And we went through all the reasons why people would think that and why the Bible wouldn't agree with any of them. So I thought we would try to move on a little bit this evening.

[11 : 03] I think with the evangelical doctrine of scripture, where the rubber hits the road, there are two sticking points. Number one is what happens in church.

So this is the preaching and teaching of God's word, and the sticking point being when people have... when people say, I listen to the preaching of God's word and I find it's tiresome and boring. And that, I think, is a reason why people would not be enthusiastic about the evangelical doctrine of scripture.

That particular issue, I'd like to put on one side for another time. It is in the church diary to look at the matter of preaching. So that's not a way of ducking out of it.

The second sticking point is that personal Bible reading is difficult and unrewarding. And I thought we'd have a look at that. Because people say that it's difficult and people don't necessarily say it's unrewarding.

[12 : 24] They behave as if it's unrewarding because they don't have a habit of personal Bible reading. So presumably, if it was rewarding, they would. And presumably, they think it's unrewarding and therefore, they don't.

that's what I thought we would have a look at this evening. So, the zeroth point is that the Bible itself does not command a quiet time of personal Bible reading.

And it would be a strange thing if it did because people haven't had access to their own personal Bibles until such time as they were printed, which a quick look on Google says is in the 1530s.

So, for one and a half centuries of Christianity, it has not been possible to have your own Bible. So, therefore, presumably, it would be a rather strange thing if we were commanded to do our own personal Bible reading if we didn't have our own personal Bible.

Bible, but the Bible does say something not too far away from that. So, let's look at Psalm 1, which is an example that there are many other pieces of the Bible that say something not too different. [13:50] Psalm 1, verses 1 to 3. Psalm 1, verses 1 to 3.

And, Roger, could you read that to us, please? Have I caught you on the hop? Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, who stands in the way of sinners and who sits in the seat of the wicked.

But his delight is in the law of the Lord. And on his law, he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by a spirit of water which yields the spirit in season.

And he is the person of the world that ever does. God Thank you very much. That was Psalm 1, verses 1 to 3. And it contrasts the way of the wicked, the way of sinners, the way of mockers and says, don't go that way, go the other way.

And what is the other way? Well, the other way is the way of the person whose delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law he meditates, we presume he or she meditates day and night.

[15:21] So, I suppose that the Psalm is describing something that is possible without having your own copy of the Bible. but it's assuming that there is some way of thinking about what's written in the Bible every day and every night.

And it might have been memorization because if you don't have your own printed copy you might find that the idea of remembering extended pieces of the Bible is a much more necessary thing.

So, it might have been my memorization or it might have been that somebody had a portion of the Bible and you got together with them and read it.

So, it might have been in a group reading or it might have been in the synagogue or it might have been in the context of the family. I don't know. But there must have been some way that they could do this otherwise it wouldn't have said it.

So, in other words, although the Bible doesn't command, thou shalt have a quiet time when thou wakest up and thou shalt spend at least twelve and a half minutes reading the Bible and thou shalt get extra points for every minute above twelve and a half that thou spendest.

[16:46] It doesn't say anything like that. No, it does say something like that. It doesn't say that but it does say it's a blessed thing to meditate on the law of the Lord every day and every night.

And it goes on to say that such and such a person is like a tree planted by streams of water which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither and whatever this person does prospers. so it says there's a blessing, a real spiritual blessing in doing that, in meditating, thinking about what God has said.

Okay, that's the zeroth point because that's the sort of foundation. Now, I think I probably stopped doing numbering at this point but anyway. is it easy or difficult?

Last time one of the objections was, or the possible objections was the Bible is difficult. And I'm sure we could all think of bits of the Bible that are difficult.

[17:58] We were just discussing one a few moments ago and Adam and Rachel were saying that they'd been reading through the book of Leviticus. Was it Leviticus? Right.

Really hot suppers you get into numbers. But Leviticus, it's not an easy book for a Christian to read, is it? It's said that Jewish children are taught Leviticus as being foundational.

It was the first book that they were taught in the synagogue or in the home because it was so foundational. But Christians, we find it's very difficult very difficult indeed.

Well, okay. So, should that put us off the idea of reading the Bible ourselves? We looked at the point last time that the Bible is understandable and there's a word for this which is perspicuity, which means clear.

The God of the Bible is a God who speaks so that we, not just the clever ones amongst us, but all of us can understand it.

[19:13] That's the perspicuity of Scripture. God speaks so that we can understand. We have to add a few things to that. It doesn't mean that we necessarily understand every single thing.

So, I've put around that. God speaks so that we can understand the main point. the main point of the gospel. So, the foundational things.

How to be saved. How to live the Christian life. How to be a witness for Jesus Christ. How to do what God wants us to do. So, the Bible doesn't necessarily tell us how to solve simultaneous differential equations or play chess.

Of course, God doesn't necessarily want us to do that, but the things that God does want us to do are there and we can understand the main points. I've also added to that, that we can understand if we use normal means.

So, what would you do if you were trying to understand any book? Well, you would read it from starting at the beginning working through to the end, for example.

[20 : 22] You wouldn't read it backwards. You wouldn't expect to understand it if you read it backwards. You'd read it in the normal way. If there were words you didn't understand, you'd look them up in a dictionary.

Things like that. God has spoken to us in human language, using the human conventions of language, and we are to use the normal human means in order to understand it.

Now, one of the interesting things is that the Quran, so I understand, I'm open to correction on this, but the Quran loses its power if you take it out of Arabic into another language.

But the day of Pentecost proves that it is possible to speak about the saving works of God in all different languages. So that message is in essence translatable without losing its power into ordinary language such as English.

So, although each fine detail you might say, well, I need to look this up in a reference book or something like that, but for the main point, we have a Bible in our own language, we ought to be able to come to a reasonable understanding of what it says using ordinary means.

[21 : 45] means. So, it's not without using means, it is using ordinary means. Then I put another point there, that we need to be in prayer, we need to pray when we come to the Bible because it's not just an ordinary book, it is written in ordinary English language, but it isn't just an ordinary book, it's God's word, and we are seeking to have something like a conversation with God when we open his book.

So, I put prayer, it doesn't have to be a long, flashy prayer, but just saying, Lord, please can you help me to understand the Bible this morning or this evening or whenever it is I'm reading it this lunch time.

A prayer, it's at least respectful, isn't it? And if you were talking to somebody, you'd, you'd, well, if you were expecting to understand what somebody was saying, you would make it a two-way thing, so prayer.

And I've also put there, by the Holy Spirit. Paul tells us that there is this thing that people can understand the words and yet not appreciate the spiritual impact of them, and he says, and I haven't got the reference, that spiritual things are spiritually discerned.

So a clever linguist or a clever reader of English language could read the Bible and say, well, yeah, I understand that. And if you said to them, but do you feel your need to turn to Christ?

[23 : 29] They might say, well, not necessarily. Do you believe what you've written? Not necessarily. see, there is that importance of the work of the Spirit. So that's why I put is it easy or difficult?

Well, God speaks so that we can understand, so we can understand the main points using normal means as we pray and as the Holy Spirit helps us.

And I have one reference for this, which was Psalm 19 verse 7. Psalm 19 verse 7.

Enid, please, could you read us Psalm 19 verse 7? The Lord and the Spirit and the Spirit and the Spirit make it wise the simple.

Thank you. So it was just that little point at the end. Making wise the simple. You don't have to have a PhD in order to understand the statutes of the Lord.

[24 : 54] He makes wise the simple. So it's much more to do with the soul that is genuinely wanting to hear what God's saying than being terribly clever and knowing the original languages and all that sort of stuff.

So that point there. Is that fair enough? At this point I completely forgot that I'd started numbering. So I've got two lists here. one list of what sort of goodness we might expect the Bible to have for us and a second list of how we might in practice seek to make that our own practice and our own experience.

experience. So what sort of goodness does the Bible give? I did put a little caricature which I think I've left behind. Yeah, I have.

So realistic expectations and what I keep coming back to is it's not a magic book.

[26 : 19] It's not magic. It won't we shouldn't expect God to speak to us in some sort of zapping way.

It's difficult to try and put it in the make sure you're not saying contradicting the right thing. Okay, let's do it this thing. What can we expect?

So I put a list of things there and you can tell me whether you agree with them and if you can think of anywhere where the Bible says this. So I've put that the Bible gives comfort.

So I'm thinking of security. What's another word for comfort? In this sense.

Think about that. encouragement. Encouragement is a word which isn't just about feeling positive.

[27 : 29] It does include courage. So presumably if you encourage people, you put them in a position where they are having courage to go and do whatever they're supposed to do.

encouragement. So I put conviction and challenge. So that would be the idea that the Bible doesn't just pat us on the head all the time but it says to us actually you're deeply wrong in what you are thinking and you're deeply wrong in what you are doing or failing to do.

and the Bible I'm saying and you can tell me whether you agree with me in a minute has the power to in quite a sharp way and an unmistakable way to say to us you're wrong on this point.

So to convict us and to challenge us and I put assurance which perhaps isn't that different from comfort but I'm thinking of being made sure so that we're not wibbly wobbly in what we believe so we believe it strongly for a few minutes and then we're not sure what we do to make us sure and then I've put training in righteousness so that we have the skills in living to live rightly in all the different situations that we face and then I put reasons for praise so that's my so that's my list of things that we might expect the Bible to give to us so A do you agree with the list and B is there anything else that you think ought to be on the list true isn't it yes let's write that down is there any sort of information that you had in mind particularly thank you some of those

Yes, consolation, isn't it? Yes. Yes.

[31 : 09] Yes. Thank you.

Yes. Yes. I had in mind Romans 15 verse 4 a part of that which includes a number of those things Romans 15 verse 4 Martin, could you give us Romans 15 verse 4 please Thank you I was sort of linking endurance and encouragement with scripture rightly or wrongly the idea the one that I had in my mind is through the patience and encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope but anyway he says here that scripture does give encouragement so that was one of the texts I had in mind for putting encouragement yeah yeah yep thank you Rachel were you thinking of a song yes yes oh right

I wasn't thinking of that one very good very good yes yes and interesting that one of the ways of meditating on scripture is by singing seems to me that that's one of the advantages of song that it does stick in your mind and you can bring it back again quite quite easily well at least some of the phrases stick in one's mind I think that in itself is is part of this meditating on the law of the Lord and bringing to one's mind the things that are that God has said yep knowledge knowledge thank you yeah that's right

I suppose I end up with a a very long list of things that scripture does but it certainly provides us so that we know things so we know what the Lord did we know what he said we know what God did in the in the Old Testament and all of those things are feeding to our faith aren't they is that what you were yeah yes yes yes yes that's right yeah yeah yeah yes it yeah yeah yes how we become part of that story now Catherine was saying and again I'm open to correction that the Quran doesn't do that it's not a story it's just a set of sayings that are put down one after another in not not a sequential order but the Bible is a a story isn't it it follows through and part of getting to understand any part of the Bible is how it fits into that story so it's very difficult unless you've got an idea of where it's all going to yeah is there a part in the Bible where it specifically says it trains us in righteousness 2 Timothy 3 16 2 Timothy 3 16

Chris could you read that to us please scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching rebuking correcting and training with righteousness so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped and effective thank you that's a quite a comprehensive statement isn't it all scripture is God breathed and then it says what sort of good things it's useful for so teaching which we've touched on rebuking which we've mentioned correcting which we've mentioned training in righteousness which is the phrase I used on the screen and the idea that the man of God or the I think we could extend that to the reader may be thoroughly equipped for every good work so it's something about the sufficiency of scripture every good work whatever good work it is the Bible is able to equip us for it thoroughly

in other words we don't there is not such a thing as a good work for which we have to go outside the Bible to get our advice because the Bible is incapable of instructing us on that point scripture is there so that we may be thoroughly equipped for every good work so that was a list of things of the sort of goodnesses that we might rightly expect the Bible to give us it won't in that list

[38 : 07] I don't think we should have a bit that says that the Bible will sort of magically tell us which what the answers are going to be in our exam or what job to apply for or what university to apply for or things like that the Bible enables us to make those sorts of decisions that's part of the training in righteousness but we shouldn't expect the Bible in some magical way to tell us ah you should have gone to Surrey or whatever it is a bit late now isn't it do you see what I mean anyway so second list God's word is supernatural but not magic so we shouldn't this is how we come to the Bible so this is my list see what you think so not by forgetting the things we already know so I don't think the

Bible is designed so that when we read our if we read if we were in the habit of reading a paragraph or a couple of paragraphs when we've woken up we shouldn't expect that paragraph to say everything as if we'd never heard anything else before it's not by forgetting the things we already know part of meditation on scripture part of our spiritual duty is to remember and it's helpful if the passage that we're reading reminds us of things and if it doesn't we might have to remind ourselves some other way so for example in Leviticus it's not going to remind us of the facts of the gospel unless we bring other things in so we might have to say we will supplement this by reading from the gospel of Mark or something else do you see what I mean so not by forgetting the things we already know not by reading at random so there was an idea that if you know if you just sort of threw the Bible up in the air see what page it is when it opens and read the first thing that comes to your mind that that is a particularly spiritual way of God speaking to you but I don't think it is I don't think the Bible is designed to work like that not by reading at random but by prayer with repentance and responsiveness using the mind with help from guides with others using technology with obedience with habit and perseverance perseverance and that was my second list so let's just for a few minutes see what we think about that is that sensible or are there other things that you think ought to be on that list it's a great prayer place that you say well I'm not quite sure where I'm going with most of this but this bit here I know what that bit means and

I can make that into a prayer or as you say take it with you through the day I must say I'm not very good at doing that but there's usually something that you can fix on yeah so I didn't quite catch the last bit you said but you said respect yeah thank you yes yes I suppose there's an interesting question as to what respect means yeah yeah as opposed to triviality as opposed to flippancy so saying

I'm reading this and I really do take it seriously I remember Steve Slater who was and to a sentence is a missionary in Russia saying that he was rebuked as an evangelical by the attitude of the orthodox people because they wouldn't read the bible sitting up in bed because it was disrespectful whereas Steve said that he would do you think that is it respectful to read the bible in bed yeah I think it is yes I don't think it's a matter of your bodily posture so much as your mental attitude isn't it that you're taking it seriously yes yes

[44 : 25] Let's...

Yeah. Yeah.

Yeah. Somebody who's been there before, knows their way around. Yeah. I think that's right. And I think also you're right to point out there is a...

It's not so much a pitfall, but something to be wary of, that you find a good guide and you end up reading the guide and taking more notice of the guide than the Bible.

And I suppose what this is saying is we've just got to keep... Do things to keep Bible reading fresh.

[45 : 51] So if you've been using such and such a set of notes, which are very helpful, I mean, my experience is I find them helpful, and then after a while I think, oh, this has stopped being fresh and try some different ones or try a different...

a different thing or a different book or something like that. In some ways I think the important thing is to do it, really, is to be opening the Bible and reading it.

It is a recipe for wandering away from the Lord, isn't it?

Yeah. But if you don't need the Bible, then it's a very much available, you know, the Bible isn't available to understand what is speaking through it and I remember it goes through different factors, I remember who was in the dark so you know, sometimes it goes in one eye and out the other at

times and I'm sure you've had that experience and so it's a good thing to do because you don't have to come back to it. Yes, I agree with you on that.

How do you think to follow that quotient challenge? I would say, read it with quotient, once you know it, you're going to have to change the ways you can use it.

[47 : 33] I didn't quite understand that. Read it with quotient, if you're scared, you might read it with no other things, you're going to have to change it. Right, yes.

So read it with red, red and change it. Okay, yeah, so it's a sort of, in the same areas I put of responsiveness. Yes, I think there is an issue if we know there's something wrong in our lives and we're not prepared to change it, that Bible reading does become a bit of a hollow exercise and one wouldn't really expect it to be particularly real and meaningful if there's something in one's life that one is, that one knows one is just not.

Being obedient about. Being obedient about. I think there are situations where, as you go, because there are some things that we like to do right, the previous thing, you know, we've made a problem. And now we've made a problem. Sometimes because of the way they, the place they are in your lives. Sometimes you, you know, again, back to just sort of, I say the law of God's word.

Yes. Sometimes that, um, it's now what we need to think about. I think that one would do something like that. Yes, that's right. There's things that are, in a way, legitimate, which can become too important, distracting, and they can be things that are good in themselves.

[49 : 14] I suppose we could say they become idols if they, if they become, loom too large. And the Bible is there to point that out. Yep. I mentioned this reading with others.

So, there is an importance about meditating on the law of the Lord oneself.

But reading with others, reading, perhaps, if you're a married person with your husband or wife, or reading with a group, Bible study group, reading the Bible in the family.

If you look back into previous centuries, when there were households and servants that lived in, the Christian householders would actually set a great store by getting the servants together in the morning, reading the Bible, praying, and then they go about their business.

And then having prayers for the household again in the evening. So, I mean, most of us, most of us don't have servants, do we? I think the idea of group Bible reading, if it's in the family, I would commend that very much.

[50 : 32] So, Pastor Les, when we had next door 70 Viaduct Road, and Les had all his students, however many, 8 or 12 students, he'd come back from work, cook up value burgers, mashed potato, and frozen beans, and feed these 12 hungry students.

And there would always be a Bible reading and prayer. And that was an important, I think that was an important part of that community. And what about with habit and perseverance?

Would you agree with that, Chris? Yes. Yeah. Say it again. Say it again. Yes.

So, what's the definition of a hollow habit then? When you were saying about, there's no point in reading, so what's the challenge of your life?

And you're not really reading, it's just, I'm going to get this done. If you're not reading, you're just seeing it. It was a team, you just took it off. Yeah. Yeah.

[51 : 51] Yeah. If it was like that. Yes. It was like that. It was like a time spread out. It was like a time spread out. It was like the circumstances or whatever sometimes, it becomes like that. Yeah.

The problem is, do you say, well, you should stop reading the Bible. in the Bible. And then it becomes more difficult to go back to it. The sense of going back to the prayer is important. Sometimes it happens in my class when we don't feel the prayers are getting there. If we still read and we still attempt to pray, the testimony of many people is that then the sort of warmth does come back. Yes. I agree with that. Yes. Yes.

Yes. Yes. I think doing something just so you can tick it off a list is rather dismissive and disrespectful to that activity. But persevering with something that we know we should be doing even if we're finding it unrewarding temporarily I think is a right thing to do. Jesus had habits.

It says he went into the synagogue as his habit was. And as his custom was. So I think habit as such is our friend in this. It's like with many things in the Christian life or a certain number of things.

If you know you're just going to do that anyway rather than thinking shall I, shan't I, do I feel the Lord leading me to do this, whatever. If we say, well I always read the Bible at lunch time. When I've, well having my sandwiches I know I'm going to be not disturbed but I always read the Bible. And it gives me an opportunity to pray. A habit is a good thing. If you're a commuter, I know

commuters have that section of time and they might say, well I always read a good book or I always read my Bible on the train. And I just do that. And it, those sorts of things pay off I think as the years go by. Okay, that's what I was going to look at. Thank you very much for your contribution and I hope that was helpful. Let's close by singing 7, 6, 8.