

On Reading the Bible

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Preacher: Canon Dr. J.I. Packer

- [0 : 0 0] The first of what I hope will be a number of what I'm now calling Fireside Chats with Dr. Packer. Please join me in welcoming him.
- Well, brothers and sisters, this is wonderful. I mean, all we need is the fire and we can get on without that.
- And I will attempt to chat in an appropriate way. I have something fairly informal to share with you.
- There may be some stumbling and some fumbling because I have always spoken from notes. People haven't always recognized that.
- And indeed, I've tried to conceal it. But at the moment, speaking from notes requires that I write some notes to speak from.
- [1 : 1 6] And my eye condition makes writing extremely difficult. So there may be a little stumbling and fumbling.
- And I treat you as friends. And I'm not going to be bothered by it. And so you better hadn't be either. Okay, well, Alexandra has given you her title.
- Now I'll give you mine. I shall be doing this with the magnifier to try and ease the reading of the notes and then the spouting of the story.
- My title for what finally emerged from the hopper was on and is on reading the Bible.
- And it's a mix, in fact. There is Bible directly in the talk.
- [2 : 3 3] There is also history. There is also a bit of personal reminiscence. You will pardon that, I'm sure, for no one can dispute that I reached the point in life which is commonly referred to, at least behind people's backs, as anecdotage.
- So here I go on the best I can do with the eye condition I have to live with.
- And so I'm going to say something about the collect for the second Sunday in Advent.
- The collect that we have just used in our worship. I'm going to say some things which I think fit the end of a learner's exchange season.
- And as I said, there's going to be a little bit of personal stuff, which I suppose may cause joy, may cause sorrow, or may simply distract your attention.
- [4 : 0 4] I don't know. But we'll find out as we go along. Now, let's begin with the collect for the second Sunday in Advent.
- Its first appearance in the world was in Thomas Cranmer's first prayer book, produced in 1549.
- My guess is, however, that he composed it a little earlier. Why do I think that?
- Well, for one reason, because it's heavier in doctrine and substance than most of the collects in the prayer book.

And the second reason is that not many years before, when Cranmer was already Archbishop of Canterbury, there had been a momentous event in the English church, Henry VIII, with quite unusual charity towards the things that his archbishop stood for, had allowed Cranmer to plant, or at least to ordain the planting, in every parish church in England, of the Great Bible.

[5 : 52] Do you know what I'm referring to? The Great Bible actually was mostly Tyndale. It was Tyndale's work completed, and then printed, in large type, in a Bible that was at least three feet long by two feet wide.

And that Bible was something like six inches thick, and it was, I think I said, and I do say now, planted in every parish church and chained there.

The idea was that in every parish church there should be, at all times, a Bible that could be read and would be read by those who had the skill of reading.

It was not a literate society, at least in the country churches, the country villages. It wasn't. But in any country village there would be someone who could read.

And it seems clear that Cranmer's vision was that the arrangement should be made for this someone or a schedule of readers to be in church to read the Bible aloud to those who wanted to learn what was in the Bible.

[7 : 42] they would come and listen. And the chain, well, you can work out for yourself what that was for, just as you can work out what the enormous size of the Bible was for.

precious things tend to get stolen in this fallen world. And Cranmer didn't want the great Bible to need replacing in the 10,000 parish churches of England into which it was to be set.

Well, the experiment was abortive because within a couple of years Henry VIII had changed his mind and come to think that the general reading of the Bible was an unhappy thing for the kingdom.

He meant, of course, by that, his kingdom. And therefore, the whole thing must be abolished and it was. And Cranmer, patient fellow, could only roll his eyes and wait for the next reign to begin.

Edward VI. And by then, he was in a position to publish the 1549 prayer book.

[9 : 13] And since... Sorry, it's 1549 prayer book and hoped very soon to be able to implement his vision of the Bible being read in every parish church.

Okay, that's the scenario. it doesn't seem as if much ever came of it in practice. Perhaps because all the readers, the literate people in so many of the parish churches couldn't give the time to sitting for hours by the Bible waiting for people to come in and listen to some reading of it.

But however that may be, the second collect in Advent survives as a memento or monument of that experiment and that vision, shall I say, on Cranmer's part.

and we, finally, are the beneficiaries because the second collect, sorry, the collect for the second Sunday in Advent, that's what I'm trying to say, is in fact a magnificent statement of the approach to the Bible, the only approach to the Bible that is healthy and enlivening and it's all there.

I don't know if you've ever meditated your way through the collect for the second Sunday in Advent, but if you have, you will have been amazed, as I have been amazed, by how much is contained in that all when I say it's all there.

[11 : 25] we'll glance our way through it, through the collect, I mean, before we finish this morning. But having said that much, filled you in on the history, I would like for the moment to change the subject and become anecdotal and tell you how I first met the reality of personal Bible study.

At the top of our road in Gloucester, England, where the Packer family lived, was a, well, what do we say, a failed farm farm, and in the farmhouse was a family, and there were children in the family, and some were older than myself, and some were younger, and I was drawn into the life of this family, first, by an invitation to join them one evening to play a most wonderful game, so it was presented, a most wonderful game, which somebody had discovered, and which they all thought was too good to keep to themselves.

What was it? Well, I dare say that your knowledge of the world and its ways will enable you to pick it up. It was Monopoly, the best board game in the world.

No one wants to challenge that. Good. Let me continue. And I remember that evening of playing Monopoly because we had, I think, two or three hours of, how do I describe it?

Well, it was enormous fun. If you have ever played for Monopoly, I'm sure that you know how it is when a Monopoly mood catches all players.

[14 : 13] And, well, the fun comes unmitten. All right, so it did there. I was, I suppose, eight or nine at the time.

And that got me into the family home. From time to time, I was tagging along the things they were doing in the home and from the home and became friends at that level.

And the next thing I remember was, I suppose, two or three years on, the mother of the children, the lady who effectively ran the farm, ran the farmhouse because that's what it was, she was at the front door talking to my mother and telling my mother, I can remember, I was standing by my mother when all this happened, telling my mother that they had a Bible study one evening every week in their home and they would like to invite me to it.

And I think I can remember, though this may be fancy, that my mother was showing signs of discomfort in the way that she did, which was not a way that everybody could read.

I mean, she was always polite, positive, so on, but I could see that she felt embarrassed about this.

[16 : 10] However, she didn't feel able to say no, so, yes, I was allowed to go to the Bible study. And I went to the Bible study, and I can distinctly remember the first study that I was part of, sitting in the living room of the farmhouse with her second husband.

The first husband actually had died. He was a heart patient in his forties, and, well, there's another story there, but I'll not tell it.

She had remarried, and it was her second husband who was running the Bible study. And what would you expect to find, that they were studying?

Well, feel free to guess, and I guarantee that you'll guess wrong. He was taking the group through the 13th chapter of Jeremiah.

How many of you, I wonder, could tell me off the cuff what the 13th chapter of Jeremiah is all about? Oh, it's about Jeremiah buying a loincloth at the word of the Lord.

[17 : 41] in a group of friends like this, I think I could, I can translate it into modern English and say, buying underwear.

Well, that's what he did at the word of the Lord, and then the Lord said, now go to the river Euphrates, which is about a hundred miles away, and hide it.

Well, you'll find a place to hide it on the bank. So, Jeremiah did, and then he says, after a long time, the Lord told him to go back to the river Euphrates, and reclaim the loincloth, which, of course, was rotten and no use to anybody.

And it was actually an active parable of the decline of Israel into practical ungodliness, something which, I suppose, two-thirds of the chapters in Jeremiah are all about.

Well, how would you react to the knowledge that we're having a family Bible study, and we're going to do Jeremiah 13?

[19 : 14] Now, I'll tell you, the second husband had quite a gift, actually, for exposition, and it was, to me, who was 11 or 12 at the time, quite an interesting occasion.

Well, I don't think, honestly, that that's a matter to be laughed at. I mean, if I may put it this way, there's nothing particularly funny about underwear.

But, anyway, that's what he was doing, and he continued to do it, one evening a week, and from time to time, as circumstances permit, I was with him and the family, and more of the word of God than ever I'd known before was going in.

I didn't realize how much I was absorbing. but that's how my own concern for Bible study began.

It was interesting. God was interesting. Hmm, let us continue. So, having told you that as something that actually happened to me before I'd really appreciated the fact that it was happening, I will now go back with you and take you with me, I hope, to the collect, and ask you to notice the elaborate way in which Cranmer spelled out what was involved in Bible study that was serious.

[21 : 21] Read. Well, if you can read, if you're literate, do it yourself. Otherwise, of course, get someone else to read the Bible to you.

Mark. What does that mean? That means note. Take seriously what you're reading.

Ask yourself, what is there here that I should remember? And setting yourself to bear it in mind in such a way that you won't forget it.

Learn. Well, you learn when you understand what written material is, as we say, in aid of, what it is that it carries by way of message and is seeking to put across to readers.

Well, we're to do that with the Bible. We're to let the Bible speak about what it's concerned to speak about. and we should set ourselves to remember those important things as we discern them.

[22 : 47] And it isn't just a matter of remembering. We are to inwardly digest it, which means what nowadays we express by talking the language of meditation and telling each other how we understand meditation as a matter of so thinking through the material that the Bible has presented to us that we take it to heart as a message from God to ourselves as to every other Bible reader who takes it to heart and takes it to heart and you take it to heart in a practical way.

It will tell you how to behave, it will tell you what to do, it will tell you what not to do, it will tell you what you can hope for, etc., etc., you inwardly digest all that's there, all that comes through to you as you seriously read.

and Cranmer puts all of this into the collect and it comes up in the church for us as for others every year, second Sunday in Advent, and the challenges are, not the challenge simply is, you could see it coming.

Are you inwardly digesting scripture, which no doubt you read on a regular basis, but are you inwardly digesting it?

That's the question. Is it being allowed to shape, perhaps to reshape your life? Well, this is what you have in the collect for the second Sunday in Advent, and you will agree with me, it's a mouthful, it's a mindful, it's a life task, and Cranmer, a teacher, as he was, great teacher, Cranmer is making the fullest use of his opportunity to encourage people to let the Bible shape their lives.

[25 : 53] well, that's what it's all about, that's what we're brooding on in this talk. You ask the question, so you should, it's the question, actually, that Alexandra asked right at the beginning when she introduced me, why read all this and practice all this life-changing discipline?

Answer, and indeed the answer itself is given in the collect, so you've got it in your mind already, I'm sure.

learn, and keep learning and relearning to embrace what the Bible is setting before you, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which God has given you by giving you the Bible.

and it's the hope of everlasting life, which is given in our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Cranmer is a realistic teacher. He knows that you can only say so much at any one time, and he's coming to the end of a very heavily loaded prayer, as we've seen, and he recognises that it won't be much use to start another weighted and heavy weight subject in detail in the prayer, so he doesn't do it.

[28 : 00] He simply says that through patience and the strengthening ministry, that's the significance of comfort, through patience and the strengthening ministry of the scriptures, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life.

life. Here it is fairly heavy phraseology, as you can see, although Cranmer is holding back a great deal. The blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Christ. Sometimes, when I'm teaching, I have said, the Bible is a unity, and if you will give me two words to use, I shall be able to show you that unity.

the two words are prepositions, one is through, and the other is in.

Here you got in. And as Cranmer refers to the hope that God has given us, in our Savior, Jesus Christ.

[29 : 40] You can see, perhaps, without my needing to say it, that in and through are the prepositions that one needs in order to spell out everything, yes, everything, that the Bible says about the relation between us needy sinners and our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Christ. The meaning, shall I say, of the link is reinforced by a third word.

We could get on without it, but it's much better when we use it. The third word is the word our, which he's given us, the hope that he's given us in our Savior, Jesus Christ.

And I am sure that as he wrote this, Cranmer resolved afresh that right at the center of his ministry as Archbishop of Canterbury and composer of the prayer book and so on and so forth, would be the relationship between us needy sinners and the Lord Jesus Christ, our Savior, as we exercise faith, that is, as we approach our Savior, as what the Bible says he is, that is, the one who is supremely concerned about all of us all the time.

Perhaps I better not say all, I better say every one of us, every moment of time. Yes, and when we've spelled out that relationship in full, we've got all the theology that people like me have ever taught, because this is, how do I say it, this is its nervous system, this is its internal linkage, understanding life in and through the Savior in whom and with whom we share divine life, understanding the Savior by whose ministry in his incarnate life, the salvation that the

[33 : 05] Father had planned actually came our way, that's the heart of the matter and it embraces ultimately everything.

Don't be alarmed, I am not going to show you that even on the small scale this morning. Time marches on and it's already nearly quarter to ten for the next business of Sunday worship.

But this is where Cranmer in his composition for the second Sunday in Advent points the finger, directs the attention and insists, I think that's fair to say, insists on being heard.

I see my job in this well, what has this been?

A ramble really, I suppose. But I see my job in this ramble, today's talk, in the terms that I've spelled out, the terms that he's spelled out, and I want to say, as I close, that in fact, everything is there.

[34 : 45] And I think that we at St. John's do need always to be reminding ourselves that everything is there in and through the Lord Jesus Christ who is our life.

Just because in the world of professed Christianity and in the world that has turned its back on professed Christianity, Christians often see themselves as called to contend for a system.

And as they contend for the system, however biblical and however true, their personal relation with the Lord Jesus Christ gets pushed into the background.

Not off the stage, goodness, no, knows, but in the background. While the question of contending for the truth becomes the primary interest.

Brothers and sisters, it shouldn't be quite like that. Contending for the truth, yes, is the way and the means to the destination, but the destination is a personal relation with the Lord Jesus, which ought to be our central concern from morning to night every day, and to which climatically, as I may say it, this collect for the second Sunday in Advent directs us.

[36 : 42] I did say that the word comfort speaks of an active strengthening ministry from God.

Perhaps I ought to amplify that a little, because the Latin verb confortare, from which the English comfort comes, does definitely mean impart strength.

You probably have heard at some point in your pilgrimage that in the Bayer tapestry in France, where the invasion of England by, what's his name, by the Norman, the Norman army, the invasion, the tapestry of the invasion, there's a scene for which the Latin inscription on the tapestry is Harold, that's the English king, comfort that's comforts in Latin, comforts his troops, and the form of the comfort which is being illustrated is encouragement, raising morale, imparting strength, exhorting them to fight the best fight of which they're capable, and so on and so forth.

comforts in our day has come to refer primarily to the comfort of the cushion, and in sermons and similar discourses, you do sometimes hear the health-giving contrast drawn between the comfort of the cushion and the comfort of the cross.

well, if Cranmer could come back and explain what he had in mind when he spoke of comfort through the scriptures, I am sure he would be talking about Christ and the cross and the way in which strength comes to us from that source in the way that we preachers sometimes do in these days.

[39 : 32] Well, now, I told you that this talk would be a ramble, and indeed such it has been. And now the time has come to stop, so what am I going to do?

Well, I'm going to stop. What did you think? Now, we have ten minutes, I think, don't we, for questions and discussion.

Do you have time for a couple of questions? Mm-hmm. I have a question. Well, yes. I don't want to go first, but now that I put myself first.

So, for an undisciplined Bible reader, do we start at the beginning and go through? Do we pick one from the old, one from the new? What advice would you give?

I would advise, make a plan, and make the plan manageable. That is, don't plan to read the whole Bible in a single calendar year, if you can't give enough time day by day to doing that.

[40 : 56] Day by day you would have to give time to read, on average, three and a half chapters a day. And most of us, frankly, can't do that.

Make a realistic plan, read the Bible in two years, read the Bible in three years. Yes, but make a plan to read the whole of it. And then, whatever you do, add to the plan, a further plan, to keep reading the Gospels.

I would say, plan to read all four Gospels several times a year. Why? Well, because there we meet the Savior direct.

If I had more time, I would like to show you how each of the four Gospels is consciously, purposefully, laboriously, even, projecting the person of the Lord Jesus Christ in such a way that the reader may never forget, should never forget, that the Savior is still the person that he was then, and the Savior is still a person coming, shall I say, coming at each of us in the way that he came at people, needy folk, in the days of his flesh.

I am, for better or for worse, an author, and as an author, I've had to think over and over, now how am I going to get this over, in such a way that people can't miss it.

[43 : 04] I've spoken already, just in a single sentence, about people missing the fact that Christ is central to the scriptures, because they're so concerned to vindicate the system of truth, which the scriptures teach, in order that Christ may be understood.

and yes, it can happen again, and it must happen. Make a plan then, that you will read the Gospels more than you read any other part of the Bible, and that you will focus on the living Lord, who is your life, the one in whom and through whom, as I said, we live, we hope, and will finally enjoy the glory.

nothing must take priority over that. And in our daily meditations and prayers, nothing must take priority over that.

And I sometimes shake my head, as I say, evangelicals distinguish themselves by laboring the truth of the Gospel, and they allow the Lord Jesus to be lost sight of.

He's on the stage, yes, but there's stage furniture of one sort or another in front of him, so that we don't focus on him day by day.

[44 : 53] And now I come back to where I was in my talk and finish this unduly long answer. Sorry. Maybe, is there another question?

And then we'll... Could Dr. Packer read the whole of that collect as one of them to... Sorry, say that again. Read the collect? Read the collect.

Could you read the whole collect just right through it to reach up each length? I will recite it. I haven't got a prayer book with me, but I think I can recite it without going wrong.

Let us see. Blessed Lord, who has caused all Holy Scripture to be written for our learning.

You can work out to whom the word our should be applied in these days. To whom the...

[45 : 52] to cause all Holy Scripture to be written for our learning. Grant that we may in such wise hear them that was Cranmer writing.

Do you want me to help? Hear them? Read. Mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy Holy Word we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life which thou hast given us in our Savior Jesus Christ.

Amen, of course. Thank you. Thank you. Well, I don't know of any other speaker that in our reduced format could cover the four pillars of learners exchange.

Christian history, Anglicanism, the Bible, and our personal walk with Christ. So thank you so much. Who would have thought one game of Monopoly and... There we are.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.