

THE BIBLE GIVES HOPE AND COURAGE

- A. Introduction: We're talking about the importance of becoming a regular, systematic reader of the Bible (especially the New Testament) as part of a larger discussion on our inheritance in Christ. Acts 20:32
1. Regular reading means: Read everyday or as close to that as possible. Systematic reading means: Read each book from start to finish. The purpose of this type of reading is to become familiar with the Bible. Understanding comes with familiarity. Don't stop to look up words you don't understand or get out the concordance. You can do that at another time. Just read.
 - a. We don't read out of religious obligation or to earn brownie points with God. We read for the same reason we eat food. Just as food is vital for our physical well being, God's Word is vital to our spiritual well being. It's food for our inner man. It nourishes and strengthens us. It builds us up and changes us. Matt 4:4; I Pet 2:2; I John 2:14; James 1:21; I Thess 2:13; etc.
 - b. We read to get to know God. The Living Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, is revealed through the written Word, the Bible. John 6:63; 5:39,46; etc.
 2. This type of reading renews your mind by changing your perspective. It helps you see things the way God sees them and gives you a framework from which to understand and deal with life. Rom 12:2
 - a. Regular, systematic reading will help you see that there's more to life than just this life and enable you keep things in perspective. It will lift you up in the midst of life's challenges. II Cor 4:17,18
 - b. Regular, systematic reading makes you aware of and helps you access the unseen realm or kingdom of full power and provision available to you now that you are God's son or daughter. Rom 10:17
 - c. Regular, systematic reading helps you see the big picture. Becoming a Christian is like putting a puzzle together. You gather pieces as you listen to sermons. But unless you see the picture on the box you won't know where to put the pieces or if a particular piece even belongs to the puzzle.
 3. A plan is unfolding. God purposed in eternity past to have a family with whom He can dwell and made earth to be home for His family. The plan went off track when Adam sinned and human nature was fundamentally altered. The material world was infused with corruption and death and Satan became the god of this world. Eph 1:4,5; Isa 45:18; Rom 5:12-19; Rom 8:20; II Cor 4:4; etc
 - a. Jesus came to earth the first time to pay the price for sin so it can be removed from all who bow their knee to Him as Savior and Lord and a process of transformation can begin—a process that turns sinners into holy righteous sons and daughters of God. He'll come again to cleanse the family home of corruption and death and establish the visible kingdom of God on earth.
 - b. The Bible is a collection of 66 books and letters (or epistles) that together tell the story of God's desire for a family and the lengths to which He has gone to have this family through Jesus.
 1. It isn't a promise book with answers for your immediate problems or a book listing the steps to living an abundant life. It's a revelation of Almighty God and His plan to have a family.
 2. All 66 writings adds to and advances the story of redemption or God's plan to deliver His creation from corruption and death and carry out His original purpose for a family.
 3. We are living in the years just prior to the Lord's return to complete the plan. God's Word describes these times as perilous (II Tim 3:1). But the Bible helps us understand and navigate this period. It gives us hope for the future and courage for the present—another reason we need to read.
- B. Let's begin with a brief summary of the New Testament. It consists of 27 books and letters all written by eyewitnesses (or close associates of eyewitnesses) to the events of which they wrote.
1. The first four books, the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John), are selective biographies of Jesus' life and ministry ending with His death and resurrection. All were written so that men would believe that Jesus is the Christ "and that by believing you may have life in his name (John 20:31--NIV).
 - a. Matthew (tax collector) and John (fisherman) were part of the original twelve disciples. Mark (his family was prominent in the Jerusalem church) and Luke (a Greek physician) traveled with Paul.

- b. These are real people who wrote about what they saw and experienced. Much of the information is repeated in the four books but each has a different emphasis and targets a particular audience.
 - 2. The Gospels are followed by the Book of Acts which is a record of the first apostles as they went out to preach Jesus and the resurrection and established communities of believers (or churches).
 - a. Next are the 21 epistles or letters written to those who became followers of Jesus through the ministries of the apostles. They deal with what Christians believe and how we're to live.
 - 1. Paul wrote the bulk of the epistles (14). His are grouped together at the beginning. Each one is named for the church or individual to whom it was written.
 - 2. The other 7 are named for the authors, Peter and John (part of the original twelve disciples), James and Jude (half-brothers of Jesus).
 - b. Last is the Book of Revelation, a record of a vision given to the apostle John of events leading up to the return of Jesus. It ends with the completion of the plan, God on earth with His family.
 - 3. The men whom God used to write the New Testament understood that a plan was unfolding, lived their lives in the light of it, and instructed the first generation of believers to do the same.
 - a. The fact that a plan is unfolding and that there's more to life than just this life permeates their writings. They all expected Jesus to return during their lifetimes to complete the plan.
 - 1. Only four of the New Testament writings contain no references to the return of Jesus—and three of them are short, personal letters (Galatians, Philemon, II and III John).
 - 2. Luke recorded Jesus' first message to believers after He returned to Heaven: I'll be back (Acts 1:11). Peter, in one of his first sermons, proclaimed that Jesus has returned to Heaven until the times of the restitution of all things (Acts 3:21). Restitution (in the Greek) means to restore something to its former state. "Until the final recovery of all things from sin" (TLB).
 - 3. Paul's writings are laced with the statements about the age in which we live coming to an end and a new one beginning when Jesus returns. I Cor 11:XX; Heb 2:5--the coming habitable earth (Rotherham); the future world (NLT); Heb 6:5; I Cor 10:11; 11:26; etc.
 - b. We are part of something bigger than ourselves and knowledge of the big picture, the overall plan of God, gives this present life meaning and purpose from which we can draw hope and courage.
 - 1. II Pet 3:13--Peter faced death as a martyr with the hope that this world will be made new and he'll be part of it. New means new in quality, superior in character as opposed to new in time.
 - 2. II Tim 4:6-8; 18--Paul faced also death with this same awareness. There's more to come.
- C. None of this means there's no "practical help for how to live life" in the Bible, but a right perspective is vital. The Bible is clear that times will grow more and more difficult in the days before the Lord returns.
 - 1. God's unfolding plan has been opposed by the devil since he gained control on earth through Adam's sin as he seeks to hold on to his kingdom and prevent the establishment of the kingdom of God here.
 - a. Following Adam's disobedience the Lord told Satan: the Seed (the Redeemer) of the woman will come and bruise your head or destroy your power and lordship over men. Gen 3:15
 - b. Satan went to work to stop the coming Redeemer. We could do many lessons, but consider this.
 - 1. Matt 2:16,17--When Jesus was born, evil King Herod had all the children in the region age two and under murdered in an attempt to kill Jesus.
 - 2. Then he inspired wicked men to turn Jesus over to Rome to be crucified in an attempt to thwart His efforts. Luke 22:3; Matt 26:45; Acts 2:23; I Cor 2:7,8
 - 2. During His earth ministry Jesus revealed that He was not at that time going to establish the visible kingdom of God. Rather it would take a different form—the kingdom of God in human hearts through new birth (the beginning of the process that turns sinners into holy sons). Luke 17:20,21; Rom 8:29,30
 - a. Jesus further revealed that the kingdom would advance through the preaching of the Word of God and that Satan would work to stop the spread and effectiveness of God's Word. Matt 13:1-30
 - 1. Opposition to the disciples began immediately and progressed from warnings not to preach to beatings to jail to death. Acts 4:17; Acts 5:17,19; 28,40; Acts 7:54-60; Acts 8:1-4; etc.

2. Unbelieving Jews followed Paul everywhere he went, accused him of undermining the Law of Moses and stirred up mobs against him. Acts 13:44,50; Acts 14:2,5,19; Acts 17:1-15; etc.
- b. False teachers and various erroneous teachings and heresies (teachings contrary to what Jesus said and did) also began to appear, influencing new converts.
 1. There were the Judaizers or Jews who said the Old testament Law must be kept in order to be saved. For Gentiles that included circumcision.
 2. The seeds of what would become Gnosticism in the second century were developing. They taught that salvation came to an elite few through knowledge and said nothing about sin, guilt or faith. They exalted the mind and taught that matter is evil. This led to a denial of God's creation of the material world, the Incarnation of Jesus, and His bodily resurrection. They said that since the body is temporary you can either fulfill its every lust or starve it.
- c. Behind all this is the spirit of antichrist come to steal the Word, thwart the production of fruit, and prevent the kingdom of God from expanding in human hearts through the new birth. Antichrist denies the Lord that bought us—who He is and what He's done. I John 2:18,22; II Pet 2:1; Jude 4
3. I realize that a lesson like tonight's doesn't seem practical for those of us who have real problems. But you must understand, even though it's two thousand years later and we live in the modern world, none of this opposition has gone away. In fact, it is ramping up.
 - a. The Bible is clear that Satan will attempt to hold on to his kingdom on earth. He's going to offer the world his counterfeit of the True Prince of Peace or his Antichrist who will preside over a worldwide system (government, economy, and religions) that will oppose the rightful king. Rev 13
 1. It won't come out of a vacuum. Events are moving this direction and will continue to do so. The stage is being set for a worldwide government and false religion. Our lives are will be increasingly affected by this momentum.
 2. Jesus said these years will be characterized by religious deception (Matt 24: 5,11,24). The New Testament writings were written in part to tells us who Jesus is, what He did, and how we should live in light of it. We need this information more than ever.
 - b. Jesus also said these years will be characterized by lawlessness. Matt 24:11,12--Iniquity comes from a word that means lawlessness—many false prophets will arise, and will mislead many; and as lawlessness spreads, men's love for one another will grow cold (NEB).
 1. Through the sixties counterculture revolution many societal restraints were removed and the seeds of deception and lawlessness inundated society: deception in the form of rejecting objective truth (truth is whatever I feel it to be) and lawlessness in the form of rejecting authority. Respect for authority has been replaced with: I don't have to if I don't feel like it.
 2. II Thess 2:3--Paul called the final world leader a man of lawlessness (AMP, NIV, RSV; etc). He, along with John made it clear that the power behind this man of sin was already at work in their day. II Thess 2:7--For the mystery of lawlessness—that hidden principle of rebellion against constituted authority—is already at work in the world (Amp).
 3. Satan works in the world through his children of disobedience (unbelievers, tares), influencing and directing them as he seeks political control and worship. Eph 2:2; I John 3:10
 - c. There are two types of restraints on human behavior—within or without. Men apart from Christ are wicked and lack inner restraints. As societal restraints have been progressively removed outward restraints on behavior have been removed leading to greater deception and lawlessness.
 1. This is consistent with Paul's description of human behavior just prior to the Lord's return. II Tim 3:1-5--utterly self-centered (Phillips); greedy, proud; undutiful, ungrateful, irreverent (Goodspeed); unholy; they will consider nothing sacred (NLT); without natural affection; irreconcilable and implacable; no self control; false accusers, slanderers, malicious gossips; despisers of those who are good; betrayers; reckless and proud (NLT); lovers of pleasure, rather than God. They will act as if they are religious, but they will reject the power that could make them godly (NLT).

2. In the western world we're seeing the fruit of several generations of kids raised under the philosophy that the most important thing is their self-esteem. They've not heard the word no, never learned to deal with conflict, loss, or disappointment, have no respect for authority, aren't grateful for what they have, and know nothing about Almighty God.
 4. As God works out his plan to have a family on earth, it's being opposed by the devil and has been since the beginning. If you don't understand this, the events around us could be terrifying. Accurate knowledge from the Bible is a source of courage and hope for us. II Tim 3:13-17
 - a. It protects us from deception by telling us who Jesus is and what He has done. It is the standard for objective, Eternal, absolute truth. It builds our faith in God's power and help. I Pet 1:5
 - b. It gives us wisdom on how to navigate through the lawlessness and helps us recognize the voice of the Holy Spirit giving us specific instructions on what to do. (lessons for another day)
- D. Conclusion: People struggle with reading the Bible because they don't understand the purpose for which it was written and have false expectations as to what regular, systematic reading will do for them. That's why we're taking time to explain what the Bible is and why it's written as it is.
1. We emphasized the fact that it's a supernatural book that will work in you and change you. I've stated repeatedly that if you commit to doing this, you'll be a different person a year from now.
 - a. I'm taking time to go over this information that doesn't seem to relate to the "real issues" of life to help you overcome some of the challenges that will arise when you first start to read.
 - b. You won't understand what you're reading. It won't be exciting. You'll probably have to force yourself to do this for a while before it seems to have any real value. You've got to develop a habit and a taste for the Bible. It takes time and effort to develop a habit. But it's well worth it.
 2. I think all would agree that this past month has flown by. If you had begun reading three chapters a day from the Gospels on the first day of last month you'd have finished all of them by now.
 - a. There are eighty-nine chapters in the Gospels. At three a day, that's a little under thirty days of reading. You could be starting on your second read through right now. This month is going to fly by just as quickly as last month. Why not put it to good use and read the Gospels through?
 - b. Once you've read the Gospels through a couple of times, move on to the epistles. There are 121 chapters in the epistles. If you read four chapters a day you can finish them in a month.
 - c. When I began to read through the New Testament regularly, I set up this system for myself. I had learned that the epistles were written to tell Christians what we believe and how we're to live. So, I'd read one Gospel and all the epistles. Then I'd read another Gospel and all the epistles until I'd read all the Gospels once and all the epistles four times. Then I'd read Acts. I skipped Revelation.
 3. We have more to say next week but consider one final thought. Our answer is not in a political leader or system of government. Jesus is our answer and He's coming soon. His Word assures us of that. Therefore we can have courage and hope no matter what happens in this world. Read the Bible!!