

The final phone calls made from those on board the hijacked flights on 11 September 2001 make harrowing listening. Some are from flight attendants asking for help from their airlines' bosses. Some are from passengers desperately trying to get information, or explaining how they are going to mount some kind of resistance. But above all, they are deeply touching – an attempt to pass on love and reassurance. In the face of death, it seems that letting our loved ones know how much we care for them is a high priority.

I wonder who you would call if you knew death was coming? Who would you send your last letter or text to? And what would you write?

The apostle Paul had to make that same decision. Aware of his impending execution, the great apostle, in yet another prison cell, picks up his pen to write one last letter. He does not write to the authorities to beg for his release, or to churches asking them to pray and protest. Paul has more urgent priorities than his own survival. Paul writes to Timothy, a young church leader he has been mentoring, and his letter is full of love, of hope and vision too. The whole letter is worth reading and savouring as it sets a standard for Christian relationships. *In Paul's last words we get to see his first principles.* But today we are homing in on the main thrust of Paul's argument, the pinnacle to which his letter has been building. The letter is directed at young Timothy, but Paul has in mind the future of the church. Paul calls Timothy to:

1. Hold on to the truth that was passed on to him through his mother and grandmother (2 Timothy 1.5 and 3.14-15)
2. Be bold enough to preach faithfully even when doing so will be unpopular (4.2)
3. Fulfil every aspect of God's call on his life (4.5).

But these directives to Timothy are for the benefit of all Christians and all of them have to do with the irreplaceable role that the Bible is to have in our lives.

Today is Bible Sunday and we celebrate the way that the bible has played an irreplaceable role in the church's worship ever since Jesus commissioned his disciples to take the gospel to the nations. Paul

gives us five reasons in this passage to make sure we take the Bible seriously for ourselves and also consider how we make sure it is made available to everyone.

1. The bible makes us wise for salvation (3.15)
2. The bible brings us intimacy with God (3.16)
3. The bible is God's means of our development and growth as Christians (3.16)
4. The bible equips us for every good deed (3.17)
5. The bible keeps us on God's path (4.3-4)

### ***1. The bible makes us wise for salvation (3.15)***

*As a child I remember being inspired by the pearl fishermen who would tie a rock to their feet and descend 18 metres under the surface of the ocean looking for pearls amongst the oyster beds. They would hold their breath unaided and unencumbered by oxygen tanks in search of their precious treasure. For me the bottom of the bath tub was as deep as I could go to figure out how long I could hold my breath for. No matter how hard I tried, I never managed more than 20 seconds before I would emerge gasping for air, surprised that I felt so desperate for something so readily available.*

Today access to the Bible is only a click away on a smart phone. Additionally, most of our homes have multiple copies of the Bible in print format and in multiple translations. In the western world we have easy-to-read, easy-to-access versions of the Bible at our fingertips. But because it is so easily available, it is possible that we undervalue it.

Perhaps Timothy was in danger of taking the Bible for granted. Since his childhood, The bible had always been part of his life. Paul reminds Timothy of his rich and privileged heritage, because he wants to leave a legacy in the life of Timothy and the life of the church that will carry on into the future.

Jesus is the only way that any of us can be reconciled with God. Jesus' death on the cross only makes sense if, as the earliest church proclaimed: *'There is salvation in no one else! God has given no*

*other name under heaven by which we must be saved.*' (Acts 4.12)  
Jesus alone is the way that we can be saved from sin and experience life in all its fulness, yet the bible is essential to our salvation because how else will we know about Christ?

Even in his own earthly ministry Jesus was constantly referring to the Old Testament the bibles, quoting them, explaining them, showing how his life, death and resurrection were fulfilling all that the bible foretold (for example: Matthew 5.1 and Luke 24.27). In the same way the earliest church went about preaching the bible (Acts 2). Paul spells out to Timothy that vital to his faith was the sacred writings faithfully passed on to him by his mother and grandmother.

Those of us who are parents or grandparents need to hear the challenge here – just like Timothy's mother Eunice and grandmother Lois, we have a part to play in helping our children or grand-children to know and love Jesus through the bible. In fact, we all have a responsibility to help those we love to hear and be inspired by the Word of God. It is often said that Christians are the only Bible some people will ever read. We must live, act and pray so that this is not true. We need to excite and inspire people to hear or read the bible so that their minds and hearts might be opened to the beauty and wonder of the gospel. Paul in his letter to the Romans makes it very clear: '*So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.*' (Romans 10.17).

## ***2. The bible brings us intimacy with God (3.16)***

*These days sorting through the day's email is a tedious chore. Sifting through the dross to find the important or even urgent is a pain. But 25 years ago, before Facebook, Skype, Instagram or even emails, it was a different story. Invoices, circulars and catalogues are really nothing to write home about.*

Knowing that God has given us The bible means we should cherish it, value it, hunger for it, devour it. Loving God is the first and greatest commandment and The bible is an irreplaceable part of loving God, because the more we know God, the more we will love him. Without regularly listening to God through his word, we will not grow in our love and intimacy with him.

All The bible is breathed out by God (or God breathed). In Paul's day the bible definitely applied to the Old Testament. But then in 2 Peter 3.16 while telling everyone how hard it is to understand Paul's writings, Peter explains '*There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures.*' Peter refers to Paul's writings as scripture. That means the same standards of authority and reliability that were taken for granted about the Old Testament are true for the New Testament too. But we miss something important about the nature of The bible if we just focus on the technicalities of the inspiration of the bible. The fact that all The bible is God breathed is also a beautiful turn of phrase. God has breathed his spirit of love into the words that have been faithfully preserved, translated and printed for us. The bible is God's message of love to us that we might know him intensely and intimately.

The printing press in China has produced over 100 million Bibles and that is only just scratching the surface of demand for the bible as people desire intimacy with God.

Does the bible feel like a dry and dusty book to you or does it captivate you like a long awaited love letter? To rekindle a heart habit of reading and relishing The bible, perhaps you can take some time this week to revisit parts of the Bible that in the past have been especially meaningful to you. For many people there are Psalms that have a special significance, or perhaps the gospel accounts of Jesus. If regular Bible reading has become difficult, why not revisit these parts of the Bible and as you read them, pray that God would give you a fresh passion for his word?

### ***3. The bible is God's means of our development and growth as Christians (3.16)***

*I was out shopping for cooking utensils for my son as he set off for university. We ended up at a Swedish furniture store that does a magnificent sideline in cheap domestic products. I couldn't resist the bargain bundle of 7 different essential cooking utensils. I am not sure how as an adult in their mid-forties I have managed to live without some of the utensils that were included in this 'essential' bundle. Somehow it has never crossed my mind to buy myself a pasta server*

*or long cooking tweezers. Perhaps it is because I have a perfectly good large spoon and large fork that have done the job well enough for long enough.*

To be honest, many of us struggle to see the usefulness of much of the bible. Although Paul tells us that ‘All The bible is useful’, we have gotten by perfectly well without really utilising the story of Esther, the Old Testament food laws or the book of Jude for our spiritual development. But I would encourage you that unlike whoever decided what would go into the IKEA *essentials* culinary bundle, the God who collected, superintended and breathed his Spirit into the bible understands us better than we know ourselves, loves us enough that Jesus would die for us and so when he tells us that ‘All The bible is breathed out by God and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and for training in righteousness’, he can be trusted.

#### ***4. The bible equips us for every good deed (3.17)***

*I am pretty sure that my fascination with gadgets was ignited by watching James Bond films. There was always the classic scene early on in the movie where Q brings Bond the tools of his trade. A watch with a sonic pulse, a car that can be driven via a smart phone, a pen that has a bomb inside it, radioactive lint that you could place on someone you wanted to track or X-ray glasses. I would make a careful note of each of the gadgets realising that the film would not be over until every one of those gadgets had been deployed in order to save the world.*

Paul wants us to know that the bible is not just useful for our coming to faith, or even just for our growing in faith – he also sees the bible as essential equipment when it comes to serving God in the world. God expects us to do good, and Christians are supposed to make a positive impact in our world demonstrating the mercy, grace and compassion of God to those in need. We will be empowered and equipped to do this through the God-breathed the bibles. Reading the Bible should inspire us to serve God more wholeheartedly but it should also equip us to serve with wisdom and humility. The more you serve in the world, the more you realise the wisdom of the bible. The more you read the bible the more you are motivated to serve in the world. It is a virtuous circle.

## **5. The bible keeps us on God's path (4.3-4)**

*It is such a long time since I have driven in thick fog. You end up crawling along the road with fog lights on and making slow progress. Sometimes you simply have to keep going. The lines demarking the lanes suddenly become a lifeline. They show each metre of the road one at a time, helping you navigate the bends, avoid collisions, and – eventually – to get to your destination.*

Paul is spending so much energy commending the importance of the bible to Timothy because

he realises that a time is coming for the church when it will be very difficult to stay faithful to God's path. He predicts a time when instead of seeking the truth, Christians will let their own desires be the filter for what they hear, distracted by false teaching. Paul imagines a time *'For a time is coming when people will no longer listen to sound and wholesome teaching. They will follow their own desires and will look for teachers who will tell them whatever their itching ears want to hear. <sup>4</sup> They will reject the truth and chase after myths.'* (4.3-4).

It is easy to understand why it may be tempting to evaluate teaching based on whether we like the way it sounds, or whether it meets our expectations, entertains us or exonerates us.

In our media-saturated society we are exposed to so many messages, marketing interventions and the bombardment of how so many people want us to think about life through the continual broadcasting of social media. Yet in the fog of information overload we experience on a daily basis, the bible functions like the lines on the motorway, it keeps us on the path of following God.

What are the ways that you can weave the reading and meditation of the bible into your daily routine so that you are constantly able to check your life direction is staying faithful to God and not being diverted off course by the information overload we live in?

## **Conclusion**

Paul has written an impassioned plea to his beloved son in the faith, Timothy. We have been able to eavesdrop on this intimate communication because from the time of the earliest church, Christians recognised the Spirit's breath behind these words. We have been given ample reason to pay the bible close attention if we want to be wise for salvation, drawn closer in intimacy with God, equipped to serve God and stay faithful to him. These are surely priorities for all Christians.

But like the lines on the side of a motorway, a handwritten letter in the post, or the very air we breathe, we can easily take the Bible for granted. But around the world, Christians do not have the Bible so readily available to them in a language they can understand. If we are to show love to our brothers and sisters, we need to make sure this lifeline becomes available. There is still a huge need for Bible translation in the world and so why not consider what part God might be asking you to play in making the Bible available to them?