

ACTS 17:10-15
EAT THIS BOOK!

“Imagine a group of men and women in a huge warehouse. They were born in this warehouse, grew up in it and have everything there for their needs and comfort. There are no exits to the building but there are windows. But the windows are thick with dust, are never cleaned and so no one bothers to look out. Why would they? The warehouse is everything they know, has everything they need. But then one day one of the children drags a stepstool under one of the windows, scrapes off the grime, and looks out. He sees people walking on the streets; he calls to his friends to come and look. They crowd around the window – they never knew a world existed outside their warehouse. And then they notice a person out in the street looking up and pointing: soon several people are gathered, looking up and talking excitedly. The children look up but there is nothing to see but roof of the warehouse. They finally get tired of watching these people out in the street acting crazily, pointing up at nothing and getting excited about it. What’s the point of stopping for no reason, pointing at nothing at all and talking up a storm about nothing?

But what those people in the street were looking at was an aeroplane. The people in the street look up and see the heavens and everything in the heavens. The warehouse people have no heavens above them, just a roof. What would happen though, if one day one of those children cut a door out of the warehouse, coaxed his friends out and discovered the immense sky above them and the grand horizons beyond them? That’s what happens when we open the Bible – we enter the totally unfamiliar world of God, a world of creation and salvation stretching endlessly above and beyond us. Life in the warehouse never prepared us for anything like this. Typically, adults in the warehouse scoff at the tales the children bring back. After all, they are completely in control of the warehouse world in ways they never could be outside. And they want to keep it that way.” (Peterson; *Eat this Book*)

The Bible is a huge new world of discovery. God speaks, God reveals Himself to us through its pages. We read the big stories of men like Abraham, Moses, Samuel, David, Jesus; we read songs of praise and prayers; we read letters written to new, young, vibrant churches; and we discover what God is like, what God has done for us and what God is still about in His mission. Of course, some of it gets lost in translation and some of it is from a very different time and culture from ours, but so much of it is timeless, as true today as the day when someone decided to write it down. The statistics tell us that most of us, most Christians in Scotland, don’t read the Bible regularly. Why? Because it is a chore? Because we struggle with it? Because we don’t see the need? When we do engage with Bible - and there are a whole lot of ways in which we can do that and books, notes and apps that can help us – then there is a whole new world of discovery for us, a whole new horizon to life that we never saw before, a whole new way of seeing life, ourselves, other people, God.

God is on a mission and Paul and Silas are being sent. We left them in Thessalonica last week, in danger from the mob, but the mob couldn’t find them; they were hidden! Today, they are being smuggled out of Thessalonica, 50 miles down the coast to the town of Berea, today known as Verria. This is the only time we visit Berea; we know very little about it apart from the fact that town was 4-500 years old when Paul and Silas went there and ministered there. There is a single line in the story that sets them apart from all rest and we’ll look at that in a second, but first of all, we see how God turns trouble into opportunity. Leaving Thessalonica in secret was not what Paul and Silas wanted; it must have seemed a bit of a disaster to be run out of town like that by the mob; they feel got at, under threat. But being run out of Thessalonica

opened up a new opportunity – ministry in Berea; a door is closed, but another door opens and they went through the door gladly! Here was a new area of fruitful ministry.

There is one sentence in the story of God’s mission in Berea that stands out; it speaks about the quality of response that came from the people who heard Paul and Silas preach. “*Now the...*” (Acts 17:11) There were two qualities to their response and these don’t always go together in our minds. First of all, “*they received...*” (Acts 17:11b); they were ready and willing to listen and were delighted to hear what the apostles had to say; they were the preacher’s delight as an audience, listening, drinking in what he is saying with obvious relish. Then there is their second response: they “*examined...*” (Acts 17:11c) Now that might seem to contradict their enthusiasm; “we’re checking Paul out, to make sure he’s telling the truth!” Does that not create a feeling of suspicion in Paul? Again, this is the audience that is the preacher’s delight; they want to know more; they are reading the Bible to see if they can find out more about Paul’s message, not just to make sure it is true, but to dig deeper, to find out more. “What else is there to find out about Jesus from the Bible?”

These two qualities are the perfect balance in our response to the Christian preacher. The preacher is (or should be) delighted when people are eager to hear, when there is an appetite for the gospel. This is a sign that the Spirit is at work in our hearts when we’re ready to listen, eager to hear and to respond with faith. But, we’ve all known charismatic preachers, orators who have created a following for themselves by the power of their preaching or their oratory. People would follow them anywhere, so eager are they for more! So that eagerness needs to be balanced and that balance is provided by the Bible. Test what the preacher says by what the Bible says. Is there something that you’re not sure about? Then examine what the Bible says about that matter and if what preacher says is out of step with the Bible, tell him and disregard his teaching. The Bible is the touchstone for preaching and for faith. Equally, we can be inspired by the preaching to want to know more, to dig deeper than we can do in 20 minutes on a Sunday morning; go back to read today’s passages, find out more about faith. Be eager and let that eagerness be balanced and tested by the Bible.

I love Psalm 19; it is such a positive, upbeat piece of writing; it is full of the glory of God in the first part and full of the joy of Bible reading in the second. Go back and read what it says about the glory of God revealed in the heavens when you get me; we’ll concentrate on the second part for now. Verses 7-9 describe six qualities of the Bible, and six benefits of Bible reading: “*the law...*” (Psalm 19:7ff) There are different ways of describing what the Bible is and contains, law etc, but look at the qualities of this writing: it is perfect, trustworthy, right, radiant, pure, sure. You could not sing the praises of any book more highly than that. As if that’s not enough, then look at what this book does: it revives the soul, it gives wisdom, it gives joy to the heart, it gives light to the eyes, it endures forever, and altogether there is something good and right about the Bible. You could not sing the praise of any book more highly than that. Sure, it needs to be translated; it is of a time and culture that is not our time and culture and some of what it teaches has no meaning for us; but most of it is timeless, showing us what God is like, showing us what we’re like; showing us what God has done for us and in the world. It is a book more precious than gold, sweeter than honey.

The people that Paul and Silas met in Berea knew this; the preaching set them off to read the book and rediscover how good the Bible is and how valuable it is and to discover that what Paul and Silas were preaching was four-square built on what the Bible said. “*Many of...*” (Acts 17:12) This is the beginning of the Church in Berea,

people of faith, faith created by the preaching and by reading the Bible. This is what the Bible does; this is what preaching does – it creates faith. The best result of a sermon preached is that faith is created or made stronger; most Christian preachers will tell you that the best result of any sermon is that people are pointed to Jesus and that they go to Jesus in faith. This is not about being famous or creating a following for the preacher, but is about pointing people to Jesus. It is the same with Bible reading: we don't read the Bible to know the Bible or to be able to quote some proof texts to people to show that you are clever; we read the Bible to deepen our faith, to make faith stronger; that's the real good result! There is no other way, really, to strengthen and deepen faith – it will only come about by reading and digesting what the Bible says.

In the story at the beginning, the Bible inspired people to dream, it opened their eyes to see a whole new world of God and faith and Jesus, and the Bible still does that today; it helps us see a world of grace and God that is otherwise hidden, it lifts our lives above the warehouse roof to see something eternal. Others come looking for answers to big questions and look to Christian faith to provide these answers; the place where they go is to the Bible and so often the answers that they find are life-changing. There are big issues of life and culture in our world today, and time after time, the Bible is proved to be as contemporary as you like; it has a word for today, a principle that we can apply to the world in which we live, it shapes our attitude to the poor in the world. The Bible inspires us, it challenges us, it equips us, it leads us to Jesus. Of course, it is not always straightforward and there are times when it just seems obscure, but even then it is more precious than gold, sweeter than honey.

You might agree with all of that, say a hearty “Amen” to all that we've been saying this morning. But the statistics for Christians in Scotland reading the Bible are awful: only one in ten Christians in Scotland read the Bible regularly. Why? Is it too hard? Are we too busy? Are we just not interested? Everyone who is member of the church has promised, as part of our discipleship, to read the Bible regularly. This is the key to stronger faith; the key to the resources that will sustain faith when life is hard; the key to understanding life and the world as it really is; the key to understanding yourself as you really are; the key to knowing Jesus and what He has done for us and how we are saved; the key to finding grace for living of our lives. The apostle John is pictured “eating this book” in Revelation chapter 10; it gets into his blood, into his nerve-endings, into his reflexes, into his imagination; the book shaped his life, his faith, and brought joy to his heart. The Bereans “received...” (*Acts 17:11*) What a way to be; it is the only thing we know about them! Read, mark, learn and inwardly digest this book!