

the bible – God speaks!

There's so much uncertainty in the world today – about life and death, right and wrong, about God and what to believe – that many say they prefer to be agnostics. We can't really know, they say, *It could be this - or it could be that.*

We can't be sure, so we'll keep an open mind.

But if there's a God who made us and who cares for us, it stands to reason that he wouldn't leave us in the dark about himself – or even leave us to grope our way to him. We can expect him to show himself to us in various ways, and that is exactly what the Bible claims he has done.

left in the dark?

Christians believe that God has not left us in the dark about himself. Instead he enjoys letting us know about him. He has left us a permanent record of the way he appeared to people in the past, so that we today can learn from them. Christians believe that the Bible is this permanent record.

The way in which God met with individuals; the way in which he provided for, and disciplined, his people; the particular messages he had for them; the spiritual experiences of those who lived very near to him - all this and more can be found in the pages of the Old Testament, written down and recorded for us over many years and by many different people.

The Jews of Jesus' day had such a respect for the Old Testament that for them it added up to 'the word of God'. They believed that what the Old Testament said, God said. When religious questions came up, it was to the Old Testament that they went for their answers. To be able to quote the writings was the end of the argument.

Jesus took the same line. For him too, the Old Testament was God's word. In spite of the new teaching that Jesus gave, he never contradicted the Old Testament. In fact, he said that he had come to fulfill it, to draw out its inner meaning in his teaching, and to live out its predictions and promises in his life, death and resurrection. Those who accept what Jesus said to be true, have to take the Old Testament seriously as well.

The New Testament came together as the first Christians wrote about Jesus' life **the gospels**, about the early church **acts of the apostles**, or wrote **letters (eg. I Corinthians)** to the young churches. The apostles not only accepted the Old Testament and Jesus' teaching as their guide, they too began to see their own writings on the same level - God revealing himself. By the power of the Holy Spirit they were speaking on behalf of Jesus, and very early on, their writings came to have the same value as the others.

By reading the Bible for ourselves, we can draw on the rich experience many different people have had of God. The Bible tells us all that we need to know about him - and more.

✓ **we see something of God in what he's made.**

Many people are drawn to think of God as they look at nature. The Bible tells us that the creation tells us generally about God's great power and splendour. But for all its wonder and beauty, nature doesn't give us many details about God.

✓ **we learn something about God from the way we're made.**

We are not just things or unthinking creatures. As human beings, we have spiritual needs and ask searching questions

about the meaning of life. We can be plagued with our concern about right and wrong. We also feel the need to worship something greater than ourselves. All of these things tell us more about the God who made us in this way. But the picture we get of God only by looking at ourselves is still incomplete and out of focus.

✓ **God spoke in history to make himself known.**

The Old Testament gives us a much clearer picture of God. It tells the story of the nation of Israel, and how he worked in their history. By seeing God in action, encountering people and guiding events, we get to know more about him. But even the Old Testament is incomplete - pointing forward to someone who would show us God more fully.

✓ **God finally sent his Son.**

Jesus gives us the perfect picture of God in his own life. Because he was God, he can show us what God is like - and because he was a man, we can understand him. But Jesus went further. He said that if we want to know God properly, it has to be through him.

✓ **the Holy Spirit guided Jesus' followers.**

The rest of the New Testament completes*our understanding about Jesus. Because there were many things about Jesus' life and teaching that his disciples couldn't understand during Jesus' life, God sent his Holy Spirit to teach them about what had happened - and what it all meant. In this way God finished off what he wanted us to know about him. The Bible invites us to go beyond knowing about God, to knowing him for ourselves in our own experience.

These writings bring you back to the living image of that most holy mind – the very Christ himself, speaking, healing, dying, rising . . .

Erasmus

God spoke through REAL people

Some of the Bible's writers went so far as to say that God was speaking directly through them. The Jewish people, and Jesus himself, recognized that this was true. But it would be wrong to think of these writers as a sort of heavenly typing pool with God telling one or another, 'take a letter', or 'write a book'!

When God wanted to make himself known, he took up people and spoke through their personalities, through their times and circumstances, through their background and upbringing. (This is why we need to learn as much as we can about their life and times if we're going to understand what he said.) Although people like Jeremiah said they spoke from God, we still have a pretty good idea from his book what Jeremiah was like too. The same goes for other Bible authors like Hosea, Paul, James or the rest. God was actually using their characters and experiences to teach people what he was like.

Does this mean that the Bible is full of mistakes and human errors? Not if you believe what Jesus said about it. God had such a hand in things that although he allowed the authors to be themselves, he also

controlled what they finally put down. That's why Jesus and his followers could go to the Old Testament writings with perfect confidence, and claim that what they had said was what God wanted us to know. This whole process is called 'inspiration'. Of course, it means more than saying that the Bible is great literature which moves people when they read it - like the works of Shakespeare or Dickens. It means that God had his hand on its production in such a way that we can accept what we read in the Bible as being completely trustworthy.

**the Bible wasn't written for the privileged few- the rich or the clever –
it was written for ordinary people who need direction in their daily lives. You and me!**

is the Bible out-of-date?

Perhaps the Bible can seem to be out-of-date when we compare it with modern views and opinions. Haven't physicists proved finally that God doesn't exist? Hasn't psychology shown that we have created God in our own image? Don't sociologists tell us that all humans need to live in groups, and religions are just one way of doing this?

We need to remember that the physical sciences can only tell us about a physical world. Modern science has helped us to understand our universe better, but to talk about God, who is beyond the physical realm, is outside the scientist's job description. Many modern scientists do believe in God, and many are Christians.

Psychology and the other human sciences tell us about our needs, but that doesn't mean that there is no reality behind our needs. We have an appetite for food because it exists. And in the same way we could say that we need God because he is there.

The modern view of man as a body and nothing more has not proved popular. People still need to believe that life has purpose and that there is something or someone greater than ourselves. Twentieth century people can still be surprised to start reading the Bible, and find that it rings true to life in their own experience.

an X-ray or a heat picture, give us different information about parts of our bodies – both are equally valid.

Science and the Bible give us different views of the world, but both are equally valid.

are the accounts reliable?

How do we know that what the Bible authors put down was accurate? How do we know that, after all that copying, we have anything like the original books today?

- **the testimony of archaeology.**

A good number of Bible stories which used to be dismissed as being impossible have been established as being perfectly accurate simply because of what archaeologists have dug up. A great deal of work has been done in recent years in Palestine and in surrounding countries which have shown that the Bible accounts are accurate. Many of the historical details in the Bible, like times, places and the way they did things in those days, have come to light through the discoveries which have been made.

Of course, there are many events in the Bible record which we couldn't expect archaeology to 'prove', simply because the people living then didn't leave anything behind which could be unearthed as evidence. But the general background of Bible times is becoming clearer year by year, and what is coming to light strengthens our belief that the Bible authors were very careful when it came to recording what had happened.

- **the evidence of the manuscripts.**

Some of the Bible stories weren't written down first of all, but were passed from father to son for several generations. Because of this, some people have argued that all kinds of errors could creep in. But we need to realize that all information was passed along in this way before writing was invented. What is more, we know from primitive tribes who do the same sort of thing today, that it's possible to develop a phenomenal memory for details which we have lost as we rely so much on writing.

Writings, of course, had to be copied by hand before printing came on the scene, and it might be supposed that all sorts of errors could be introduced in this way. Once again, what we know about the way in which the Jews copied their Old Testament simply doesn't support this. They were extremely careful to be accurate, because of the enormous respect for the books themselves. They went out of their way not to make mistakes.

What's more, when it comes to the New Testament, we are more than well off as far as manuscripts are concerned. All that we have of many of the classical writings from Greece or Rome may be just one copy made centuries after the original writing. We have literally hundreds of manuscripts for the New Testament, some containing the whole book, some parts, the earliest of which go back to about two or three hundred years after it was first written. These, together with the early translations into other languages, give us a very good idea of how the New Testament books looked when they were first produced.

Dead Sea Scrolls

One of the most important recent discoveries was the accidental find in the 1940's and 50's of a collection of scrolls which had been written just before or during Jesus' lifetime. Down by the Dead Sea in those days, there was a Jewish monastery where the members spent most of their time studying the Old Testament and adding their own writings to it. Before the Romans destroyed the place around AD 70, the monks hid their library in caves in the area, and there it stayed until an Arab boy stumbled on it. Before this discovery, our oldest manuscript of the Hebrew Old Testament was from about a thousand years after the monks wrote. Because the collection contained Old Testament books, what we know about the text was pushed back about a thousand years almost overnight. One of the interesting results of all this was that the text these monks used was very little different from the one copied down centuries later- which speaks highly of Jewish copying by hand over a thousand years!

This can make us even more confident that the Bible is an accurate record of what was originally written.

all Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching the truth, rebuking error, correcting faults, and giving instruction for right living . . .

Paul

who says what's what?

Where do we go for our authority when it comes to what we believe? Over the years even Christians have been divided on this question.

Some people have argued that Jesus entrusted the truth to his church, and that as time has passed and different situations have arisen, the church has had the right to say what's what when it comes to what we believe or how we behave. That's alright as far as it goes, but what happens when the official church begins to speak with a different voice from the Bible? What happens when church teaching actually contradicts the Bible? This is what people like Martin Luther and the other Reformers claimed had happened when they led people back to a faith in the Bible by itself.

Others have felt that although Bible teaching might have been alright for the days in which it was written, as we progress in our ideas we must be free to pick and choose, and to discard what doesn't fit with our up-to-date thinking. But who is to say that 'modern thinking' is right and the Bible is wrong? If God has taken the trouble to reveal himself to us, shouldn't we rather test our views in the light of his? This can also lead to a matter of every man for himself. When that happens, we don't end up with what Christians believe, but with a collection of different faiths, each tailored by the individual according to his whims. The Reformers' view, that the Bible was God's truth for all time, goes back to the belief that Jesus as God's Son was God's last word to us. Because God is a God of truth, he wouldn't contradict himself. He wouldn't tell one generation one thing and another something quite different. History teaches us again and again that fashions in thinking change, and that people have been sincerely wrong in their opinions. We need something outside of our own thinking to keep us on the right track. That's why God gave us the Bible in the first place.

proving the Bible for ourselves

We can spend a good deal of time talking about the accuracy and reliability of the Bible, of the way in which it is likely that God would speak to mankind and so on, but we'll never really prove the Bible until we face up to its message ourselves.

this is what we do when we first come to faith in Jesus

We believe what the Bible says about him, and we take him at his word, and we discover that things begin to happen in our lives. We prove the truth of the Bible for ourselves. Similar things have taken place whenever the church has placed an emphasis on the Bible as being the word of God. There has been an upsurge of spiritual life as people have proved that God means what he has said.

This is also true as we progress in our Christian living. This is why it is so important that, having become Christians, we begin to read the Bible for ourselves. There is so much that God wants us to know about himself, about ourselves, and about what he can do for us if only we let him. Many Christians have discovered that by setting aside time from their daily programme to read the Bible and to pray, they have begun to see everything they do in a new light. Of course, this is not always possible for everyone because of jobs or circumstances. There are no rigid 'rules' about reading the Bible. But we will find it a great strength to read and understand the Bible. After all, if the Bible is God's word - God speaking to us - then as we read and absorb it we will actually begin to think God's thoughts after him. We begin to see the world and its needs as he does. And we begin to see the possibilities in our own lives when God is let into the picture.

what does the Bible say today?

The Bible was written centuries ago, for people very different from ourselves. But there is a great deal in the Bible which speaks directly to any generation. Our basic needs have not changed, and Christians can still experience the same Holy Spirit who has been working in the lives of men and women from the first Christians right down to today.

But there are still parts of the Bible which don't appear (at first glance, anyway) to have anything to do with us, because they deal with problems we don't face any more. For example, early Christians were very concerned about what they should eat or not eat. This was because Jews who became Christians had been brought up with very strict laws about diet. And also, eating in the pagan world could very easily involve you in the worship of false gods. These problems seem pretty remote from us today.

However, we don't have to cut these chapters out of our Bibles, because in the advice which was given in that situation, there are principles which can apply to very different problems today. Some of the principles in this - situation were:

- ✘ **Christians were not to criticize each other just because they differed over details.**
- ✘ **no Christian was to see himself as spiritually superior to those who didn't do things quite his way.**
- ✘ **Christians were taught to think through what they did, and to be on their guard against simply importing non-Christian standards into the church.**
- ✘ **above all, they were told that Christians can love one another and yet agree to differ on things which aren't really essential when it comes to living for Christ.**

The other difficulty arises when we face a modern problem about which the Bible says nothing at all. For example, there were no trades unions in those days, and no nuclear weapons. In this sort of case we have to go to the Bible looking for the same timeless principles which apply to our very different needs- things like responsibility, honesty, justice, loyalty, hard work, love for others, a concern for peace. In this way we find that the Bible has a great deal to say to us just where we are today, even though it was written in a very different world from our own.

which Bible translation?

Because language is changing all the time, and because we're discovering more about Bible manuscripts there can be no final translation of the Bible. Some, like the English King James Version, last for many years because they are so well done but in order to make the Bible meaningful for ordinary people in our generation, the work of translation must go on.

English-speaking people have a wide range of Bible translations, some close to the original text, others trying to capture the liveliness of modern English, but all useful when it comes to introducing people to Bible reading.

- **For someone who is just starting out in the Bible: the Good News Bible is one of the easiest to read.**
- **For general reading in up-to-date English and study: the Good News Bible, New International version, or New Jerusalem Versions are all good.**

A QUICK GUIDE THROUGH THE PAGES . . .

When you look at the Contents page of a bible, you find it divided into different sections:

The Old Testament : The New Testament (Testament = witness)

Some bibles have a third section called the Apocrypha – a set of books that fits in between the others.

It's good to have this in your copy as there are many fine stories in these books, but they are less important.

Lots of variation:

As you roam around from book to book you find there are all sorts of different kinds of writing and topics, just as on the shelves of a proper library.

there's: FACT AND FICTION, ETIQUETTE & EPITAPHS, HISTORY & GEOGRAPHY ROMANCE & WAR, LETTERS & LISTS, MYSTERY STORIES, JOKES & RIDDLES, OLD WIVES' TALES, HOW-TO MANUALS, SONGS & SERMONS
and a lot more.....

The books are collected together as follows:

the Old Testament

These are the Jewish Scriptures (Jesus calls them "the Law and the Prophets"). They also foretell who Jesus will be:

The "Pentateuch" – Law

A funny word, but "Penta" gives the clue, like Pentagon, or Pentecost, it means FIVE.

The Pentateuch is the formal name of the first 5 books of the O.T:

GENESIS, EXODUS, LEVITICUS, NUMBERS, DEUTERONOMY

These books go together because they have one theme: that God has chosen the people of Israel to share a special relationship with Him, provided they obey his LAW.

So, these books are full of stories about how this happened, and full of laws about everything you could think of, and a lot else besides!

History

This group is:

JOSHUA, JUDGES, RUTH, 1 & 2 SAMUEL, 1 & 2 KINGS, 1 & 2 CHRONICLES, EZRA, NEHEMIAH, ESTHER

They tell the story of what happened to the Israelites through centuries of history.

Wisdom

A special group: **JOB, PSALMS, PROVERBS, ECCLESIASTES, SONG OF SOLOMON**

These are songs and sayings, the best examples of how poets and wise people reflected on life and how they understood all of life's problems and glories and how God is part of all that.

The Prophets

A large group of 17 books:

ISAIAH, JEREMIAH, LAMENTATIONS, EZEKIEL, DANIEL, HOSEA, JOEL, AMOS, OBADIAH, JONAH, MICAH, NAHUM, HABAKKUK, ZEPHANIAH, HAGGAI, ZECHARIAH, MALACHI

Each prophet was a real person who lived in Israel's heyday. They felt themselves called to tell the people what God's view of their situation was. They were specially in tune with God.

the New Testament

These are the specifically Christian Scriptures. One way or another they are all about Jesus Christ.

THE GOSPELS

MATTHEW, MARK, LUKE, and JOHN – need no introduction. Or do they?

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

A unique book by Luke that tells us the history of the first Christians.

THE EPISTLES (Letters)

Most of the rest of the N.T. is made up of 21 Epistles:

ROMANS, 1&2 CORINTHIANS, GALATIANS, EPHESIANS, PHILIPPIANS, COLOSSIANS, 1&2 THESSALONIANS, 1&2 TIMOTHY, TITUS, PHILEMON, HEBREWS, JAMES, 1&2 PETER, 1,2&3 JOHN, JUDE

“Epistle” means Letter. All these books are letters from the great leaders of the Church in its first years to the young churches. They show us people like **us** grappling with the problems of being Christians...and **REJOICING** in it too!

REVELATION or THE APOCALYPSE

This book seems very strange to us today, but imagine what a TV cartoon might look like in 1000 years from now! Like Genesis, Revelation puts into words a picture of spiritual things. Today we need special spectacles to see just what it reveals!

seeing the wood for the trees!

Putting the books of the Bible into groups like this does help us see the rich mixture of what's there.

But we need to remember that whatever book we are reading, it's still the **BIBLE**, and we need to see it as a whole, with each book needing the others around it. Then we are less likely to get weird and distorted ideas from what we read. And most important we begin to see God's hand in the great story of which we are a part.

Something for you to do at home:

1. try to memorise the order of the Books in the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus . . .)
How far can you get without looking?
2. Find Paul's letter to the **Philippians, Chapter 2 verses 6 to 11**: copy the words of this lovely hymn into the box below – and try and memorise them