

READ YOUR BIBLE

Text: 2 Timothy 3
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Research makes it clear that in the Western world we are becoming biblically illiterate. The Gallop Poll refers to America as a 'nation of biblical illiterates'. It cites that a majority of Americans cannot name the four Gospels of the New Testament. The Barna Research group has found 'religious illiteracy has increased'. It gives the example that three out of four Americans believe the Bible teaches that 'God helps those who help themselves.' A former Secretary of Education concludes 'We have become the kind of society that civilized countries used to send missionaries to'. Another group poses the question why so many professionals who carry out all kinds of complicated tasks in their work remain at primary school level in their religious understanding. Why is there so much ignorance about the Bible? Most likely because people don't read it. A recent National Church Life Survey in Australia revealed the majority of Christians don't read their Bibles, even if they have a number of copies in their homes. It seems we could be heading for a similar situation to the pre-Reformation days when no ordinary person had their own Bible. The majority couldn't read anyway. The resulting ignorance led to all sorts of superstitions and very wrong understanding about the gospel. It was through the invention of the printing press and new translations of the Bible in their own language that people rediscovered the wonder of gospel.

Now is there an issue in all this for us at Hope? Well you might recall we said that the National Church Development survey revealed our current lowest factor is 'Passionate Spirituality'. We said the 'Christian faith is not just an acceptance of biblical teaching, but involves a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and as our relationship with Jesus intensifies so we become more passionate in our spirituality. That means we need to create time for our personal bible reading and prayer.' Now when we look more closely at the data of the survey it reveals that one of the lowest results was on the question (Q84) 'I enjoy reading the Bible on my own'. In other words it would seem

many of us struggle to read the Bible for ourselves on a regular basis. Why is that the case? Well most folk I have spoken with suggest it's got to do with a lack of time. We have never been so busy & rushed as in our times. But is that the only issue? I came across a list of reasons why people lack in their Bible reading. One is that the Bible has become too familiar. You've heard the stories over and over and think the Bible has little left to say. But how well do we really know the Bible. Here are some the things children have said: One said the fifth commandment is 'Humour your father and mother.' And the seventh commandment is: 'You shall not admit adultery.' One little boy said the greatest miracle in the Bible is when Joshua told his son to stand still and he obeyed him. These children were recounting familiar sayings from the Bible, but they weren't accurate. Shallow familiarity with the Bible may make it seem ordinary and unimportant. For others, the Bible is too unfamiliar. Who can read those strange names, or work out all that ancient history. Is it really relevant in our day and age? Now, can I challenge our sinful natures and suggest there's another reason we don't read the Bible much, one we may not be so aware of, or not want to be aware of. If we approach God in his Word he will tell us things that are so important we have to respond to them. We have to believe and obey what we read. And let's be real honest, there are things we like to keep doing that God speaks against. There are things we should do we'd rather not be reminded of. The Bible is authoritative. It is "*God breathed*" said Paul. The more the Bible is in our lives the less our sinful natures are in control. As Martin Luther said 'The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold of me.' So if we are spiritually sensitive to our own sinfulness we recognise how easy it is to avoid the Scriptures. Again as Luther said 'All the cunning of the devil is exercised in trying to tear us away from the Word.'

Now, Paul here in our text is giving a strong word to Timothy, which basically comes down to this: 'Stick with the Word'. "*Continue in what you have learned.*" The context here is that Paul's second letter to Timothy is the last one he wrote before he died. At the end of the letter in chapter 4:6-7 he says, "*For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.*" Most historians agree that Paul wrote this letter just weeks or months, before he was executed. So at the end of his life he's saying, 'Of all the lessons I've learned, what would I want to pass on to somebody who is going to take the torch into the next generation?' One of them is this: The Scriptures

are of utmost importance. The Bible is life-giving. "*Continue in what you have learned.*" 'Stay with the Bible'.

Now I want you to notice what the world was like when Paul wrote these words. Look at the long list in verses 3:2-4: "*People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God...*" It all sounds rather familiar, doesn't it? Timothy was called on to minister in times just like ours. So what do we need in a world like ours? We need the Bible. In fact I would venture to say that we are more in need of being in the Bible regularly than we have been for centuries. I say that because we no longer live in Christendom. Christendom can be described as where the country and culture is Christian. It's assumed that Christianity drives the laws of the land and the basic way people live. That being the case many have felt that an individual Christian can just go with the flow of what everyone else does. But that is no longer the case. Here in Australia we live in a very secular culture. Australia is a friendly and wonderful place to live. But God is no longer in the picture of much of what we think and do. The problem is that too many Christians are still just going along like everyone else. But we can't do that. Paul mentions in 3:13 the "*evil men and impostors*" who "*deceive*". There are all sorts of different religions around us now. Here in the Hills your neighbour can be atheist, 'new age', Buddhist', or even be part of a coven. It's good we are a tolerant society. But how do you work out truth amongst all these different views? Do we simply take the post modern view and say all religions lead to God. 'You do your thing, I'll do mine'. Or do we recognise the deception in that? How do we decide on the way we should live? Paul also warns Timothy that "*everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*" Have you found that to be outwardly Christian is to be the odd person out these days? How do we manage to keep faithful in a situation like that? To each of these issues Paul says: "*continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of.*" In other words, keep reading the Bible and stick to it.

Now when it comes to knowing our Bibles, and being encouraged to read it, Paul in verses 14&15 reminds us that we learn Scripture from influential others: "*you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have know the Scriptures...*" Who taught Timothy the scriptures? Well the clue is in Paul saying "*from*

infancy". In chapter 1:5 Paul says *"I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded now lives in you also."* See how the faith is passed down the generations as parents faithfully read the Bible to their children and model for them the faith. So Paul is saying to Timothy 'stick to the Word', just as you saw your mother and grandmother stick to the word. When we see the life of a parent or friend or church leader that obviously is following God and we see them often in their Bibles we are much more inclined to read the Bible for ourselves. What mostly happens is that believing people gather around the Scriptures, and they learn together, from one another. As I see conviction from God in your face, I am convicted. When I see tears of joy in your eyes, I am able to hear the words of joy from Scripture myself. When I recognize that you are becoming strong where you were weak, and hopeful where you were frightened, and when I hear you testify to what God has done for you, then I believe the words myself. Private devotions are an essential part of our personal walk with God. But the stress on our individualism and privacy can leave us with little support. We need parents and friends and small groups to encourage us, to hold us accountable, to read the word and teach us. *"Continue in what you have learned because you know those from whom you learned it."*

Another reason why it's so important to read the Bible is, as Paul says in verse 16 *"All scripture is God breathed."* That's a wonderful expression. It says that even though the words of the Bible were penned by human beings they are the breath of God breathing out of a human instrument. We often speak of the 'inspiration' of scripture. 'Inspire' means to 'breath into'. But the Greek word here is more 'ex-spire', breathing out. Someone who plays a wind instrument breathes music out of the instrument they're playing. And God has instruments through whom he has breathed. He said exactly what he wanted to say, not just vague ideas. So the words of the Bible are reliable and trustworthy. But there's another important aspect of recognizing that Scripture is God-breathed. When can you feel someone's breath? Most of the time it is when they have their arms around you. When they are very near to you. It doesn't say that Scripture is God-shouted. From a great distance you can hear someone shout. But at that distance you may know nothing about them. But Scripture in its entirety is breathed from the heart by God. That means that he is so near to you that you are encountering him in the Bible. This is about a love relationship. It's not just a book with a series of ideas. It is wonderful to have good Bible teachers and preachers. But

it's important to get into the Bible for yourself. As we read, it teaches us about God because he is breathing out from the very pages. He is that near to us. He is that intimately interested in us. He wants us to hear his heartbeat. He wants us to know what he thinks. That's the point of the Bible. It teaches us how deeply God has loved us in Jesus. It teaches us how God acts and thinks. And how he wants us to relate with him. It's not required that we be Bible scholars. What's required is that we receive the Bible as a love letter. Somebody has his arms around us, so close we can feel his breath on our face when he's saying these things. Remember what Jesus said to those who opposed him: "*You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me....*" (John 5:39.) We need to find Jesus on the pages. We need to find the One who loves us enough to have died for us.

The final thing we note is that Paul says that (:16) "*Scripture.. is useful- for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness*". The words of the Bible allow us to grow in wisdom. They enable us to think more deeply about the saving work of God in the world, to participate actively in what he's doing in our lives, to joyfully know things we didn't know before. The Bible is useful in a number of ways. Paul says it's good for "*teaching and rebuking*". That is, if there are errors in our thinking, the teaching will help us understand the errors. And the rebuke will help us change those errors. It's good for "*correcting and training in righteousness*". If we are thinking and acting in ways we shouldn't we can be corrected by the word of God. And we can be trained in righteousness so we will live differently. It also "*thoroughly equips us for every good work*"; to be exactly the kind of people God made us to be. This book, about which we're sometimes too complacent, which we don't love as much as we ought to, trains us for every good thing that there is to do.

So I am encouraging you to be those who will 'enjoy reading the Bible on your own'. Read it with enthusiasm, expectantly, that you'll feel the breath of God on your face and his arms around you as you read it. Read it in community with other people and hear what they are learning and learn it with them, and share what you've seen. It is the number one way for us to increase the passion in our spirituality. Research has proven that the most significant catalyst for spiritual growth is reading and reflecting on the Bible. But we already knew that. As Psalm 119 says "*I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches. I meditate on your precepts and consider your*

ways. I delight in your decrees...your statutes are my heritage forever, they are the joy of my heart...your statutes are wonderful, therefore I obey them. ...The unfolding of your Word gives light, it gives understanding to the simple. ...All your words are true; all your righteous laws are eternal."