

Title: Power to Interpret

Text: Acts 13:13-49

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Last week we explored the sending power of the Holy Spirit. While the church at Antioch was praying and fasting, the Holy Spirit spoke to them, calling them to set aside two of their key leaders, Paul and Barnabas, for the work that God had called them to. And so with more prayer and fasting Saul and Barnabas are sent out on what would be a three-year adventure, taking them first to Cyprus and then to the Asian mainland.

They travel about a hundred miles inland, crossing steep mountains rising 3500 feet above sea level until they come to the city Pisidian Antioch. I got a couple of emails from people who were confused to the reference to two cities called Antioch. On our map we have one here in the middle-east from where Paul and Barnabas set off from, and one here where they travelled to as part of their journey. Just to confuse things even further, in the Roman Empire of the time there were actually sixteen cities called Antioch!

Pisidian Antioch was a strategic military and governing city in the southern region of Galatia. More likely than not the 'Galatians' that Paul writes one of his first letters to would have included the church he and Barnabas established at Pisidian Antioch.

After their arrival in the city, Paul and Barnabas, as practicing Jews, attended one of the synagogues in the city for Sabbath worship. The format of worship would have been very familiar to them, and even in many ways to us.

There would be a call to worship as the synagogue leader recited the words of the Shema taken directly from Deuteronomy; 'Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.' Prayer would then be offered, following by at least two Scripture readings, one from the first five books of the Old Testament and another from the prophets, like Jeremiah and Isaiah. Next there would be a sermon, an exposition or explanation of the Scriptures just read. It was at this point that Paul and Barnabas come to the fore. Luke tells us:

After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the synagogue rulers sent word to them, saying, 'Brothers, if you have a message of encouragement for the people, please speak.' Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said: 'Men of Israel and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me!' (Acts 13:15b-16)

Like the preacher he is, Paul does not need to be asked twice! And so he launches into a passionate, brilliant sermon on the fulfillment of the promises of Old Testament scripture in the coming of Jesus.

He recounts Israel's history from the time of the patriarchs like Abraham right up to the monarchy established under King David.

All the while he presses home the point that consistently through Israel's history God has acted patiently towards his people. While Israel sins and rebels against God again and again, God's grace is even more evident.

Paul's sermon builds to a crescendo as come to the central point of his message; that in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus all the promises of the Old Testament and all the centuries old hopes of Israel for a messiah are fulfilled:

We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm: 'You are my Son; today I have become your Father.' The fact that God raised him from the dead, never to decay, is stated in these words: 'I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David.' So it is stated elsewhere: 'You will not let your Holy One see decay.' (Acts 13:32-35)

Paul, who was once Saul the Pharisee, knows his Old Testament bible inside-out and back to front. He does not need to read the synagogue scrolls; he has memorised it. And so in three sentences, Paul refers to three different scriptures, two from Psalms and one from the prophet Isaiah.

In the end, Paul did not just want to change what people believed, but in how they behaved. He did not want his audience to just believe the message, but to respond to it by repenting of their sins and placing their faith and trust in Jesus.

So Paul concludes his sermon, and as seems to be the case more often than not when he preaches, there is uproar.

Some Jews believe and respond to the message and become followers of Jesus. Others are resentful and slander Paul and Barnabas and reject their message.

One week later, on the next Sabbath a huge crowd gathers to hear them preach again, including Gentiles, people with no Jewish background whatsoever. Seeing how many of the Jews are rejecting the gospel, Paul directs his attention to a broader audience:

For this is what the Lord has commanded us: 'I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.' When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed. (Acts 13:47-48)

Again, Paul quotes directly from the Old Testament with another passage from Isaiah. We finish this part of the story with Luke's editorial comment:

The word of the Lord spread through the whole region. (Acts 13:49)

When we read the twenty eight chapters of Acts, Luke's account of the first few decades of the early church, we cannot help but discover that the Holy Spirit empowered Christian believers to interpret the scriptures.

After the Holy Spirit fell on them at Pentecost, starting with Peter, the early church interpreted the Old Testament passages through the lens of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Jewish culture was immersed in the Bible. Jewish children would memorize the first five books of the Old Testament in synagogue schools – repeating the words over and over again out loud until they were seared into their minds.

These scriptures that were so well known by Jesus' disciples now took on a new depth and breadth of meaning. And so the New Testament is awash with direct quotes and references to the Old Testament made by Jesus and then his followers. One conservative estimate calculates that 1 in 23 verses in the New Testament are direct quotes from the Old Testament, and that more than 10% of the New Testament is quotes from the Old Testament, or direct allusions to the Old Testament.

One of the early church Fathers, Saint Augustine, put it this way:

In the Old Testament the new lies hidden, in the New Testament the old is laid open. (Saint Augustine)

The Holy Spirit empowered the early church to interpret the Old Testament Scriptures in the light of the New Testament Event of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

And the Holy Spirit can empower us to do the same.

Jl Packer has said of the Bible:

God the Father is the giver of Holy Scripture; God the Son is the theme of Holy Scripture; and God the Spirit is the author, authenticator, and interpreter of Holy Scripture. (J. I. Packer)

In CS Lewis's book *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Eustace, Lucy and Edmund stare at a picture of a Narnian ship when suddenly the picture draw them into a whole new world. Suddenly the picture on the wall becomes alive and they begin to feel the breeze, smell the sea air and hear the sounds. They find themselves magically transported in the water where they are invited into a boat with the wonderful name, *The Dawn Treader*. Now in a new reality, the three children travel to distant lands looking for the seven lost lords of Narnia, eventually discovering a lamb who transforms into lion called Aslan. It's a great story.

The presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives brings to life the truth embedded in each page of scripture. The Holy Spirit illuminates what are otherwise words on a page to become a Living Word that can pierce our heart and transform our life. The Holy Spirit invites us to dwell in God's unfolding story as it is told in the Bible.

How is it that this ancient, sometimes confusing, often infuriating book can speak to us today? Practically speaking, when we open this book, how can we read this book so that the Holy Spirit transforms words on a page into God's word for us?

I want to name five very practical principles we can adopt to make bible reading into a life-transforming experience.

First, we should **Read with an Open Heart not a Closed Mind**

Every time I open my bible to read it I should do so with the expectation that God will speak to me. Very practically, my habit is to read the bible before or after I drop off the kids to school. Usually I go to our outdoor table with a cup of coffee, my journal and a pen. I pray as I write, in the process stilling my mind and opening my heart to receive from God. After I have prayed I read, as I read I pray, and after I read I pray some more. God speak to me; God teach me; God correct me, God inspire me; God challenge me; God change me. And as I read, I hear from God.

Slowing down our lives enough to hear God speak through His word is one of the great challenges of our day. But as we take the time, as we slow down God rewards us with rich fruit.

Second, we should **read the Entirety (of the Bible) not only Morsels**

As I have shared on numerous occasions, the most regular outing that Sue and I share is our regular trips to the supermarket. Some couples go out for dinner and a movie; we find romance waling the aisles of Coles. Sometimes we do a big shop, other times we pick up a few necessities. When we go there are two aisles I will always gravitate to; the soft drink aisle, which happily also has the chips, and the confectionary aisle. I know these two aisles well. I can tell you the regular price of my favourite chocolate, the best special for Coke and which brand of potato chip gives you the best combination of taste and value. I can picture in my mind where the jubes are, what shelf the Arnott's mints slices are on and where you can find the liquorice bullets. I know those two aisles well.

But it's a different story with other parts of the store. For example, I have to think hard before I can find my way to the fresh fruits and vegetables. You see, when it comes to supermarket shopping I have my favourite aisles which I know well and will always gravitate to.

When it comes to reading the Bible, most Christians have their favourite books, chapters and verses that they will naturally gravitate to.

When I open my bible, if it was up to me, I would go straight to Romans 8, or the Sermon on the Mount, or Luke 15 or the unfolding drama of King David. Like I have my favourite aisles at the supermarket, I have my favourite parts of the bible. To help me find them, I even underline them or highlight them.

But just as it is unhealthy, dangerous even, to spend all my time in only two aisles of the supermarket, so too it is unhealthy, dangerous even to spend our time in only some parts of the bible. Scott McKnight has said:

One-chapter Bible readers develop one-chapter Christian lives. (Scott McKnight)

Paul tells his young student Timothy:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.
(2 Timothy 3:16)

All Scripture is God-breathed and useful, not just the bits we like -all scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, from the Old Testament to the New. On every page of the bible, in every verse is the potential for God to speak words of comfort, challenge and transformation into our lives. Saint Ambrose put it beautifully when he says:

As in paradise, God walks in the Holy Scriptures, seeking man. (Saint Ambrose)

One of the great tragedies of this age of the church is that never before has so many Christians had access to the bible, and yet so many of us are still ignorant of its words. Many of us have never read the bible from beginning to end, in doing so coming to understand and appreciate the unfolding drama of God's search and rescue mission for humanity.

Some of us are thinking, 'there is no way I could do read the bible from cover to cover! It's too long, too hard and too difficult.' I did some research during the week. Reading out loud at normal speed it would take you a total of 71 hours to read the bible from cover to cover. That's 12 minutes a day. 12 minutes! All our excuses look pretty pathetic up against that figure.

While I would never contradict Paul's claim that all scripture is useful and God-breathed, and that we should immerse ourselves in all of it and that we should read it from cover to cover from time to time, I would want to say there are some parts we should linger in longer than others. Not unlike there are some aisles at the supermarket that it is more helpful for us to spend time in than others.

For example, we are New Testament people who believe that Jesus is the long-awaited messiah and that the story of the Bible points to him, and is fulfilled in him. So it makes sense that we spend a disproportionate time in the gospels that recall his life and teaching and the letters that his early followers wrote. As a rough rule of thumb, I would suggest spending a third of our time reading the bible in the gospels, one third in the rest of the New Testament, and one third in the Old Testament.

Bible reading becomes a life-transforming experience when we **read in Context not in Isolation**

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We believe the Bible is the inspired word of God; that it has behind it a Divine Author who speaks to us directly through its pages. But God penned the bible through human authors with their own personalities, who wrote to diverse communities with their own history, issues and challenges. The bible is not so much a books as it is a library of 66 books written over a span of centuries by an incredibly diverse range of human authors. The contexts in which the bible was written matters, and it matters a lot of we are to allow the Holy Spirit to interpret the scriptures accurately for us. So when I read a passage in my bible, there are some key questions I need to ask:

What is its literary context?

The bible contains a diverse range of literary forms including history, biography, wisdom, poetry, legal pronouncements, letters, apocalyptic visions, prophecy and drama. The form of the passage affects how we should read and interpret it.

What is its historical context?

The bible was written by real people for real people. Understanding the history out of which the bible was written helps us to understand more fully the reason why the author writes what he does, in the way that he does. For example, the urgency of the prophets like Jeremiah and Isaiah is better understood when we comprehend the rebellious anarchy that was breaking out across Israel at that time.

What is its cultural context?

Ancient middle-eastern culture is very different to life on the Gold Coast in the 21st century. We read the bible better when we explore the cultural context in which it is written. For example, the story of the so-called Prodigal son who is welcome home by his father who runs to the outskirts of the village to embrace him takes on new meaning when we understand that family patriarchs never ran, never humbled themselves in such a way.

As an aside, a really helpful tool in coming to understand the context that the bible was written in is to read of the many helpful introductions to the Scriptures. One I highly recommend is available in our bookshop. It is called: 'How to read the Bible for All Its Worth.'

Read for Offense not just Comfort

In some Bibles you will have an index at the front that helps you find verses that address particular needs. When you are grieving, or depressed, feel betrayed, desperate for direction, need forgiveness – read this particular passage. And people read these verses and find enormous comfort. Wonderful.

But sometimes the bible does not comfort us; it offends us. As it should.

Some people refuse to read the bible, or give up reading it because it offends them. The bible is sexist, or homophobic, or justifies war...and the list goes on. None of which I believe by the way, but you have heard people say it. You may have said it yourself.

To refuse to read the bible because some of what it says might offend us misses the point. You see the message of the bible should at times offend us, if that it means it makes us uncomfortable about our sinful disobedience towards God.

The bible will offend in every time and in every culture because in every time and culture people ignore God.

The writer of Hebrews says this:

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)

So when we read our bible and are at times uncomfortable with what we read, offended even – then good. When that happens we should slow down and ask ourselves:

Why am I uncomfortable or offended?
What belief, behaviour or attitude might need to change in me?

This brings me to my final point.

As we read the bible **we should read for Transformation not simply Information.**

There are plenty of people in our world who know the bible far better than me, who are fluent in ancient Greek and Hebrew and in experts on the historical and cultural background of the bible. When it comes to understanding this book I am only a beginner.

That is OK. You see, this book is most powerful when I don't just read it, but allow it to read me.

When I don't just dig deep into it; but allow it to dig deep into me.

When I don't just question it; but allow it to question me.

Famous poet, WH Auden has said:

A real book is not one that we read, but one that reads us. (W H. Auden)

The bible does not sit under us; we sit under it and the Living Word that it contains and points to.

The bible does its best work when I read it not just to increase my knowledge, but seek transformation for my life.

Paul and Barnabas drew from the rich resources of what we know as the Old Testament as they proclaimed the good news of Jesus in Pisidian Antioch. The Holy Spirit enabled them to interpret scripture and to apply it to their everyday life and mission.

And the Holy Spirit can do the same today for you and me.

On the first Sunday in January I shared a powerful story that illustrates the remarkable power of these pages. It was January, so a lot of you weren't there, but even if you were, this story is worth telling more than once.

Evangelist and author Ravi Zacharias tells the amazing story of a young Christian in Vietnam. He writes, 'I was ministering in Vietnam in 1971, and one of my interpreters was Hien Pham, an energetic young Christian. He had worked as a translator with the American forces, and was of immense help both to them and to missionaries such as myself. Hien and I travelled the length of the country and became very close friends before I returned home. We did not know if our paths would ever cross again.

Seventeen years later, I received a telephone call. 'Brother Ravi?' the man asked. Immediately I recognized Hien's voice, and he soon told me his story. Shortly after Vietnam fell, Hien was imprisoned on accusations of helping the Americans. His jailers tried to indoctrinate him against democratic ideals and the Christian faith. He was restricted to communist propaganda in French or Vietnamese, and the daily deluge of Marx and Engels began to take its toll, 'Maybe,' he thought, 'I have been lied to. Maybe God does not exist. Maybe the West has deceived me.' So Hien determined that when he awakened the next day, he would not pray anymore or think of his faith.

The next morning, he was assigned the dreaded chore of cleaning the prison latrines. As he cleaned out a tin can overflowing with toilet paper, his eye caught what seemed to be English printed on one piece of paper. He hurriedly grabbed it, washed it, and after his roommates had retired that night, he retrieved the paper and read the words, 'Roman, Chapter 8.' Trembling, he began to read, 'And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him...for I am convinced that nothing shall be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

Hien wept. He knew His Bible, and knew that there was not a more relevant passage for one on the verge of surrender. He cried out to God, asking forgiveness, for this was to have been the first day that he would not pray...after finding the Scripture, Hien asked the commander if he could clean the latrines regularly, because he discovered that some official was using the Bible as toilet paper.

Each day Hien picked up a portion of Scripture, cleaned it off, and added it to his collection of nightly reading...what his tormentors were using for refuse – the Scriptures – could not be more treasured to Hien.' Eventually he was released from prison and fled to Thailand.

Saint Ignatius has said this:

He who has heard the Word of God can bear his silences. (Saint Ignatius of Loyola)

My prayer is that as more and more we read the bible, that in the power of the Holy Spirit, we will hear God's word.