

The Bread of Life

(Deuteronomy 8:3 and Matthew 4:3)

“(The Lord) humbled you, and caused you to hunger then feeding you with manna which neither you nor your fathers had known to teach you that man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”

These were the words used by Christ when tempted by Satan to turn stones into bread as He was fasting in the wilderness. Our Lord often quoted Old Testament scriptures, sometimes applying them to his teaching, or in reply to a question.

Famously on the road to Emmaus, He used these scriptures to explain why the Messiah had to die and rise again. What a bible study that must have been!

Just as we need daily bread as part of our daily diet, so the Lord in His prayer teaches us that we need our spiritual bread, the word of the living God, to be an essential part of our spiritual diet. Indeed, it is unlikely we can grow in our faith without this bread. That is why the work of Bible translation and Bible Societies is so vital.

Like many of you my introduction to the Bible was my bedtime story. When I was able to read I was thrilled to be given my own Bible with drawings and maps, along with Scripture Union notes, and I dutifully read both for a number of years. It was not until I became a Christian however at the age of 13 that the Bible became more than a religious habit. In God's providence at that time, my readings were in Philippians, which just seemed so essential for a young Christian, especially when I found myself in a new form when I returned to school, and separated from Christian friends. What was God doing I prayed - until I read Phil 4:11 "For I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances." These words just leapt off the page into my situation then, and on many occasions in the intervening years. The living word of God has proved to be relevant, topical and essential for daily living some 60 plus years later.

The Psalms have been particularly precious, as I began to read a psalm every day as a young believer and it is to them I turn in every crisis, as they never fail to help me refocus on Christ and not my circumstances.

As time went on, however, I began to feel that I was paying more attention to the Bible Reading notes rather than the voice of God and at that point I was challenged by my 80 year old mother to read the whole Bible in a year as she was doing. So I began to do this in 1993 with a version of The New Living Bible which conveniently set out some Old Testament, New Testament, and a psalm for each day. I was often amazed to find how often these different passages complemented each other, and how I kept finding new things in readings that I had read many times. It was also sobering to realise how much I had forgotten and needed to be reminded of annually.

Eventually this much loved book fell apart so I went looking for a replacement. What I stumbled across was a New Living translation, covering the whole year but arranged in chronological order, and this has provided yet another dimension and illumination. Where there is overlap the passages are woven together and the integrity of scripture is clearly seen. For example, the psalm written following a certain incident appears immediately after the historical record. In the gospels where the same incident appears in more than one account they are grouped together and the emphasis of each writer is seen clearly. Once more God's word appears fresh.

But, of course, while reading the Bible is vitally important it is even more vital that we live it out, and allow it to shape our attitudes, our thinking, our actions and reactions. Almost imperceptibly, the Holy Spirit helps us to absorb its' teaching and to have "ears to hear" – and then to obey, shaping us so that we become more like our Saviour, and that He is seen in us. In this way we grow closer to Christ, who is our "bread of life" and essential to our nourishment and maturity. We know that God's word is sharper than a two edged sword as well as sweeter than honey. Thus we need to absorb the whole counsel of God.

In retirement it is a great blessing to be able to spend more time in the scriptures every day, and to hear His voice speaking from the pages. What a privilege, what a joy!

Let me encourage you to take up the challenge, and feast on the living word of God by reading the whole Bible every year. You will be blessed beyond measure.