

Chapter 2

Looking back before looking forward

We are given a lot of information nowadays about how to keep fit. We can be informed by the media of a well-known person's careful diet, or be treated to a photo of some senior minister going to work on his bicycle. No doubt many less well-known citizens take great care to eat properly and go for a run before work. In Britain many elderly people do a daily crossword puzzle to help them to stay mentally alert. Yet how many in a population give much thought to their spiritual health?

It is 100% certain that physical death lies ahead for all of us. On the way, many will know failing physical and mental powers or emotional upset. If life is lived in a spiritually unhealthy way, we need to understand how this will affect the survival of 'the real me' – the essential person. Probably most of us know someone with a physical disorder and are good at suspecting somebody's mental or emotional illness, although not everyone understands that spiritual ill health is equally serious. Perhaps doctors and patients alike would be better off to think more about the need for soul-medicine than of the more usual prescriptions for high blood pressure or depression.

Looking for the Maker's instructions

When we get a new piece of unfamiliar equipment, we probably look inside the box to find the maker's instructions for use. There are, of course, people who think they know how to put it all together without being told. Some even throw away the box with the advice still inside it. Then, if the machine doesn't work, or goes wrong later, they struggle for a long time to put it right by themselves. Some kind friend may then repeat the old saying, 'If all else fails, read the instructions', but by now these are lost. The hope is that they will be found or that someone who knows this particular model will come to the rescue.

Thankfully, when we want to find help for our spiritual lives, there is

an unflinching source of information and help waiting to guide and teach us all we need to know. A visit to the doctor usually starts with questions and answers about the history of the complaint and what the patient has tried. As we think of spiritual ill health and its remedy, it will help to look at an outline of the history of God's dealings with humanity. His purposes are recorded in the Bible and we'll consider how for centuries people have tried or failed to meet standards given as the Maker's instructions. All too often people have ignored or lost them. By choosing to go our own way, the result has been the chaos and unhappiness found in much of the world throughout the ages.

Missing the mark

Ecclesiastes is a book of the Bible that, if set to music, would be in a minor key. It starts with the author's thoughts on the meaninglessness of life. It is significant that in the first 44 verses, the word 'I' occurs 38 times! We do not find meaning in life by depending on our own wisdom or possessions. Perhaps it is appropriate that the middle letter of the word 'sin' is 'i'. 'Sin' is an old expression for 'missing the mark'. When we offend God by ignoring his standards and so missing his mark, we sin. So much sin comes from disobeying God by being self-willed, with 'I' kept firmly at the centre but an easy target for temptation.

Whether we speak of a driver breaking the speed limit, or someone whose blood level of alcohol, sugar or cholesterol exceeds the safe limit (to miss the accepted 'mark'), is to take risks and face undesirable consequences. A visit to an Accident and Emergency department or a medical outpatient clinic will demonstrate what some of these consequences are. There are also standards to be kept to ensure our spiritual health. Failing to keep them has equally serious consequences.

One of my friends is an expert at the game of bowls and wins trophies for her skill. This requires excellent judgment, for in doing so well she has dealt with a big problem. For those unfamiliar with this ancient game, a 'bowl' (or 'wood') is a heavy round wooden ball that is rolled across a grass lawn, aiming to hit the 'jack', a small white ball already on the green. This may sound easy enough to a novice, but the problem is that the bowl has bias and it rolls in a curve. For centuries,

this has been deliberately supplemented by embedding a piece of metal at the heart of the wood. Inexperienced players find it very hard to get at all close to the jack.

All of us, young and old, have an inborn bias; we have a tendency to curve in on ourselves, deflecting us even from meeting our *own* standards. The unaided skill of the best of us will never overcome the ‘I’ embedded in our hearts, stopping us from going straight.

The two testaments

As we go on to read of what the result of mankind’s disobedience, and what God has done about it, our source book will again be the Bible. It is in two parts, the first known as the Old Testament and the second the New Testament. Both give us important and inter-related messages today. These books are not simply textbooks, to read as we read for exams. We need to listen with our spiritual ears to the messages they give and be open to hearing God’s voice through them. We don’t need to read very far to find serious human failure to honour God and keep his standards. Our newspaper headlines today tell the same story, so we would do well to learn how to avoid such failures.

A ‘Last Will and Testament’ records someone’s final wishes about what to do with remaining possessions after that person dies. Sometimes the person making a will attaches certain conditions, but to die without making a will leaves a lot of problems. In the Bible, the word ‘testament’ has a deeper meaning, for it is an inspired record of God’s will.

Why speak of the Bible as inspired?

Some who are unfamiliar with what the Bible says may find it strange that others believe it to have been divinely inspired. They perhaps view such a notion with scepticism, whilst students of literature may enjoy the language of the old Authorised Version and read it as appreciatively as they would a play by Shakespeare. To offer more insight we need to think more deeply about the origins of the Bible and how it is still such a significant resource for many seekers after meaning and purpose in their lives.

In his book *The Contemporary Christian*, John Stott unpacks the topic with customary clarity. He explains how God has revealed himself to humanity by ‘speaking to and through the biblical authors’. He has not acted like a remote radio transmitter, intending his messages to be mechanically recorded and relayed by selected listeners. Rather he has chosen writers whose existing interests and aptitudes have prepared their minds and wills to co-operate with his. Some of them were by inclination historians, some theologians, some enjoyed literary composition, and God ‘spoke through them in such a way that the words spoken [and written] were simultaneously and equally his and theirs’. Although produced in very different times from ours we can study the records to determine what principles the original accounts intended to convey, whatever their chosen subject. The worship of man-made idols in the past was a serious insult to a faithful God, and a punishable offence, but today nations and individuals risk the same consequences when something (or someone) takes God’s place as an object of worship.

To apply the meaning and message of those old writings to our present day lives will mean assessing the mood and mentality of our surrounding culture. Dr Stott says, ‘Only then shall we be able to discern how the unchanging word speaks to the changing world.’ He calls this the discipline of ‘double listening’, that is, ‘listening humbly to the Scripture and critically to modernity in order to relate the one to the other’. Clearly this calls for us to make balanced judgements, being neither so immersed in our holy huddles that we neglect the needs of the world about us nor so preoccupied with worldly affairs that we fail to apply to them the revealed wisdom of God. The Bible does not give us many obvious job descriptions, but offers guiding principles as we look for direction in all our ways.

The Old Testament

In the Bible, God expresses his will as an agreement, or covenant – his ‘testament’ to which his people should agree. This covenant was established by God’s grace with people who had rejected him. Instead of bringing judgment on them, he graciously chose to redeem a people for himself, and gave them rules for life which, if accepted and obeyed would allow a continued relationship between them and God. For

people to fail in their side of the agreement would break trust and take them towards death and destruction, not life and growth.¹

Jewish and Christian traditions name Moses as author of the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch (excluding the account of his death at the end of Deuteronomy). Some experts suggest 1446-1406 BC as the likely date for these writings, whereas others disagree about both this and the authorship. A basic difference in approach is that the critics are more interested in trying to clarify what cannot now be clarified, but traditional Jews and Christians see the books as a reliably recorded history, with many lessons still to be applied today. This is the line I shall follow.

In *Genesis* we are told the story of creation, including that of human beings. Centuries after the first humans rebelled against God, he called a man named Abraham to follow him. He promised to make Abraham's children into a great nation, and to give them the land of Canaan to live in and to grow as God's people, so that they would become a blessing to the whole world. This promise was repeated to Abraham's descendants, Isaac and Jacob (later renamed 'Israel' by God). Israel's children were rescued from starvation by one of their brothers, Joseph. Earlier he had been betrayed by his older brothers and so began a long and painful story that finally took him to be prime minister of Egypt, where he was in a position to save the lives of all his family. Years passed, the children of Israel multiplied, but were later enslaved by the Egyptians. The books of *Exodus* and *Numbers* tell how God remembered his promises, raising up Moses to lead the people to freedom. On Mount Sinai, God gave his law and told Moses some of the offerings they had to make to God in worship, and as an atonement for their sins. Between these two books comes *Leviticus*, which outlines the sacrifices and offerings that were required to deal with sin, along with many laws for living distinctively as God's people.

The history of the Hebrews under Moses' successor is recorded in a book bearing his name, *Joshua*. It describes how he finally led them into Canaan. After Joshua's death came a series of leaders, recorded in the book of *Judges*. Few of them measured up to God's standards; they gave poor leadership and the people lost direction. Finally God sent them a new leader – Samuel. He was both priest and prophet

and ruled wisely and well. Even so, the people rebelled and because they wanted to be like other nations, they asked for a king. God directed Samuel to anoint the disappointing Saul and after him the distinguished David, as their kings.

King David made the holy city of Jerusalem his capital and penned many contributions to the book of *Psalms*. The two books of *Samuel* record the histories of Samuel, Saul and David. Next are the books of *Kings*, containing the account of David's son, King Solomon, his (mostly ungodly) successors, and after his death the division of the kingdom into northern Israel and southern Judah. Solomon built a magnificent temple in Jerusalem, dedicating it to the worship of God, as told in the two books of *Chronicles*. He had God-given wisdom, some shown in the 'wisdom literature' – the books of *Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes* (warning how empty life is without God) and the love song, *Song of Songs*.

The kingdoms of both Israel and Judah disobeyed God, not least by worshipping idols, and despite many warnings by the prophets (their names making a roll-call for over a third of the books of the Old Testament) first Israel and then Judah were invaded and their people taken into exile. Jerusalem was destroyed by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. It was only after Babylon had been defeated by Cyrus, the king of Persia, that permission was given for the Jews to return home. Efforts at rebuilding the city of Jerusalem and its temple were encouraged by *Ezra* and *Nehemiah*.

Among the other stories the books named for them tell of two significant women, *Ruth* and *Esther*. Matthew mentions Ruth in the family tree of Jesus² and Esther, Jewish wife of the king of Persia, was able to save her people from slaughter. God used each of these women to work out his purposes in history.

Last in the long series of prophets came *Malachi*. His book warns of a coming curse instead of blessing if on-going peace talks set up by God with his people should end in failure. Yet among the many forecasts of trouble ahead there had also been some hints about a Saviour, or Messiah, who would finally come to the rescue. The biblical record is then silent for four hundred years.

The New Testament

This part of the Bible starts more hopefully, with the coming of Jesus as the long-promised deliverer. He came very quietly, and we'll be thinking more about this later, but he fulfilled the prophecies about the coming Messiah in many remarkable ways. The aim of his life's work and the events around his death and resurrection offered a new covenant that would no longer be primarily for the Jews, but for people of all nations. He would become the Saviour of the world.

The old covenant had shown that people could not keep God's laws by their own efforts, but Jesus would bring in a new covenant, based on his death and resurrection. Christ's self-giving death and obedient love would cover all that the law required.³ Through faith in Jesus, people would receive new life and a new heart, given by the Holy Spirit. This astonishing gift of God's Spirit, working alongside and within them, would transform them, helping them to live lives pleasing to God.⁴ This new life would be characterised by love for God and for one another.^{5, 6, 7}

Attitudes to these Scriptures

The 39 books of the Old Testament are still revered by orthodox Jews and have echoes in the Qur'an. Jewish, Muslim and Christian readers all recognise the importance of great men of faith such as Abraham and value the lessons to be drawn from their lives.

Some modern scholars suggest that the Old Testament describes a very different, warlike God from the loving one we meet in the New Testament. It is true that looking back to the early period of biblical history raises thought-provoking questions with few easy answers. Historical research makes clear, however, that the peoples of Canaan were corrupt and evil: their idol worship was accompanied by child sacrifice, prostitution, and sexual orgies. Like an aggressive cancer, such evil had to be eradicated, however painfully. Some changed their ways in time, put their trust in the one true God and found mercy.⁸ This can still happen today.

Many of the prophets longed for peace but they knew it would only come by people repenting of wrongdoing, not tolerating or co-operating with it. There will always be casualties when the good and godly resist the forces of evil. But the Bible offers hope. It makes it clear that God's Son will finally return. Then there will be no more death, mourning or pain and all will be made new.⁹

Traditionally Christians have believed that both Testaments, as originally given, were (and remain) the authentic word of God, his mind and purpose being shared with writers inspired by his Spirit to make them reliable messengers. The Old Testament includes many pointers to the coming of the Christ (or Messiah), bringer of salvation, and the New Testament identifies this person as Jesus, God-made-man and central to the Christian faith.

A few years ago I gave an English New Testament to a Hungarian Christian who at once complained, 'Why have you only given me half a Bible?' It was a good question, for long ago in the first century Augustine, a great Christian thinker, said that in the Old Testament the New was concealed, and in the New the Old was revealed. The two go together.

BC and AD

Before the coming of Christ most of the people described in the Old Testament failed to remain faithful to God, rejecting him and turning to idols time and time again. It seemed as though this pattern would continue forever. Then the coming of Christ changed history. We refer to the time before his birth as BC (Before Christ), but the years since are referred to as Anno Domini (AD) – Latin for 'in the year of our Lord'. To use BCE (Before the Common Era) and CE (Common Era) fails to observe the significance of Christ's entry into the world.

We are likely to find ourselves mirrored in the Bible's account of how humanity has either rejected or responded to God's love in action, with important personal and social consequences in each case. As we start to think about whether this is still happening today, could it be true that a lot of personal and national troubles are caused by what has

been called ‘a God-shaped gap’ in people’s lives? Taking no time to get to know him is at the root of much spiritual ill health. If this is really so, it is time to find ways to repair that gap.

Although it is now over two thousand years since the birth of the Christ child in Bethlehem, the story of God’s creative love started many centuries before that. To trace his plan for humanity, and that includes each of us today, we will first look back at the Old Testament record as it unfolded and see how well or otherwise people cooperated with the truth God shared with them. How did people learn to recognise God’s will and way for living their lives in those long ago days? After that we will look at the New Testament, telling how his plans matured so that his people, too, can gradually become more mature. His aim is to restore us to the image in which we were created.

For further thought

- Would you be happy to follow guidance about how to live well?
- Had you thought of the link between living well and spiritual health?
- Did you realise that God gave us the Scriptures as a ‘keep fit manual’?

Further resources

- Wenham G. *The Pentateuch in Carson DA ed. New Bible commentary 21st edition*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994
- Stott J. *The contemporary Christian*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992
- Jones J. *With my whole heart: reflections on the heart of the Psalms*. London: SPCK Publishing, 2012
- Stott J. *Favourite Psalms*. Milton Keynes: Word Publishing, 1988

References

- | | |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Deuteronomy 30:15-18 | 6. John 13:34-35 |
| 2. Matthew 1:5 | 7. Mark 12:28-31 |
| 3. Romans 8:1-4 | 8. Joshua 2:11-12, 6:23 |
| 4. John 14:15-16; Romans 8:5-17 | 9. Revelation 21:3-5 |
| 5. Micah 6:8 | |

