

## **How Do We Make Sense of Life?**

A sermon given by Stuart Robinson from Crossway Baptist Church, Victoria on 3/4/05  
Used with permission from the author for use as a resource for Bible Celebration material

How do we make sense of life, when in one week thousands of people are killed in an earthquake in Indonesia, a woman in hospital has her feeding tubes deliberately withdrawn to cause her to die, an Australian Navy Sea King helicopter on a rescue mission in Indonesia goes down killing nine of the eleven people on board and then finally as it were to cap off this awesome seven days the Pope in Rome dies? There will be many investigations and lots of talk about these several events and reports will come out explaining how they occurred but who is going to tell us why?

I don't presume to offer some quick-fix, simplistic answers to these deep mysteries of life but today I want to refer you to a book which contains the principles which can give some of the answers to the 'why?' questions. It is far better that you search out the principles for yourself than I spoon feed you and you walk out of here and they're swilled away by the first cup of coffee you have as you move into a busy week. The book I refer to you was written by over 40 different authors during a 1500 year time span. Within this book there are many stories; stories of great sacrifice, of love and hate, of the human condition, of sex and sadism, of courage and self-denial, of kings in battle, of individuals terrified and lost in deserts of isolation and fear. Within its pages there is written much poetry and sermons, hymns, prophecies, prayers, letters and of course, not a little bit of history. Over the centuries during which this book which has been in existence there have been many attempts to debunk it, to deride it, to disprove it but when all the clash and the clamour has once more subsided, the book is still there to comfort, to encourage, to give a compass in life and to be an inspiration to many.

The book I speak about, of course, we call "The Holy Bible". Around the world at least some part been translated into over 2500 different languages and it is estimated that at the current rate of progress by the year 2025 portions of it at least will exist in almost every language of the world. Its teaching is unique. During the course of its writing there were peoples living all around the lands where it was being written who worshipped many gods but this book only speaks of one God. Its outstanding character, the chief personality within its pages, is Jesus Christ. It has been amazingly preserved in the form of which we now have it today for almost 2000 years. Archaeological discoveries made in more recent times have turned up fragments over 2300 years old and comparing those fragments with what we have today they are almost exactly the same as when originally written. It's amazing when one considers how remarkably accurately this book has been preserved in its original form. In the English language, our most famous playwright is William Shakespeare. He wrote as recently as the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. He wrote long after the invention of the printing press and so his plays were put into book form and yet in every one of the 37 plays written by this most outstanding dramatist there are great gaps in the material. But the Bible has been around for a couple of millennia and yet it's still there, miraculously preserved.

The Bible itself has often been put to many different and interesting uses. In an American city an elderly lady returning home from church one day was startled to find an intruder in her house in the process of robbing her of her valuables. Creeping up behind him with great presence of mind she shouted out Acts 2:38. Bible scholars would know that part of that particular verse says "Turn from your sin". The burglar stopped dead in his tracks, paralysed, unmoving and the lady took the opportunity to call the police. He stayed there motionless until the police officer turned up and handcuffed him. "Why did you just stay there when this old lady just shouted a bit of scripture at you?" asked the police officer. He replied, "Scripture? She didn't shout scripture. She said I've got an axe and two 38s!"

Every day around the world, every second, day and night, a copy of the Bible is being sold somewhere. For many years it's been the world's best seller, but in our country, and in countries that we collectively call the "west", although it's still the best seller, it may become the least read among the best sellers. But in those places where it is not as easily available people go to great

lengths just to get some of it. Some Christians visiting China recently spoke to a leader there who became a follower of Jesus in her teenage years through the life, witness and testimony of her own mother. For some years she never even saw a copy of the Bible. But from time to time she, with other Christians from her area, would hear that somebody in a nearby town had a few verses copied out of the sacred text and so they'd hurry over there to copy them out by hand. Then they'd hear someone in another town had a chapter of the Bible so they'd go over there and copy that out. And then, very occasionally, they'd hear of somebody who even had a copy of an entire book of the Bible and they'd race off and spend the whole night where they wouldn't be interrupted just copying it out. Gradually over the years they collected the sacred writings of the revelation from God and passed on their little pieces of paper to others. That story is not uncommon.

The Bible has within it an amazing capacity to transform lives. Alfonso Ballen grew up in Bogota in Columbia. He became a drug addict at an early age and ran away from home and joined a street gang. For 12 years he lived on the streets, pushing and selling drugs. One day somebody gave him a copy of the New Testament. He and his friends used to tear the pages out to use as wrapping for their marijuana cigarettes (and you might reply "Holy Smoke"! ) One day instead of smoking a page he actually read it! He unfolded it and it was Revelation chapter 5. What he read there gave him an understanding that it was only Jesus Christ who had the capacity to open the "Book of Life" at the end of days. He fell on his knees and right then and there in the street he asked God to forgive him. He went back to his gang and he lead 10 of them to Jesus Christ. Alfonso went on to serve as a pastor in his country and 6 of his gang of 10 followed him also into Christian ministry and full time Christian service.

Because the Bible has this amazing capacity to change people from where they are (and often where their political leaders want them to be), to something else, something God wants them to be, it has often been attacked. The attack on Christians and their Bible is nothing new in our history, we just tend to forget about it the past. Back in the fourth century the Roman Empire Diocletion outlawed Christianity and instigated a process to destroy all places where Christians met. The property of Christians was confiscated. He attempted to destroy every copy of the Bible and anyone who was found with a copy of the Bible was killed. Thousands upon thousands of Christians were killed and destroyed along with their Bibles. Eventually Diocletion built a memorial column to commemorate his assumed triumph and on his column he had engraved the words in Latin 'Extincto nomine Christianorem', which means "The name of Christianity has been extinguished" but within a few decades it was the Christian faith which had conquered the Roman Empire. In the next century the famous Latin scholar Jerome translated the Bible from its original text in Greek and Hebrew into Latin enabling it to spread throughout the Mediterranean world.

Throughout the centuries, the Bible has often come under attack. In 18<sup>th</sup> Century France, the great literary genius, Voltaire, said, "I am weary of hearing people repeat that 12 fisherman founded Christianity, I will show the world that one Frenchmen is sufficient to overthrow it". Gallic pride if ever there was! He predicted that within 100 years the Bible would exist only in museums. The interesting thing is that within the time frame he himself predicted, his own home had been turned into a headquarters of the Bible Society and was distributing copies of the Scriptures!

In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, it was Adolph Hitler who declared himself as the greatest liberator of humanity and he said "I will tear up Christianity root and branch. I will annihilate it in Germany. The masses will never again be Christian. The tale is finished; no one will ever listen to it again." Even before he himself lost his life, many of his soldiers were losing theirs in the battle of Stalingrad. As they were surrounded by enclosing Russian troops, the last radio message they sent out to headquarters was "Send us Bibles". And the German Air Force, the Luftwaffe, risked many planes flying over enemy territory to parachute in copies of the Bible to Hitler's own troops.

In Jewish homes today only the Jewish scriptures, the Old Testament as we call it, is freely admitted. In Muslim countries the distribution of the Bible may be severely restricted and in some Muslim countries it is entirely banned because it is said to be too dangerous. The Bible's obituary

has been written again and again but it has this uncanny habit of reappearing after its own funeral. It says in Hebrews 4:12 that this Word of God is living and it is active. It can not be destroyed.

But why should we in this 21<sup>st</sup> Century read and study the Bible? Well, there are many reasons for it. The Bible itself gives many clues, it describes the human condition as being spiritually dead, cut off from God and if we want to come to life, if we want to reconnect with God then we need to learn of him and his ways through the pages of his Word, the Bible.

So firstly, there is the matter of new life. The gospel of John was written so we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that by believing we might have life, it says so in John 20 verse 31. But new life is inadequate by itself, it needs to be nurtured. So after reconnecting with God, secondly, there needs to be growth. So it says in Romans 10:17 that faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God. 1 Peter 2:2-3 says that as newborn babies we are to desire the pure milk of God's word that we might grow and Hebrews 5:14 encourages us not just to stay with the milk but to go on to the meat, to get into the deeper stuff.

Thirdly we read the Bible for strengthening. Psalm 119:11 says "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you". Greatest protection against repetitive habitual temptation is the word of God protecting our hearts and our minds.

Fourthly, there is the matter of succeeding in what God has called us to do and to be. In Joshua 1:8, Moses warned Joshua that if he was going to succeed and to prosper in the great enterprise that was now set before him to enter in and to take over the promised land of Canaan, then the critical thing for him to succeed would be for him to meditate every day upon the word of God.

Fifthly, how much do we need guidance and direction? Every one of us everyday is looking for guidance and direction for what to do. Psalm 119:105 says "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path". Note that it is a lamp to my *feet*, a light to my *path*. It is not a laser light meant to point to the moon and over the hills, it's a little lamp. The idea is a flame which just shows us the next step and then the next. It doesn't need to show you what's around the corner. It doesn't show you what's over around the curve in the road but it is sufficient to show you the next step you need to take.

Sixthly, we read the Bible because we need constant empowerment. Ephesians 6:17 speaks of the word of God as being like a sword which gives strength and power for the spiritual warfare in which we will often be involved. These are just a few of the reasons as to why we should, every day, read and study the word of God. There are many more. However, while I encourage you to read and study it I also need to give you a warning because reading the Bible is dangerous. It ought to have not just "Holy Bible" printed on the outside; it needs one of those safety warnings that we sometimes see "Highly Explosive", "Handle with Care". One needs to read it, yes, but understand that as it affects our lives we may be placed in situations which could be injurious to our health!

Leban Ibrahim Hussein became sick. He did the traditional thing and asked for the leaders of his Muslim community, the sheiks, to pray for him. Nothing happened. They encouraged him to read the holy book, the Qur'an, which he did but it gave him no relief. Then he started to hear about the Bible and three years after the onset of his sickness he started to believe that what the Bible said was true. Five years afterwards he sent off for a copy of the Somali New Testament. In the request that he wrote for this book, he said this "Please be aware that if you send me this book, you'll be sending me the greatest gift that can be given to any human being". As he started in to read this book, fully aware of the implications of doing this in an almost 100% Muslim country, his life started to change and he became a believer in and a follower of Jesus. Weighing up all that was at stake he was eventually baptised and then he started to influence others. The Bible became a danger to his life because his words were affecting others and then one morning as he walked to work at 7.30 am, two gunmen were waiting for him on the side of the road and they

shot him dead. He had obtained the great prize of eternal life through Jesus Christ and it came to him through that greatest of gifts, the holy Word of God, the Bible. He gave his life to join a great list of martyrs who have similarly given their lives in the pursuit of the knowledge contained in its pages and the conviction that they must preach it to others.

Although the Bible might be dangerous in some ways as we read it, I tell you for all of us it's even more dangerous if we do not read it. In Judges 2:10 it says that a generation grew up and knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for them. You see they became bankrupt in terms of their values; they were left with no basis upon which to make moral decisions. They became as we would say today, "Biblical illiterates" with no knowledge of God's word. They found themselves in a situation of dangerous drift and that's always the outcome in any nation where God's word, once known, becomes disregarded.

In Australia today, for the first time in our history since the European settlement, we have now growing up in our midst young adults who have had absolutely no contact with church through church attendance or family devotions or what we used to call "Sunday School" or anything else for that matter. In that situation, it is not surprising then that we see in our time a great change in public values which are enshrined eventually in law because that reflects where our society is going. What used to be called modesty is now regarded as a sexual hang up. What was Christian behavioural discipline is now regarded as unhealthy emotional repression. What was once regarded as crudely obscene is now called adult entertainment. What was moral irresponsibility is now neurotic inhibition. What was living in sin is now a meaningful relationship between partners. What used to be called perversion is now an alternative lifestyle. Depravity becomes self expression, killing the unborn is freedom of choice and bribes are called creative negotiating procedures. On and on it goes, where does it end if you have no foundations, no guideline to make these sort of decisions?

It was many centuries ago that Moses said to the people of his generation in Deuteronomy 6:6-7 "These commandments I give to you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them upon your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up." Let the word of God and the commands of God come into your life and just totally renew you and make sure that you take it into the lives of your children. It is not the responsibility of anyone else, church and children's church may help but it is your responsibility if you are parents or grandparents.

The problem today is that because we neglect God's word there are dire consequences already happening across our nation. If we reject the Bible then we have little or nothing by which to live because we have no reference point. In the United States of America there is a small bronze disk which is in North Central Kansas and it marks the spot where the 39<sup>th</sup> parallel crosses the 98<sup>th</sup> Meridian. It's at a place called Meeds Ranch and every place within the United States is measured and calculated from that point. It's the geographical reference point for the entire nation so no government dam is built; no missile is launched without reference to that exact location. There was a time when the state highway department of the state of Pennsylvania set to work building a bridge, and as is often the case, they started from different sides of the river but they came together in the middle they found they were 4 metres off line. That was pretty bright of them! It had come about because each working group had used its own reference point. Remember this, location by approximation is extremely dangerous and costly. For nations and individuals the Bible needs to be that reference point for our national life, and without it, to the degree that we sway away from it, we become in a dangerous situation.

When former Nixon presidential advisor, Chuck Colson, was visiting Buckingham Palace talking with Prince Phillip, the Prince asked him in his own inevitable style "What can we do about crime here in England?" Chuck Colson said to him "I suggest your highness, that you send more children to Sunday School." The Prince, in keeping with his style, thought it was a joke but Colson went on to refer to certain sociological studies that he knew about which tracked what had happened in previous eras of English life. In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, British society was

marked by very high levels of crime and violence but then it was noted, as the statistics were kept, that in the latter part of that century and into the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, crime amazingly dropped away. What changed the nation's character and behaviour? Throughout that period attendance at Sunday Schools steadily rose. In 1888, 75% of the nation's children were weekly, regularly, in Sunday School with a corresponding decrease in law and disorder. When that started to change and attendance at Sunday School went down again, up went the crime and violence rates once more. What we do as churches and what we do as parents to bring our children to faith in Jesus through a knowledge of God's Word, is a vital contribution to securing the future of our nation.

In Russia an angry official snatched a Bible out of the hands of a pastor who was reading it as a train was going along and he threw it out the window. The pastor thought, "Well I'd never see that again." And then a few months later, a stranger came to his office with an unusual request. The man had come from a neighbouring village and he'd asked the pastor to baptise him. When the pastor asked him "What church do you belong to or from where have you come?" the man said "I don't belong to any church but I've read the Bible, I know something about God and I know that Jesus Christ is my Lord and he commands that I be baptised so I'm here today, as a follower of his to ask you to baptise me." The pastor asked how this stranger had come to reach these conclusions and the man replied "Well I am a construction worker and a few months ago I was working down by the railway track when suddenly out of a passing train there came a book thrown out the window and it fell down near where I was and I went over and picked it up and I started to read it, and I've been reading it ever since." It was the Bible, and when that man accepted Christ because of his changed life, later on everyone in his village became Christian followers of Jesus. God's word continues to do the work for which it was sent if we take it in as God wants us to and as I encourage you to do today. Pick up the word of God afresh! Dust it off! If you've got a Bible sitting on a shelf and dust is on its cover then probably your life will be rather dry. On the other hand, if your Bible is all falling apart then probably your life isn't, because you'll be into your Bible.

I stand here and tell you stories of how just reading God's word changes people's lives. It will not only change you it will change our church, it'll change our city, change our nation. The Bible does that. You see it's not just a book we read, it's a book which reads us as we open its pages. As I said at the beginning, if you want to try and understand some of the traumas through which we've been living, the tsunami and the earthquakes, the deaths, the accidents, the murders, the euthanasia, the suicide of the famous rock singer, yes, that occurred in the same week as other things and of course the death of the Pope. You want to understand the 'why?' of some of those things; you'll find it in the pages of the Bible. It gives us the understanding of the past. It brings fulfilment into the present and it certainly provides security for the future. We live on earth for just a moment but God is someone who is forever, he's the Lord of the Ages. He is God of all time and this is his Book. We get our understanding of him through this Book.