

3. A Coherent Word

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- [0 : 0 0] We're going to read now in the Bibles and in two places this evening. First in Luke's Gospel, chapter 24, that's the last chapter of Luke's Gospel, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, page, I think, 885 or thereabouts in the Church Bibles if you have one.
- And then in Luke's second volume, in the Acts of the Apostles, which is after John's Gospel, and a few verses from Acts chapter 10, that's page 919 in the Vista's Bibles.
- Luke 24 and Acts 10. And Luke 24 is the great resurrection chapter. And reading at verse 44, Jesus has appeared to his disciples, showed them his hands and feet, but we're told in verse 41 they still disbelieved for joy.
- They were marveling. And he said to them, have you anything here to eat? They gave him a piece of broiled fish. He took it and ate it before them. Then, verse 44, he said to them, these are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you.
- That everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled. Then he opened their mind to understand the scriptures.
- [1 : 2 7] And he said to them, thus it is written that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead. And that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.
- Thus is it written, says Jesus. That's what the Bible, that's what the Old Testament means. And you, he says, verse 48, are witnesses of these things. And behold, I'm sending you the promise of my Father upon you.
- Stay in the city until you're clothed with power from on high. Turn over then to Acts chapter 10 and just a couple of verses, but very, very helpful verses.
- Acts chapter 10, verse 42 and 43. Here is Peter speaking in the household of Cornelius. You know the story. After he has received a dream.
- And Cornelius has received a dream and the Lord has put the two of them together. Cornelius is seeking the truth of God. Peter is sent to give the truth of God to Cornelius.
- [2 : 3 6] Cornelius gets his whole household together and says, Now tell us everything that God has told you to tell us. Acts chapter 10, verse 42 and 43.
- Peter summarizes very neatly and very profoundly what Jesus commanded the apostles to preach. This is the apostolic gospel. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be the judge of the living and the dead.
- That's the gospel.
- Through his name. It's striking, isn't it? That the New Testament message of the apostles that Jesus commanded them to preach was a gospel of the coming judge of heaven and earth and of all people.
- And the message that Peter says all the Old Testament prophets bear witness to is that this man would be the savior who would bring forgiveness of sins.

[4 : 04] Very striking, don't you think? Lots of people think the Old Testament is a book all about judgment and the New Testament is a book all about forgiveness. And Peter says exactly the opposite. The New Testament gospel is by the imminent judgment of God.

The Old Testament promised a way of forgiveness and salvation from him. But both together, Old and New Testament testifying to the story of God's great salvation.

Perhaps you'd open your Bibles there to the end of Luke's gospel. We're again in this thematic series. So we're not looking specifically at one passage. But it might be helpful just to have that in front of you.

It's the 400th anniversary, as we've said, of the authorized version, the King James version of the Bible. And so we're asking the question. We have the opportunity to do so.

We're asking the question, what is the Bible? Whatever version we're using. What does the Bible claim of itself? What has the church understood the Bible to be all the way down through its history, all the way through the ages, when we talk about this book as being the Word of God?

[5 : 12] Well, first of all, we saw that this book is a covenant word. It's a word of personal revelation from God to us, so that it can lead men and women into a personal relationship with God.

First and foremost, it's God reaching out to us to draw us to him through his words. We can't have a relationship without words of some kind, words that reveal and show ourselves to another.

And so God speaks to us so that we can know him and love him. Then last week we thought about the fact that this Bible is a clear word. God's revelation is accessible to us.

It's understandable to us. It comes to us ready interpreted for us by God. It's not shrouded in mystery. It's a word that is clear so we can understand it.

So like the psalmist, we can say it is a light to our path. It brings understanding to our minds. But today I want to think of another aspect of God's revelation, and it's this, that the Bible that we have in front of us is also a coherent word.

[6 : 19] That is, it's a word of comprehensive revelation to us. It reveals to us everything that we need to know about God and about his salvation, and everything we need to know about God's will and his purpose for this world, and indeed his will and purpose for our own lives.

But to know everything that we do need to know about God and the world and our lives and our response to him, we need to know not just a few texts here and there from the scriptures, no, we need to grasp that God's word is a whole word.

It's indivisible truth. It's a coherent revelation in its totality. Not a pick and mix box. Now sometimes theologians use the phrase *tota scriptura*, which is the posh Latin way of saying all scripture.

All scripture is our standard for everything in life. So Jesus said, man does not live by bread alone but by every word, every word that comes from the mouth of God.

All scripture, says Paul, all scripture is breathed out by God and is able to make us wise for salvation, so that the man of God may be equipped for every good work.

[7 : 40] All scripture, every word of God. We need a coherent whole that we find in scripture if we're going to live as God wants us to live.

And moreover, scripture has a bearing on all of life, every aspect of life, every possible aspect of our lives and our thinking that we can ever imagine.

That's why Paul can say in 1 Corinthians 10 verse 31, whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Every single thing in your life.

Well, if we're going to be able to do that, we must know how to do that, mustn't we? God must tell us how we can do everything to the glory of God, else we can't do it. And that is what scripture tells us, how to do everything to the glory of God.

Of course, that doesn't mean that scripture in our Bibles explicitly mentions every single thing that we would come across in life. It doesn't plainly do that. Scripture doesn't mention explicitly many of the ethical issues that we deliberate about today.

[8 : 46] There's no mention in the Bible of cloning. There's no mention in the Bible of abortion. No mention in the Bible of all kinds of things. But of course, the Bible does forbid murder.

And the Bible does clearly teach that unborn babies are human persons. does teach that from conception, a life is sacred in the mind of God and must be honored and protected as such.

So we can work out very clearly the ethical issues on a whole number of different areas, even though they're not explicitly mentioned in scripture. The Bible doesn't mention anything about cars.

Well, how could it? The Bible doesn't tell us which cars are godly cars and which cars are not godly cars. It doesn't tell us explicitly how to drive to the glory of God, does it?

But of course, the Bible teaches us a lot of things that are pertinent to that. It teaches us how to be wise and not foolish with our money, wise and not foolish with our action, sensible in how to make decisions and all kinds of things.

[9 : 50] And above all, to glorify God in everything that we do, we just need to apply all of these clear biblical principles, even to the cars that we buy, even to the ways that we drive.

If the government puts the speed limit up to 80, it'll be a lot easier for some of us to drive in a godly fashion, won't it? But you see what I mean? The Bible has a coherent revelation.

It teaches a coherent view and indeed a comprehensive view about God, about his salvation, about this world, and about our lives under God's rule in this world.

And that means that we need to take the Bible and the whole Bible seriously in our thinking and think how it is that it applies to the whole of our lives. The whole of God's word applies to the whole of God's world.

That's the principle. The whole of God's word applies to the whole of God's world, that we can do everything to the glory of God. And that means we must approach the Bible seriously to learn how to read it, how to understand it properly, how to grapple with the way it does teach us and the way that it does inform us coherently and comprehensively.

[11 : 08] Because if we don't do that, we'll just abuse the Bible and we'll just treat it, well, as little more sometimes than a Christianized horoscope. And I'm afraid that is how often Christians have treated their Bibles.

Maybe you've done it. I'm sure I've done it myself. Randomly sort of selecting a verse for today and saying, well, God, give me a word. What can I see? What can you tell me from this verse I'm going to pick from the Bible about the particular issue of guidance that I'm struggling with at the moment?

In a previous generation, some of you may remember this, people used to have what was called promise boxes. Anybody remember that? Little boxes with rolled up pieces of paper with Bible verses printed on them.

And you would go to your promise box and take one out and unravel it and read it. And this is God's special word for you today. Now, in the mercy of God, sometimes he used, I'm sure, these little bits of paper in an amazing way.

But it's not really how we're meant to read the Bible, is it? It's the same thing when people today are looking for guidance and they open their Bibles to get some special verse. Or perhaps somebody says, I've got this special verse for you.

[12 : 24] You open the Bible, your eye falls on it, and you say, oh, right, that's the answer to my need today. But that's terribly demeaning to the Scriptures, to treat the Bible like that.

It's terribly demeaning to God himself. Because God has given us a coherent word, not a random collection of texts. And moreover, it's not just demeaning to God, it's actually very dangerous for us.

I think I've told you this story before of the young student who was very depressed because his girlfriend had abandoned him. And so he prayed to the Lord and was asking what to do. What should I do, Lord? So he opened his Bible and said, well, I'll look for what the Lord is going to guide me in the Scriptures.

And he opened his Bible and his eye lit on Matthew chapter 27, verse 5, and read it. And it said, Judas went out and hanged himself. And he thought, well, that doesn't sound very helpful at all.

And he closed his Bible and he prayed a bit harder this time and for a bit longer. Then he opened his Bible again and said, Lord, guide me this time. And his eye fell on Luke 10, verse 37. You go and do likewise, it said.

[13 : 27] Oh my goodness, this is terrible. So he closed his Bible and prayed very, very, very hard for a long time and then opened it again at John 13, verse 27. What you are going to do, go and do it quickly. That's funny, isn't it?

But it makes a serious point. Because many people do treat their Bibles just like that. As though it was just an incoherent and random selection of verses that were there just for me, to speak to me.

As if the Bible was really, primarily all about me and all about my life. Written all directly to me in that particular way. Well, it's a Bible study notes, really, if we're honest.

I've written rather like that. The kind of questions they ask. How does this make you feel? How do you identify with this person in this story? What does this make you think about today? It's all about me, me, me, me-centered.

As if this was all about me. But that's back to front, isn't it? Because the Bible isn't about you or me. The Bible is primarily about God. It's a coherent revelation that's there to teach us about God, about who God is and about what He's done and about what He commands and about how we're to respond to Him in the light of that.

[14 : 44] It's a comprehensive revelation which is to transform our whole minds and our thinking more and more so that we will see God and the world and ourselves more and more and more coherently with a whole biblical worldview, a biblical view of everything.

The whole of God's Word shaping our view of the whole of God's world and our part in it. And what that means, friends, is that reading the Bible is actually quite hard work.

The Scriptures will not yield their treasures to chance inquiry. You wouldn't take any other book, would you? any other book and just open it randomly and read a few words here or there and think somehow you've got the message of it or the whole story.

Of course you wouldn't. You wouldn't just read a few paragraphs from the middle and one from the end and one from the appendix and, oh, this is the way to read a book. Of course you wouldn't. With a story, you read it from the beginning to the end.

You might sneak a peek at the back page first if you like that. With a reference book, maybe a book about gardening, well, you probably wouldn't read through the whole of the illustrated encyclopedia of gardening.

[15 : 55] But you would probably go to the index and look up the particular subject that you were looking for. So just recently, I went to my encyclopedia of gardening to look up powdery mildew. I don't know if anybody else has had that problem this year, but my roses are being covered with powdery mildew.

Anyway, I went to the index, looked up the section of the symptoms, the treatment, the disease, and so on. There I was, got my answers. Actually, my current problem is dog lichen in the lawns.

I don't know if anybody's had that. I've had very little success in the index to find any solutions for that. So anybody who has a solution for dog lichens in the lawns, please do help me and come and see me afterwards.

But anyway, that's how you read that kind of book, isn't it? Or if it's a textbook, well, of course, you might take different sections. Not necessarily from the beginning to the end in order, but you'll take different sections and learn and study and you'll build up a picture of what the whole of that subject is all about.

In other words, you read a book, whatever it is you're reading, you read that book in the appropriate context. You take notice of what kind of book it is. You take notice of the place that you've got to and so on.

[17 : 01] Because you recognize that a book is coherent. Whether it's a story or a dictionary or whatever it is. It's a whole. It hangs together. Not just all being randomly put together.

And so it is with the Bible. It's a very obvious point when you make it, isn't it? But it does need to be made. If you take any particular text without regard to the context in that way, then very likely it will just become a pretext.

A pretext for misuse and abuse. I once watched on the television a TV evangelist. And he was, as TV evangelists tend to be doing, appealing for money from people.

And this particular Christian TV channel was having a 24-hour round-the-clock what they called week of mission. And what the week of mission actually meant was a mission to get as much money in to the TV channel as possible.

And they had a whole range of these different people coming on and giving their biblical words. This chap came on and he took the text, Luke 19, verse 31, which is the text in Luke's gospel about Jesus telling the disciples to go ahead before the Passover and they would find a cult tied up and they were to go and bring it for Jesus for his triumphal entry.

[18 : 19] If anybody stopped them he was to say the master has need of it. He read the text, he looked directly at us out of the screen and he said, now some of you have given already to our week of mission and some of you may find you have no money left that you could give.

You looked in your bank account and you just don't have any more money to give this month. But, you may find that like this man who had his cult, you too have fixed assets that could be untied because the master has need of it.

You may have a car, you may have a house that you could remortgage, you may have something else that you could sell so that you can come and untie your fixed asset and put it at the use of the master.

I hope I don't have to tell you that that is an utterly outrageous use of the Bible. In fact, I think it's bordering on criminal. No wonder the new atheists like Richard Dawkins and others heap scorn on the Christian church for making the Bible say anything that they want it to say.

If you take a text like that and take it utterly out of its context and make it a pretext for putting moral pressure on feckless people to pour money into your rotten organization, it's a scandal.

[19 : 43] So how then do we ensure that we are not like that? How do we ensure that we are workmen who, as Paul says, need not be ashamed but rightly handle the word of truth? Let me mention briefly three different contexts that we have to bear in mind as we read the Bible just because the Bible is a coherent revelation.

revelation. First of all, we need to remember that the Bible is a coherent revelation of God himself. First of all, the Bible is from God and about God.

Deuteronomy 29, verse 29 says, The secret things belong to the Lord our God but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever that we may do all the words of this law.

We have all God's words so that we can live before God knowing that through these words God has told us everything about him that he wants to reveal to us and that we need to live before him.

That's what that verse means. Doesn't mean we know everything about God. There are secret things that belong to him. But everything we need God has revealed. And that means that we have a complete and a coherent revelation of his nature, of the way he works, of his desires and of his demands from us and everything else.

[21 : 07] That means that we're not left with mystery about the things that God wants us to know. We can know God's mind. We can know it clearly and truly without contradictions and without any errors.

Because God is himself coherent. He is not self-contradictory. And that means that by reading the scripture as a coherent revelation about God himself we can assimilate what we call doctrine or systematic theology if you like.

That means that we can get a whole picture about what God reveals about any particular era of his being. And we can get a whole picture of the ethics or the morality if you like that flow from that doctrine of the commands that God has for us as human beings because of the way he is.

So take for example the whole area of marriage. Well to understand the doctrine of marriage a complete picture of the Bible's teaching on marriage we need to take the Bible as a coherent whole.

We need to begin with Genesis 1 and 2 which is the foundation of marriage. we need to look at the Decalogue and the teaching there that forbids adultery. We need to look at all the law of Moses where it teaches about sexual prohibitions and sexual fidelity and so on.

[22 : 30] It teaches about divorce. We need to take into account Jesus' words about these things. We need to read the apostles' writings about these things to the church not to say the wisdom literature, the proverbs, the psalms, the song of songs.

And together when we take all of these things that the Bible reveals to us about God's purpose and plan for marriage, we have a coherent whole, a theology, a doctrine of marriage and sex according to the Bible.

And that flows from the coherence of the mind of God himself. God gives these words to us in a coherent way so that we can apply them to every aspect of life.

And that's the same for every area of ethics that you could possibly think about. The Bible's teaching on honesty or property ownership or on work or on rest or on self control or anything else you care to think about.

Whenever you meet one text that speaks about some area like that, we need to give thought to the whole Bible context because the Bible is a coherent revelation of God, what he is and what he wants, what he wants us to do.

[23 : 42] So we need to assimilate doctrine, systematic, theology, of marriage, of sin, about hell, about holiness, about every other thing.

Because the Bible is a coherent revelation of God, his nature, his will, his commands and so on. It's the whole counsel of God that we are given and therefore anything that we need to know about God and salvation and faith and life, as the Westminster Confession of Faith, that's the confession of our church, it says this, it's either expressly set down in scripture, everything we need to know, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from scripture.

So we have enough to coherently put it all together and say this is what God wants, this is what we must do. That's why we can have a coherent morality, a coherent set of ethics, because and only because we have a coherent revelation of God.

So that's the first context we need to think about as we read the Bible, comparing scripture with scripture. Secondly, though, the second context we need to take notice of is that the Bible is a coherent revelation of God's salvation and the story of that salvation.

In simple terms, what that means is that the whole Bible has a storyline. That is, it's not just a reference book, it's not just a theology textbook that you look up the index and consult on a particular subject.

[25 : 08] No, it's not put together like that. It's why the work of systematic theology is sometimes difficult. No, but the Bible is a history of God's plan of salvation unfolding right from the beginning and right to the very end.

So from creation, through man's rebellion in Genesis chapter 3, through God's promises of ultimate reversal of that curse on sin, through salvation by the promised seed, and then the fulfillment of all of these things through the coming of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus.

Jesus. Now that's what Jesus is saying in the passage you read in Luke chapter 24, and also for that matter in Acts chapter 10. Jesus opened their minds, we read, to understand the scriptures that all in the law and the prophets and the Psalms spoke about Jesus and looked to fulfillment in the coming of Jesus.

That's what Peter said to Cornelius, that Jesus had commanded them to preach the story of God's salvation. That Jesus is appointed as the judge of all, but that he is the one whom all the prophets pointed to as the Savior who is yet to come.

Now that means, you see, that whatever text you're reading, at whatever place you are in the Bible, you need to remember that that text lies somewhere in that unfolding story. And you've got to read it like that.

[26 : 33] We're not to read the Bible as though it were flat, as though it didn't matter whether any particular text was in Genesis or Isaiah or the letters of the Romans or Revelation. We need to see the coherence of that unfolding story.

So you need to ask, whenever you come to any part of the Bible, where about in the story am I? Just as if you opened a book about a story, you would have to say, well, where are we? How much has happened? So what's normal in Genesis chapter 1 and 2, before man's rebellion and sin, is not normal after Genesis chapter 3 and that rebellion.

And as the story progresses, as the story goes on and more and more events happen, then the revelation that we have of God accumulates so that we have more and more and more of God's unfolding story, more of his promises, more about what is to happen.

And we have to read the Bible with that in our minds. And above all, we have to recognize that there's a huge difference between the era of promise, that's the Old Testament, and the era of fulfillment in the New Testament, and especially after the death and the resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

And that means that we can't treat a text in the book of Leviticus, for example, exactly the same way as we treat a text in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. But of course, they're both equally valuable, both equally authoritative and authentic as words of God.

[28 : 04] But we need to ask ourselves the question in Ephesians, well, what's changed here because Christ has come and the promise has been fulfilled? And what's not changed but has become clearer perhaps because Jesus has come and the revelation is complete?

So, for example, when you read the Old Testament, it's perfectly clear that certain foods were prohibited for God's people, the Jews, for Israel. And that was done to keep Israel marked out as a distinct people until the Messiah came.

There were other things to do that, but just the example of food is one of them. And yet, when you come to Mark chapter 7, you find that Jesus declares that all foods are clean. And the reason, well, the reason is spelled out there, but it's spelled out very clearly in Acts chapter 10, actually, that we read from.

And the angel has to make it so clear to Peter that the reason is that now the era of fulfillment has come. And no longer are Jew and Gentile to be separate, but all together are brought to be one in Jesus Christ through faith.

In just exactly the same way. Circumcision, the New Testament tells us very clearly, is no longer there to divide Jew from Gentile. It doesn't matter for anything anymore. What matters is new creation in Christ.

[29 : 21] And Christian baptism unites together, Jew and Gentile alike, all in the Lord Jesus Christ. So we need to understand all of these Old Testament commands in the light of their New Testament fulfillment.

But of course, God's people are not to stop being holy just because Jesus has come and fulfilled the promises of God. Of course not. God's people are still to be holy and pure in their lives.

That hasn't changed at all. The Old Testament commands about sexual purity, for example, they're never brushed aside in the New Testament, not ever, in the way that the food laws are.

In fact, quite the opposite. They're strengthened and made even more prominent. It never was just acts of sexual immorality that were wrong. It was always the attitudes and the desires of the hearts that were the root of sin.

And Jesus is the one who makes it even more plain, doesn't he, that even the most private thoughts of our hearts judge us in God's sight in these matters. Whoever looks at a woman in adultery commits adultery.

[30 : 26] You see, we do need to see the unfolding nature of God's story and the coherence of that if we're going to understand any part of the Bible properly. It's when people don't take that seriously actually that they make silly comments, facile comments, about Old Testament laws.

You've heard them. Oh, well, then, if gay sex is wrong, how come eating prawns is all right? Ha, ha, ha. The answer to that really is, come on, grow up, learn how to read.

Don't be so stupid. Treat the Bible with a little more respect and seriousness. You wouldn't even read your newspaper in that sort of way. Recognize that this is a coherent story in a whole.

It's perfectly explainable and understandable when we do that. We don't always do that as Christians. It's important that we recognize that. Take a text like 2 Chronicles 7, verse 14, for example.

You know it all well. It talks about how God says to his Old Testament people, if my people will humble themselves and turn to me again, then I will come down and heal their land.

[31 : 31] That's a very, very popular text that people band around. I've seen it often on notice boards in the church in the United States in particular. I don't know if it's a particular American thing.

Do you see the huge mistake that's being made there? They think that when God is talking to his people about healing their land, he's talking about the United States of America. But he's not, is he?

Nor is he talking about the United Kingdom or Russia or Japan or any nation state today. He's talking about God's kingdom on earth. His special chosen land of Israel in the old dispensation.

When the land of Israel under the Messiah, under God's anointed king was the outcrop of his kingdom. But no land today can claim that.

Jesus made it quite clear. His kingdom stretches to the ends of the earth. It's not about a political entity. We can't claim promises like that that are specific to God's people in Old Testament Israel and suddenly apply them to us as though they were applied to the particular state that we live in today.

[32 : 41] We've got to understand that the Bible is a coherent unfolding story. Be sensitive to that and apply it properly. Thirdly, we have to understand also that the Bible is a coherent revelation that is for human beings.

That it's written in our language. The Bible is God's word. It's his words. But it comes to us through words that are equally fully human words.

Peter tells us that men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. We'll look at that. We'll look at the inspiration of Scripture later on in this series. But suffice to say that the Bible was not dropped from the sky, ready written, and handed by an angel to somebody on earth.

That is not what we believe about Scripture. There are some religions who treat their Scriptures in that way as though they were received intact from heaven at the hand of an angel. But that has never been the understanding of the Christian church.

Well, God spoke through human authors. authors. And those human authors wrote purposefully. And they conveyed what they meant to say under God's inspiration. What that means is that we must always approach the Bible not only as a fully divine book.

[33 : 54] We always must approach it that way. But also we must approach it as a fully human book. And that means, by the way, there's no conflict in that. There's no conflict in saying that the Bible is both fully human and fully divine any more than there's a conflict in saying that Jesus Christ was fully divine and fully human.

But we're to study the Bible using all the human tools of normal human analysis just as we would study other writings. And that's because God has not made it hard for us to understand his words.

He's spoken in our language, our way, so that we can understand him clearly. And we honor him by acknowledging that. And that means that we honor him when we read the Bible intelligently, with hard work.

We read it as a coherent message to us. Not as something strange, not as something mysterious that's full of fanciful interpretations, that's full of secret codes and all that sort of thing.

Leave that to the Dan Brown novels. That's not at all anything to do with how the Christian church ever reads the Bible. That doesn't honor the Bible. That dishonors it. With the elders at the moment and also with the staff, we're reading through a book by Christopher Ashe called Hearing the Spirit.

[35 : 11] It's an excellent book and I commend it to you. But in his chapter there called Understanding the Bible, he makes the point that we need to give thought to at least three things because the Bible is written in our words.

To its language, to the genre, the kind of literature it is, and to the canon of Scripture. Or I might put it like this. We need to give thought to the coherence of the words, the convention of the writing, and the completeness of the witness.

Now you'd expect me to put it that way, wouldn't you? Let's make it even simpler. The words, the writing, and the whole. We've got to give consideration to all of these things. Now the words, that's the most basic thing, isn't it?

That means that we need to understand the language and the idiom of the Bible for it to understand it. So if you see the word P-A-I-N, matter a lot, doesn't it?

Whether you're in France or you're in Scotland. If you're in Scotland, the reaction will be, ow. If you're in France, the reaction will probably, yum, yum. Lovely bread. If you see a sign with a red circle around it on the road and the number 60 inside it, matters a lot which country you're in, doesn't it?

[36 : 22] Is it kilometers per hour or is it miles per hour? It matters. If a woman shouts out, 40 love, is it a middle-aged woman telling you how old she is?

Or is it a tennis umpire telling you the score? Or take the word maiden, for example. It's a big difference, isn't it, between whether you're watching cricket or reading a fairy story.

Bowling a maiden over is not the same as bowling over a maiden. We need to understand the language and the context. And you understand that language from the context, don't you?

And Bible words have Bible meanings. So when we're told in the Bible you must have faith, we're not being told to conjure up some general vague belief in something, hoping it might be true. We're being told to submit to the rule of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the obedience of faith.

So we need to understand the Bible words. We need to understand also the Bible writing. We need to know what kind of thing it is that we're reading if we're to understand the context. Are we reading a letter, like Romans?

[37 : 29] Are we reading a poem, or a proverb, or some prophecy, or some narrative and story? And we do that naturally all the time in life. And it leads you to expect certain things.

If you're sitting in the hairdresser as I was this week and you pick up the beano, you expect to find different things there from if you picked up the economist. Well, I know you wouldn't find the economist in the hairdresser, but you know what I mean. At least not in mine in Ibrox, that's for sure.

If you're reading a Geoffrey Archer novel, you expect a whole different convention of writing to if you pick up the Oxford English Dictionary, don't you? You don't think if you're doing that that you're reading an exciting story.

Although there was the Irishman who picked up the dictionary and read it through and said to somebody, I didn't think it was a very exciting story, but at least they explained every word to you as you went along. But we do it all the time, don't we?

We know the kind of thing we expect to read and we understand it in the right way. And that's what we have to do in the Bible, but it's remarkable how often we don't do that. Certainly not if you just open the Bible and look at a verse and hope for God to speak to you in that sort of way.

[38 : 38] If you go to the book of Job and you read some of the words of Job's comforters and you assume that we should take that in exactly the same way as we read the words of the Apostle Paul or the words of Jesus, you'll get in a terrible mess.

We need to grasp the nature of the writing as well as the actual words themselves and the language. Thirdly we have to think about the whole. That's really just the point we've made already, that we need to recognize that the Bible is a coherent whole. A coherent revelation of God that we compare Scripture with Scripture and a complete whole story that's unfolding.

So this is a coherent revelation from God. We need to consider the words, the writing and the whole. And that means that when we come to the Bible and open it, we need to use our heads.

We need to just ask sensible questions when we come to any text. First thing to ask is what does this actually say? It's amazing how often we actually see there, not what it actually says, but what we think it ought to say or what we would like it to say.

Extraordinary, isn't it? There used to be a program on TV when I was young called Screen Test. I don't know if some of you remember it, but they had a round and they would show these panelists clips of a film and then there'd be all sorts of questions afterwards about, you know, what color was the man's hat or how many people in the shot had a mustache.

[39 : 58] It's just amazing how you can watch something and think you've seen it and actually you haven't seen it at all. We've got to read the Bible asking the question, what is it actually saying? We also need to say, why is it saying it here?

What's the purpose? We need to ask what this whole book is all about, this part of the Bible, this letter or this song or this psalm or all these kind of questions. Basic questions just about learning to read.

Often the key to a particular part of Scripture is finding the clear theme, if you like, that runs through that portion of Scripture, that book or that section.

It's what we call at Cornhill the melodic line, the theme tune, the big story, the big idea. So if you take Luke and Acts that we've read from, two books, volume one and volume two of Luke's writing, the theme tune is signaled right in the very first few verses of Luke's Gospel, where Luke tells us that he is recording that which was given to them from those who from the very beginning were servants of the Word.

And he does it, he says, so that you, my readers, may be certain of all the things that you have heard to be true. And all the way through the book, Luke's Gospel begins to tell us what Jesus began to do and teach by his powerful Word.

[41 : 28] Read through the Gospel, you'll see the emphasis on the powerful Word of Jesus. Read through the book of Acts, and what do you find? You find that it's all about the ongoing works of the power of the Word of Christ at work through his church by the Spirit.

And all the way through Acts, remember we saw it when we studied Luke's little summaries, and so the Word increased and grew mightily. It's the theme tune of both of those books, the increase of the Word through the beginning in the ministry of Jesus, and it going on through the ministry of his apostles to the end of the earth.

Get that theme tune, and all the way through your reading you'll begin to see things and understand things that otherwise might just pass you by. Or take John's Gospel, for example.

It's a great one. The very end of John's Gospel, in John 20, verses 31 and 32. We get the key to the whole of John's book. Just look back here, it's just worth looking at this, because it's such a helpful one, it's so clear.

John 20, verse 31, verse 30, sorry.

[42 : 38] Now Jesus, he said, did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book, but these are written, so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

These signs, these evidences that point, that witness to the identity of the Lord Jesus Christ, these are written that you might believe, that in believing you might have life.

Go through John's Gospel and you'll find that in almost every page there is something about witness to Jesus, signs, evidence about Jesus' identity, there's something about belief and unbelief, and there's something about life and death.

It's the key to the whole of John's Gospel. Everything he writes, all the signs he records, are that there might be faith to bring people to life. I could go on and on like that through the Bible in so many different places.

We haven't got time even to begin tonight. That's why we do what we do at Release the Word. That's why we do the Corn Hill Training Course. That's why we have evening classes. And that's why we do the teaching that we do, to try and help people to read the Bible for themselves, to see all the riches of God's revelation for us.

[44 : 02] The Bible won't yield its treasures to chance inquiry. Opening up your Bible blindly and looking for a verse can lead you to all kinds of disaster. Because the Bible is a coherent revelation.

A coherent revelation. Comprehensively teaching us the whole truth about God for the whole of life. The whole story about God's salvation in Jesus Christ as it unfolds.

And wholly using our human language and our own conventions of writing. So that all that God has revealed can be clear to us.

For us. For our children forever. So that we can know and so that we can do all that we need to in order to love God with all our heart and all our soul and all our mind and all our strength.

So friends, let's not demean Scripture. Let's not treat it with contempt. Let's not leave it to mere chance inquiry. But let's honor it. Let's take it seriously.

[45 : 07] Let's give ourselves individually and as a congregation, give ourselves to studying his whole word and applying it to the whole world for his glory.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you that you honor us with such a comprehensive and coherent and clear word of revelation to us.

What a wonder to think that you are the God who has not hidden himself. The God who has spoken loudly and clearly and wonderfully. So Lord, open our eyes that we may behold wonderful things out of this, your law.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.