

Growing in our attentiveness to Scripture

Matthew 22:23-46

Sometimes when you life takes a twist,
your eyes are opened up to a whole new way of looking at the world.

Our young son Theodore has just started walking, and all of a sudden
I've become very attentive to the death trap that is our house.
Powerpoints, glass vases on shelves, hard corners on tables,
All of these are very big problems that we never had before.
(it doesn't help that Theo thinks he's a competitor on Baby Ninja Warrior!
--- but my eyes are peeled!)

And in recent weeks my eyes have been opened to another issue around our house.
We've all been told that our electricity bills are about to go up significantly,
And so all of a sudden my eyes are scanning the house for ways to cut costs
Can we replace these halogens with LEDs?
How many appliances am I keeping on standby?
Do I really need to shower in anything but cold water?
A change in life circumstances means a change in what we pay attention to.

And so it is when we go through the biggest life change of all:
when we turn aside from a life of self-rule and unbelief,
turning towards God, trusting his Son and accepting *his* rule over our lives.
Becoming a Christian is an eye-opening experience;
As the old hymn writer John Newton has us singing in *Amazing Grace*
"I was blind but now I see".

And what is it that we see?
Well, one of the major items to which our attention is drawn is the Holy Bible.
Become a parent and your attention is drawn to Robyn Baker's *Baby Love*
Learn to drive and your attention is focused on the RMS book of rules
Become a child of God and your focus falls upon his Spirit-breathed word.

We are continuing on in our series titled *Growing more like Jesus*,
And when we become Christians we sign up for just that;
a life where we seek, with the help of the Holy Spirit,
to become more like the one who has achieved salvation on our behalf.
And in this week's reading
we witness just how attentive Christ was when it came to the Holy Scriptures.
To be like Christ is to pay close attention to what's found in the Bible.

In particular, today's passage has Jesus demonstrating three levels of attention.
Maybe you're already familiar with the Bible in one of these ways,
but perhaps there's room to develop your attentiveness. Let's see

We begin in Matthew Ch 22:23,

Palm Sunday has been and gone, his crucifixion will only be a few days away,
and so it's a time when the pressure is really being turned up for Jesus;
people are really trying to catch him out.

First cab off the rank are a group known as the Sadducees.

Now, the Jewish religion of Jesus' day was split into different groups

The Sadducees were one group

who only believed in the first 5 books of the Bible.

And not only that, these guys didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead
(that's why they were sad, you see!)

And so they try and disprove the idea of the resurrection

by thinking up an extreme example of why resurrection doesn't work.

"Jesus, what if someone was married 7 times?" they ask,

"who then would they be married to at this supposed 'resurrection'?"

The idea that someone would suddenly find themselves

with 7 spouses all at once seemed ridiculous and was therefore

good evidence that the resurrection was a dumb concept.

Jesus' answer comes in two parts.

On one hand he reveals that in the age to come there will be no marriage,
so on one level, it doesn't matter how many marriages we have in this life,
none of them are going to carry over.

But the more serious issue is the Sadducees' lack of belief in the resurrection.

To address this Jesus refers them back to the Bible,

and he demonstrates that, if they could be bothered studying it,

even their own small section of Scripture

is enough to warrant belief in life after death.

Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures
or the power of God.

I think the idea of this verse is to say

because the Sadducees don't know the Scriptures

then neither do they have any concept of the power of God.

Is there any other passage of Scripture

that demonstrates the power of God better than Genesis ch 1?

A passage that describes how God made the world we see out of nothing,

A passage relating how he spoke and things were created.

A passage indicating that it would not be hard for God to re-create us,

That the resurrection of the dead is not an impossibility for God.

This evidence was there before the Sadducees all along,

if only they were being attentive!

And Jesus points to another part of the their Scriptures to defend the resurrection

V 31 But about the resurrection of the dead—have you not read what God said to you, ³²‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead but of the living.”

Here Jesus demonstrates a remarkable attentiveness to detail.

Read over these words as they appear in Exodus
and the detail might be lost on you,
but Jesus makes much of the fact that God himself
speaks of his relationship with these three men in the present tense.
Not “I *was* the God” but “I *am* the God”.
That is, these men who belonged to a much older generation
are counted as still living, as still being in some kind of relationship with God.
Life after death is a great Biblical doctrine, and yet,
such is the Bible’s richness
that the great doctrines can be present in even the smallest details.

So this is level of attentiveness with which Jesus approached the Bible,
he knew the details, he knew all the twists and turns,
he felt the significance of every movement in language,
even to the point of a change in tense.

From time to time I watch the NRL footy show on TV
and every now and again they’ll have a guest on the show
who just knows everything there is to know about rugby league.
The details of who scored what try in which grand final,
the amount of games played by this person in that season.
The detail of understanding is always very impressive.
And what is it that gives birth to that level of understanding?
It’s a love for the game isn’t it? A life where the game is given first preference.
And here is Jesus, loved by God and full of love for God
and so it’s no wonder that he knows the things of God to this level of detail.

But its not only the details of the Bible that Jesus has been paying attention to,
He’s also got an eye for the bigger picture.
There’s an old saying “Don’t miss the forrest for the trees”, meaning,
“don’t get all caught up in the details so that you miss the big picture”,
and we see in his next interaction that Jesus manages to avoid this problem.

In verse 34 we read that Jesus silenced the Sadducees with his answer,
no doubt they were feeling a little sheepish
after having their neglect of the Bible exposed.

And so it’s the Pharisees who then take up the challenge to Jesus.
Now the Pharisees accepted more of the OT than the Sadducees,
But they still had a special interest in the first five books of the Bible,

Because they had a special interest in making sure
everyone obeyed the laws of Moses.
It was their belief that the Messiah would come if everyone obeyed the law,
and so they would add extra laws to ensure the original laws were kept safe.
If the law said “don’t eat grapes”,
the Pharisees would say “Well, don’t go into a vineyard”.
The problem with this approach
is that it made obedience to God’s word
much more difficult than what it needed to be.

And so it’s no surprise to hear the Pharisees ask in V36
Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?
Maybe by trying to get Jesus to highlight one aspect of the Law
the Pharisees can accuse Jesus of undermining the rest of it.

And so Jesus answers in verse 37 “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and
with all your soul and with all your mind.’ ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment.
³⁹ And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets
hang on these two commandments.”
Jesus answers in such a way where he can isolate the details
so that they pay due respect to the whole.
The two commandments he picks are indicative of the whole law;
“Obey these two”, Jesus says, “and you’ll be on your way to obeying the rest.”
With this answer there’s no way that anyone would be able to accuse him
of favoring one part of the law at the expense of the remainder.

So how is he able to come up with an answer like this?
Well, not only does Jesus pay attention to the detail
but he’s also able to identify the unifying themes that bind up all the details.
Obviously Jesus knew the OT well enough
to be able to pick out two commands that did justice to all the others.

Knowing the big picture is absolutely vital if we are going to use the Bible correctly.
As one of my own teachers told me at theological College
“Knowing the detail stops you from being bored with the Bible,
but knowing the big picture stops you from mishandling the Bible”

Last week I spoke briefly about how Christians can sometimes distort the faith
to serve their own ends.

As Jesus put it, they do not have in mind the concerns of God,
but merely human concerns.
And I mentioned how one horrendous way in which this can happen
is when someone uses Bible verses to justify abusing their partner.

Now, one way we can protect ourselves from this

is to make sure we are doing our best to understand the Bible in its entirety,
so that when verses are taken out of context or misapplied
we're able to detect that something is not right.

Knowing the whole Bible gives us a picture of human relating
that is other person centred,
that is marked by the fruit of the Spirit:
 gentleness, patience and kindness.
And so when these elements are replaced by
Belittling speech, violent actions and malicious scheming,
even though the perpetrator might quote a few Bible verses
we can, with our greater Bible knowledge, detect that something isn't right,
that despite the fast talking and bible quoting such actions cannot be justified.
What *is* the summary of the law, according to Jesus?
 It's love, not abuse; that's the greater pattern of Biblical teaching.

After Jesus answers the Pharisees in this way,
He then turns and asks them his own question.
And this next interaction reveals another level of attention from Jesus,
Not only does he have an eye on the Big themes,
but he's mindful of the biggest theme of all,
of how his own ministry is a thread detected all the way through the Bible.
Jesus asks in verse 42 What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?"
"The son of David," they replied.

Everyone knew that The Messiah, the anointed one,
would be a descendent of King David, the rightful heir to the throne of Israel.
But as we saw last week, Jesus saw this role differently to others.
And this is what he explains in the next few verses.
He said to them, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'? For he says, ⁴⁴ "The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet." ' ⁴⁵ If then David calls him 'Lord,' how can he be his son?"

David had visions of someone greater than him coming along.
Any regular son of his would be his equal, another human king.
When Charles becomes King he's not going to be any less or more a monarch
than his mother; same title, same powers.
But David knew that one day a King would arrive that's on a different plane,
one that even *he* would be duty bound to call Lord.
Again it's a small detail in the Psalm, but not one that Jesus misses.

And so Jesus is reminding everyone that a 'capital M' Messiah is arriving,
And given Jesus himself has been called the Son of David
 and given he has accepted that title
 then he's making the claim that he is that Messiah.

And in doing so he's demonstrating something about the OT,
that within its pages there are plenty of hints
that someone greater was on his way, and that someone, Jesus says, is him!

Knowing this theme really does bring out the Bible in all its colour.

At the moment I'm reading the OT book of Joshua,

And one of the things that has struck me

is the way the defeated Kings of Canaan were treated in Jos 10:26-27

²⁶Then Joshua put the kings to death and exposed their bodies on five poles, and they were left hanging on the poles until evening. ²⁷At sunset Joshua gave the order and they took them down from the poles and threw them into the cave where they had been hiding. At the mouth of the cave they placed large rocks, which are there to this day.

Now, upon reading this my mind immediately went to the Easter story,
when Jesus was hung up on a cross,
when his body was taken down at the end of the day,
when he was placed in a cave-like tomb with a rock rolled in front.
The difference of course, is that while the Canaanite Kings
remained there at least until the time Joshua was written,
Jesus was raised back to life on the Sunday; he didn't remain in the cave.

I can't help but wonder whether this story in Joshua is there
as an anti-type to the Easter story,
a reminder that the Kings and powers of this world
are nothing compared to the King we have in Jesus.
But if I didn't already have eyes for the Christ-shaped theme within Scripture,
then maybe I would have missed it

I was going to talk at length about the benefits of attentiveness, but I'll just say this
Note that Jesus is using the Bible when he is under attack;
knowing the Scriptures keeps him sure of his path,
it keeps his faith safe from those who wish to attack it.
If what we desire is a sure faith, a certain faith, an enjoyable faith,
then I think an increased attentiveness to what's in the Bible is going to help.

I know that it can seem daunting,
because the Bible is a big book,
a book that is hard to understand at times.
There is heaps of help available: Join a Bible study,
come and do Christianity Explored, you'll get to know Mark's Gospel.
There heaps of Bible study apps for phone or tablet,
Organisations like Scripture Union have Bible study reading notes
to help you make sense of what it is you are reading,
or just pick up a bible and read.
If you don't have one, or you want one in a different language,
we'd love to give you one, because we want you to become more Like Jesus,
and Jesus knew what was in this book. I'll lead us in prayer.