

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **WHY YOU SHOULD BECOME A SERIOUS AND DILIGENT STUDENT OF THE WHOLE BIBLE**

*<sup>9</sup>How can a young man keep his way pure?  
By keeping it according to Your word.  
Psalm 119:9 (NASB)*

*<sup>18</sup>Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law.  
Psalm 119:18 (RSV)*

*<sup>10</sup>For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.  
Ezra 7:10 (NASB)*

*<sup>13</sup>Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.  
1 Timothy 4:13 (ESV)*

*<sup>13</sup>Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.  
2 Timothy 1:13 (ESV)*

*<sup>20</sup>And they rose early in the morning and went out into the wilderness of Teko'a; and as they went out, Jehosh'aphat stood and said, "Hear me, Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem! Believe in the Lord your God, and you will be established; believe his prophets, and you will succeed."  
2 Chronicles 20:20 (RSV)*

*He who despises the word brings destruction on himself,  
but he who respects the commandment will be rewarded.  
Proverbs 13:13 (RSV)*

*"He who gives heed to the word will prosper....."  
Proverbs 16:20 (a) (RSV)*

*"Hear, O earth: behold, I am bringing disaster on this people,  
The fruit of their plans,  
Because they have not listened to My words,  
And as for My law, they have rejected it also.  
Jeremiah 6:19 (NASB)*

For the average 'churchgoer', in the West, the Bible is just dipped into at a shallow, surface level. Very few people study it seriously or deeply. We do also hear short readings in church, but generally only of well-known passages. Some of us read the Bible for ourselves, but usually we are only looking at favourite books and avoiding the rest.

That's the inadequate and superficial way that most of us handle the Bible, even assuming we look at it at all. I spoke recently to a young woman of about 24 who told me she had read "*Genesis, the gospels, some of the Psalms and Proverbs, and bits of Corinthians*". That was all. Yet she claimed to have been a Christian for many years.

When she told me how much (or rather how little) she had read, she wasn't embarrassed. On the contrary, she felt she was doing rather well, as she had read more than most other people in her church. She expected me to be impressed and didn't feel she was failing in any way.

The truth is that most of us need to take the Bible much more seriously than we do. It is the most important book in the world. Without it you cannot grow as a Christian. It is our greatest possession and the key to finding eternal life and to being effective as a disciple. In fact, it is the key to everything.

### **The advantages and benefits that come from studying the Bible.**

God makes many promises about how you will grow if you are willing to study the Bible persistently and thoroughly. It will change your life, mainly by changing your character. It does this by re-shaping all your attitudes, habits, values, thoughts, speech and actions. When you read the Bible, it is 'reading' *you* and working on you, to bring about change wherever it is needed.

We are also promised that if we fear the LORD and take delight in His commandments, then a wide range of blessings will come to us. These come firstly as a direct reward for our love of the Bible and our obedience to it. They also come indirectly, from the changes that the diligent study of God's Word makes to our character. Those changes alter the way we live and therefore bring God's blessing on us as a consequence:

*<sup>1</sup>Blessed is the man who fears the LORD,  
who greatly delights in his commandments!  
<sup>2</sup>His descendants will be mighty in the land;  
the generation of the upright will be blessed.  
<sup>3</sup>Wealth and riches are in his house;  
and his righteousness endures forever.  
Psalm 112:1-3 (RSV)*

Psalm 119 is famous for being the longest psalm. It is filled with a wide variety of statements about the many benefits that flow from studying God's Word. Let's look at just some of the main claims that the Bible makes for itself and let's take them seriously. For starters, we see from verses 1-7, that studying the Bible will cause us to:

be blessed,

walk in God's ways,

avoid unrighteousness,

not be ashamed,

have uprightness of heart.

*<sup>1</sup>How blessed are those whose way is blameless,  
Who walk in the law of the LORD.  
<sup>2</sup>How blessed are those who observe His testimonies,  
Who seek Him with all their heart.  
<sup>3</sup>They also do no unrighteousness;  
They walk in His ways.  
<sup>4</sup>You have ordained Your precepts,  
That we should keep them diligently.  
<sup>5</sup>Oh that my ways may be  
established  
To keep Your statutes!  
<sup>6</sup>Then I shall not be ashamed  
When I look upon all Your commandments.*

***<sup>7</sup>I shall give thanks to You with uprightness of heart,  
When I learn Your righteous judgments.  
Psalm 119:1-7 (NASB)***

According to verses 98-105, the Bible will also:

make us wiser than our enemies,  
give us more insight than our teachers,  
give us more understanding than the aged,  
enable us to hate every false way,  
be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.

***<sup>98</sup>Your commandments make me wiser than my enemies,  
For they are ever mine.***

***<sup>99</sup>I have more insight than all my teachers,  
For Your testimonies are my meditation.***

***<sup>100</sup>I understand more than the aged,  
Because I have observed Your precepts.***

***<sup>101</sup>I have restrained my feet from every evil way,  
That I may keep Your word.***

***<sup>102</sup>I have not turned aside from Your ordinances,  
For You Yourself have taught me.***

***<sup>103</sup>How sweet are Your words to my taste!  
Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth!***

***<sup>104</sup>From Your precepts I get understanding;  
Therefore I hate every false way.***

***<sup>105</sup>Your word is a lamp to my feet  
And a light to my path.***

***Psalm 119:98-105 (NASB)***

Every one of these claims is important in itself, but when they are all combined together, they are truly life-changing. Why not work your way through all 176 verses of Psalm 119? There are many other assertions about how the Bible helps, guides, informs, instructs, improves and strengthens us. For example, here is another verse which refers to two more benefits, i.e. that the Bible will give us great peace and prevent us from stumbling. Let's examine each of these claims a little more closely:

***Those who love Your law have great peace,  
And nothing causes them to stumble.***

***Psalm 119:165 (NASB)***

So, the Bible will also:

give us great peace:

The only way we can ever get real peace is from knowing God. We get to know Him primarily by knowing His Word, or His 'law', as the Psalmist refers to it. However, we can only get that knowledge if we *love* the Bible. It will not come to people who merely read it passively.

It applies only to those who love God's Word. It takes time for us to develop such a love, but anyone can get it, provided they really *want it* and are willing to study the Bible *diligently*, like the Psalmist did.

prevent us from stumbling:

The Bible tells us of very many things which would otherwise trip us up if we had not been forewarned. These warnings enable us to benefit from the wisdom of God without having to learn every lesson for ourselves, first-hand, through bitter experience. That is assuming that we could ever learn such things for ourselves, which is most unlikely.

Consider the situation of the prophet Daniel and his three friends, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. They were all young men from the tribe of Judah who were taken into captivity by the King of Babylon. They were taken to work for the King and that meant they had to spend some years in study and preparation. They did that alongside other young men, most of whom were Babylonian. However these four young Hebrew men also had the Scriptures to study. Their knowledge of the Bible gave them a huge advantage over all their competitors. It enabled them to operate at a far higher level in terms of wisdom and understanding:

*<sup>17</sup>As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all letters and wisdom; and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. <sup>18</sup>At the end of the time, when the king had commanded that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. <sup>19</sup>And the king spoke with them, and among them all none was found like Daniel, Hanani'ah, Mish'a-el, and Azari'ah; therefore they stood before the king. <sup>20</sup>And in every matter of wisdom and understanding concerning which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom.*

*Daniel 1:17-20 (RSV)*

### **The consequences of ignoring or despising God's Word**

We have seen some of the many and varied benefits that come from loving and studying God's written Word. It follows therefore that if we ignore, undervalue or despise God's Word then those benefits will not come to us. However, we need to put it more strongly than that. If a person avoids or ignores God's Word then there will also be direct adverse consequences. In fact, if a person claims to be a believer but ignores, or does not bother, to read God's Word, then we are told that the prayers of such a person are an 'abomination' to God:

*If one turns away his ear from hearing the law,  
even his prayer is an abomination.*

*Proverbs 28:9 (ESV)*

What exactly does this mean? There are two possible groups to whom it could apply:

- a) Those who claim to be Christians, but who are not really. They say they believe, and they may attend church etc, but they are not genuine.
- b) Those who really are saved but who, for one reason or another, ignore God's Word and do not value it. Therefore they do not read it diligently, or even at all

I personally believe that the above verse applies to both groups. That is that the prayers of people in either group are unacceptable to God. We cannot afford to be so complacent as to assume that it only concerns unbelievers. If it does refer to us all then it is of profound importance to every genuine believer. In short, it means we cannot ignore or despise God's Word and yet still expect Him to hear our prayers and to answer them

Moreover, to despise God's Word, (i.e. to be casual about it, devalue it or treat it as unimportant) will also lead us into all sorts of other sins. There are always consequences. People who ignore God's Word and disobey it will usually end up doing so to a greater and greater extent, committing ever

larger sins. That is the reality, as we see in this next passage. Such people begin by despising God's Word, but their sins then develop and become increasingly gross:

*<sup>13</sup> Yet the LORD warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, "Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you by my servants the prophets." <sup>14</sup> But they would not listen, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been, who did not believe in the LORD their God. <sup>15</sup> They despised his statutes, and his covenant that he made with their fathers, and the warnings which he gave them. They went after false idols, and became false, and they followed the nations that were round about them, concerning whom the LORD had commanded them that they should not do like them. <sup>16</sup> And they forsook all the commandments of the LORD their God, and made for themselves molten images of two calves; and they made an Ashe'rah, and worshiped all the host of heaven, and served Ba'al. <sup>17</sup> And they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings, and used divination and sorcery, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger. <sup>18</sup> Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel, and removed them out of his sight; none was left but the tribe of Judah only.*

*<sup>19</sup> Judah also did not keep the commandments of the LORD their God, but walked in the customs which Israel had introduced. <sup>20</sup> And the LORD rejected all the descendants of Israel, and afflicted them, and gave them into the hand of spoilers, until he had cast them out of his sight.*

*2 Kings 17:13-20 (RSV)*

The Bible contains God's Word to us. It is full of His promises, instructions and warnings. It reflects Him and what He stands for. Therefore, to be casual about the Bible is to be casual about God. To neglect it is to neglect Him. To ignore it is to ignore Him. Many would deny that and insist that they are very devoted to God, in their own way, but that the Bible is just "not my thing" or that they "don't get much from it" and so on.

They might seek to justify themselves in those ways, but the fact is that that is not how God sees it. God strongly approves of those people who value Him to such an extent that they take His Word seriously. He loves it when we really believe His promises and rely on them. Conversely, it angers Him when we are flippant or casual about His promises and instructions.

An example of this is Isaac's son, Esau, who was a few minutes older than his twin brother Jacob. Therefore the promises made to Abraham and to Isaac were due to be inherited by Esau. One could say that he should have been the son through whose family line the promises of God would pass. If Esau had valued God's promises properly and if they had mattered to him sufficiently, then he would have been longing for God to build a nation through him.

His descendants (the Arabs) were, at that time, in line to be the chosen people and to inherit the Promised Land. In theory, the Messiah could then have been born into Esau's family line. Of course, that could not have actually happened, because God's intention, all along, was to operate through Jacob, and the Jewish people, not through Esau or the Arabs.

Those things are just some of the enormous promises that were made to Abraham and Isaac and, as things stood at that time, it was Esau's birthright that these should be fulfilled through him. You might imagine that that extraordinary privilege would have really mattered to him and that his mind would have been constantly focused on God's promises, as was the case with Abraham and Isaac. However, that was not how Esau saw it.

Esau's principal fault was not that he did not *believe* God's promises. He certainly did believe them. He also believed in God. His fault was that God's promises did not really *matter* to him. Esau was casual. He obviously knew all about the promises. We can be sure that he heard all the stories told many times over as he sat around the camp-fire with Abraham and Isaac as he grew up. He must have known them all by heart, just as Jacob did.

Nevertheless, by the time Esau had become a man he had begun to take these momentous promises for granted. He had grown dismissive and even uninterested. The promises did not grip him as they did Jacob, or as they had gripped Abraham and Isaac. Esau's lack of regard for God's promises must have been apparent to his younger brother, Jacob. He sorely wished that they could be fulfilled through him.

He longed to be the one who could inherit the Promised Land and become the ancestor of God's chosen people and of the Messiah who would one day bless the whole world. The prospect of all of that excited Jacob and it held his attention deeply. He could not have failed to notice Esau's complacent attitude and it must therefore have rankled with Jacob all the more to think of Esau inheriting all of that rather than him.

Then, one day, Jacob made the request of Esau, as recorded in Genesis chapter 25 that Esau should "sell" the birthright to him in exchange for a bowl of soup (pottage). That was a strange offer, but it did not come from nowhere. There was a history to it. Jacob already knew that Esau cared very little for God's promises and that it was not unrealistic to think that he might actually be willing to accept such an absurd offer:

***29 Once when Jacob was boiling pottage, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. 30 And Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red pottage, for I am famished!" (Therefore his name was called Edom.) 31 Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." 32 Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" 33 Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. 34 Then Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentils, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.***

*Genesis 25:29-34 (RSV)*

That whole conversation about the soup and the birthright must have seemed light-hearted to Esau. No doubt he did not really mean what he was saying, and would not have said it if he had only paused to think for a moment. But he did not stop to think and he did say it. In doing so, he "*despised his birthright*".

In that apparently unimportant conversation, Esau spoke disrespectful words about the promises of God. In doing so, he altered the whole course of his life and of world history. All of the promises of God were then transferred from Esau to the family line of Jacob and then onwards, from him, to the whole Jewish people. That had, actually, been God's intention from the outset. Nevertheless, it was Esau's own actions and attitude which brought about the circumstances that caused the transfer to take place. Therefore it was Esau's own fault.

Although that 'sale' of his birthright may have seemed insignificant to Esau, or even a joke, that was not how God saw it. God was appalled by Esau's indifference to the enormous promises that He had made. They were Esau's to inherit, if only he had *valued* them. That is why God was so angry with Esau. It was not because he did not believe the promises but because they weren't *important* to him.

We must all learn a vital lesson from the way that Esau despised God's promises. Or, you could say, from the way he despised God's *Word*. We must ensure that, unlike Esau, we truly value all of God's Word. We must cherish it, long for it and be preoccupied with it, as Jacob was.

Jacob obviously chose the wrong *way* to go about getting God's promises transferred to him, behaving carnally and dishonestly in the process. Later on he also tricked Isaac into giving the blessing of the first born to him, rather than to Esau (See Genesis 27:1-40). That dishonesty obviously displeased God and it was not what God had wanted Esau to do.

However, the operative point is that, although Jacob behaved badly in the *way* he sought to get the promises transferred to himself, his underlying attitude did please God. The fact that Jacob valued the promises and cared about them touched God's heart. Jacob believed what God had promised and took

it really seriously. That is what pleased God and caused him to value Jacob highly, for precisely the same reason that Esau's indifference had angered Him.

The same wholehearted attitude that Jacob had was also seen in his son, Joseph. He too had character faults, even though he was highly gifted. For example he was insensitive and tactless in the way he spoke to his brothers. That partly explains why they hated him so much that they sold him into slavery. However, the fact remains that Joseph shared his father's passionate interest in the promises that God had made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

He believed God and fully expected those promises to be fulfilled. Joseph did not doubt that the family line of Jacob would become a nation and would live in the Promised Land at some time in the future. He took it completely seriously. Joseph also expected that he personally would, one day, be resurrected and that he himself would live in the Land.

His devotion to God's promises, and his seriousness about them, is illustrated by the fact that when Joseph was about to die he gave strict instructions to his family to preserve his *bones*. He told them to bring them to the Promised Land and bury them there when they eventually went to live in it. He knew that would not be until over 400 years in the future, because that had already been told to Abraham by God.

But that fact did not prevent Joseph from taking God's promises completely seriously and *acting on them*. He knew that one day the Israelites would possess the Promised Land and he wanted to be buried in it. More than that, Joseph wanted to be resurrected in the Promise Land. That was how seriously he took all of God's promises. They were utterly real to him:

***<sup>24</sup> And Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die; but God will visit you, and bring you up out of this land to the land which he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." <sup>25</sup> Then Joseph took an oath of the sons of Israel, saying, "God will visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here." <sup>26</sup> So Joseph died, being a hundred and ten years old; and they embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt.***

*Genesis 50:24-26 (RSV)*

The seriousness with which Joseph had viewed this request concerning his bones, such that he required his brothers to swear an oath about them, is also reflected in the way that Moses, over 400 years later, carried out Joseph's wishes. He brought the bones with him when they all left Egypt to go to the Promised Land:

***<sup>17</sup> When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, "Lest the people repent when they see war, and return to Egypt." <sup>18</sup> But God led the people round by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. And the people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt equipped for battle. <sup>19</sup> And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him; for Joseph had solemnly sworn the people of Israel, saying, "God will visit you; then you must carry my bones with you from here."***

*Exodus 13:17-19 (RSV)*

Likewise, in the next generation, when the Israelites were allowed to enter the Land, Joshua took this request absolutely seriously and had Joseph's bones buried in the Promised Land:

***<sup>32</sup> The bones of Joseph which the people of Israel brought up from Egypt were buried at Shechem, in the portion of ground which Jacob bought from the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for a hundred pieces of money; it became an inheritance of the descendants of Joseph.***

*Joshua 24:32 (RSV)*

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews also refers to Joseph's request concerning his bones. He describes it as *faith* and includes Joseph within the 'hall of fame' of Hebrews chapter 11. He does so

because the earnest way that Joseph viewed the matter, and the care he took over his burial requests, demonstrated how very seriously he took God's Word, just as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had done before him:

*<sup>17</sup> By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, <sup>18</sup> even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." <sup>19</sup> Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death. <sup>20</sup> By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future. <sup>21</sup> By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff. <sup>22</sup> By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions concerning the burial of his bones.*

*Hebrews 11:17-22 (NIV)*

Which of these two attitudes most closely resembles yours? Do you care deeply about God's Word as Jacob and Joseph did? Or are you casual, such that you can take it or leave it, like Esau? That is a question which each of us needs to reflect on. And we must not be too quick in answering it, because the truth is that, even in the church, there are far more Esaus than there are Jacobs. Therefore each of us needs to consider very seriously the possibility that God may view us as an Esau rather than a Jacob.

For every Christian who spends many hours every week studying their Bible there are probably nine, or 19, or even 99, who spend only minutes on it, even assuming they open their Bibles at all. If that is the case, then on what basis can such a person assume that God will be any less angry and displeased with them than He was with Esau? That is a question for us all to reflect upon carefully.

### **The effect that study of the Bible will have on your life and character**

It is impossible to exaggerate the improving effect that the Bible will have on every part of your life if you are willing to study it properly. Good qualities and habits will grow. Bad ones will fade, or even disappear. The Bible will also help you to resist sin and to reduce its grip on your life:

*<sup>11</sup>Your word I have treasured in my heart,  
That I may not sin against You.*

*Psalm 119:11 (NASB)*

Knowledge of God's Word is also able to save us from perishing. It does that firstly by showing us how to find salvation through Jesus, and secondly by helping us in every kind of difficulty:

*<sup>92</sup>If Your law had not been my delight,  
Then I would have perished in my affliction.*

*<sup>93</sup>I will never forget Your precepts,  
For by them You have revived me.*

*Psalm 119:92-93 (NASB)*

God is able to use the Bible to change your character, but only if you will allow that. He will not impose these benefits on us. It is purely voluntary. We need to cooperate with the Holy Spirit and allow Him to use the Bible to its maximum effect. In fact, we should positively ask Him to do so, and go on asking, for the rest of our lives. It is a process, and it does not end until we die. It is up to us to make sure we don't miss out on any of it.



**You need to long, with all your heart, for understanding of the Bible and to ask God to open your eyes to grasp it**

Note the wholehearted intensity of the Psalmist's love for the Bible. He doesn't just like it, he treasures it. That is the attitude that God will really bless. So, if we are to benefit fully from the Bible, we must do much more than merely skim its surface. We must pursue with zeal everything that it has to offer. Seek to imitate the Psalmist's passionate heart-attitude, as revealed in this next passage:

*<sup>10</sup>With all my heart I have sought You;  
Do not let me wander from Your commandments.*

*<sup>11</sup>Your word I have treasured in my heart,  
That I may not sin against You.*

*<sup>12</sup>Blessed are You, O LORD;  
Teach me Your statutes.*

*<sup>13</sup>With my lips I have told of  
All the ordinances of Your mouth.*

*<sup>14</sup>I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies,  
As much as in all riches.*

*<sup>15</sup>I will meditate on Your precepts  
And regard Your ways.*

*<sup>16</sup>I shall delight in Your statutes;  
I shall not forget Your word.*

*<sup>17</sup>Deal bountifully with Your servant,  
That I may live and keep Your word.*

*<sup>18</sup>Open my eyes, that I may behold  
Wonderful things from Your law.*

*<sup>19</sup>I am a stranger in the earth;  
Do not hide Your commandments from me.*

*<sup>20</sup>My soul is crushed with longing  
After Your ordinances at all times.*

*<sup>21</sup>You rebuke the arrogant, the cursed,  
Who wander from Your commandments.*

*<sup>22</sup>Take away reproach and contempt from me,  
For I observe Your testimonies.*

*<sup>23</sup>Even though princes sit and talk against me,  
Your servant meditates on Your statutes.*

*<sup>24</sup>Your testimonies also are my delight;  
They are my counsellors.*

*Psalm 119:10-24 (NASB)*

We need the same heart-attitude as the Psalmist. However, it will not come automatically. Neither is anybody born with it. It is up to us to acquire it, mainly by effort, choice and persistent diligence. We must also ask God to help us to value His Word, and to love it more and more. Make a decision to pursue the greatest possible knowledge of God's Word and to learn to take delight in it.

This should not be done moderately or reluctantly, but abundantly. The Psalmist did not merely dabble in God's Word. He wanted everything that it has to offer and with an intensity that puts most of us to shame. Here he continues to express how strongly he feels:

*<sup>25</sup>My soul cleaves to the dust;*

*Revive me according to Your word.*

*<sup>26</sup>I have told of my ways, and You have answered me;*

*Teach me Your statutes.*

*<sup>27</sup>Make me understand the way of Your precepts,*

*So I will meditate on Your wonders.  
28 My soul weeps because of grief;  
Strengthen me according to Your word.  
29 Remove the false way from me,  
And graciously grant me Your law.  
30 I have chosen the faithful way;  
I have placed Your ordinances before me.  
31 I cling to Your testimonies;  
O LORD, do not put me to shame!  
32 I shall run the way of Your commandments,  
For You will enlarge my heart.  
Psalm 119:25-32 (NASB)*

Although your own effort in studying the Bible is essential, you can't rely solely on yourself to find your own way through the Bible. Cry out to God for Him to give you the ability to understand it. Ask Him to open it up to you so that you can fully grasp all that He wishes to teach you. The Bible is a supernatural book. Therefore, although effort is needed, it can only properly be understood with God's help:

*33 Teach me, O LORD, the way of Your statutes,  
And I shall observe it to the end.  
34 Give me understanding, that I may observe Your law  
And keep it with all my heart.  
35 Make me walk in the path of Your commandments,  
For I delight in it.  
36 Incline my heart to Your testimonies  
And not to dishonest gain.  
37 Turn away my eyes from looking at vanity,  
And revive me in Your ways.  
38 Establish Your word to Your servant,  
As that which produces reverence for You.  
Psalm 119:33-38 (NASB)*

**Resolve to do whatever is necessary to develop a longing for God's Word, such that you cannot live without it**

This deep longing and passion for God's Word does not come overnight, or by a single decision. It comes from intensive, ongoing study of the Bible and from persistently asking God, over many years, to give you that kind of heart. It will never come merely by the passage of time alone. We have to seek for it actively.

But however long that process takes, it always has to begin with an initial decision of your will. That requires a setting of your heart to study God's Word with determination. If all you have is a mild or half-hearted desire to learn the Bible, you will never achieve what the Psalmist did. There must be no half measures or lukewarmness:

*44 So I will keep Your law continually,  
Forever and ever.  
45 And I will walk at liberty,  
For I seek Your precepts.  
46 I will also speak of Your testimonies before kings  
And shall not be ashamed.  
47 I shall delight in Your commandments,  
Which I love.*

*<sup>48</sup>And I shall lift up my hands to Your commandments,  
Which I love;  
And I will meditate on Your statutes.  
Psalm 119:44-48 (NASB)*

Unless we ask God to give us a proper understanding of His Word we will miss a lot of what it is saying. Many of us read the Bible too passively, just picking up whatever is easy to grasp because it is on the surface, and ignoring anything more complicated.

Instead we need to ask God to give us deeper and deeper insights and we must keep on and on asking, until we have them. Even within Psalm 119, the Psalmist asks repeatedly for more understanding, despite already being an accomplished scholar of the Bible by anybody's standards:

*Your hands made me and fashioned me;  
Give me understanding,  
that I may learn Your commandments.  
Psalm 119:73 (NASB)*

*Let my cry come before You, O LORD;  
Give me understanding according to Your word.  
Psalm 119:169 (NASB)*

Many of us see reading the Bible as if it was a chore, and therefore don't look forward to it. Instead, we need to get to a place where we long for God's Word intensely, in the same way that a man in a desert would thirst for water:

*I opened my mouth wide and panted,  
For I longed for Your commandments.  
Psalm 119:131 (NASB)*

Anyone who prays for understanding of God's Word with that kind of commitment, and who is willing to keep on and on doing so, will certainly receive what they have requested. God delights to answer such a prayer. He will pour out understanding on any person who really wants it. However, He will not do so for the casual or passive person who is only mildly interested.

Therefore, from now on, ask God to help you to match the zeal of the Psalmist. Why shouldn't you? He was only an ordinary person like us. He just had an extraordinarily good attitude. Therefore there is no reason why you cannot be like him. You are free, and able, to adopt any attitude, if you really want to.

Remember that when the Psalmist was pleading with God for more understanding of the Scriptures, he had already got enough understanding to have written Psalm 119, plus other psalms. Most of us would consider that he had already fully 'arrived' as a student of the Bible and that he did not need to go any farther or deeper.

But the Psalmist clearly did not think so. He never stopped seeking for more and more knowledge of God's Word. Therefore we must never imagine that we have reached a point where we do not need anything more from the Scriptures. Such a time will never come, at least not until after we die.

### **King David's passionate, wholehearted attitude to the Bible**

We are told that King David was "a man after God's heart". It makes sense therefore to imitate him, as well, not just the writer of Psalm 119. David sets out the intensity of his own feelings about God's Word in Psalm 19:

*<sup>7</sup>The law of the LORD is perfect,  
reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure,  
making wise the simple;  
<sup>8</sup>the precepts of the LORD are right,  
rejoicing the heart;  
the commandment of the LORD is pure,  
enlightening the eyes;  
<sup>9</sup>the fear of the LORD is clean,  
enduring for ever;  
the ordinances of the LORD are true,  
and righteous altogether.  
<sup>10</sup>More to be desired are they than gold,  
even much fine gold;  
sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.  
<sup>11</sup>Moreover by them is thy servant warned;  
in keeping them there is great reward.*  
*Psalm 19:7-11 (RSV)*

Look as well at what King David says in Psalm 139 about the preciousness of God's thoughts:

*<sup>17</sup>How precious to me are your thoughts, God!  
How vast is the sum of them!  
<sup>18</sup>Were I to count them,  
they would outnumber the grains of sand.....*  
*Psalm 139:17-18(a) (NIV)*

King David was on the same wavelength as the writer of Psalm 119. That is one of the main reasons why God felt such approval for David and made him so successful. However, that heart-attitude is entirely available for you to adopt as your own, just like David. You do not need to be gifted or clever. It is purely a matter of *choice*. It has nothing to do with ability or genetics. If you really wanted to, you could choose to be like King David, at least in this respect.

Nothing is stopping you, except your own lack of willingness. The Bible needs to become something you love and value above every other possession. Remember what it is - God's own Word to us, containing the key to everything we need in life. It is worth more than any other asset, even fine gold. David says so above, and so does the Psalmist:

*<sup>127</sup>Therefore I love Your commandments  
Above gold, yes, above fine gold.*  
*Psalm 119:127 (NASB)*

This is not exaggerated poetic language. It is plain fact. God literally intends that the Bible should become our delight, and our greatest treasure. That applies to all of us, not just to supposedly 'special' people like King David and the Psalmist.

### **The need for effort and diligence in studying God's Word**

What you get out of the Bible will be directly proportional to the effort you put in and the intensity of your desire for understanding. It requires persistence and enthusiasm. It particularly means long and regular periods of time spent alone studying God's Word. That is the kind of person God is looking for, and to whom He will respond.

He will not give deep knowledge of the Bible to anybody who is not willing to work hard to get it. God's heart is touched by those whom He sees making an ongoing effort to study His Word. He has

put so much of Himself into the Bible that to seek for knowledge of the Bible is the same as to seek for *Him*. It contains His very words:

***<sup>147</sup>I rise before dawn and cry for help;***

***I wait for Your words.***

***<sup>148</sup>My eyes anticipate the night watches,***

***That I may meditate on Your word.***

***Psalm 119:147-148 (NASB)***

Only the Bible is totally and perfectly true. Every other book, however worthy, contains only the ideas and opinions of human beings who are as flawed as we are. But the Bible as a whole is the infallible truth. Even if you reach the age of 90, you will still be nowhere near to exhausting what the Bible has to offer. Like a coalmine, there are things available to be dug out at all levels.

Some of it is on the surface and can be picked up quite easily by anyone. The rest is deeper and requires varying levels of excavation work. Some truths are very deep indeed, like coal which is 1000 metres underground, and can only be found by those who are willing to keep digging for decades, not just for years.

God actually hides things in the Bible deliberately, as if it was a 'treasure hunt'. He wants to find out whether you are willing to keep on searching for those things, for as long as it takes, until you find them. It is a contest. God hides things intentionally and it is then up to us to find them, if we are sufficiently motivated to do so:

***<sup>2</sup>It is the glory of God to conceal a matter,***

***But the glory of kings is to search out a matter.***

***Proverbs 25:2 (NASB)***

Never lose heart or stop searching, just because some parts of the Bible are hard to understand. Some of it is meant to be difficult, so do not be surprised or discouraged by the fact that you struggle. Sometimes God wants you to struggle, even for a long period of time, to see whether you will be tenacious enough to overcome your difficulties.

He also wants to find out how much it matters to you to find the truth and how long you are willing to go on searching. However, most of the time, if we come across passages which do not make sense to us, it is because of one or more problems or errors on our part. It is certainly not the fault of the Bible. When we meet such problems God expects us to deal with them. Some examples of these are as follows:

- a) wrong ideas about how to interpret the Bible
- b) unbelief or scepticism
- c) factual errors and wrong ideas that are fixed in our minds due to poor teaching
- d) wrong ideas which are fixed in our minds due to church traditions. These come from men, not from the Bible
- e) lack of diligence in searching for answers
- f) errors by the translators
- g) lack of knowledge of ancient history
- h) lack of knowledge of the culture and conventions of Bible times

Therefore persist and deal with every one of these potential stumbling blocks. Deep understanding of God's ways will only come to those who are willing to keep on and on working to find it. God has said that He is *"a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him"*:

***But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.***

*Hebrews 11:6 (NKJV)*

### **The importance of doctrinal accuracy and having a correct understanding of Scripture**

There is a widespread view in Western churches, even among some real Christians, that it doesn't really matter much what we believe, *"as long as we love God"*. Getting our doctrine right, i.e. correctly understanding what the Bible teaches, is not generally considered important. The minority who do consider doctrine to be important are frequently viewed as narrow-minded or dogmatic. But the truth is that it really does matter whether we understand or misunderstand the Bible.

All sorts of consequences will flow from getting it right and, likewise, from getting it wrong. It is not just an academic subject that can be left to theologians to worry about. On the contrary, it is every individual's solemn responsibility to gain a correct understanding of Scripture and to avoid being mistaken or deceived. Otherwise you could find that you are believing things that are not true. If so, you could be labouring in vain and *"to no avail"*:

***<sup>8</sup>"Behold, you are trusting in deceptive words to no avail.  
Jeremiah 7:8 (NASB)***

What we believe, or don't believe, in the Bible and what we know, or don't know, about it will have a profound impact at every level of our lives. The Psalmist was not satisfied to have just a "rough idea" of what the Bible means. Neither should you be. Aim for exact definitions, and for full knowledge and understanding. Seek to fill all gaps, and eliminate all errors, so far as you possibly can.

Likewise, we are commanded to be on the alert, watching out for any false teaching so that we can recognize it and reject it. This is really important, because what we believe has profound consequences in our lives. That is why Jesus warned the disciples to beware of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees, because their teaching was false and would do them great harm if they believed it:

***<sup>5</sup>When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. <sup>6</sup>Jesus said to them, "Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." <sup>7</sup>And they began discussing it among themselves, saying, "We brought no bread." <sup>8</sup>But Jesus, aware of this, said, "O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? <sup>9</sup>Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? <sup>10</sup>Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? <sup>11</sup>How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." <sup>12</sup>Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.***

*Matthew 16:5-12 (ESV)*

### **God expects and requires us to know the whole Bible very well**

God has gone to enormous trouble to give us His Word and He expects us to make the effort to know it thoroughly. He will hold us individually accountable for how hard we try to gain a full and accurate knowledge. That is not just true for Bible teachers, though they will be judged more strictly. It applies to all of us. It is true that He will judge each one of us according to what we personally knew.

He will also judge us according to how diligently, or casually, we pursued a thorough knowledge of His Word. Thus, we cannot avoid God's disapproval by deliberately avoiding knowledge, so that we cannot be held accountable for it. That trick won't work. God would judge us instead for the fact that we deliberately chose not to learn. Apostle Paul tells Timothy that one of the things he should do, in order to be approved, is to study God's Word to such an extent that he can handle it correctly:

***Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.***

***2 Timothy 2:15 (NIV)***

### **We must not neglect or ignore God's Word or harden our hearts to it**

God will hold us accountable for the attitude that we choose to adopt towards His Word. As we have seen, the way we treat His Word is a very accurate proxy for how we treat Him. Therefore we cannot claim to love God any more strongly than we love His Word. We cannot pay Him any higher honour than to study his Word.

Conversely, to ignore or despise His Word is to ignore or despise Him. Thus it is crucially important that we adopt the right heart-attitude towards the Bible. The Bible summarizes this by saying that we should "*listen diligently*". In the original Hebrew this is expressed by repeating the verb to 'listen'.

Thus it is rendered in Hebrew idiom as to "*listen listening*", because the way they emphasize a word is to repeat it. It then means that you are doing that activity very emphatically or diligently. So, to "*listen listening*" means to *really* listen or to listen *very attentively*. The thought behind it is that we are to humble ourselves in the sense that we incline our heads to the side, as we do when we are really trying hard to listen to a very quiet sound:

***Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;  
incline your ears to the words of my mouth!  
Psalm 78:1 (RSV).***

That that is how God wants us to act towards His Word. The attitude He wants us to have is one where we so strongly want to hear what God is saying that we are straining our ears and inclining our heads to the side to listen as closely as possible. Anyone who does that is paying a compliment to the speaker. They are showing that they are hanging on his every word, not wanting to miss the slightest bit of what is being said.

A person who has that attitude towards God and wants to hear and understand everything that God is saying can be described as having a soft or tender heart. They are open to all that God has to say. They value the Bible and respect it very highly. The opposite of that is to be hard-hearted or indifferent, such that we despise His Word. If we adopt that attitude we will bring destruction upon ourselves:

***Whoever despises the word brings destruction on himself,  
but he who reveres the commandment will be rewarded.  
Proverbs 13:13 (ESV)***

This 'destruction' will arise in two ways, i.e. directly and indirectly. Firstly, we need to make clear that to despise God's Word doesn't mean that we hate it or are strongly opposed to it. It means that *we* ignore, neglect or undervalue it. If we have that attitude we will miss out on the guidance and wisdom that the Bible contains. Therefore we will encounter all sorts of additional and unnecessary problems in our lives due to our ignorance of what God wants us to know, or our failure to take it seriously.

Thus, we would have brought destruction upon ourselves indirectly. However, there is also a secondary meaning to it. Anyone who despises God's Word will also bring destruction upon himself directly by incurring God's anger and causing Him to oppose us, punish us and even destroy us. We see an example of this in the life of King Rehoboam, the son of King Solomon. We are told that he "forsook the law of the LORD":

***When the rule of Rehobo'am was established and was strong, he forsook the law of the LORD, and all Israel with him.***

***2 Chronicles 12:1 (RSV)***

That casual attitude which caused Rehoboam to neglect and ignore God's Word led to his downfall. He lost nine of the twelve tribes of Israel. The northern tribes rebelled against him and the nation was split into two parts, with Rehoboam only having the small Southern Kingdom consisting of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, plus many of the Levites who moved south.

The prophet Zechariah spoke to the people of Judah about the way that they and their ancestors had neglected and ignored God's Word, as expressed by all the earlier prophets. They had hardened their hearts and deliberately resisted and ignored God's Word because they did not want to hear it:

***<sup>4</sup>Then the word of the Lord of hosts came to me: <sup>5</sup>"Say to all the people of the land and the priests, When you fasted and mourned in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted? <sup>6</sup>And when you eat and when you drink, do you not eat for yourselves and drink for yourselves? <sup>7</sup>Were not these the words that the Lord proclaimed by the former prophets, when Jerusalem was inhabited and prosperous, with her cities around her, and the South and the lowland were inhabited?"***

***<sup>8</sup>And the word of the Lord came to Zechariah, saying, <sup>9</sup>"Thus says the Lord of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, <sup>10</sup>do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart." <sup>11</sup>But they refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears that they might not hear. <sup>12</sup>They made their hearts diamond-hard lest they should hear the law and the words that the Lord of hosts had sent by his Spirit through the former prophets. Therefore great anger came from the Lord of hosts. <sup>13</sup>"As I called, and they would not hear, so they called, and I would not hear," says the Lord of hosts,***

***Zechariah 7:4-13 (ESV)***

The Jewish people hardened their hearts to God's Word and He responded in judgement and showed His anger towards them. It resulted in them losing their right to live in the Land and being exiled from it for many years. If that is how strongly God felt about their neglect of His Word, what basis have we got to assume that He will view our attitude to His Word any less seriously?

**The main reason Jesus spoke in parables was to withhold the truth from those who did not want it or care about it**

Have you ever wondered why Jesus spoke in parables, especially in the latter stages of His ministry? He tells us Himself that He was doing so because there were many people in His audiences who did not really want the truth, or care about it. Such people do not have the love of the truth. They have no genuine desire to understand what God is saying. God will eventually take steps to hide the truth from those who have already shown that His Word does not matter much to them. Here is how Jesus explained this:

***<sup>10</sup>Then the disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" <sup>11</sup>And he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. <sup>12</sup>For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an***



*abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. <sup>13</sup>This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. <sup>14</sup>Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says:*

*““You will indeed hear but never understand,  
and you will indeed see but never perceive.”*

*<sup>15</sup>For this people's heart has grown dull,  
and with their ears they can barely hear,  
and their eyes they have closed,  
lest they should see with their eyes  
and hear with their ears  
and understand with their heart  
and turn, and I would heal them.’*

*Matthew 13:10-15 (ESV)*

It is important to get the sequence of events in the right order. It does not begin with God hiding or withholding the truth. On the contrary, it begins with Him speaking clearly to us. It could be through His written Word, or our consciences, or even through the wonder of His creation. However, if we are uninterested or indifferent, or if we aren't willing to obey the things we do already understand, then eventually God will begin to hide all further truth from us.

In the end, He will even take away the very ability to understand at all. However, that only happens if we first despise or ignore what we *already know* about His Word, in the way Isaiah prophesied about. Thus we need to take this very seriously and not allow ourselves to be complacent or to assume that Jesus is only referring to other people and not to us.

We see another examples of this principle in operation in the way Jesus deals with the Pharisees in Matthew chapter 21. They had refused to face up to the truth that had already been revealed to them concerning John the Baptist. Therefore Jesus refused to answer their questions and would not give them any further information:

*<sup>23</sup>And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” <sup>24</sup>Jesus answered them, “I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. <sup>25</sup>The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?” And they discussed it among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ <sup>26</sup>But if we say, ‘From man,’ we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet.” <sup>27</sup>So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.*

*Matthew 21:23-27 (ESV)*

If they had been honest enough to admit that John the Baptist was sent by God, and that his message of repentance applied to them, then Jesus would have revealed more truth to them concerning Himself. But they would not, so He would not.

It is essential that we recognize this vital principle and begin to take seriously, and obey, whatever we currently know about God's will, however little that may be. If we will do that, then God will reveal more of His will to us and correct any errors in our current understanding of His will.

### **God's inevitable response when we despise Him by disobeying or ignoring His commandments**

Consider also what God did to bring judgment on the people of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and note His reasons for doing so. God caused the King of Assyria to invade the Northern Kingdom because of the way the Israelites had "*despised His statutes and His covenant*":

***<sup>14</sup>But they would not listen, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been, who did not believe in the Lord their God. <sup>15</sup>They despised his statutes and his covenant that he made with their fathers and the warnings that he gave them. They went after false idols and became false, and they followed the nations that were around them, concerning whom the Lord had commanded them that they should not do like them.***

***2 Kings 17:14-15 (ESV)***

Their neglect of God's Word had caused the Northern Kingdom of Israel to degenerate further into all kinds of other sins. Let's look at a lengthy passage which addresses this. It is a clear warning to us today about how strongly God feels. The Assyrians were therefore allowed by God to invade the Northern Kingdom. This was God's deliberate punishment upon them for their sin but, in particular, for their neglect of His Word:

***<sup>5</sup>Then the king of Assyria invaded all the land and came to Sama'ria, and for three years he besieged it. <sup>6</sup>In the ninth year of Hoshe'a the king of Assyria captured Sama'ria, and he carried the Israelites away to Assyria, and placed them in Halah, and on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes.***

***2 Kings 17:5-6 (RSV)***

This invasion by the Assyrians arose because the Northern Israelites were unfaithful to God. In particular, they served other gods in the form of idols and imitated the ways of the neighbouring pagan nations:

***<sup>7</sup>And this was so, because the people of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and had feared other gods <sup>8</sup>and walked in the customs of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel, and in the customs which the kings of Israel had introduced. <sup>9</sup>And the people of Israel did secretly against the LORD their God things that were not right. They built for themselves high places at all their towns, from watchtower to fortified city; <sup>10</sup>they set up for themselves pillars and Ashe'rim on every high hill and under every green tree; <sup>11</sup>and there they burned incense on all the high places, as the nations did whom the LORD carried away before them. And they did wicked things, provoking the LORD to anger, <sup>12</sup>and they served idols, of which the LORD had said to them, "You shall not do this."***

***2 Kings 17:7-12 (RSV)***

In doing all these wicked things the people of the Northern Kingdom of Israel had ignored and disobeyed God's commands. These were set out clearly in the Bible by the prophets whom God had sent. As God saw it, their sinful behaviour meant the people had "*despised His statutes*". He viewed their actions as sinful enough in themselves.

However, they also signified a deliberate rejection of His written Word, which He had given them. That is why God took it even more seriously. We need therefore to learn from what happened to them as a result of ignoring the Scriptures. And we must take care not to do likewise:

***<sup>13</sup>Yet the LORD warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, "Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you by my servants the prophets." <sup>14</sup>But they would not listen, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been, who did not believe in the LORD their God.***

***<sup>15</sup>They despised his statutes, and his covenant that he made with their fathers, and the warnings which he gave them. They went after false idols, and became false, and they followed the nations that were round about them, concerning whom the LORD had commanded them that they should not do like them.***

***<sup>16</sup>And they forsook all the commandments of the LORD their God, and made for themselves molten images of two calves; and they made an Ashe'rah, and worshiped all the host of heaven, and served Ba'al. <sup>17</sup>And they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings, and used divination and sorcery, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger.***

***2 Kings 17:13-17 (RSV)***

The evil things that the Israelites did, especially in the Northern Kingdom, are basically the same as what our own generation is now doing. If anything, our own generation's disregard for the Bible is even greater than that of Northern Israel. Therefore, I see no alternative but to conclude that our generation will be judged just as severely as they were, if not more so:

***Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel, and removed them out of his sight; none was left but the tribe of Judah only.***

***2 Kings 17:18 (RSV)***

Let's look briefly at each of the main things the Israelites did. Then let's consider how well, or how badly, we do today in the Western churches in comparison to them:

- a) They "*sinned against the LORD their God*". But surely our modern Western churches sin more than they did, and we are even less ashamed about it than they were. They did not have the same levels of pornography, dishonesty, adultery, fornication, divorce, materialism, and financial corruption that we have today.
- b) They "*walked in the customs of the nations*" (i.e. the pagan Gentile world). That means they were worldly, rather than being holy and set apart for God. Again, we seem to be even more worldly, carnal, compromised and hypocritical than the people of Israel were. One also doubts if they could have been as brazen about their sin as our generation is, in particular concerning homosexuality.
- c) They "*served idols*". But we in the Western churches also serve idols. The only difference is that our idols are not made of wood or stone. We serve things like self, money, comfort, leisure, denominational tradition, career, ambition, power, status, possessions, etc etc. Can you or I truly say that none of those things are idols to us?
- d) They "*would not listen* (to God's warnings by the prophets) ..... *but were stubborn*....." Here we can make a very direct comparison. The Israelites refused to listen to the prophets, but we have far greater access than they had to what those same prophets said and wrote. Plus we also have the later prophets and the apostles. We even have the direct words of Jesus, which they had not got. Yet we undervalue, ignore, and even disobey, all of these. Therefore many of us are ignoring more of God's Word than they did, and with less excuse.
- e) They "*burned their sons and their daughters as offerings*". Some of the Israelites did this as part of their pagan worship, sacrificing their own babies as burnt offerings to demon gods like Molech and Baal. Some would protest that we are, at least, innocent of this. But are we? Even in Great Britain alone, 200,000 babies are killed every year in abortion. In America it is over 1,400,000 babies per year.

For the vast majority of those abortions the only real reason is the convenience of the mother and/or the father and/or grandparents. It is done because it doesn't fit in with their career plans, or their social life, or because it is economically difficult. If so, quite apart from being murder, it is being done for the sake of those 'gods' or 'idols', i.e. career, finance, convenience, self-interest etc. Therefore, how is the abortion industry of our day any less sinful than sacrificing babies to the god Molech?

If anything we are far worse than them, because the numbers are so much larger in our case. The Jewish people, even in the Northern Kingdom, never killed anywhere near the number of children that we kill in the Western world today. Our abortions are conducted on an industrial scale. Worst of all, abortion is happening today even amongst those who claim to be part of the Church.

### **Israel degenerated because they ignored God's Word**

What is the cause of all this? Why did Israel degenerate into such dreadful sins? The answer is contained within the passage above from 2 Kings. It is that:

- a) they did not listen to the warnings of God's prophets;
- b) they were stubborn;
- c) they despised God's statutes;
- d) they despised the covenant God had made with them through Moses.

The prophet Hosea also alludes to this problem when he says:

*My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me. And since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.*

*Hosea 4:6 (RSV)*

Hosea then adds:

*“..... and a people without understanding shall come to ruin...”*

*Hosea 4 14(b) (RSV)*

When it says in 2 Kings 17:15 above that the people of Israel "*despised*" God's statutes, it does not mean that they hated or actively opposed them. It simply means that, like Esau, they considered them to be of little importance. But that is exactly what our own generation does, at least in the West. The Israelites also put too little importance on the covenant which God had made with them through Moses.

Although the Law of Moses is no longer in operation, we now have a much greater and even more important covenant. That is the '*New Covenant*', which Jesus brought into operation by His death on the cross. That covenant is permanent. The Church in our own day is despising and undervaluing the New Covenant far more blatantly than either Israel or Judah despised the lesser (and only temporary) covenant that God made with Moses.

Alongside the covenant made with Abraham, the New Covenant is now one of the two main covenants which concern us today. Unlike the covenant made with Moses, it is eternal. But, the Western churches today place far too little importance on this. Most of them rarely even mention, let alone emphasize, the cross, or the death of Jesus, or His blood which was shed in order to bring the New Covenant into being.

If the Jewish people's sin in despising the temporary covenant with Moses angered God, how much more angry must He be when so many of us in the Western churches in our day undervalue, ignore, or even deny, what Jesus did for us on the cross? The main way that we devalue or despise the New Covenant is when we ignore or fail to study God's Word. Remember that the very name we use for the books of the Bible from Matthew through to Revelation is the '*New Testament*'.

That is simply another way of saying the '*New Covenant*'. The words 'covenant' and '*testament*' mean the same. So, when we despise God's Word, especially in the New Testament, we are automatically also despising the New Covenant itself, that Jesus made for our benefit when He died on the cross. What is more, in despising the New Covenant, we are also despising the earlier covenants too.