

The Cure for Itching Ears
Psalm 119:97-108 & 2 Tim 3:14-4:5 (selected verses)
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Old Testament: Psalm 119:97-108

Oh, how I love your law!

It is my meditation all day long.

Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies,
for it is always with me.

I have more understanding than all my teachers,
for your decrees are my meditation.

I understand more than the aged,
for I keep your precepts.

I hold back my feet from every evil way,
in order to keep your word.

I do not turn away from your ordinances,
for you have taught me.

How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!

Through your precepts I get understanding;
therefore I hate every false way.

Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path.

I have sworn an oath and confirmed it,
to observe your righteous ordinances.

I am severely afflicted;
give me life, O LORD, according to your word.

Accept my offerings of praise, O LORD,
and teach me your ordinances.

New Testament: 2 Tim 3:14-4:5

¹⁴But you must continue with the things you have learned and found convincing. You know who taught you. ¹⁵Since childhood you have known the holy scriptures that help you to be wise in a way that leads to salvation through faith that is in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶Every scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for showing mistakes, for correcting, and for training character, ¹⁷so that the person who belongs to God can be equipped to do everything that is good.

4 I'm giving you this commission in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is coming to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearance and his kingdom. ²Preach the word. Be ready to do it whether it is convenient or inconvenient. Correct, confront, and encourage with patience and instruction. ³There will come a time when people will not tolerate sound teaching. They will collect

teachers who say what they want to hear because they are self-centered. [NRSV: *For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires.*] ⁴ They will turn their back on the truth and turn to myths. ⁵ But you must keep control of yourself in all circumstances. Endure suffering, do the work of a preacher of the good news, and carry out your service fully.

A few weeks ago I posted on Facebook the following question:

Why do you think people don't read the Bible? And "People" can be you!
It got 77 responses! Some of them were funny.

They've seen the movie!

No pictures!

Hard to track who begat who.

Some were thoughtful but more individualized to one respondent.

In all honesty I just don't have time. I'm a single mom with an hour commute...I'm lucky to get the kids to church on Sunday.

Because honestly, people don't read AT ALL. (Said the professor currently teaching a Bible class to 18-22 year olds.)

Too much distractions by jobs, other books and periodicals, surfing the Web, and being on Facebook. [keep in mind this guy was writing this up on Facebook.]

Now there were several comments that could be grouped around a few common issues. Here's one:

Why don't I read the Bible? Where to begin. I mean really, where to begin!

Without a reading plan do you just open to a page?

Not easy to pick up without a guide/plan and a focus.

So figuring out where to start reading is one issue. So is simply understanding the words on the page.

So many thee, thou, whereunto, that it gets overwhelming

I think many people aren't familiar with newer, more readable versions.

Figuring out where to start; finding a translation you can actually understand.

Then there's the issue of whether or not we want to submit ourselves to the authority of the Bible.

A lot of people don't think the Bible is God's truth. Plenty of cooler self-help books out there.

People don't think it is relevant to their lives in 2018. Also people don't want to study the Bible to understand the truths because it is not how they want to live their lives.

Now, I want you to hold on to three of these thoughts: “I don't know where to start,” “I have a hard time understanding the words of the Bible,” and “I'm not sure I want to listen to what the Bible tells me.” I'm going to talk about each one of these in this sermon.

Let's start with “I'm not sure I want to listen to what the Bible tells me.”

It's a good place to start, because way back in our passage from 2 Timothy, Paul was warning that people would have a hard time listening to the scriptures. Here's how he put it in our passage today:

There will come a time when people will not tolerate sound teaching. They will collect teachers who say what they want to hear because they are self-centered. They will turn their back on truth. [v. 3-4]

In other words, people will turn to cooler self-help books, as someone put it on facebook.

A translation that sticks closer to the words Paul originally used puts it even more colorfully:

The time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires.

In the Wednesday women's Bible study, we were talking about metaphorical itching ears before someone said, “uh, I ACTUALLY have itchy ears.” She says it's so hard not to scratch them—which of course only makes them worse! The doctor gives her a topical medicine to control the itching.

So in Paul's analogy, people with itching ears need to look for a topical medicine to cure their itching. That medicine is the holy scriptures, which he tells us,

- Help us to be wise in a way that leads to salvation
- Are inspired by God
- Useful for teaching, for showing mistakes, for correcting, for training character
- Helps every person who belongs to God to be equipped to do everything that is good.

That's what the medicine of holy scriptures will do as they explain to us the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Or if we want, we can keep scratching our itching ears with other stuff which doesn't cure that itch. All sorts of other stuff where we put our faith besides the gospel of Jesus Christ. Could be some kind of addiction. Could be material success, or the respect of others. Could be trying to collect the most toys or striving to have the most perfect family. Whatever we are ultimately using to scratch our itching ears is not the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I read an interesting article on HuffPost last week called "Work Is Our Religion and It's Failing Us." In it, its author Benjamin Hunnicutt of the University of Iowa warns against our tendencies to look to work for our salvation. The idea that we could is a relatively recent phenomena—only with the Industrial Revolution did our modern concept of work come to be, with the ideas about being hired and paid—resulting in clear divisions of work and life. Until this time, aspirations, success, meaning, purpose, and identity were found largely in traditions and faith.

In recent generations, purpose, success, meaning and identity are now formed in work rather than in traditions and faith. The danger of this is that as work becomes more fragile because workplaces become increasingly mechanized and internationalized and workers become less important. And itchy-eared individuals trying to find meaning somewhere outside of the Gospel of Jesus Christ need to go yet somewhere else to find meaning, when they could simply turn to the scriptures to get the right medicine they need to cure their itchy ears.

Paul knows that the cure for itchy ears is the ever-faithful scriptures, because they point to the ever-faithful God who has come to us in Jesus Christ. And the way we get to know this faithful God in Jesus Christ is through the Bible:

Since childhood you have known the holy scriptures that help you to be wise in a way that leads to salvation through faith that is in Christ Jesus.[v.15]

And here's the thing: if we want to get to know our faithful God in Jesus Christ through the Bible, that means we need to read the Bible! That's why we are inviting everyone to participate in the Summer Book Club starting tomorrow!

So now let's go back to another one of those three reasons why people don't read the Bible: "I don't know where to start."

To answer this, there's a full schedule to follow in your bulletin, and the weekly schedule will be in each week. It starts tomorrow in the first chapter of Matthew and gives us about three chapters a day. Now, I do have to warn you that the first chapter of Matthew does start with one of those infamous genealogies, with a bunch of people begetting a bunch of other people. I encourage you to do what I'll do, which is just skim that, before getting on to Mary and Joseph toward the end of chapter one

The full schedule is also on-line at the church website at www.firstchurchlf.org. You can also find the passages on the church's facebook page every day. You can also get an email with the passages sent to you every day from the church by making a note about it on the friendship pad with your email address or by contacting Donna Birney in the church office.

Reading about three chapters takes 90 days to get through the whole New Testament—but it's about 98 days from Memorial Day through Labor Day. So there are several catch-up days for you to get back on track, or to read ahead.

So that gives an answer to the second reason why people don't read the Bible: where to start. Now I want to talk about the third and last reason: "I have a hard time understanding the words of the Bible."

There are lots of different translations and paraphrases out there designed to help people understand the Bible better. Translations try to stick close to the original languages (Greek for the New Testament and Hebrew for the Old Testament); paraphrases move further away from the original languages to put the thoughts into new words which are intended to be livelier and more dynamic for today.

People who read the Bible regularly often find a version that they like a lot. If you have one, stick with it, unless you want to use another one this summer to see what you learn by changing it up. But if you don't regularly read the Bible, I'd encourage you to try the Common English Bible. That's the translation we'll be emailing and posting. Our former pastor Christine

Chakoian was part of the project to develop it and it's both understandable and beautiful.

Another readable paraphrase is the Message; we use the New Revised Standard Version here in worship usually. Other versions have their cheerleaders. The important thing is to find one that you find accessible. The website Biblegateway.com lets you compare a lot of different versions at the same time to find one you like.

Now I know that there are lots of reasons not to read the Bible, but I want to close the sermon telling you why I do read the Bible. I read it because I feel like it's the most direct way that God talks to me. So often as I read along, the passages relate to my life in such powerful ways that I know the Holy Spirit is using them to speak directly to me. And often they are a cure for my itching ears, keeping me from making some mistake because I'm valuing something that God is not valuing.

For instance, in the spring of 2007 I was graduating from the PhD program at Princeton Seminary and was talking to a church in Bloomington, IL, about serving there as their senior pastor. It was a great church—about 700 in worship, big staff, brand new sanctuary, great youth ministry. But I did not want to live in central IL in a small city. So God and I were in this wrestling match about whether I was actually called there or not.

On April 6, 2007, I read in Psalm 78 some verses about how God gave and gave and gave to the Israelites as he brought them out of Egypt. My paraphrase would go something like this: God said, "I parted the Red Sea; I guided you with a cloud by day and fire by night; I gave you water in the desert; I gave you manna. Then you started complaining, wondering why I didn't give you meat. And I got mad."

I felt like God was saying, "Look I've given you so much in this great church. You're really going to complain about Bloomington? I'm about to get mad."

It was just the medicine I needed to cure my itching ears, which wanted God to line every single detail up for me so that it would be exactly the way that I wanted it to be (as if I were God telling God what to do, instead of God giving me a gift that was lined up the way God wanted it to be.)

I served almost five years there, and I'm grateful for how God speaks to me when I read the scriptures.

This summer in worship, each week the preacher will preach on their favorite passage from the previous week, and we'll meet after the service right up here for a Book Club gathering to talk about whatever passages you want to discuss from the week too. I pray you'll find a few where God talked to you.

The Summer Book Club is going to be great. Just join in! The readings start tomorrow. If you get behind, just join back wherever you can. After all, the sooner you can get a cure for your itching ears, the better!