

Good evening everybody, welcome to our Midway Mini Message. It's midway through the month and hopefully it'll be a mini message but, when preparing for tonight, I had a load of ideas, so I'll try and keep it as brief as I can!

Tonight, is about helping us engage with the 2021 New Testament Reading Plan. Hopefully many of you have begun to read through this. We're currently in the book of Mark, the Gospel of Mark, and it's been encouraging to hear how different people have begun to be engaged with it, forming little groups to support one another even, which is amazing!

But maybe, like other new year's resolutions at times, you're beginning to feel "Like okay, halfway through the first month this is becoming hard" and some of the initial enthusiasm is a waning a little bit. Maybe you're even finding a little bit more difficult than you thought, that you're reading through, you're being diligent, but maybe not getting as much as what you hoped you might from it; and my plan, my hope is that tonight, and in future sessions, we might equip you in that, and encourage you through this this year as we read together through the New Testament.

The Psalms remind us that those who dwell, meditate, chew upon the Word of God can know the blessing of God. Psalm 1 says "Blessed is the one whose delight is in the law of the Lord and who meditates on his law, day and night." That blessedness is not about protection from all perils and hardship, but it does include peace and well-being, includes growth of character, stability, delight, joy, even in the midst of hard and difficult times, and many much is the testimony that I and others could share of the benefit of digging into God's Word and how, through it, we have met with the living God, and our faith has been sustained, maybe especially in the difficult times.

Now this way of reading scripture, that we've begun one chapter a day, is a particular way and it may be quite different from what you've ever done before, and many of us have maybe used things like Daily Bread or other resources like that, where someone has prepared things in advance for maybe three or four months and you read a bit, and they've got some thoughts to read, or you might use an online reading plan from the Bible app for example. Often it can jot around different parts of the Bible, maybe following a theme hopefully. Some of the reading plans maybe do work systematically through a portion of the Bible and again, though there's often some people's thoughts on that and that's not a bad thing. I've used it myself, as you know as I've said often, I've used the Lectio 365 app a lot last year. Pretty much it was my main source for devotions but this year I thought I'd do something different. Go back to a method I've used a lot and invite you to give it a shot and journey with me in this, that we might know more of Jesus and more of the teaching about Jesus, and how we are to live as Christians. And so, we're focusing there on the New Testament.

There's a couple of things to bear in mind to try and get the most out of this. I guess, first of all we need to remember what Paul said to young Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:16 that "all scripture is god breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training and righteousness" and so, if we approach the Bible in that way, then it will change how

we receive things and how we expect things will come more expectant. I think expecting to hear from God and the less nice bits, the less glossy bits, the bits that we think “Oh, it's just a Sunday School lesson” we might take more heat off it. Might not be, as you're reading through, the thing that initially jumps off the page that you're meant to hear. It may be something else and so, just bear that in mind, as you come to it, that you're coming to God's Word, that it is from the heart of God and there might be something there, will be something there for you, even in those days where it's like “I'm just not getting anything”. Maybe in that time especially, is when you see that you have to love your neighbor - Sunday School lesson – “Oh, I know to love my neighbor!” well maybe take some time to think about that and see where God takes you by His Spirit.

So, that this is a method I've been using for years. It's been used by billions of Christians, probably most Christians, probably in other countries who don't have access to other resources. I assume that this is just the way that they're doing it, they're just reading through the scriptures and then learning about God, and then learning what it means to follow Jesus. As they read through, and God is speaking to them, and it's been used from the day the Church began, it's just how they've been using it and through that their faith has been sustained, has been grown, and I pray it would be the same for us.

You've probably already begun to realize that, as you read through chapter by chapter, there's stuff you don't understand and it's the same for me. I'm reading through things I'm not always understanding everything and that's okay. It's okay not to understand everything that day, that you can come back to another time, another year, maybe another decade, and maybe at that point it'll be then that it falls into place for you. So, it's okay not to understand stuff. I'm not getting everything, I don't expect you to get everything either, okay and that kind of thing is maybe more for Bible studies or maybe for Sunday preaching, or maybe some more intensive kind of Bible reading routines, that you can use in our benefit, but it's not this.

Okay, so let's bear that in mind as we come into it. It's also worth bearing in mind that we're going to come across a couple of different genres in the New Testament. So, we've got the gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - and they're very different from the epistles, the letters by the Church fathers like Paul and John and Peter – so, the early apostles. Okay. And it can be helpful just to be aware of that dynamic, that in the Gospels the focus is very much on Jesus, on who He is, what He came to do what He did, and some of the teaching He passed on, and that those Gospels are written for all the Church to read, and know, and apply. The epistles are a bit different - they're as relevant for all the Church, but in a different way, because they were written to our particular audience, sometimes a particular congregation or a group of congregations. And then we've got the Book of Revelation, and we'll talk about that nearer the end of the year, because that's a whole other different type of genre. And what you take from the different genres, how you approach the different genres, will be different, and it's worth remembering that ,and if you're not familiar with that, or you just want a bit more help, I've got two resources for you to consider getting a copy of.

Okay. now if you're listening back to this message on the telephone we can get either of these resources printed off for you although one will probably be more helpful than the other. The more helpful one and useful for everybody, is the Bible Society resource and they've produced online resources, that you can either read online or downloaded and printed off, for each book of the Bible, and each book of the New Testament as well, and so, it gives you a bit of an introduction to the book, it tells you who wrote it, gives you some inspiring quotes from it, it gives you a bit of a structure to maybe help understand. In that way it gives you ideas of what this might mean for you as well as some maybe discussion questions to think about yourself or talk about with others, and I'll put a link to this resource in the description of this video.

The other resource is by a group of people who come under the title The Bible Project, and most of it, they've got a website and a Youtube Channel, and for each book of the bible, as well as loads of other ideas and themes and issues. They've produced videos and the videos take you through a bit of a cartoon drawing that they've done, and so we can print off this cartoon drawing for people to read but without the commentary it might not mean quite as much. So, we can get that for those that are not on the internet but again, as I say, it might not mean as much without the commentary, and these are five to ten minute introductions.

That was the book of Mark. There's also the book of Galatians just to give you a very quick overview to remind you what to maybe expect or be having in the back of your mind as you're reading through. So, the Bible society and The Bible Project really helpful as you come to the scriptures as well as simply knowing that it's the word of God and approaching it with that kind of heart and disposition.

Now, when you've been reading through hopefully you've been engaging with the questions and with the prayer stuff because it really needs both for these to be truly meaningful. I think Tim Keller, in his book on prayer, he talks about how prayer and the reading of scripture just have to and should dovetail so closely together and that one needs the other and vice versa, and so, don't skip on that, don't approach it in a peripheral way. You're coming to God, you're coming to hear from Him as he's spoken through His word. and use the questions that are there. So, for example, going through the gospel of Mark, I've been thinking "What does it show me here of Jesus?" and I've just been reminded of His power and the dynamism He carried by the Spirit and that lives changed and there was an expectancy with Jesus, and Have I got that expectancy? Have I kept that expectancy? and that's, in part, what prompted the message and following prayer time on Sunday, that as I read through the scriptures, that's what arose in me; as I saw more of the person of Jesus but equally those other questions "Is there a sin to confess? There's been a couple of, as I've read through things, thinking "Oh Lord, I don't live that way!" or I see something and that how that person responded to you and my life too. "Forgive me Father, forgive me." Or maybe there's been a command to follow or something you've needed God's help with. Who knows, maybe what it's been, but again there will have been things for me and there's so many thoughts going around our heads just now and in general. Isn't it so.

One of the other things that I find helpful is to take some notes in a journal. Literally a sentence is all you need to write down, one sentence. Turn it into prayer if you like - I often do that nowadays. Rather than just here's a thought, I write down a prayer with the thought and with that kind of heart. Or it maybe with the verse that has jumped out to me. And then, at the end of the week, you can, on a Saturday, if you've done all your five readings Monday to Friday, on a Saturday you can just take some time to look back over the week and see if you've got any more thoughts. Talk to God about it a bit more and then on Sunday you've got Church so no need for a reading that day. Yeah?

So, the questions are there to be used. Please don't just bypass them. I do try to use them. And approach it prayerfully, and, as I say, you're not looking to understand everything but you're trying to see "Well, what is God maybe saying to me today, here, now?" You're looking for what grabs your attention or what strikes your heart or what encourages you, challenges you. But, as I say, there'll be days, there will be days where you're reading through and it's hard work. I have been there myself, and in that day you're maybe just need to take a pause, maybe say "God I need Your help. I'm not getting anything today." and maybe it's coming back to it later in the day, or it could be just seeing if there's something that sounds a bit dull or bland or the Sunday School lesson "Love your neighbor" and maybe that's the thing you should dig into because it's all God's word, it's all beneficial, there's something you can get from it if we seek God's help and put in a bit effort, at times, as well.

So, I encourage you that and then just take it into prayer and pray about it and think if you approach it that way I think you can get something helpful from it each day.

But I am conscious that there will be things that come up you know like "What does that mean?" or "Does this mean that?" or "Surely no!" or "I'm really confused!" and so, that's where this idea about having a question and answers session. The idea came up for a questions and answers evening, and so for the 16th of February myself and a couple other ministers from the Braes Churches will get together to record a video to upload for the Tuesday night where we answer some of your questions. Now, to give us enough time to do that and juggle that around everything else, I need your questions in by the 4th of February, which is a Thursday. Get them in. That gives us about a week to do some digging for you, think through some stuff and come prepared and get the recording done. Can't promise we'll do every question but we'll try and do as many as we can. We just don't know who's going to get involved because it's not just Brightons reading this plan, which is really encouraging, it's also Slammannan and I think we're sending it out to Blackbraes and Shieldhill, Muriavonside, which is great, as well. So, who knows what will come! So, get your questions in and help us all just to chew things over.

Nevertheless, as I say, the goal in this is not to understand everything, I don't think anyone has understood all of scripture, and that's okay, the goal of this primarily is to nurture your relationship with God and so you're looking for What are You saying to me today, God? What's the thing that encourages me or challenges me? What's prompting me to speak and praise You? and sometimes the wonderful thing about this way of

reading the scripture is that some days, not all the time, but more often than not, something will come along that maybe just speaks into a situation and that you're particularly facing. It's like I needed to hear that and it's just really striking how God does that and I've known a number of seasons where that has been the case.

So, I pray that we get some of those for each of us as well going through this year but especially I pray and hope that as we go through this it'll grow your faith that you'll get to know Jesus so much more, you'll get to see what this is about and the life He calls us to individually and as a Church, and I think, if we support one another, nurture one another, learn from one another, take on board these questions, and approach the Bible as God's word, with that sense of expectancy, that He will speak to us, He'll give us something day by day, our daily bread. Man does not live on bread alone but from the very word of God, and I pray that each of us might know that this coming year.

So, thanks for tuning in. I've tried to keep it as brief as possible, probably longer than a mini message, but nonetheless I pray it's of blessing to you.

And so, as you go from, may the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with you this night and forevermore, Amen