



HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

Nathan Veall

THE TREASURE I FOUND, THAT MY CHURCH HAD FORGOTTEN.

MY NAME IS NATHAN VEALL. I'M 21, I COME FROM CORNWALL, AND A HISTORICALLY METHODIST UNDERSTANDING OF THE BIBLE HAS TRANSFORMED MY LIFE.

REJECTION – THE COUNTERFEIT WHICH FAILED TO DELIVER

The process of discovering what role the Bible had in my life, and indeed in the life of the Methodist Church was a somewhat slow journey for me. I became a Christian at the age of 14, but until my late-teens my experience of the Word of God in Methodism was very limited. Unfortunately, that was the case because there simply wasn't much desire for proper interaction with it, either in my personal life, or my Church experience. Even after becoming a Christian, I didn't really care much about the Bible. In my head, the Bible was just a book that talked a bit about God, had some nice stories, and carried some basic moral lessons. Overall, it was just about as relevant to my life as Aesop's Fables. Being brutally honest, for the most part save several exceptions, it felt like my Church had that view of the Bible too.

The Bible was an unusual story book, where the Sunday sermon might (at

times) not look very different to the kind of teaching you'd get in Sunday School. Someone might go up to the front and for 10 minutes or so share a 'story' from the Bible which had some moral lesson to learn from it. Here's a story of where Jesus was nice to people, so be nice to people. Here's a story where Jesus didn't judge someone, so don't judge people. Here's a story of where Jesus rode on a donkey, so don't care too much about nice cars. Now of course, we should be nice to people, not judge, and not care too much about possessions. But if the sum-total of the Bible's message is basically just 'be nice', then I found no real reason to read it or to go to Church. I had already been taught Aesop's Fables in Year 3. As far as I was concerned, I did not need to spend the rest of my life being reminded of morals that I agreed with through stories about dead people at an adult's Sunday School. I completely rejected this fairy-tale moralism with "Jesus language" thrown on top. I didn't need it since the whole world was telling me the 'be a nice person' message every day. Jesus, or at least the 'Jesus' I knew, had nothing distinctive to offer my life than any other club, religion or culture around me. The Bible was simply irrelevant, that's just where I was at. Thankfully, it's far from where I find myself now. I've been on a journey, and that journey first began with some questions.

I became a Christian after discovering the holiness of God, my sin and therefore condemnation before him, and yet his amazing salvation through Jesus. Yet,

at school, with my non-Christian friends I really struggled to answer some basic questions about God and Science, about Heaven and Hell, and about the Old Testament and the New. Where my atheist friends had questions about my faith, I'd be annoyed that I didn't have answers. I didn't know what the Bible said about a host of different issues. Each time, I would quickly google some basic rebuttals and then continue to be frustrated at my lack of knowledge about God. All the while, my Bible gathered dust and lay closed on my desk. I turned everywhere else, yet it never crossed my mind to seek answers in the Bible.

Now, if you've been a teenage Christian in the last 10 years or so, you'll know that in Christian youth culture everyone is always asking the question 'What is God's will for my life?'. At youth group or Soul Survivor we would spend ages thinking about the question. We'd hear stories 'from the front' of people who had received some special call to go and do an extraordinary 'new' thing. We'd all wait for this crazy spiritual experience where God would directly reveal to us the job we were going to do, the person we were going to go out with, the new thing he wanted to tell us. Yet, like many, I found myself without real answers. Most of what I thought 'God told me' about those things just turned out to be my desires. In frustration I'd spend ages at youth group waiting for God to speak something new to me about my life. All the while, my Bible gathered dust and lay closed on my desk.

To add to the struggle for knowledge, I found myself having a superficial love for God. During worship I would raise my hand in the air and give off passionate vibes. I'd sing about how much I loved God, how thankful I was to him for saving me, and how 'I'd never know how much it cost to see my sin upon that cross'. But behind closed doors I'd rarely pray for more than 5 minutes a day, I'd continue watching porn without an ounce of real repentance or change, and I'd never really talk about Jesus to my unsaved friends. I would wallow in short-term guilt, and think I'd never be able to 'get serious about God' until I was older. Holiness was not on the agenda. All the while, my Bible gathered dust and lay closed on my desk.

Hopefully, you're getting the theme here. Namely, my Bible gathered dust and lay closed on my desk. I never turned to the Bible because it wasn't cool, it wasn't relevant, and it couldn't help me in my struggles. Why would I turn to it? I didn't see my friends or Church turning to it as the primary place for answers, or the authority on how to live. Why would a book about morals help my real-life struggles? As I was waiting for God to tell me something new, the thought never crossed my mind that perhaps what I need to hear is what God's people have always needed to hear. That perhaps God's Word contained everything I need to know about his call on my life. God wasn't silent, I just refused to open the letter he'd already sent. I was trying to fight personal sin in my own strength, 'waiting for the Spirit to help me'. Yet, the "Sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Ephesians 6:17), the weapon I needed to conquer my sin, lay sheathed in its holder. There were answers hidden in plain sight, and I had no idea.

REALISATION – THE TREASURE THAT BROUGHT-FORTH LIFE.

Gradually, I began to realise that whatever I needed, it wasn't going to be found in myself. So, I began to turn to the Bible. Through the help of friends, and Ministers who preached it, who taught it, who expounded it, and who applied it, I began to sit under the actual teaching of the Bible, through online sermons, and through personal study. Rather than a 'Radio 4 style' 10-minute 'thought for the day', I listened to people who stood up boldly and proclaimed a simple truth to me: that I needed to read and meditate on

the teaching of the Bible. As I began to do so, by the power of the Spirit, everything changed for me.

I began to read what Wesley and others said about the Bible, that it was 'a lantern unto a Christian's feet, and a light in all his paths' (John Wesley, 'The witness of our own spirit'). That its teaching was the highest authority for the Christian, and rather than take it lightly, I should submit to it. That in doing so, real freedom would be found. Though I'd heard these things, like many my age I'd never bothered to pick it up when no one was around. So, I picked it up, and began to study it. As I listened to online sermons, I began to find answers that I never thought existed. I was confronted in my sin in a way that I had always needed. I began to feel love for God and direction in life that I'd never had before. I began to feel the weight and sorrow of my sin, which led to real repentance. I began to grasp something of the greatness and majesty of God. A year-or-two on I was free from addiction to porn, I had answers to most of the questions I had ever asked, and I had a genuine assurance that Jesus had 'taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death'. I actually understood the cross, and was born again. I was thirsty and found living water. I was starving, and found manna for the soul.

REJUVENATION – THE METHOD TO METHODISM.

I chose to believe that what Jesus, history, and indeed Wesley said about Scripture was true. That the Apostles bear Jesus' authority (John 14:26, Matthew 10:40, Luke 10:16, 1 John 4:6) and that the Old Testament is the Word of God too (Matthew 5:17-20, Mark 7:13, Matthew 22:31, John 10:35). Like Methodists historically have done, instead of just going-along with what my culture likes, I chose to believe that by sitting under what Jesus and his Apostles taught, that I would find true freedom. It wasn't easy, and it took perseverance, but through the Bible, by his Spirit, the Lord changed a teenager's life. Now, I'm utterly convinced that the best thing any Christian can do, every teenager, is to study the Bible daily.

Who knew, that this view of the authority and goodness of Scripture was a very Methodist view of the Bible? I didn't! The Bible being front and centre in the life of a Christian and the life of the Church,

is the method that method-ism forgot. I wonder if you've ever thought why many different Church buildings historically have the altar front-and-centre, but the pulpit to the side? Mainly because the Eucharist was central to their worship and Church-life. Yet in Methodist Churches, the pulpit is normally the central point in the sanctuary, clear for all to see. This was because the Ministry of The Word was central to Methodist worship and Church-life. Wesley believed that the Bible is the primary way God speaks to his people; that it gives answers to the searching, shows us Christ, and brings us to him in our hour of need. Wesley never saw the 'Wesleyan quadrilateral' as 4 equal pillars where reason, tradition or experience could lead us to contradict what Jesus and the Apostles taught. Rather, the 3 lesser pillars were always to support, uphold and help us understand the central pillar, the pillar of Scripture.

Many of the issues I and my Church faced ultimately stemmed from not taking the Bible seriously. We need a rejuvenation of biblical preaching, and personal study. The Bible is far more than a historical document. It's the living, breathing Word of God. In it is found the hope of the gospel, light in a dark world, hope for the hopeless, and God himself. That's not about advocating a literalist view, we leave plenty of room for different genres of literature etc. Historical and textual criticism only confirm this reality. (<http://evangelicaltextualcriticism.blogspot.com/>). Taking God at his word is not about literalism, it's about who is King. Christ, or culture? This journey, which has changed my life, leaves me to conclude with nothing other than the words of Wesley himself - "O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it! Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be homo unius libri ('a man of one book'). (John Wesley, Preface to standard 'Sermons')

Nathan Veall is the former President of Warwick University Christian Union, and a member of the CARE Leadership Programme. He has a passion for the Gospel, expository preaching, and engaging with culture. He has recently moved to London, and works in the House of Commons. Visit www.whotway.com to find out latest youth videos hosted by Nathan, Bekky Brown and Ben Juliano.