A BIT OF A RANT ABOUT BIBLE VERSES

Posted on January 6, 2014 by Eddie

Category: Musing On Biblical Themes

I like the Bible, I really do. But I have to confess that I am becoming more and more allergic to Bible verses on Facebook, Twitter and elsewhere.

Before you report me to the heresy police, let me explain. To make life easy for us, the Bible is divided up into chapters and verses. This means that when we need to refer to a passage of Scripture we can use a reference such as Philippians 2:5-11, rather than pointing people to that bit in Paul that talks about Jesus being willing to be humble and dying.

Let's face it, without the chapter and verse notation, most of us would never find passages in Leviticus.

The problem is that having divided the Bible up for ease of reference, we all too easily start quoting verses in isolation, as if they had a life of their own outside of the context of Scripture. The most obvious case of this is the way thatÂ John 3:16Â is used, generally without any reference to what Jesus was actually saying to Nicodemus. I picked up onÂ one particularly egregious example of this tendencyÂ in the early days of this blog.

The thing is, the Bible was written as a connected narrative, not a series of disjointed sayings that can be quoted at random. Even passages which do seem to stand on their own, such as some of the proverbs, make more sense when read in the whole context of the book they are found in. Often two proverbs will balance each other out, providing nuance. Simply quoting an isolated proverb will often not do justice to the teaching of the whole book.

Another problem is that it is all to easy to pick a verse or passage that says what you want to hear, rather than telling some of the harder, more challenging truths of Scripture.

Let's take an example:

> *"For I know the plansÂ I have for you," declares theÂ Lord, "plans to prosperÂ you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."Â Jeremiah 29:11*

This verse is often quoted to indicate that although an individual or group of people might be going through a tough time, everything will work out all right in the end. The problem is, this passage wasn't written to that particular individual or group, it was written for an entirely different bunch of people altogether and there is nothing about this passage which says that it can be applied generally. Â What's more, this is only a partial quote. The preceding verse indicates that the nation of Judah will be in exile for 70 years before God's plans come into effect. Almost everyone to whom thisÂ *encouraging*Â passage was originally addressed would be dead long before the encouragement came true.

I don't think I've ever seen anyone quote the preceding verse as an encouragement!

> *"When seventy yearsÂ are completed for Babylon, I will come to youÂ and fulfil my good promiseÂ to bring you backÂ to this place."Â Jeremiah 29:10*

It's not that I don't believe I fully believe that God has good plans for us and that he will work them out. He does, but often we will not see them come to fruition this side of eternity.

When we take passages out of context we tend to take the nice, warm and friendly verses and not the ones about denying ourselves, taking up our cross, sharing in Christ's sufferings and that sort of thing. But a rounded approach to Christianity cannot ignore the tough stuff.

If we only look at the bits of Scripture that make us feel good; how can we look our brothers and sisters in Iraq, Pakistan and other trouble spots in the eye?

I foundÂ this piece in a recent Daily TelegraphÂ to be very challenging:

> *The Gospel is hard, and it contains within it, not the fear but the absolute certainty, that persecution and misunderstanding will always follow in its wake. It is based on the idea of dying in order to live; of losing life in order to find it; of taking up the cross, that instrument of torture, and finding therein not merely life but glory.*

If we just pick the passages we like from Scripture we risk missing this vital truth about the nature of our faith.

/rant off