



Talk 6 – Why and How Should I Read the Bible?

Duration 38 Minutes
HTB Transcripts

Key:

Personal Story / Testimony that Nicky Gumbel tells in the classic Alpha talk. These may be replaced with a live speaker's personal story or the speaker may tell the story about Nicky in the same way Nicky tells stories about others.

Story that Nicky tells about someone else (about a friend or a story he heard or read about).

Quotes are key to the talk to emphasise a point and to enable guests to engage and relate to a point made. There is now a way that people can seek permission to omit or replace quotes used in the original talks. A quote should be replaced with something equally effective to maintain the balance of teaching, story, and references to other information sources.

Key Quotes will need approval to change (these will be identified by a comment in the left column). Please email publications@alpha.org with your request.

Key Bible Passages are identified and you may wish to display these visually for your guests.

Red type identifies a part of the key teaching text that may be removed or altered for contextualisation.

Text left untouched is the standard key message content of the Alpha talk.

NOTE: Key elements of this script are: personal stories, humour and reference to media / popular culture to draw the guests in to engage with the talk.

Parts of the talk may need to be contextualised for other contexts or cultures but make sure you maintain the key elements of humour and personal testimony. Notice how quotes, and stories are used throughout to add emphasis to the main points of the talk (theology and testimony).

KEY: **Personal Story** **Story** **Quotes** **Key Quotes** **Key Bible Passages**

[Tell a story about the Bible either using a personal testimony like the example here, or the story of a well-known Christian figure (eg Brother Andrew, who is famous for smuggling Bibles). Talk about the reaction of those who received the Bible to show how Bibles are precious.]

My father didn't get married until he was 49 years of age — so by the time that I was 21 he was 73. One of the things that my father always wanted to do was to visit Russia before he died. So in 1976 we went as a family on a trip to Russia. And I had recently become a Christian, and I'd read that in the Soviet Union, as it then was, Christians were persecuted and it was very hard to get hold of Bibles.

So I wrote to an organisation which I knew smuggled Bibles into places like the Soviet Union. And I sent them some money and said that I would like to take some Bibles in when I went.

I got two replies. One was the official reply. The official reply was 'So sorry, we can't supply you with any Bibles — it's illegal to take them into Russia, and we suggest that you don't do so.' The second was the unofficial reply, which was when I came home the following day I saw on the doorstep an unmarked brown paper parcel containing Russian Bibles. So, feeling like James Bond, 007, I packed these Bibles into my case. They were amazing Bibles because they were printed on very thin paper, and they were the whole Bible.

And when I was there, we went into a church, and in those days the churches were often infiltrated by the KGB. And so I tried to see in the congregation someone who I thought looked as if they were a genuine Christian. I saw this man, probably in his sixties, who had this — just the light of Christ shining in his face. So I followed him out of the church, and I followed him down to a street where it was completely deserted, and I took out of my pocket this complete Russian Bible, and handed it to him.

He took out of his pocket what he had — which was probably a hundred years old, almost totally worn out, the pages threadbare. When he saw a whole Bible, he was just elated! He was literally jumping and dancing for joy. He was hugging me! I didn't speak a word of Russian, he didn't speak a word of English, but we were hugging each other and we were running up and down the streets, jumping for joy!

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[You may contextualise or remove the text in red if these names are not known or relevant in your context/culture.]

Now, why was he so excited? Many today would see the Bible as rather dull — a kind of outdated rulebook, full of contradictions maybe, irrelevant to the lives of twenty-first century people. So why was he so excited? What's so special about the Bible? Well, it's uniquely popular. It's the most successful literary creation ever, more influential than Shakespeare or any other great texts. It's completely international. Homer has been translated into forty languages, Shakespeare into sixty, the Bible into well over two thousand — ten times more than any other book. It's every publisher's dream, really! It's the world's bestseller — forty-four million copies of the Bible sell every year.

I read that in the average American household there are 6.8 Bibles!

And there was an article in *The Times* sub-headed like this: 'The Bible is the biggest-selling book every year. If sales of the Bible were ...'

'If sales of the Bible were reflected in bestseller lists, it would be a rare week that anything else would achieve a look-in. Is it wonderful, weird, or just plain baffling in this increasingly Godless age, when the range of books available grows wider with each passing year, that this one book should go on selling hand over fist, month in, month out?' The article ends by saying, 'All versions of the Bible sell well all the time. Can the Bible Society offer an explanation? "Well," I'm told disarmingly, "It's such a good book!"'


It's also uniquely powerful. One former Prime Minister described it as 'high explosive', and in my own life it was reading the Bible that brought me to faith in Christ. It's uniquely powerful — it has the power to change individuals and it has the power to change societies. And it's uniquely precious. The psalmist says about the Scriptures that he had that they were 'more precious than gold'. The Queen at her coronation was handed a Bible with these words: 'We present you with this book, the most valuable thing that this world affords.' Now, why is that?

Would you like to turn to Matthew, chapter 4, verse 4? Jesus said this:

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'It is written: "People do not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."'

Material things alone don't satisfy. As well as a physical hunger, which can be satisfied by bread, we also have this spiritual hunger, which can only be satisfied by spiritual things. It's a kind of longing for God that is in every human heart, longing for a relationship with our Creator. And Jesus says people can't live on bread alone, but every word... And the Greek word means it's continually coming out of the mouth of God, like a stream pouring forth. God's longing to communicate with us, to be in a relationship with us. And he speaks to us primarily through the Bible.



Talk Point 1

GOD HAS SPOKEN – REVELATION

The Bible is first of all God's revelation of himself. In the Bible God has spoken. The very first week, we looked at God's supreme revelation, which is in a person, in Jesus Christ. The writer to Hebrews says: 'in the past God spoke in many and various ways, but in these last days he's spoken through his Son, Jesus Christ.' That's God's ultimate revelation. But the main way we know about Jesus is through the written revelation.

God has also revealed himself through creation. The psalmist says, 'the heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands'. You know how it is: you're on top of a mountain, or you look up at the sky at night, and you say, 'Wow, this is awesome! This suggests that there's a Creator, it points to the existence and the power and the majesty of God.' But you can't discover very much about God like that.

Science, of course, is an exploration of the way in which God has revealed himself in creation. And Biblical theology is an exploration of how God has revealed himself in the Bible. That's why there should be no conflict between science and Christianity.

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Albert Einstein, one of the greatest scientists of all time, said: 'A legitimate conflict between science and religion cannot exist. Religion without science is blind, and science without religion is lame.'

We need both.

Would you like to turn to Timothy, chapter 3, verse 16? The writer says this:

'All Scripture is God-breathed' — or, as some translations put it, 'inspired' by God — 'and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that God's servant may be thoroughly equipped for every good work'.

The word translated 'God-breathed' there, it's the literal translation of it, because the Greek word *theopneustos* [*qeopneustoj*], it's a transliteration, really: 'God-breathed'. What the writer is saying is that the Bible is God speaking. Not that, sort of, God dictated the Bible. Of course, he used human authors. Over a period of 1500 years at least forty authors — kings, scholars, philosophers, fishermen, poets, statesmen, historians, doctors — they wrote different types of literature such as history, poetry, prophecy and letters. It's 100 percent the work of human beings. But what the writer is saying here is it's also 100 percent inspired by God. How can that be?

[Try to use a similar analogy if this example isn't suitable for your context]

Let me use an analogy, if I may. Sir Christopher Wren, the greatest English architect of his time, built St Paul's Cathedral. He started aged 44 in the year 1676, and for 35 years the cathedral was built under one architect. It was completed in 1711, when Wren was 79 years of age. Sir Christopher Wren 'built' St Paul's Cathedral. But actually he didn't lay a single stone. Other people put the stones in. Many different builders were involved. But there was one mind, one architect, one inspiration behind it. And so it is with the Bible — many different writers, one architect, one inspiration behind it all: God himself.

And the reason I believe that is because that is what Jesus believed. And if Jesus is our Lord, I think we have to follow what he said. And for him, what the Scriptures said, God said. And this view of the inspiration of the Bible has been held almost universally by the worldwide

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church down the ages, that the Bible is inspired, it's trustworthy, it's true.

That doesn't mean to say that there are no difficulties. Of course, there are many difficulties in the Bible. The apostle Peter, talking about some of Paul's letters, says, 'There's some things in them that are really hard to understand!' Well, if one apostle couldn't understand another, what hope have we got!

There are also moral and historical difficulties. Now, some of these get resolved with time. For example, perhaps you'd keep your finger in 2 Timothy, chapter 3 and perhaps you'd like to turn to Luke, chapter 3, verse 1?

'In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar — when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene — during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert.'

In other words, Luke places this firmly in history.

We know that the fifteenth year of Tiberius was 27 AD. It was once said that Lysanias of Abilene was executed by Marc Antony in BC 34 and therefore Luke must have got it wrong. But more recently — this is the fascinating thing to me — inscriptions have been found of a later Lysanias who was tetrarch of Abilene exactly when Luke said he was.

As the historian Edward Meyer puts it, Luke is entirely correct.

So some of the historical difficulties and so on may get sorted out with time. But there are others — apparent contradictions that can be explained by their context and so on. But still we're left with things that are real difficulties in the Bible. Does that mean that we should abandon belief in the inspiration of Scripture? I don't think so. Every great Christian doctrine has its difficulties. Take the love of God. Every Christian — you can't be a Christian unless you believe that God is love. But what about the issue of suffering? That's a huge moral problem, to believe that God is love and can yet allow the massive amount of pervasive suffering that we see in our world.

And some people, of course, reject Christianity on the basis of that. But for the Christian, we

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struggle with these things. And what I've found, certainly, is the more we struggle with them, rather than rejecting the fact that God is love, but the more we explore and try and wrestle with these two things — the love of God and the suffering we find in the world — although there are no easy answers to these questions; these are very complex questions — the more we explore, the more we wrestle, the greater our understanding of suffering and the greater our understanding of the love of God. And I would encourage you to take a view of the Bible as inspired by God and to wrestle with the difficulties.

So back to 2 Timothy 3, verse 16.

'All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that God's servant may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.'

In other words, this is the supreme authority for what we believe for teaching, rebuking. That's why we try and base the talks on Alpha on the Bible: each week we try and look at two or three verses, because what we believe comes from this book.

It's our authority for how we act, for correcting and training in righteousness. This is where we find out what is wrong in God's eyes and what is right — how to live in a right relationship with God and with others. How to conduct our everyday lives, how to work — what the Bible says about work or about pressure, living under pressure. That it's right to give and to forgive. It's full of practical advice and wisdom — how to bring up children, care of elderly relatives, and so on.

Now, some people say: 'Well, I don't want a rulebook! Isn't that rather restrictive? I don't want all these regulations. I want to be free. If you follow the Bible, surely you lose the freedom to enjoy life.' But is that really right? Does the Bible take away our freedom, or does it actually give us freedom?

[You might like to use this story, either telling it about Nicky or personalising it if you share a similar story.]

Some years ago, when my eldest son was eight years of age, they used to play football on Clapham Common. And they had their regular football during the year. Andy Busk was their coach, and he was the referee. And I remember one time at the end of term they'd

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arranged a kind of sports day. And I went along — I think I was the only father at the match, actually, because it was midweek and in the afternoon — and Andy Busk hadn't turned up. So they kind of press-ganged a referee, and that was me.

I had a number of difficulties. Because first of all, at that time on Clapham Common there weren't football pitches: so there were no markings for where the goals were or where the lines were. So I put a couple of sweaters down for the goals. The other thing was I didn't have a whistle. The boys didn't have different colours — they were just in their kind of ordinary clothes. And also I didn't know the rules. Nor did I know their names — I knew my son's name, but I didn't know the other people's names!

And so the match started. And one boy shouted, 'Oh, the ball's out!' Another boy shouted, 'No, that's not out!' So I didn't know. I'm a kind of non-confrontational person anyway — I just said, 'Play on!' And then someone did a foul, and someone said, 'Hey, that's a foul!' and someone else said, 'That's not a foul!' I didn't know whether it was a foul or not, so I said, 'Play on.' Literally there were three or four small boys lying on the ground — and the place looked like a battlefield! And eventually, to my immense relief, I saw Andy Busk arriving on his bike.

Andy Busk had his whistle, he knew the boys' names, he put them in teams. Every time there was a foul or the ball went out, he blew the whistle, stopped the game, and he imposed the rules. Now, were they more free when I was refereeing and there was total chaos, or were they more free when there was someone in charge and there was a definite set of rules and within that set of rules they were free to enjoy the game?

And God has given us guidelines of how to live — not because he hates us, but because he loves us, and he wants us to enjoy life to the full. So he didn't say 'Don't murder' because it's such fun killing people! He didn't say 'Don't steal' because, oh, you know, it would be miserable if we couldn't steal!

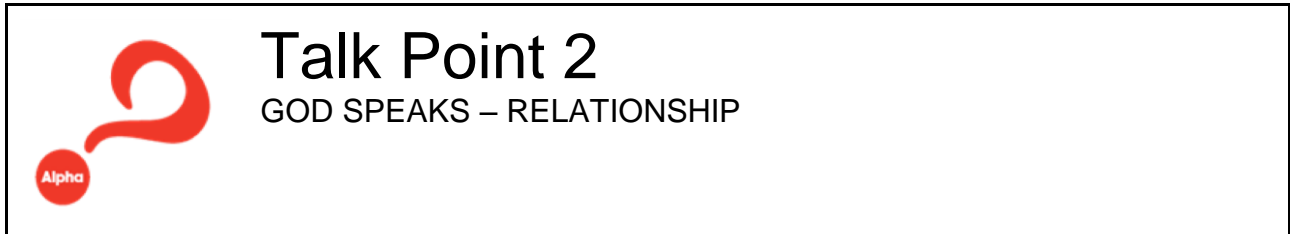
[Reword or use another example if this doesn't translate.]

One man said he didn't read the Bible because it interfered with his work. So someone said to him, 'Well, what do you do?' and he said, 'I'm a pickpocket!' **But, you know, it's not fun**

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having people around picking our pockets; it's not fun... He didn't say 'Don't commit adultery' because he wanted to ruin our fun; he said that because he didn't want people to get hurt, because he loves us.

So the Bible is God's revelation of what he's like, supremely in Jesus, and how to live this life.



But it's more than that. Not only has God spoken — it's his revelation — he still speaks through the Bible. It's about a relationship.

St Gregory the Great said, 'The Bible is a letter from God.' St Augustine says that 'the Bible does nothing but speak of God's love for us.'

So in a sense you could say it's a love letter from God.

[You may reword or personalise this story or remove it if it is not applicable to your context.]

I was having a discussion with someone about this, and they said, 'Well, you know, do people send love letters any more?' I don't know the answer to that. Do people send love letters any more? They were saying, 'Well, maybe people send love emails or love texts or love faxes' — it doesn't sound very romantic to me!

I remember when ... Pips and I have not been apart for much of our married life, thankfully, but I remember there was a time when we were apart for three and a half weeks, and I was staying in this place, and each morning I'd come down and I'd look on the table at the post, to see whether there was a letter. And if I saw her handwriting, there was something, an emotion of love, because it was a letter from the person I loved. And this is a letter from the person we love, as Christians.

Would you like to turn to John 5:39?

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'You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me [Jesus says], yet you refuse to come to me to have life.'

For some people, the Bible is never more than a well-thumbed manual for life. You know, they believe God has spoken through this, and you find some people who – you know, they really study it, they learn bits off by heart, they underline it in felt-pens, they maybe even learn Hebrew/Greek to study it in the original — but somehow they seem to miss the point: that this is all about Jesus. It's all about having a relationship with Jesus Christ.

[You may adapt or reword this analogy.]

Again, if I can use an analogy: I have a battered old Nissan car. And supposing I got a new one delivered to our front door, and I went out, looked at the Nissan car, looked around and in the glove compartment I found the Nissan manual — beautiful, glossy manual, and I thought 'Wow, that is fantastic!' Took it indoors and I started studying it. And I got out my felt-pen, started underlining bits that looked really interesting, started learning particular bits that I liked off by heart, maybe cutting out bits of it and sticking it on my mirror so I could look at it while I was shaving!

I thought, 'Well, maybe we could set some of this to song' — I asked Al Gordon to compose a song so we could sing bits of the Nissan manual! I thought, 'Well, you know, I wonder whether other people like the Nissan manual. Perhaps I'll join the Nissan Club. Or maybe I should learn Japanese so I can study it in its original language!' But I would have missed the point — the point of the manual is to help you drive the car. And unless we drive the car, unless we have that relationship with Jesus, we've missed the point.

So God still speaks to us today, he wants to be in a love relationship with us. So it's no good studying the Bible without coming to Jesus. It's a two-way relationship: we speak to God and he speaks to us. The writer of Hebrews says, when he's quoting the Old Testament: 'the Holy Spirit says' — not 'the Holy Spirit said' but 'the Holy Spirit says'.

It's not just that the Holy Spirit spoke in the past; he speaks afresh through what he has

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spoken.

As Martin Luther said: 'The Bible is alive. It speaks to me. It has feet, it runs after me. It has hands, it lays hold of me.'

So what happens when God speaks? First of all, he brings faith to those who are not yet Christians. Sometimes people say, 'I don't have any faith.' Paul says in Romans 10:17: 'faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the word of God'.

And it's often as people read the Bible that they come to faith in Jesus Christ. That was certainly my experience and it's the experience of a number of other people. In fact, John says at the end of his Gospel: 'These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and, by believing, you may have life.'

[You may use or replace this story.]

There's a man called Earl Smith. Earl Smith is the cousin of Fred Smith, who started Federal Express and made an absolute fortune, and even his cousin, Earl Smith, was a wealthy man — in fact, far too wealthy: he was so wealthy that he didn't need to work and he took to drugs. In fact, he took to such hard drugs that he ended up at the age of thirty in hospital. And while he was in hospital, someone came to visit him and gave him a New Testament. And he was thrilled: because the paper in this New Testament was perfect for rolling joints! So he rolled his way through Matthew, Mark, Luke, and when he got to John's Gospel, he started reading.

And as a result of reading John's Gospel he came to faith in Christ, he became a Christian. He was being looked after by a psychologist called Tomi, who was a very beautiful woman, a model; she was also highly intelligent, had endless degrees. And she looked at Earl and she said, 'Look, I don't understand it. Your life is a complete mess, and you have this peace about you.' She said, 'I have everything! I've got good looks, I've got intelligence, I've got a fantastic job, my life is totally sorted, and yet,' she said, 'inside I feel totally empty.' So Earl led her to Jesus Christ. And then he married her! And we were at theological college together — that's how I knew them.

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So he speaks to those who are not Christians. But he also speaks to Christians. As we study the Bible, we come into contact with Jesus Christ. It's always struck me as the most extraordinary, wonderful fact that we can speak to and hear from the person we read about in the pages of this book — the same Jesus Christ. As we read, he speaks to us.

In my case, I've never heard his voice audibly, but he speaks in our hearts, we hear his message.

And communication is vital for every relationship. The strength of a relationship depends on communication. And this book is food to the soul. And I've found a sort of pattern of reading it: expecting God to speak each day is so exciting.

[You may personalise or replace this story.]

I use this Bible in One Year, and today is 1 June — I was ... I'm somebody who normally sleeps pretty well, but for some reason last night sleep was pretty elusive. I had lots of things going on in my mind, and they were churning round, and I was in kind of a bit of a turmoil. And I prayed, as I always do, that God would speak to me through the passage. And as I read these words — it was Jesus speaking to his disciples after his resurrection — he said, "Peace be with you." The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord, and again Jesus said, "Peace be with you." And at that moment I just sensed the peace of God coming, and I've tried to hold onto that verse through the day: 'Peace be with you.'

Rick Warren has written that 'reading the Bible generates life, it produces change, it heals hurts, it builds character, it transforms circumstances, it imparts joy, it overcomes adversity, it defeats temptation, it infuses hope, it releases power, it cleanses the mind.' It's spiritual food.



Talk Point 3

HOW DO WE HEAR GOD SPEAK THROUGH THE BIBLE?

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So how in practice do we hear God speak to us through the Bible? Well, first of all we need to set aside time. Time is our most valuable possession. Someone said, 'Money is power, but time is life.' So I would suggest finding some kind of regular pattern. You know, if you can read the Bible for fifteen minutes a day, you will get through the whole Bible in one year.

And then a place. Jesus, we read, went off to a solitary place, and there he prayed. He went very early in the morning, and I still find that's the best time to do it. I know that's not possible for everyone — people with young children and so on — but if you can find a solitary place.

[You may personalise or replace this story.]

I have a little corner of one room, where I always go. And I take a cup of coffee to wake me up, my Bible, a diary to write down any distracting thoughts, and a notebook — because I write down my prayers.

And then just ask God to speak. Samuel said, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.' And then just ask the questions. Read the passage: What does it say? What does it mean? And of course most important of all: How does this apply to my life? How is God speaking to me today? And then respond in prayer.

The key, of course, is putting it into practice, and that's the hardest part. And that's what we're going to spend the rest of this course looking at.

D. L. Moody said, 'The Bible was not given to increase our knowledge; it was given to change our lives.'

And I would commend to you reading the Bible each day, praying that God would speak to you, as a regular pattern over the years, is the most amazing thing. Very often it's mundane, but sometimes it's very significant.

[Replace this with a personal story of a time when God spoke to you clearly through the Bible – which was then confirmed by others. A personal story will touch the guests at the end of the talk as you conclude that God was trying to speak to you and then turn to ask the guests whether perhaps God might be trying to speak to them today.]

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I mentioned at the beginning that my father was 49 when he got married. And he died in January, 1981, when I was 26 years of age. I had become a Christian seven years earlier. And my parents' initial reaction to me becoming a Christian was one of complete horror! But gradually over the years they came round to it as they began to see the change in me. And my mother had become a very strong Christian before she died.

But my father was a man of few words, and it was very hard to read, really, what was going on in his heart. And I think what I found hardest — of course, when he died I missed him dreadfully (although it was not in one way unexpected, it's always a shock, I think, when these things happen) — but the thing that I found hardest was that I really wasn't sure whether or not he was a Christian, whether he had put his faith in Christ before he had died. And it really troubled me after he died.

And I wrote it down at the time, because it was so significant to me, but it was ten days later — it was 31 January — that I prayed to God to speak to me through the Bible about that specifically. And I read a verse which I was reading for that day: it was in Romans 10, verse 13, which says: 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' And I sensed God speaking to me at that moment and saying: 'Your father did call on me, and he was saved.'

At that moment, my wife Pippa came into the room and she said, 'I've been reading the Bible and,' she said, 'I think I have a verse for your father.' And she'd been reading the book of Acts, and she said, 'The verse is this: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." I think that's your verse. I think he called on the name of the Lord and he's saved.' Now, that verse only appears twice in the New Testament. She'd read it in one place, and I'd read it in another.

Three days later we went to a Bible study, and we were studying Romans 10. And in particular we were concentrating on verse 13: 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'

The following morning, such is my lack of faith and inability to hear God speak to me, that I was still troubled about it, I was still worrying about it. And I was a barrister at the time, I

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was on my way to Woolwich Magistrates Court, and I got off the train at Woolwich Station, and I looked up, and there was this huge billboard which said: Romans 10, Verse 13: 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved!'

I remember telling Sandy Millar this story, and he said to me: 'Do you think the Lord may be trying to speak to you?!'

May I ask you a question: Do you think the Lord may be trying to speak to you? And if so, will you let him? May we pray.

Father, we thank you so much that not only have you spoken through the Bible, but you still speak to us today through this book. And Lord, I pray for every one of us here that you would help us to find a pattern of hearing your voice in each of our lives. For Jesus Christ's sake, amen.



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