

Episode 188 Is Reading the Bible Enough? With Brent Sandy

This transcript has been edited for clarity and space.

Brent Sandy

My name is Brent Sandy. I was born in Pennsylvania. I now live in Indiana. I've also lived in Virginia, New York and North Carolina. I've been blessed to be a professor at various institutions, most recently at Wheaton College.

David Capes

Dr. Brent Sandy, Brent. Good to see you. Welcome to *The Stone Chapel Podcast*.

Brent Sandy

Thank you. It was great to be in Houston at the Lanier Theological Library a few years back.

David Capes

We need to get you back. We're going to be talking a little bit later in this podcast about your book *Hear Ye the Word of the Lord*. It has a really interesting subtitle that I'll give in a few minutes. But for those who don't know Brent Sandy, who is he?

Brent Sandy

For about 50-60 years my passion has been trying to understand Scripture as well as I can. And when I say that, I mean, especially in light of the cultural background. I want to understand Scripture, as it was understood then. I hear and read statistics that what Christians want most out of their churches is how to understand the Bible better. And if that's true, that's me. Because that's what I hope to be able to do. I've given my life to that. And I love to help out in churches to teach classes, to preach or whatever. I've been a pastor for seven years, a senior pastor. I'm very active in church and very committed to church, but trying to bring scholarship, and what's going on in the academic world to the level of people who can appreciate it and learn by it, and understand the Bible better.

David Capes

Now, you did your PhD at Duke University, as I recall.

Brent Sandy

That's correct. When I finished the Master of Divinity degree at seminary, I was looking for the best place in the world to understand what we used to call the intertestamental period. Or the Hellenistic period, the period between the Testaments, and I found at Duke University, in their Classical Studies Department, the best coverage of that period.

David Capes

You've written a book with John Walton?

Brent Sandy

Yes, we've written one book together.

David Capes

John has been all over that same question about culture. Trying to understand the Bible against its own culture first. Before we make a quick run to the modern period and say, what does the Bible mean to me? Because if you don't understand that first level of what the Bible meant to the people who first wrote it, and first heard it, I'm afraid that sometimes we can misread the Bible.

Brent Sandy

Indeed. And in all culture, when they're hearing Scripture, they're not zeroing in on individual verses so much. They're hearing the bigger picture. Because if somebody is presenting it to them, reading it to them, or even performing it for them, they're getting the scope of it. They're feeling it. Whereas we tend to stop and ponder on individual verses and words.

David Capes

Well, we're talking about Dr. Brent Sandy's book, *Here Ye the Word of the Lord*. Here's the subtitle, *What We Miss if We Only Read the Bible*. That's published by InterVarsity Press. It's a great book. It's an important book. Because I think probably what we have heard most of our lives in the West is go read your Bible. Have a time every day where you read your Bible. And that's good. And that's important. But you're telling us that we miss something, if we only read the Bible. Let's talk a little bit about the big picture of your book. What were you trying to do? What are you trying to say in this book?

Brent Sandy

The book talks about reading the Bible. For a lot of us, we're encouraged to read the Bible in a year, or maybe six months, or even three months. We get into a posture of reading it as fast as we can. I'd like to say we've got to read it as slowly as we can. And one way to read it and understand it better, is just hearing it. It's good to use one of the resources online that will read the Bible to you. That's a helpful way to do it. But that's at the individual personal level.

How was it done in the ancient world? Look at Colossians 4:16. Paul writes, now the letter that you've heard in your congregation, make sure you send that over to Laodicea so they get to hear it. And then the letter I sent to Laodicea, make sure you bring that back over to Colossi. So we get to hear it here too. They heard Scripture read to them. They heard it in group settings. They heard the Scripture come at them in large segments.

David Capes

Rather than just one verse at a time.

Brent Sandy

Yes indeed. It would likely be larger sections of Paul's letters presented all in one setting. And it could even be as much as the whole book of Revelation, memorized and presented in one setting.

David Capes

Now you told me earlier that you had heard that done at a Society of Biblical Literature conference a number of years ago. Tell us about that experience.

Brent Sandy

I didn't know what to expect going into that session where one person who had memorized it, stood up and presented the whole thing in a very powerful, dynamic way. Just one person standing up there. And he was quoting it from memory. But he was more than just quoting it. He was making it come alive with his words. He was a very expressive person. But at the end of that, (I think it was an hour and five minutes for the whole book), I just felt the power of the book like never before.

I understood the book better. By hearing it all at once like that, I was plastered back against my seat by the power of the book. So that has influenced me over the years hearing Scripture presented in a powerful way like that. And thinking that we don't do enough of that. We don't have people that present Scripture that way in our churches. Unfortunately, you know, our churches often will read Scripture, but they do it just flat, in a monotone voice. There's no preparation given for it. It's just okay, I'm supposed to read Scripture.

David Capes

You've hit on one of my big concerns, when we read Scripture publicly, at least in the Baptist tradition. We read it very badly, very poorly. No one is thinking about how important it is to hear the word and not just read it in a book. And it's done with misread words or mispronounced words. There's no rhythm, and the breathing is all wrong. And I know you've heard that as well, in your traditions and the churches that you've been in? Here it is, the Scripture that we're treating as if it were no different than the newspaper? Or some other book. I think you're right on it, my friend.

Brent Sandy

One of the endorsements for the book you can find online is from my pastor. He wrote the endorsement and said, we give so much time and effort to preparing what we're going to say about Scripture. But we don't give much attention to how we read and present the actual Scripture. You know, we come up with all kinds of ways to explain the interpretation of Scripture. We tell stories, or give illustrations, anecdotes and all kinds of things. But it's the power of God's Word that can have the biggest impact on us. Not what we as preachers or teachers can say about it.

David Capes

I had breakfast this morning with George Kalantzis here in Houston. He was here for a conference. He's one of your colleagues there at Wheaton College, a church historian particularly the early period, the patristic period. He was talking about a time when he was at Garrett Seminary years ago. And there was a fellow, an actor who had memorized the entire book of Galatians. And it took him about 20-25 minutes to recite it and recite it powerfully, and to do so beautifully. And he said, that was one of the most powerful experiences he ever had with Scripture. If we're just out there reading the Bible as quickly as we can to make sure that we tick off that box, to say we read our Bible today, the chances are good, we're going to miss something significant.

Brent Sandy

Yes, and one of the things we're so guilty of is taking verses out of context. We find a verse we like. We land on it. We build theology out of our particular verse, and then that leads us to miss the larger sense of the meaning of those verses. Sometimes a verse is limited if we just focus on the words in the verse. So let me illustrate. This is out of our local newspaper. I can usually read the newspaper and understand what I'm reading. But they have a daily column about the game of bridge. I'll read a little bit.

"After a one no trump opening some pairs use a jump response of three of a major to show game values with a singleton or void in that suit. Three cards in the other major and five dash four or five dash five in the minors."

Now I know what those words mean. On their own separately. Every word in there, I know what that word is. But in those sentences, I have no idea what all that means. I'm lost!

David Capes

Are you a bridge player, by the way?

Brent Sandy

No, I've never played the game. As I read that, I had no understanding. I think Scripture can be like that. If we read Scripture, isolated from the context and the culture, we miss out on what Scripture is saying. Even as I miss out on that bridge comment. I know nothing about bridge. The bridge strategy they were talking about is not helpful to me in any way. For Scripture to be the most helpful it can be, we need to take it in the context of the larger setting. We need to make sure we understand what the major thrust of the author is, in that passage.

David Capes

One of the things you're so good at pointing out, is the fact that culture at that time was being addressed. It was primarily an oral culture. And you and I don't have much of a context for understanding that. Now, if we go and we teach in Africa, or if we go and teach in many parts of the world, there's more of an oral context where people prefer to learn through hearing. But you and I live in a world in which there's reading all around. Tell us a little bit more about that oral culture, the ancient oral culture that you encounter when you read the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the intertestamental period.

Brent Sandy

As I call it, the oral macrocosm of the biblical world, in contrast to what people call the Gutenberg galaxy, once Gutenberg invented the printing press. The oral macrocosm was a world in which people expected to learn things by hearing. The news came to them passed along by people telling things they learned by hearing. They function by hearing, that is, by oral communication. What they heard; they pass on. This was a pretty reliable procedure. That is, people knew that there were other people out there who were charlatans, who would give them false information. But it wasn't difficult for people to determine who was a reliable source of information that was passed on to them. So, they prefer hearing, since they must operate in a world of oral communication. They assume that what they're

getting orally, is the kind of revelation that can come from God. When they hear it, they think this is God's words. They're hearing this larger segment of Scripture. They don't need something written. Written is immaterial to them. Written can be just as falsely contrived, as something oral can be falsely contrived. For them, the oral culture was dominant. And it's estimated that only 1 of 10 people would have been able to read one of Paul's letters, or a gospel. Most of the people, (if they can read, or if they could write) might be able to write their name or sign a document. They wouldn't be able to write the whole document. Maybe they'd be able to read the description on the cross. Plus, you have these ancient documents with no spaces between words. Everything ran together. It took a lot of practice. You can take Galatians, one of Paul's letters, and prepare to present it. The presenter would have to work hard over that document, so that he could follow the flow and know where to divide those letters into words in that document.

David Capes

We had the macrocosm of oral culture and the galaxy of Gutenberg. What are we in now that we are in this solar system of the cyber world? I mean, we're in a different place than we've ever been.

Brent Sandy

We are. God's Word, the New Testament is over 2000 years old. The Old Testament more than that. So, do we just read it like we would in a modern book? Or do we have to think our way back into their culture to get the full intent of God's word? As John Walton is famous for saying, it was written for us, but not to us. So yes, the fact that it was not written to us means we need to be thinking through what it meant to them.

David Capes

We often want to just pick up the Bible to learn how this is going to speak to me in my life today. And that's a noble concern. But I think it turns the Bible around in such a way that it makes it difficult. Now, before we go today, I don't want to give the book away. But what are some things that you could say to us today on the podcast to get our interests going? How do we resolve this tension? I know I'm supposed to read my Bible. I do read my Bible. I hear my Bible somewhat when I go to church. Is there more that we can do?

Brent Sandy

Yes, we can. I'm thrilled to take a passage of Scripture, let's take Romans chapter 8. And I'm working on the topic of suffering. And I realized that Romans 8 has a lot to say about suffering. But there's other things that Romans 8 has to say. I'll take Romans 8, and I'll pull out the portions especially addressing Roman suffering. Then I go to The Voice Translation. I go the New Living Translation. I go to a variety of translations. And I look for the wording that will be most likely to help on that topic of suffering be expressed dynamically when it's read to a group of people. I begin with The Voice Translation. That's my favorite translation right now, because it was actually translated for hearing. It's designed specifically with the sense of the power of the dynamic presentation of Scripture. So that's my go to translation.

David Capes

Glad to hear that because I worked on that translation!

Brent Sandy

I know you did! Thank you for all you did on that. I'm preparing a presentation of a portion of Scripture, emphasizing a particular theme, using a variety of translations. And then I get several people at church to help me and we prepare. We meditate on the passage; we work through it. We try to embrace the emotions of the passage. We think about people who have suffered and what it means to suffer. And so then, I'll have them also read Paul's description in 2 Corinthians 11, about how he suffered. And then what he says about suffering and how suffering can be resolved. So then, we present that passage of Scripture in a church setting, with three or four of us reading different lines. And almost to the point of crying as we present it, because we're just so wrapped up in the power of the passage. I'm thrilled now to be putting in practice some of the things I call for in the book.

David Capes

You know I started in Jesus music years ago. We would practice sometimes for hours in order to get a song right, that is, so we could perform it well. We could play the chords well, we could sing the melody, do the harmonies well. And it sounds like what you're calling for is the same thing. You're calling for people to gather ahead of time and to say, we're going to be presenting the Scriptures, the very word of God to a congregation. And we are not going to do that by just standing up and reading. We're going to prepare, and we're going to prepare until we can do it well. What I'm hearing you say is, that really matters at the end of the day.

Brent Sandy

Thank you. That's a good analogy.

David Capes

Well, you can use that next time! The next time you write a book about this topic, you can use that analogy. Brent Sandy, you written a terrific book, *Here Ye the Word of the Lord: What We Miss If We Only Read the Bible*, published by InterVarsity Press. It's a great book. We look forward to having you back and having you down here on our campus at the Lanier Theological Library. Brent, thanks for being with us.

Brent Sandy

Thank you.