

Don't Smoke the Book of John

Why are our Bibles so portable? The Bible is a library of sixty-six books. In scrolls, it would be difficult to impossible to carry around. The book form or codex was introduced to the world in the first century. By the second century, we have evidence that the codex became the preferred format for early Christians.

The book format allows a lot of material to be carried in a handy size. The last page of Revelation in my Bible is on page 1252, yet it is only about an inch and half thick. A best-selling novel of 650 pages can be nearly two inches thick. Why are our Bibles as thin as they are? Most Bibles are printed on thin paper.

That leads us to the odd news story of the week. The German Bible Society distributes about 400,000 Bibles per year. According to Felix Breidenstein, the society's business manager, the Chinese craving for cigarettes is driving up the price of Bible production. The rising demand for cigarette paper in China means stiffer competition for the thin paper used in Bible printing. So if you need another reason to quit smoking other than it can kill you, it also drives up the price of Bibles.

Bible paper and smoking have another link. Prisoners have on occasions used pages of the Bible to roll their own cigarettes. The World Bible Translation Center tells one such story. Thirty years ago a prisoner was using his Bible to roll cigarettes. Another inmate squealed on him. But surprisingly, the chaplain gave the man another copy of the Bible. But he left with this admonition: "Don't smoke the book of John."

The prisoner continued to roll cigarettes, but respected the charge. He didn't smoke the gospel of John, but began to read. He learned of God's great love in sending His Son. He learned of the choice between eternal life and perishing, and he chose life. The prisoner was converted and now serves as chaplain at three different jails in Texas. He recently baptized 15 and has distributed 300 Easy-to-Read New Testaments in the past year.

How odd that Bibles and cigarettes are in competition for the same paper! Currently, China does not allow missionaries into the country. China attempts to restrict religion to government-authorized religious organizations and registered places of worship. Persecution exists. My prayer for the Chinese is that they also discover the best use of thin paper – the Bible.

–Russ Holden