

READING THE SCRIPTURES

THERE is an unexplored depth of reality in the saying, "Whatsoever things were written aforetime, were written for our learning." All consent to the saying as a true one, but only a few go far enough in the process of "learning" from what has been written. Even these will never get to the end of the process while in the flesh. They will always be discovering some new force in exhortations they have been familiar with from infancy. Our progress in this respect, however, will depend entirely on our compliance with the Divine exhortation to seek wisdom as for hid treasure. In many respects, the wisdom of God that is communicated in His word is hidden. It is accessible only to those who dig, and this digging to be serviceable must be a continuous process. It must not be done in fits and starts. It must be constant, patient, and reverential, a daily feeding on the manna from heaven. The systematic and painful efforts of mere scholarship—the spasmodic attempts of what is generally understood by the term "study"—may be to the real work of upbuilding in the word what the chemist's analysis of flour is to the process of nutrition—clever but useless. Such a mode of treating the word of God will leave a man unacquainted with nearly all the riches it contains. A daily, habitual, thankful, reverential, prayerful, and orderly converse with the holy oracles will uncover to the mind irresistible, almost inexpressible, evidences of their truth, and a fund of significance that will remain utterly unknown to the careless, irregular, spasmodic, or merely scholarly reader.

But to accomplish and continue in this mode of intercourse, requires a species of motive to which the mere scholar is a stranger. A man must fear God and realise his own insignificance and dependence. He must feel hungry before he will desire to feed on the word in this unremitting manner. He must be non-content with himself and things as they are. His affections must be operative on heavenly, and not on earthly, things. He must, in fact, have made considerable attainments in the kind of spiritual education which is implied in saintship. The Gospel, as seed to the soil, must have germinated and sprung before it can bring forth this excellent fruit of the Spirit—this continual delight in the statutes, commandments and word of the living God—the yearning thirst for communion expressed by David, when he said, "My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth, for the courts of the Lord: my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God." What does this mean but that a man must not only know that there is a God, but must love Him and be filled with admiration of His infallible and eternal excellencies; that he must not only know that he himself is a mortal, but must have such a living sense of the fact, as to be in a constant temper of modesty and extreme reverence towards God, trembling at His word; that he must not only be aware that there has been a Christ in the world, but realise that there is a Christ now, and that we, having yielded ourselves to his purchase, are no longer our own, but his who lived and died for us? Only this rich indwelling of the word of Christ will enable a man to perseveringly discern the excellence of the word of God, and the absolute insignificance of all present things, though they be very importunate of our attention and striking in their impressions upon the senses. Only such will be found, day and night, giving the word of God that place in the economy of life which it ought to have.

The reading of the Bible and the appreciation of it will re-act productively one upon the other. Read the word and you will appreciate it; appreciate it and you will desire it, and seek the comfort that is to be found in reading it. And thus, as in every vital process, there will be a dual action which will preserve life.

But there is a view of the matter outside of the word and outside of man, because there is a God outside the word and outside of man. The word is the only form in which the name and honour of God have a visible place among men at the present time. His temple is in the dust, His nation scattered, His kingdom destroyed. His word remains, and He hath magnified it above all His name. It is in the hands of the nations. It is the principal and most numerous multiplied book in the world. It is everywhere His representative. The Bible in the house is God in the house. The Bible in a man's life is God in a man's life. Where people place the Bible, they place God. The place it demands is the heart—the throne. With nothing less will God be satisfied. Do you neglect it? you neglect God. Do you allow the affairs of house, or business, or friends to ride over it, to displace it from the first position, to put it in the corner, to keep it hidden, neglected, disregarded? Then is God cast behind your back, and great is your danger. A voice of thunder would not be too loud to rouse you from your folly. You say you have no time to read. The plea is absolutely inadmissible. You take time to eat and drink, and this is the most important kind of eating and drinking. You will have to take time to be ill some of these days. Death will rap at the door, and he won't ask you if you have time to attend to him.

Christ will stand in the earth one of these days, and what about your family, your house, your business then? You will want to turn to wisdom in a hurry, but wisdom will fly far from you. You will want to seek God with your whole heart, but He will not be found of you. So has God arranged things, that He will cause everyone to find the fruit of his ways. "Wisdom crieth without; she uttereth her voice in the streets. ". . . How long, ye simple ones, will ye love simplicity, and scorners delight in their scorning, and fools hate knowledge? Turn you at my reproof. Behold I will pour out my spirit upon you. I will make known my words unto you . . . Blessed are they that keep my ways. Hear instruction and be wise, and refuse it not. Blessed is the man that heareth me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors. For whoso findeth me findeth life, and shall obtain favour of the Lord. But he that sinneth against me, wrongeth his own soul. All they that hate me, love death."

But if ye heed not her gentle entreaties—if ye persist in putting her off, that ye may attend to the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye and the pride of life, hoping dimly and indefinitely that someday all will be well—hear ye your own doom declared beforehand by the same gentle voice: "Because I have called and ye refused; I have stretched out my hand and no man regarded. But ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof. I also will laugh at your calamity. I will mock when your fear cometh. When your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind; when distress and anguish cometh upon you. Then shall they call upon me and I will not answer. They shall seek me early but shall not find me. For that they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the Lord. They would none of my counsel; they despised all my reproof. Therefore, shall they eat of the fruit of their own way, and be filled with their own devices."

God has declared, "I am a great King" (Mal. 1: 14). He demands on this ground to be honoured, and to have the first place in the heart, and the best of all we have to offer. All the ceremonial appointments of the law were intended to teach this lesson. No one was allowed to approach the sanctuary except those appointed, and those only in the appointed way, on pain of death. No offering was accepted with a blemish, or hurt, or imperfection. All uncleanness required purgation by sacrifice. Holiness and majesty were continually impressed on Israel as appertaining to him in the highest degree. The lesson in its individual

application is unmistakable. Jesus brings it home in the words, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and all thy strength, and all thy mind." His own demand is "My son, give Me thine heart." He demands the highest place in all our affairs, which is His reasonable place. Let us render the service He requires. His word is in our houses. Don't let us insult Him by giving our feeblest moments to the reading of it. Don't let us wait till all our energies are worn out, and our faculties impaired in attending upon the affairs of the natural man. Don't let us sit down to the Bible when nature is exhausted, and sleep hovers on the eyelids. Let us give the best time of the day. It is a matter of contrivance. There are difficulties, but difficulties can be overcome. Where there is a will, there is a way. Besides, who knows but our difficulties are God's tests. He may want to prove us—to see and let us see whether we will honour Him or not. It is no new thing for God to leave a man that He may see all that is in his heart. Therefore, our increasing business—our growing affairs—may be a part of the machinery by which our probation is accomplished. If we resist the clamours of the flesh—if, notwithstanding the pressure of worldly affairs, we turn aside daily in reading, prayer, and meditation, we overcome; but if, on the contrary, we are carried before the stream, and leave God behind, we are overcome, and will awake sooner or later to a sense of our great folly.

If we do our duty in this matter, we shall be assisted. This is matter of promise. If we are attentive to God, He will be attentive to us. "Draw nigh to God, and He will draw nigh to you." The converse is true. Neglect God and He will allow you to fall. There have been many illustrations of this in history. One of them is mentioned in the chapter read this morning (Rom. 1: 28). "Even as they, did not like to retain God in their knowledge, *God gave them over to a reprobate mind.*" All nations were related, in the first instance, to the fountain of Divine knowledge through Noah, but they slighted God, honouring themselves, each other, and their own affairs, like the multitudes of our own day, and God departed from them, and gave them over to the reprobateness of mind which is manifest in all the sculptures of antiquity and the state of man universally. The Jews were favoured as no nation ever was. Jehovah [Yahweh] says, "As a girdle cleaveth to the loins of a man, so have I caused to cleave unto Me the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah, saith the Lord, that they might be unto Me for a people, and for a name, and for a praise, and for a glory, *but they would not hear.*"

What was the consequence? "Behold, I will fill all the inhabitants of this land, even the kings that sit upon David's throne, and the priests and the prophets, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, *with drunkenness* (that is mental confusion; the result of the wine of His wrath). And I will dash one against another, even the father and the sons together, saith the Lord; I will not pity nor spare, nor have mercy, but destroy them" (Jer. 13: 14). "Make the heart of this people fat and make their ears heavy and shut their eyes" (Isa. 6: 10). This was Israel's punishment for neglecting God. When Christ came, he cloaked his wisdom in parables, that they might remain in their ignorance, and become subject to the judgment of God. Yet even then, his teaching was plain enough to be understood by those who gave close attention, and gave that respect to God which is His due. And he made them understand that the principle exemplified in the national blindness would operate in individual cases.

He said (Mark iv. 24): "To you that hear shall more be given, and he that hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he hath." So that any one earnestly attending to what Christ taught, would be helped to understand; while those who stood contemptuously and self-sufficiently apart, doing dishonour to God, would be deprived of what wisdom they had,

in being left to their evil ways. The lesson is, that those who neglect or hold loosely what they have, are in danger of being deserted by God, and led into ways that shall be for hurt. The principle was again exemplified in the first generation of Gospel believers. These were greatly privileged in having the teaching of the Spirit visibly in their midst; but like the Israelites who came out of Egypt under Moses, they grew accustomed to marvels, and conceived the idea that these things were in some way their right; that the apostles were only fellow-partakers of a common benefit and had no more superiority among men than themselves. Hence arose false apostles. Many false brethren crept in, to whom the others listened. Many followed their pernicious ways. They dabbled in doctrines and disputed greatly about them, but it was the perverse disputing of men of corrupt minds. They received not the love of the truth. What was the consequence? Jesus hinted at this in his message to the seven churches, that he would remove the candlestick out of its place.

Paul's forcible declaration is: "*For this cause* God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie." As He had done with Israel, so He would do with the highly privileged communities founded by the apostles; because they departed from the reverential heedfulness that God demands, and began to honour and please themselves, He would fill them with drunkenness, that is, with the mental confusion resulting from imbibing the false principles that He caused to be diffused through the instrumentality of evil men and seducers. And so it has come to pass, and the Christendom of to-day is the standing monument of the faithlessness of the first century, and the living illustration of the fact, that if men disregard Him, He will leave them to ways of folly and death; even to ways that they may imagine right; for, as Solomon says, "There is a way that seemeth right unto a man; but the end thereof are the ways of death."

Now we stand related to the same principle, for God is the same for evermore. Do not let us imagine that when the nations of antiquity, and the Jewish race, and the first generation of believers were given over to reprobation because they dishonoured God by a lukewarm and half-hearted attendance upon His word, that we shall fare any better if we offer Him a like insult. God is great and we are small. God is eternal, and we are of yesterday; God upholdeth all things, and we uphold nothing, but are ourselves upholden by Him every moment. Most reasonable therefore it is that we choose His honour and His fear as the mainspring of our life. And most profitable shall we find it for ourselves. If we commit our way to Him, magnifying His word as He has magnified it, giving it first place in the economy of our lives, He will guide our steps to a greater enlargement of spiritual attainments, strengthening us with all might in the inner man, and filling us with the knowledge of His will. But if we hold the treasure of His wisdom with a loose hand, He will forsake us and leave us exposed to influences and circumstances that will be to our destruction. We are not without illustration of this in our day. We have seen many who, though they knew the truth, were not walking in the love of it, but in the love of themselves and the things connected with the present life—we have seen them swept from their moorings by a wind of doctrine which has been permitted to blow upon them to their destruction. "Who is wise and he shall understand these things? prudent, and he shall know them? For the ways of the Lord are right, and the just shall walk in them, but the transgressors shall fall therein."

(Taken from "Seasons of Comfort" Volume 1 pages 83-88 by Bro. R. Roberts)