



# ***HOW TO READ*** **THE BIBLE**

Trinity Sermon, No. 27

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"HOW TO READ THE BIBLE"

A 5DN Broadcast Address

by the Reverend

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One of the most unforgettable journeys of my life took me from the shores of the Dead Sea to Qumran, a 30 minutes' journey by an Arab-driven taxi through rough, interesting country, passing over-turned, rusting tanks used in the Israeli-Jordanese war of 1948. The red glow of the fading sun was setting on the heavy, salt-saturated, lifeless sea. Dust from the bare hills and sand-covered moulds blew in my face, but I could not resist making my way across the narrow ridges of a rocky cliff to a tiny cave.

I crawled inside and marvelled that there in 1947 a Bedouin shepherd discovered, by sheer coincidence, several manuscript scrolls of the greatest importance. For years now, Bedouins and archaeologists have been searching every hole and crevice in that wild and desolate area. The finds included one of the most outstanding discoveries in modern times; Biblical manuscripts 2,000 years old. All this is of prime importance, not only for the authenticity of the Biblical text, but also for the historicity of Christianity. Here we unveiled part of the background on which the teaching of Jesus and the

constitution of the early Church was formed.

It is now revealed that members of the Essene community were living in caves and huts along the cliff. At the foot of the rugged cliff, on a whitish-brown terrace, looking towards the Dead Sea and the mountains of Moab, I saw the ruins of a most ancient monastery. In these haunting, hostile surroundings, several hundred "Brothers" spent their lives under strict rules of poverty, studying the Holy Writ and praying for the coming of the Messiah.

At the Palestine Archaeological Museum in Jerusalem, I later looked with amazement at the actual manuscripts of the Old Testament still in existence. Altogether, remains of more than 600 different manuscripts have been found in eleven caves in the Qumran region. They date from the 3rd Century B.C., to A.D. 68. According to the Curator of the Museum, they contain larger and smaller fragments of every book of the Old Testament except Esther, a curious and perhaps accidental omission. Most are written in Hebrew, but there are

also works in Aramaic and a few in Greek.

The thought of the desolate ruins at the Dead Sea wilderness and precious ancient Scriptures before my eyes, reminded me of the words therein recorded by the prophet Isaiah, "Surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth, but the word of our God shall stand forever". (Isaiah 40:7,8)

Over a period of 1,600 years the 66 books of the Bible were written by some 40 men of different languages, living in different times, and in different countries. But the message they wrote fits into a unity. God spoke to each man in his own language and in his own time, but the message basically in each case was the same. When the great scholars gathered together the many ancient manuscripts of the Old and New Testaments, written in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, and translated them into a single, modern tongue, they found that God's promises remained unchanged. His great message to man had not varied. So it is today, that as we read these words, we find them full of meaning for this 20th Century. No wonder that the Bible has always

been one of the world's best sellers.

We may see something of the power of the Bible in the various symbols used to describe the effects of the Word of God in human life. James says that the Word is a mirror to reveal; Paul in Ephesians says it is water to cleanse; Peter says it is milk to nourish; the writer to the Hebrews says it is strong meat to invigorate; the psalmist says it is honey to delight; Jeremiah says it is fire to warm and the hammer to break and fasten. In Ephesians we are told it is the sword to fight; in Matthew the seed to grow, and again in the Psalms, the lamp to guide, the statute book to legislate, and the gold to treasure in time and for eternity.

The Bible occupies a unique position as the written record of the revelation of God made to us in Christ. From the Bible we derive our knowledge of God and His Will, and through the Bible we obtain all the needed light and guidance to live the Christian life. But we need to approach it in the right way.

We need to accept it CONFIDENTLY. Gladstone called the Bible "the impregnable rock of Holy Scripture". The authority of scripture is not a matter to be defended so much as to be asserted. Charles Spurgeon once said, "There's no need for you to defend a lion when he's being attacked. All you need to do is open the gate and let him out".

We believe in the authority of the Scriptures because the Scriptures themselves claim that authority. They come to us as the Word of God. The phrases, "the Lord said", "the Lord spake", "the Word of the Lord came", are actually used 3,808 times in the Old Testament. These men make it clear that it is not their own idea, nor does it come from their own insight or meditation. It was taken for granted that these books were the oracles of the Living God.

Christ Himself fully accepted that position. He often said, "It is written". He met the attack of Satan at the time of His temptation by the words, "It is written". He showed its value for Himself.

Quotations from the Old Testament are found in the Books of the New Testament. A specific and explicit statement in the New Testament with regard to the character of the Old Testament is found in II Timothy 3:16 "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness". Peter explained, "No prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men spoke from God as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (II Pet. 1:21). Many before you have accepted the Bible confidently and found it trustworthy; so too may you."

We need to use it INTELLIGENTLY. Once a person has before him the text of Scripture, (and it is so easily available to each one of us), the next requisite is intelligently to interpret it. While it is true that some have found help by opening the Bible at random and reading what comes before their eyes, it is certainly not an intelligent way of finding guidance. It would be so easy to take a text completely out of its context and apply it in a wrong way. No one would think of using a similar method in endeavouring to come

to an understanding of Shakesperian plays, or a text book on Science.

Here are some general rules:

1. Get at the true meaning of single words. They should be taken in their common or usual meaning, and in the sense in which they would have been understood by their original hearers or readers.
2. Get at the form of expression. It is most important to know whether a particular passage is literal or figurative. The passage to be studied may be fact or fiction, history or allegory, prose or poetry, narrative or discourse.
3. Don't be misled by chapter or other divisions, or by added chapter headings, or comments added to the text. These form no part of the original and may be misleading.
4. Interpret in relation to the context. It has often been said, "a text without a context is a pretext".
5. Interpret grammatically.
6. Beware of a limiting literalism and of a fanciful evasive spiritualization.
7. Interpret the Old Testament in the

- light of the New Testament.
8. Compare Scripture with Scripture and let Scripture check one's interpretation of Scripture.
  9. Recognise the inevitable paradoxes of the truth about things infinite, and be prepared to accept both extremes, such as the Sovereignty of God and the freewill of man.
  10. Interpret the obscure by the clear, It is wrong to make the measure of our understanding a standard for deciding the meaning or judging the value of all parts of Scripture. What a ridiculous position we would find ourselves in if we applied the principle of refusing to accept anything we can't understand, to other matters. Most of us would never switch on the light because of our lack of understanding of electricity.
  11. Respect the judgment of other believers. It is dangerous for anyone to imagine that he has a monopoly of truth. Someone once said, "If, for instance, I found myself being led to a conclusion which is in conflict with some statement in the Apostles' Creed, I shall, if I am sensible, question the accuracy

- of my own conclusion and be inclined to think that the Creed may be correct, and I mistaken". (T. Russell Howden).
12. Seek the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. He is the only Teacher fully able to expound His own inspired text book.

We should read the Bible SYSTEMATICALLY, not just occasionally, whenever we have some spare time; not just when we feel like it, and not only when faced with some unexpected emergency.

The Scripture Union has been guiding many millions of people in the systematic reading of the Bible since 1879. It now has a world-wide ministry. With the aid of specially prepared notes for all age groups, men and women, boys and girls, have come to the knowledge of Christ as Saviour and Lord.

This is the system suggested:

1. PRAY for God's help in understanding His Word.
2. READ carefully through the passage set, and decide what it is about.
3. LOOK for answers to the following

questions:-

- (a) What does this passage teach about God - the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, or the Holy Spirit?
  - (b) What does this passage teach about the Christian life?
    - i. is there a command, a promise, a warning?
    - ii. is there an example to follow, or an error to avoid?
  - (c) What is the main lesson?
4. READ your Scripture Union notes.
  5. PRAY, using the thoughts you have gained from your reading.

Whether you use this method or some other, the important thing is for you not to read the Bible spasmodically or superficially, but systematically.

We should use the Bible PRIMARILY. There are many subtle temptations for Christians to substitute some other worthy activity for the reading of the Word of God. Visiting Rome and the Art Galleries of Florence, or even travelling to the Holy Land, is not a replacement for the personal reading of the Word of God. Gregory, the

Bishop of Nyssa, far back in A.D. 380, said something we should ponder. "Before I ever saw Jerusalem, I knew that Christ was Very God. I knew that God was born of a virgin before I saw Bethlehem's stable. I believed in the Lord's Resurrection before I looked upon the church built upon its memory. This little profit alone did I get for my journey".

For this early Christian, travel was not a substitute for Bible reading. It is so easy for ministers, Sunday School teachers, youth leaders, church officers and others, to neglect the actual study of the Word of God itself, and put in its place all kinds of substitutes. It is not sufficient to read books about the Bible, or to listen to someone else reading the Bible on a radio service, or a telecast. We must read it ourselves. It should have a priority in our reading. It's not just another book. It is God's Book, and its message is relevant to you and me today.

On five occasions our Lord asked of different groups of religious leaders, a question, simple in itself, but full

of implications: "Have ye not read?" Twice He asked the question of the Pharisees; twice also of the Chief Priests and Scribes, and once of the Sadducees. All are contained in Matthew's Gospel. From these 5 texts there clearly stands out the basic fact that Jesus insisted that the great questions of life can be answered from the Word of God. He asked not simply, "Have ye not read?" but, "Have ye not read in the Scriptures?" He did not suggest that His listeners ought to be readers of contemporary Greek or Latin literature; His emphasis was exclusively upon the reading of the Word of God.

He was addressing the most educated men in Israel. They, like us, were able to read. They were in a position to read the Word of God. No other people on earth at that time had this privilege. Neither the Greeks nor the Romans had any divinely inspired volume. Because they could read the Word of God they had a responsibility to understand, believe and obey it. But although they could quote hundreds of passages, they had not entered into the deeper implications of many of these revealed

truths. They had constructed a system of error, were ethically insincere, and were blind to the fact that their Messiah, of whom the Word of God spoke to them, stood in their midst. They didn't recognise it because they read the Scriptures, as it were, with blind eyes to the truth of God.

Yes, the Word of God needs even more than the fact of having a priority. We need to approach it REVERENTLY, for it contains the message of Jesus Christ, our Saviour. That is the story of the Bible. It is the story of salvation. Christ is the theme of the Old and the New Testaments.

In Genesis, Christ is the Seed of the woman.  
In Exodus, the Passover Lamb.  
In Leviticus, the Atoning Sacrifice.  
In Numbers, the Smitten Rock.  
In Deuteronomy, the Prophet.  
In Joshua, the Captain of the Lord of Hosts.  
In Judges, the Deliverer.  
In Ruth, the Heavenly Kinsman.  
In the Sixth Book of Kings, the Promised King.

In Nehemiah, the Restorer of the Nations.

In Esther, the Advocate.

In Job, the Redeemer,

In the Psalms, All, and in All.

In Proverbs, the Pattern.

In Ecclesiastes, the Goal.

In the Song of Solomon, the Satisfaction.

In the Prophets, the coming Prince of Peace.

In the Gospels, He is coming to seek and to save.

In the Acts, He is Christ Risen.

In the Epistles, He is Christ at the Father's Right Hand.

In the Book of Revelation, He is Christ returning and reigning.

Simple, clear, bold, is this message of the Living Son of God. It is the message of Jesus Christ, and it contains His offer of peace with God.

But we need to look at it even more than just reverently. We need to listen to it OBEDIENTLY, because Jesus said that we are to hear the Word, and to keep it. And as we allow this Word of God to speak to our souls, we need

to show this in active obedience.

When we read, "Repent ye, for the Kingdom of God is at hand", it means that we ARE to repent of our sins. When we read, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved", it means that we ARE to believe. When it says, "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden", it means that we ARE to come. When it says we are to confess our sins, it means that we ARE to confess our sins. And when it says that we are able to say, "I know my Redeemer lives", it means that if we act in obedience to this Word we will come into that complete certainty, just as Augustine did in the early centuries.

In his youth he was wild and reckless, given over to riotous living and drunkenness. He went through a time of heart-searching, when he realised that he was a sinner before God. But he heard what seemed to him a voice of a child, saying, "Take up and read. Take up and read". And he took up the New Testament nearby and read the words from Romans 13, verse 13, "Let us walk

honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh".

And Augustine said, "No further would I read, or need I. For instantly at the end of this sentence, by a light as it were, of serenity infused into my heart, all the darkness of doubt vanished away". He was obedient to the Word which he heard.

I wonder, have we come with this attitude of obedience today? Are we prepared to come to this Word

- Confidently
- Intelligently
- Systematically
- Primarily
- Reverently
- Obediently

because then we will be introduced to Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and we will come to Him, because He asks us to do so; and we will have that glad assurance of the forgiveness of our sins, the certainty of our salvation,

and a task to make this truth known to others.

May God bless us now, and enable us, having heard the Word, to obey it.

- PRAYER -

Blessed Lord, Who hast caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of Thy Holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which Thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.



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