

GIVE HEED TO READING

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on December 6, 1964 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

The center of ancient Rome was the Forum. In addition to a large assembly area, it had a platform from which the Caesars and other orators spoke to the assembled multitude. To one side was the Capitoline Hill on which were built the palaces of the rulers. Other government buildings surrounded the area. A stone's throw away was the Mamertine Prison, where it is thought that the apostle Paul was kept during his second imprisonment in Rome. You will recall that he was allowed to stay in his own hired dwelling during his first imprisonment. The Mamertine Prison still remains, and it is still possible to see some of the subterranean chambers.

I should like you to visualize the aged apostle Paul in the last years of his life while in this prison awaiting sentence from Nero. His travels are over; his preaching is done. All of his books have been written with the exception of the last of his writings, the second epistle to Timothy. As he brings this last book to completion he says, "I charge thee in the sight of God, and of Christ Jesus ... preach the word; be urgent in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure the sound doctrine; but, having itching ears, will heap to themselves teachers after their own lusts; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and turn aside unto fables. But be thou sober in all things, suffer hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill thy ministry. For I am already being offered, and the time of my departure is come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give to me at that day; and not to me only, but also to all them that have loved his appearing."

The New Testament Emphasis

Then he adds these personal words, "Give diligence to come shortly unto me ... the cloak that I left at Troas with Carpus, bring when thou comest, and the books, especially the parchments." (II Tim. 4:1-13). Notice especially that the aged apostle Paul feels the need for two things. The damp, stone walls of the prison make him long for a cloak to warm his body, but this is not his deepest longing. He asks Timothy to bring the books, which would mean the papyri, and the parchments, which would mean the vellum or skins. It is likely that he is calling for some of the Old Testament books of scripture. The apostle Paul feels a desire for these important and sacred documents that he may feed his mind. He is still growing, still reading, even though his life is all but spent.

This is consistent with the emphasis which we find in the writings of the apostle Paul throughout his life. For example, in I Tim. 4:13, he wrote, "Till I come, give heed to reading, to exhortation, to teaching." In II Tim. 2:15, we find, "Give diligence to present thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, handling aright the word of truth." Across the page in my Bible are these additional words, "From a babe thou hast known the sacred writings which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness; that the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work." (II Tim. 3:15-17).

The Old Testament Emphasis

The Old Testament also abounds in emphasis upon the importance of reading God's word. In the book of Exodus we find Moses causing the great multitude to assemble so that he could read to them the law which God had given him on Mt. Sinai. Later, when the Israelites had entered the promised land Joshua called the people together in the great natural amphitheater between Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerazim and there read the law to them. Still later, when God's people had returned from Babylonian captivity, Nehemiah, the governor, and Ezra, the scribe, called the people together and read to them the law of God from morning until evening.

We also find the reading of God's word emphasized in the writings of the Old Testament. Notice the first psalm:

Blessed is the man that walketh not in the council of the wicked,  
Nor standeth in the way of sinners,  
Nor sitteth in the seat of scoffers:  
But his delight is in the law of Jehovah;  
And on his law doth he meditate day and night.  
And he shall be like a tree planted by the streams of water,  
That bringeth forth its fruit in its season,  
Whose leaf also doth not wither,  
And whatsoever he doeth shall prosper. (Ps. 1:1-3).

The longest chapter in the entire Bible is the 119th Psalm, whose theme is the importance of God's law. This chapter has 176 verses in it, with more than 150 of these emphasizing God's law in some way. The chapter is divided into twenty-two stanzas of eight verses

each. The law of God is referred to through the use ten different synonyms, all of which refer to the writings, the ordinances, the commandments, or the law of God. Notice a few of these sentences:

- v. 2: Blessed are they that keep his testimonies,  
That seek him with the whole heart.
- v. 9: Wherewith shall a young man cleanse his way?  
By taking heed thereto according to thy word.
- v. 11: Thy word have I laid up in my heart,  
That I might not sin against thee.
- v. 16: I will delight myself in thy statutes:  
I will not forget thy word.
- v. 33: Teach me, O Jehovah, the way of thy statutes;  
And I shall keep it unto the end.
- v. 53: Hot indignation hath taken hold upon me,  
Because of the wicked that forsake thy law.
- v. 66: Teach me good judgment and knowledge;  
For I have believed in thy commandments.
- v. 71: It is good for me that I have been afflicted:  
That I may learn thy statutes.
- v. 72: The law of thy mouth is better unto me  
Than thousands of gold and silver.
- v. 89: Forever, O Jehovah,  
Thy word is settled in heaven.
- v. 92: Unless thy law had been my delight,  
I should have perished in mine affliction.
- v. 97: O how I love thy law!  
It is my meditation all the day.
- v. 98: Thy commandments make me wiser than mine enemies;  
For they are ever with me.
- v. 99: I have more understanding than all my teachers;  
For thy testimonies are my meditation.
- v. 105: Thy work is a lamp unto my feet,  
And light unto my path.
- v. 165: Great peace have they that love thy law;  
And they have no occasion of stumbling.

#### The Modern Emphasis

This emphasis upon the reading of God's law is out of keeping with the spirit of our times. Ours is a generation in which reading is being neglected. While reading is better taught in our day it is probably more neglected, percentage-wise, than in any other generation. It is true that our young people are taught the skill of reading in a remarkable way. Machines help them develop rapidity of eye movements, while teachers suggest the techniques of scanning and of reading by paragraphs and other devices. Some achieve the ability to read 600 or 700 words per minute, with improved comprehension, and a few even pass the 1,000 word per minute mark. Most of us would read at a slower pace, but all of us read well when compared with those of the past. Even so, little reading is done, when we eliminate the surface reading of the headlines, the billboards and the scanning of picture magazines.

While there are more books and magazines available, there is less real thirst for reading the deeper, more permanent materials. Our remarkable mobility, which keeps us so constantly on the go, the availability of television and the constancy of radio have joined together to eliminate the hours of reading that were customary in previous generations. This generation of Christians is less well taught in the scriptures than previous generations. Our love of the Lord is not less, but the hours that we spend in reading his word are less. As a result we do not know the scriptures as our fathers and grandfathers knew them.

The Bible contains 1189 chapters, more than 31,000 verses, and more than 750,000 words, yet it can be read in its entirety in eighty-nine and one-half hours. It can be read in its entirety in one year, if one spends only fifteen minutes each day at the task. It can be read in one year if one reads three chapters each week-day and five chapters each Sunday throughout the year.

Those who spend some time with the Bible discover that it is most interesting reading. The Old Testament is divided into books of history, law, wisdom, and prophecy. Each of these sections has its own special appeal. The New Testament is divided into biography, history, the epistles, and finally prophecy. These also have unusual appeal. In addition to the general reading of the scriptures, the Christian needs to single out key passages that teach God's will on important subjects. These he needs to know thoroughly, even to the point of memorization. As we learn other subjects we need also to spend sufficient time to learn the basic teachings of God, for our own soul's salvation's sake. It is also important that we know where in the scriptures we may find certain matters discussed. It is not

enough to know that the Bible says “something like this” and that it says it “somewhere or other.” It is only enough when we can turn to the book, the chapter, and the verse. The apostle Peter wrote, “Sanctify in your hearts Christ as Lord; being ready always to give answer to every man that asketh you a reason concerning the hope that is in you, yet with meekness and fear.” (I Peter 3:15).

### Areas for Special Emphasis

In summarizing the areas in which the Christian needs especially to read, we would suggest first the Bible itself. He needs to have the King James Version at hand, along with the American Standard Version. With these as his two basic texts he may well own a copy of the Revised Standard Version, the New English Bible, J. B. Philip’s translation, and others of more recent origin. These will be useful for the purpose of comparison. The studious Christian needs a good Bible dictionary, such as Westminster Dictionary of the Bible by Davis and Gehman. He also needs a good Bible encyclopedia, such as the Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia. A good concordance is also desirable. The covering of both Old and New Testaments with dependable commentaries is also necessary. Adam Clarke’s Commentary on the whole Bible is good. Dummelow’s One Volume Bible Commentary is of value. The Gospel Advocate Series on the New Testament is a fine one. B. W. Johnson’s two volume People’s Notes on the New Testament is widely used and appreciated.

For the thorough student books of introduction to the Bible are needed. Edward Young’s Introduction to the Old Testament and Henry Thiessen’s Introduction to the New Testament are best. B. A. Warfield’s, the Inspiration and Authority of the Scriptures is a fine general work. In the area of church history a fine, brief work is that of F. W. Mattox entitled The Eternal Kingdom. The Christian might well read among the Ante-Nicene writer’s, who though not inspired lived immediately after the apostles, and were near the source of Christian truth. We need to be well read in the Reformation period and well read in the Restoration period. The history of Christian doctrine is also a valuable study, as are also many fine biographies of outstanding church leaders.

The field of Christian evidences is a must for the modern Christian reader! Books like C. S. Lewis’ Mere Christianity are valuable for the young person who is losing his faith. Another of C. S. Lewis’ fine books is Miracles, which defends belief in the supernatural. Bernard Ramm has presented a fine book in The Christian View of Science and Scripture. Russell Mixter has a very valuable work in Evolution and Christian Thought Today. Wilbur Smith has made a great contribution in Therefore Stand, for those who would strengthen their faith in an age of doubt. In addition to these fields we need to read concerning world religions, the different beliefs of the various denominations, Bible geography, archeology, books of instruction on how to do various phases of Christian work, and devotional books. These are only a few of the exciting and rewarding areas in which the Christian needs to read.

### Conclusion

Some time ago a friend of mind told of a practice in his home. Each evening after dinner is finished the whole family assembles in the living room and a quiet half-hour is devoted to reading. Since the family has a wide spread of age and maturity each reads silently that which interests him and that which suits his age-level. They read together in the sense of being close to each other and thereby encouraging each other. It is a fine emphasis away from television and the casual, surface emphasis of our day toward deeper and more lasting things.

God has given us a book to guide us to heaven. It will be tragic indeed to miss eternal life because we were too busy to read that book. May all of us seriously heed the admonition of the apostle Paul. “Give heed to reading.”