

HOW TO GET THE MOST FROM YOUR BIBLE STUDY

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on December 6, 1970 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Approximately one-third of the world's population speaks English. This means that there are approximately one billion souls who are within the range of English-speaking radio and television broadcasts. Several million of these people, according to surveys, listen each week to our Herald of Truth broadcasts concerning Christ and his gospel. Letters come from all over our nation and from several foreign countries. Among those who hear these broadcasts, knowledge of the Bible varies widely. For example, there are natives in Ethiopia, Nigeria, Zambia, and other countries in Africa who hear the radio broadcasts, sometimes standing together in a public place listening to a radio furnished by some shop. In the far-off Pacific, out-dated Herald of Truth films are shown to natives in Pago Pago, the Philippines, and other remote areas by our missionaries. Through the Armed Services Network, not only American servicemen, but many natives in countries around the world have some opportunity to listen. In many cases, the knowledge which these people have of the Bible is very small indeed. In these weekly audiences there are also some in our own land who are mature in years but who have never been taught the Bible. Some are young people who are just discovering Christ and his teachings. Of course, there are others who are life-long students of the Bible.

As I think of the problems of our world, especially those problems that are presented to me through the mail and in personal conferences, I realize that a meaningful knowledge of God's word is one of the world's greatest needs. So many of the tangles in which men and women find themselves could have been avoided if only there had been a knowledge of God's will and an acceptance of his guidance. So many people need the Bible's guidance and direction for their lives. Others need its messages of comfort and spiritual strength. Still others need its encouragement and hope, as found in its great promises. All need its forgiveness and salvation. My purpose in speaking on this theme is that all of us may resolve to spend more time and effort in the study of the scriptures. To that end I would like to make some suggestions about how to get the most from our Bible study.

A Beautiful Summary

Many years ago this beautiful summary statement concerning the Bible fell into my hands: "This Book contains the mind of God, the state of man, the way of salvation, the doom of sinners, and the happiness of believers. Its doctrines are holy, its precepts are binding, its histories are true, and its decisions are immutable. Read it to be wise, believe it to be safe, and practice it to be holy. It contains light to direct you, food to support you, and comfort to cheer you. It is the traveler's map, the pilgrim's staff, the pilot's compass, the soldier's sword, and the Christian's charter. Here paradise is restored, heaven opened, and the gates of hell disclosed. Christ is its grand object, our good its design, and the glory of God its end. It should fill the memory, rule the heart, and guide the feet. Read it slowly, frequently, and prayerfully. It is a mine of wealth, a paradise of glory, and a river of pleasure. It is given you in life, will be opened in the Judgment, and be remembered forever. It involves the highest responsibility, will reward the greatest labor, and will condemn all who trifle with its sacred contents." This anonymous selection is a great tribute to the scriptures and also to the man who had the insight to write it,

Facts About The Bible

The Bible contains sixty-six books, which are divided into the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament contains thirty-nine of these, with the New Testament containing the other twenty-seven. There are 1189 chapters in the Bible, 930 in the Old Testament and 259 in the New Testament. There are more than 31,000 verses and more than 750,000 words in the Bible. In spite of the fact that it is a very large Book it can be read aloud in only 89 and 1/2 hours. Seventy of these hours are required for the reading of the Old Testament, nineteen and one-half for the reading of the New Testament. These last figures were discovered when the entire Bible was recorded for the blind a few years ago.

When we think of the time that is required for the reading of the scriptures, we do well to remember that God took 1600 years to produce the Bible. He raised up men, caused them to have certain experiences that were needful, and then guided them while they wrote. There were approximately forty different men who were used as God's instruments in the writing of his inspired word. If God was so concerned for the writing of this book that he spent 1600 years in preparing it for us, surely we can spend less than a hundred hours in reading it. May I challenge you to accept this suggestion and to read the Bible in its entirety within the year 1971.

The Bible was first written on vellum or parchment, which means animal skin. Later on, papyrus, which is a reed-like plant which can be cut in such a way as to provide a writing surface was used. The bible was first divided into chapters by Cardinal Hugo in 1250 A.D. and first divided into verses in the Geneva Bible of 1560. This translation is also known as the "Breeches Bible" because in it Genesis 3:7 is translated, "They sewed fig leaves together and made themselves breeches." The King James Version and American Standard Version used the word "aprons" instead of "breeches." With the New English Bible using the word "loin-cloths." The Bible was the first book to be printed by moveable type, a feat accomplished by Johannes Gutenberg, in the middle of the fifteenth century. Some two billion copies have come from the printing presses since that first occasion. Not only has the Bible been printed more often than

any other book, but it has also been translated into other languages more often than any other book. At the present time, significant portions of the Bible have been translated into more than two thousand languages and dialects. It is by far the world's most widely published book.

Different English Translations

Of the various translations of the bible into English, the most widely known are these: (1) the King James Version, of 1611, (2) the American Standard Version, of 1901, (3) the Revised Standard Version, of 1952, and (4) the New English Bible, of 1970. In addition to these translations by groups of eminent scholars, there are also translations by individuals, such works as that of Moffatt, Weymouth, Goodspeed, Williams, Phillips and others,

From time to time I am asked why new translations are needed. Someone asks, "When we have these fine translations, why should we go to the trouble and expense of producing new ones?" The answer to this inquiry lies in several important facts. First, the Greek of the New Testament was "koine" Greek, the language of the common man rather than the classical language of the professional. In other words, the New Testament was originally given in the language of the people so that everyone could read and understand it. Our modern translations are efforts on the part of thoughtful men to keep the Bible in every-day language which everyone can understand. In the second place, we get so accustomed to the beauty and rhythm of some of the older versions, such as the King James Version, that the words just bounce off our dulled ears, and the meaning does not actually penetrate the mind. Many who have read this version come away with only a vague understanding of what it actually means.

In the third place, hundreds of words have changed their meaning since 1611 when King James commanded a group of scholars to translate the Bible. As an example, I would cite I Thessalonians 4:15, where the King James text reads, "... we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep." Three hundred and fifty years ago the word "prevent" which comes from the Latin pre, meaning before, and venio, meaning to come, properly conveyed the idea that those who live until the end of time shall not come before those who have died. In the intervening centuries, however, the word "prevent" has changed its meaning so that the American Standard Version translates this passage, "... we that are alive, that are left unto the coming of the Lord, shall in no wise precede them that are fallen asleep." For our day the word "precede" is far better than the word "prevent".

In the fourth place, we prefer a translation such as the American Standard Version, of 1901, because it had better sources from which to work than the earlier King James Version. The oldest and most complete New Testament manuscripts have been found since 1611. This means that scholars of the late nineteenth century were able to go back closer to the original source of Biblical truth than those who translated in the seventeenth century.

Ideally, we should take one of the older, respected versions of the scriptures as our basic text. This might be either the King James Version or the American Standard Version or even the Revised Standard Version. Along with this version we might well have one or more of the newer translations for comparison. In this way we have the solid accuracy and dependability of the trusted and tried translations, with the readability and meaningfulness of the newer translations.

I Corinthians 13 - As An Example

Let us make a comparison of a familiar passage as it is translated in several of the leading versions. First, here is I Corinthians 13: 4-5 in the King James Version: "Charity suffereth long and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, does not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, ..." Now, listen to the same passage in the American Standard Version: "Love suffereth long, and is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself; is not puffed up, does not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not its own, is not provoked, taketh not account of evil ..." Next, let us read from the Revised Standard Version: "Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful ..." Finally, we read from Phillips' Translation, "This love of which I speak is slow to lose patience - it looks for a way of being constructive. It is not possessive; it is neither anxious to impress nor does it cherish inflated ideas of its own importance. Love has good manners and does not pursue selfish advantage. It is not touchy ..."

In addition to having several translations for comparative purposes, it is very helpful to have a good Bible Atlas at hand, for this is a book that gives us the geographical location of each town, city, or country and other information such as climate, topography, and the like. It is similar to a road map and is just about as essential. Another good book to aid our study of the Bible is a Bible Dictionary. Carefully written, brief essays deal with the prominent people whose lives are mentioned in the scriptures, along with basic information concerning Biblical things, places, and events. A Bible Concordance is a must if one is to locate meaningful passages of scripture with ease. If a person knows as much as one key word of a verse of scripture, through the use of a concordance, he can find the location of the passage. Bible Commentaries are also helpful, for they bring the scholarship of the best Biblical students to bear upon the various passages of scripture pointing out many things which the casual reader would miss.

Plans of Reading

One approach to the reading of the Bible is the reading of three chapters each week-day and five chapters each Sunday. This takes one through the entire Bible in the course of a calendar year. A second approach is to spend fifteen minutes in Bible reading each day. This also takes one through the entire Bible in a year. A third approach is to read entire books at one sitting. This is the way we read personal letters which we receive from friends, and this is a logical way to read many of the epistles of the New Testament or other relatively short books of the Bible. Fourth, there is the careful study of a book of the Bible with some interested group. This may be a family group or another group of people who have common interests. The discussion of the scriptures helps to bring out their meaning and especially their relevance to our lives today.

Conclusion

It is wise to choose a special time of each day for one's Bible reading. A special place is also to be recommended. Then the radio and television should be turned off. One should get away from the telephone, if possible. The reading should be done slowly and thoughtfully. It is always good to begin with a prayer for God's guidance in the reading.

The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy these words suggesting the great usefulness of the inspired scriptures: "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, thoroughly furnished unto every good work." (II Timothy 3:16-17). The same apostle also said, "Give diligence to present thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, handling aright the word of truth." (II Timothy 2:15)

We must also remember that it is not enough merely to read the scriptures, nor even to understand the scriptures. It is enough only when we obey God's will as declared in the scriptures. It was the Lord who said, "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 7:21). Without the doing of God's will all of our study is in vain. These are a few suggestions to make our study of the Bible more meaningful.