

A PRACTICAL PRIMER ON PRAYER

by

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CHAPTER THREE -

GOD'S WORD IN THE QUIET TIME

"Thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name" (Psalm 138:2)

NOW THAT WE'VE DECIDED to keep our quiet time, what shall we do in that time?

Devotions should consist of reading the Bible and of prayer. A devotional book is sometimes helpful; but if something must be left out, that should be the one to be omitted, because such a book, of course, contains merely the thoughts of other men. Reading the Bible is most important, for that is GOD's very word to us.

It is surprising how many reverse this order. In a recent survey among juvenile delinquents 46 per cent of them prayed, but only 7 per cent of them read the Bible. This ought not to be, because praying is your talking to GOD, while the Bible is His talking to you; and it is more important that He talk to you than that you talk to Him.

How much the reading of GOD's message should mean to us! Unfortunately, many of us have grown too used to it. This is not true all over the world. Let me quote part of a letter from a missionary to the Nosu tribes in southwest China, and you will see how much GOD's Word means to those people.

"Last Saturday an old deacon came to us from his village fifty miles away and bought a New Testament. He did not return home that night. He sat on our doorstep and read and read until all his affections were coming out of his eyes in water. When I rose at daybreak to go to an out station for a service, he was still there reading. When I returned, he was still in the same Spot. Praise GOD for the Book!

"One outstation group waylaid my carriers and snatched a whole load of Testaments. 'Oh,' they said, 'we've waited for years for these. Tell the pastor all the money will be handed in within two weeks.' Strong men and boys have wept for joy as they have taken the Holy Book into their hands.

"Nothing has moved me so much in many years as this blessed sight of Nosu believers poring with rapturous wonder over the Word of the living God in their own tongue."

"A clean Bible - a lean Christian" was the clever saying of Dr. William Evans, renowned Bible teacher, and there is truth in what he said. It is better to own a series of inexpensive Bibles that you feel free to mark than an expensive Bible, which you feel you must handle with care.

It is helpful for two reasons to mark a Bible. It makes you concentrate on what you are reading, and it helps you to find a special verse when it is needed again. An interesting way to mark a Bible is to use a red pencil or a whole box of colored pencils. The different colors may be used for different subjects - red for salvation through the blood of CHRIST, yellow for the HOLY SPIRIT, blue for Heaven, green for earthly promises, etc. It is also helpful to keep a small card in your Bible to place under the pencil when marking. It will help you keep the line straight and neat.

Even a careless reading of GOD's Word is better than none; but if you wish to become familiar with the great truths of the Word, take a section, a chapter or more, and read the same passage every day for a week. Dr. G. Campbell Morgan, an outstanding Bible teacher in England, read the minor prophets more than forty times before he ever preached on them.

Let us pause right here to emphasize that merely reading the Bible is not enough for the Christian. Scripture says, "**Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed**" (II Timothy 2:15). This does not mean reading the Bible as most of us do, but studying it until we actually know what it says.

The best way to study the Bible is by making a devotional notebook. It will become your own personal commentary. It should take you about three years to go through the Bible verse by verse; but if you do so, you will have a basic knowledge of its contents when you are finished.

Here are a few suggestions for your notebook. You might outline the chapter. For instance:

John 1:1-14 Introduction

John 1:15-34 The ministry of John the Baptist.

John 1:35-51 Calling the five. List the names.

Or you could write a summary of the verses read. The meaning of a verse will become clearer to you if you put it in your own words.

It is true that when writing a summary, you will at times have to copy the actual words of the Bible, especially when quoting conversation. This may seem like mere copying, but it is more than that. The writing of words makes you pay closer attention to what is said and reveals new truths.

Here is an example. I was puzzled when I read in the Gospel of John of only Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb. I knew there had been several women who went to the tomb, and I wondered. It was not until I actually copied the words in John 20:2 that I noticed Mary's use of the pronoun "we," including the other women, and I saw that the passage was in harmony with the other gospels.

You may be interested in prophecy. It is interesting to list all the Old Testament scriptures which

are mentioned in Matthew as fulfilled and then to look them up in the Old Testament. This method helps you to see the divine unity of the Old and New Testaments. It shows that all Scripture is related to CHRIST. "**In the volume of the book, it is written of me**" (Psalm 40:7). And the New Testament can be understood correctly only in the light of the Old Testament.

To be really at home in the Bible, you ought to study a map of the places mentioned and know the value of the different pieces of money. Why was it out of JESUS' way to go through Samaria? How much difference was there between the two sums owed in the parable of the unjust steward?

Most Bibles have maps and money tables in the back. You can check such helps as you read.

As you study the Bible, you will notice many references to the same subject, and you will want to start a list of topical references. In one section of your looseleaf notebook, list the headings which interest you; under them write the references - and your conclusions.

For instance, there is Satan. Because in this day and age we are inclined to ignore him, it may surprise you to learn how much the Bible says of his power.

Another valuable topic is CHRIST's commandments. He says, "**Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you.**" What are they? You might head a page "His Commandments" and as you find them, list them.

Or you may be interested in what Scripture has to say about prayer, the HOLY SPIRIT, or even hell.

It will help you when you study the Bible, if you remember that Scripture, unlike any other book, has three meanings.

First, the Book is historical. The incidents in it actually happened.

Secondly, most of the verses refer to CHRIST, either by prophecy or type. "**All things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me**" (Luke 24:44).

Lastly, there is a personal application. GOD still means what He said, and He means for you to obey.

Make this a rule in your Bible study - don't rush. Be content, if necessary, to study just one verse or to look up one cross reference. It is better to master a comma a day than to hurry through the Book and not know any of it.

If you want a guide for your study, the Christian magazine His offers an excellent one. It suggests that after you have read the Scripture, you ask yourself these questions:

- "Is there any example for me to seek to follow by GOD's help?"
- "Is there a command to be obeyed?"

- "Is there a sin for me to avoid or forsake?"
- "Is there a promise for me to claim; if so, what are its conditions?"
- "What does this passage teach me (by illustration or statement) about JESUS CHRIST, GOD, myself, or His will for my life?"
- "Is there something in this passage which should be my prayer for today?"

Also, in your Bible study, dare to be brave.

When a question comes to you, write it down and pray for the answer. Many an answer will be found in another portion of Scripture. If the meaning of a verse is obscure, you may have to look in a commentary. If you can't afford to buy a commentary, try making your own by clipping the lesson helps from Sunday school lessons and pasting them into a scrapbook. (Paste them in the order of the books of the Bible.)

If you can afford a commentary, there is the one by Jamieson, Fausset and Brown. It is sensible, and yet it treats JESUS CHRIST and His death on the cross reverently. Sometimes when a verse says something you don't like, you look it up in the commentary. "Yes," agrees your commentator, "it does say that; but it is all right, and here's why." And the explanation follows. In searching the Scriptures we must be prepared to lose some of our preconceived ideas.

Surely, a study of the Bible includes memorizing some of the verses. Oh, how our lazy minds dislike to memorize! It is hard work, but suppose you set yourself to learn a verse each week; that's not so much. That way in a year's time you will know fifty-two verses.

One reason many people do not make a success of their memorizing is that they do not realize they must review and review the verses. In the first week, learn one verse. In the second week, review the first verse and learn one more and so on.

Keep a list of the verses you are supposed to know and go over them each morning for your devotions. It would not be amiss sometimes to devote all of your quiet time to memorizing a verse. The reason GOD has so few effective witnesses is that so few people can actually quote the Word when they need it. Only a verse from the Bible settles an argument. Anything else you may say is still just your opinion, and the other person is entitled to his own opinion.

Our quiet time is sacred and should not become routine. Sometimes, instead of following your usual system of study, simply meditate upon the Word. Paul wrote to Timothy, "**Meditate upon these things**" (I Timothy 4:15).

As one form of meditation, may I suggest that you select a Psalm or any other chapter of Scripture to read every day for a month. Read it in a low tone of voice so that you may concentrate on what you are reading. If you do that, you will find that your soul delights in the passage. Would you like to try the 103rd Psalm, or the 90th, or the 84th, for a starter?

Above all, ask the Lord, "What is Thy message for me today?" The American Bible Society prints a suggested Bible reading guide which says, "Search for the personal message in each day's passage for you. Your inner response to GOD's message is vital. When He condemns, bow penitently; when He offers help, place your hope on that assurance; when He commands, obey."

"Have you not often found that if you read the Bible consecutively, the passage which comes in due course will, somehow or other, prove to be as truly a lesson for the day as if it had been written on purpose to meet your case?" is the way Charles Haddon Spurgeon expressed this truth. Mr. Spurgeon was an outstanding Baptist evangelist in England during the nineteenth century, and his sermons are still read with delight by many Christians.

GOD will not say the same thing to you that He does to someone else by means of a personal application of a verse (this does not mean the verse has more than one interpretation). That is the mystery of the Book. But He will speak. If you find no message there, take a second look. It may be that you have not wanted to see it.

We must face the fact that all men are sinners, including you and me, and that even the best person in the world has some false ideas. Being a Christian calls for the remaking of the mind and personality to meet GOD's highest ideals. It is putting every thought and desire under the light of the Word. **"Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of GOD"** (II Corinthians 7:1). If you grasp one truth a day, your opinions will in time reflect neither the world, nor tradition, nor your environment, nor even your minister, but the Lord.

Don't be discouraged if sometimes your Bible study seems dry. That is often true of the beginner who knows little of the Lord and His Word. It is like talking with a stranger; you have little in common with him and the conversation is apt to be dull. One outstanding Christian told me that when he first began to read the Bible daily, his reading was often so dry that he thought he was not learning anything during his study. But later when people asked him questions, he found that the HOLY SPIRIT brought the Scripture to mind and that his blessing had been greater than he had realized.

My Prayer

Help me, O GOD, to dry each bitter tear;
Help me, O GOD, to banish every fear;
And when I find my pathway hard and drear,
Help me to know my Saviour still is near.

Help me to know that light can darkness rend;
Help me to see that sun and shadow blend;
Help me to feel Thou wilt Thine own defend,
And journey with me even to the end.

Grant me the strength to do each daily task,
My disappointment cheerily to mask;
And some fair morn in Heaven's glow to bask
These are the things, my God, I humbly ask.

- Myra Hewson McIntire
~ end of chapter 3 ~