

METHODS OF BIBLE STUDY

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CHAPTER TWELVE

THE SUPREME OBJECT OF BIBLE STUDY

OUR consideration of various methods of studying the Word of GOD naturally leads us to the ultimate aim and purpose of all uses of the Bible. For there is an ultimate and supreme object in all our association with Scriptures, and one never to be overlooked, still less set aside.

This culmination of our study is the devotional use of the Bible, the study of it as the revelation of GOD to the soul of man. On this subject of the devotional study of Holy Scripture we must notice several points.

ITS SPECIAL IMPORTANCE

The first stage of all study in relation to the Bible is that known as *Textual Criticism* - the discovery of the true text, the assurance that we have as nearly as is possible for us to obtain them the words of the sacred writers. But this stage of study is obviously only introductory. It is essential as the foundation, but it is only the foundation.

The next stage is that which is known as *Literary Criticism* - the study of the Bible as literature, the consideration of its composition, authorship, date, style, and contents. This also is important and essential, for without it we should lose much of the beauty and glory of the Bible. Yet there is something more and better to which we must proceed. The Bible is literature, but it is more, and if we rest content at this stage we shall fail at a vital point.

The third stage of Bible study is concerned with *Biblical Exegesis* - that is, the true interpretation of the contents of the Bible, the exact meaning of passages, sections and verses. This involves a knowledge of language and grammar, of manners and customs, of literary and rhetorical forms of expression. This is obviously of the greatest moment and imperative of all true study. Still, it is not everything, and it is only too possible to become occupied with details of interpretation, and all the while to be missing the essential spiritual power.

The fourth stage of our work with the Bible is occupied with *Biblical Theology* - the consideration of the religion revealed in the Scriptures, its doctrines, morals and duties. This is the highest point of Christian scholarship, and it is of the utmost value to be able to see what is the theological teaching of each stage of GOD's revelation of Himself, from the first days until the time of our Lord JESUS CHRIST.

Yet even here we do not get finality; for it is only too possible to be occupied with the intellectual contents of the Bible, to have it all arranged and grasped in our minds, and still to be devoid of the substance and power of the Word of GOD. The message is "Excelsior!" even here.

Through and above all stages we must press until we arrive at the summit, which is the use of the Bible as GOD's personal Word to our own souls, "**What saith my Lord unto His servant?**" "**What wilt Thou have me to do?**"

The Scriptures are intended to lead the soul direct to GOD, to introduce it to His presence, and to convey His revelation of truth and grace. And if we fail to realize this, we fail at the critical point, and all our other knowledge, great and valuable though it be, will count for little or nothing. Bible study above all else is intended to bring and keep the soul in direct contact with GOD. The highest privilege and holiest possibility of the Christian religion is fellowship with GOD in CHRIST, and this is absolutely impossible apart from constant devotional dealings with the Word of GOD.

ITS SPIRITUAL REQUIREMENTS

Anyone with brains can become an expert in the first four stages of Bible study referred to above. The fifth stage needs qualities and conditions far beyond intellectual capacity and attainment.

The soul must be accepted with GOD in CHRIST.

Fellowship with GOD is only possible to a saved soul, to one pardoned and accepted in CHRIST. Sin must be dealt with before communion is realized, and consequently there can be no genuine devotional study of Scripture apart from the position of a believer in CHRIST and the assurance of personal salvation.

The "**natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God**", or, to take Paul's word literally, "*does not welcome*" them. But, more than this, as the apostle goes on to say, "neither is he able to experience them" (I Corinthians 2:14, Greek); he has not the faculty which will enable him to do so. He must be changed into a "**spiritual**" man, for these things are "**spiritually discerned**."

It is for lack of realization of this patent and potent fact that so much error is abroad to-day. Men study the Bible without being at all conscious that it demands spiritual as well as intellectual qualifications.

Further, the soul thus accepted in CHRIST must be kept right with GOD, if Bible study is to be of the highest and best.

- The *life* of the believer must be true to GOD.
- The *conscience* must be kept pure and sensitive;
- The *mind* must be kept teachable, self-distrustful, and ever wishful to learn of GOD;
- The *will* must be kept submissive and obedient, and ready to do what GOD appoints.

The secrets of the Lord are only revealed to "**them that fear Him;**" for "**to this man will I look, even to him that . . . trembleth at My Word.**"

Many a believer finds the Word of GOD dark to him because he is out of spiritual condition. There is no "**open vision**" because his soul is not right with GOD. The devotional study of the Bible is at once a cause and an effect in relation to the spiritual life. It is a cause of increased spiritual vitality, power, insight and blessing, while in turn this spiritual reality of life leads to yet more spiritual revelation of GOD in His Word. Prayer and Obedience are organs of knowledge, and the more of these the more knowledge.

"If any man wills to do . . . he shall know."

For spiritual power in life we must use the spiritual food of the Word of GOD.

ITS SIMPLE METHODS

For the devotional and spiritual use of the Word of GOD there are three rules, but these three, though simple, are all-inclusive.

We must search (John 5:39).

GOD's thoughts are never revealed to listless readers, but only to eager searchers. The glories of the Scriptures are not to be discovered without diligent search. The Bible is like a mine, and its jewels are not to be picked up on the roadside. It affords opportunity for thought, and requires its exercise. Its words, phrases and sentences are full of meaning and power. Like our Lord's parables, the Bible at once conceals and reveals its message. Strenuous thought is imperative if we would obtain from the Word the blessing it contains.

We must:

- Ponder its statements,
- Dwell on its meaning,
- Grasp its message,
- Dwell lovingly and earnestly on its revelation of GOD in CHRIST.

Nothing in it is without some purpose, and what this is, the Lord will reveal in response to His servants' faithful search.

We must meditate (Joshua 1:8; Psalm 1:2).

"**Meditation**" comes from a Greek word meaning "*to attend*," and this is essentially the idea of Bible meditation.

- It is reading with *attention*.
- More than this, it is reading with *intention*.

It is concerned at each point with personal application. And it must be our own thought, our own musing, our own application. Look well at this text, made as clear as the printer's art can emphasize its teaching: "**MY meditation of HIM**" (Psalm 104:34). "**My**" meditation, not merely someone else's. The great, the primary, the essential point is first-hand meditation on GOD's Word as the secret of Christian living.

Dr. Andrew Murray has reminded us in one of his books that milk represents food which has already passed through digestive processes before it is taken by us. And so we may say that all the little books of devotion, the helps to holiness, the series of manuals of thought and teaching, however valuable, represent food that has passed through the spiritual digestion of others before it comes to us, and it has to be used as such.

Do we then decry all these? Far from it; yea, we establish them, but only in their place and for their purpose.

If they are put first, to the exclusion of the Bible alone, and the Bible day by day, they become dangerous and disastrous, crutches that prevent vigorous exercise, and lead to spiritual senility.

If they are put second, they become delightful and valuable, inspirations to further thought and pathways to deeper blessings.

When we have had our own meditation of the Word we are the better able to enjoy what GOD teaches us through others of His children, and especially those whom GOD honors with special gifts of teaching. So it must be first, foremost and constantly, "**MY meditation of HIM**."

Meditation must be real. It must be "**the meditation of my heart**" (Psalm 49:3), and "**the heart**" in Scripture means the center of the moral being, which includes the intellect, the emotions, and the will.

It implies that we come to the Word to be:

- Searched thoroughly,
- Guided definitely,
- Strengthened effectually.

The hour of meditation is not a time for dreamy, vague imaginings, but for living, actual blessing, whether in the form of guidance, warning, comfort, or counsel.

Meditation will also be practical. What are its stages or elements?

First, the careful reading of the particular passage or subject, thinking over its real and original meaning.

Next, a resolute application of it to my own life's needs, conscience, heart, mind, imagination, will; finding out what it has to say to me.

Next, a hearty turning of it into prayer for mercy and grace, that its teaching may become part of my life.

Next, a sincere transfusion of it into a resolution that my life shall reproduce it.

Lastly, a whole-hearted surrender to, and trust in, GOD for power to practise it forthwith, and constantly throughout the day.

It is to be noted that the word "**meditate**," in our English version, represents two Hebrew words - one meaning to "*muse*" or "*think*," and the other implying "*speech*," or *audible thinking* (Psalm 5:1).

These two elements should always be blended:

- Thinking over the Word, its meaning, its application, its message,
- Then talking to GOD about it, in confession of the past failures, in prayer for future blessing, in fellowship in present joys or needs.

Thus will meditation become so practical, so vital, so blessed, that we shall find in it our chief joy, and our indispensable daily power for service.

We must compare (I Corinthians 2:13).

GOD's Word is like a kaleidoscope with many combinations. In addition to our search and meditation of one particular passage, we must compare passages together, in order to arrive at the full meaning of the Word which has been given to us in "**sundry times and in divers manners**" (Hebrews 1:1).

The various aspects of truth are thus seen in their entirety and proportion, and our spiritual life becomes fully informed and completely equipped. There are so many topics or subjects scattered throughout GOD's Word, that only as we collect and compare them can we appreciate the fullness and glory of GOD's revelation.

In illustration of this let us take two or three examples out of many.

It is only by this method of comparison that we can arrive at the full truth of the doctrine of justification in its six-fold aspect.

1. GOD the Author (Romans 3:26);
2. Grace the Source (Romans 3:24);
3. Blood the Ground (Romans v:9);
4. Resurrection the Acknowledgment (Romans 4:25);
5. Faith the Channel (Romans 5:1);
6. Works the Fruit (James 2:24).

Again, the Will of GOD is the center of all life, but it is only as we start with Matthew and go through the New Testament, collecting all the passages about the will of GOD, that we can realize the wondrous fullness and glory of His claim on us. Once more, when we turn to the Old Testament it is essential to institute comparisons of the various titles of GOD, if we would discover the complete meaning of His relation to us.

An illustration of this can be seen in Prebendary Webb-Peploe's book on *The Titles of Jehovah*, presenting the various aspects of GOD's revelation to the believer.

Many more instances of the necessity of this comparison might be given; indeed, there is scarcely any truth in the Word of GOD that can be fully understood by one passage alone. We must compare. It need only be added that very much helpful and "sane" spiritualizing is possible by this method, as, for instance, by comparing the mountains of the Bible and their spiritual associations, or the valleys, or the "windows."

Or we might take such a phrase as the "**all things**" of the Scripture and see how:

- "**all things are of God**";
- "**all things are yours**";
- "**all things are for your sakes**";
- "**all things work together for good.**"

The possibilities of this method are almost endless.

For this method we need a good concordance and a good reference Bible. There are references which do not refer! Hence the need of discrimination.

All that has been said may be summed up in the words of Job: "**I have esteemed the words of His mouth more than my necessary food**;" and of Jeremiah: "**Thy words were found and I did eat them**;" and of the Psalmist: "**How sweet are Thy words to my taste!**"

The Bible must be our daily food if we are to be strong and vigorous. Not quantity, but quality, determines the nutritive value of food.

What we must emphasize is

- Capacity to receive,
- Power to assimilate,
- Readiness to reproduce.

As someone has well put it, the process is threefold

- Infusion,
- Suffusion,
- Transfusion.

The Word thus becomes all-sufficient and all-powerful in our life

- The mirror to reveal (James 1);
- The water to cleanse (Ephesians 5);
- The milk to nourish (I Peter 2);
- The strong meat to invigorate (Hebrews 5);
- The honey to delight (Psalm 119);
- The fire to warm (Jeremiah 23);
- The hammer to break and fasten (Jeremiah 23);
- The sword to fight (Ephesians 6);
- The seed to grow (Matthew 13);
- The lamp to guide (Psalm 119);
- The statute-book to legislate (Psalm 119);
- The gold to treasure in time and for eternity (Psalm 19).

~ end of chapter 12 ~

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