

Reading the Bible

By John Newton

"Your Words were found, and I ate them. Your Words became a delight to me and the joy of my heart!" Jeremiah 15:16

Books and letters written in a proper spirit, may, if the Lord is pleased to smile upon them, have their use. Indeed, the truths essential to the peace of our souls are so simple, and may be reduced to so few heads, that while each of them singly may furnish a volume drawn out at length, they may all be comprised in small compass.

But an awakened mind which thirsts after the Savior, and seeks wisdom by reading and praying over the Scripture, has little occasion for *a library of human writings*. The Bible is the fountain from whence every stream that deserves our notice is drawn; and, though we may occasionally pay some attention to the *streams*—we have personally an equal right with others to apply immediately to the *fountain-head*, and draw the water of life for ourselves! The *purest streams* are not wholly freed from the *tinge of the soil* through which they run; a mixture of human infirmity is inseparable from the best human composition. But in the *fountain*—the truth is unmixed!

Again, men teach us by many words; and if they would give us their full views of the subject, require us to read a whole volume, the life and substance of which is perhaps expressed with greater force and greater advantage in the Scripture by a single sentence—which is rather *diluted* than *explained*, by our feeble expositions. A volume may be easily written upon the *grace of humility*, and to show the evil and folly of a self-seeking spirit. But if the author should introduce this subject with our Savior's words, "The Son of Man came not into the world to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many;" whoever was duly impressed with that short introduction, would have no great occasion to read the rest of the book!

The preaching of the Word of God being an instituted means of grace, ought to be thankfully and frequently improved. And human books that have a savor and unction may likewise be helpful, provided we read them with *caution*, compare them with the Scripture, and do not give ourselves implicitly to the rules or decisions of any man or set of men—but remember that one is our *Master and infallible Teacher*, even Christ. But the chief and grand means of edification, without which all other helps will disappoint us, and prove like clouds without water—are the *Bible* and *prayer*—the *Word* of grace and the *Throne* of grace. A frequent perusal of the Bible will give us an enlarged and comprehensive view of

the whole of true religion—its origin, nature, genius, and tendency—and preserve us from an over-attachment to any *system of man's compilation*.

The fault of the several *doctrinal systems*, under which, as under so many banners, the different denominations of Christians are ranged, is, that there is usually something *left out* which ought to have been taken in—and something *admitted*, of supposed advantage, not authorized by the Scriptural standard.

A Bible Christian, therefore, will see much to approve in a *variety* of forms and parties; the providence of God may lead or fix him in a more immediate connection with some one of them—but his spirit and affection will not be confined within these narrow enclosures. He insensibly borrows and unites with which is excellent in each, perhaps without knowing how far he agrees with them, because he finds all in the written Word of God.

I know not a better *rule of reading the Scripture*, than to read it through from beginning to end; and, when we have finished it once, to begin it again. We shall meet with many passages which we can make little improvement of, but not so many in the second reading as in the first, and fewer in the third than in the second—provided we pray to Him who has the keys to open our understandings, and to anoint our eyes with his spiritual eye-salve! The course of *reading* today, will give some light for what we shall read *tomorrow*, and throw a farther light upon what we read *yesterday*. Experience alone, can prove the advantage of this method, if steadily persevered in. To make a few efforts, and then give up—is like taking a few steps and then standing still, which would do little towards completing a long journey. But, though a person walked *slowly*, and but a *little* way in a day—if he walked every day, and with his face always in the same direction, year after year—he would in time travel over the globe! By thus traveling *patiently* and *steadily* through the Scripture, and repeating our progress—we would increase in Scriptural knowledge to the end of life!

The Old and New Testament, the doctrines, precepts, and promises, the history, the examples, admonitions, and warnings, etc. would mutually illustrate and strengthen each other—and nothing that is written for our instruction would be *overlooked*. Happy would I be, could I fully follow the advice I am now offering to you. I wish you may profit by my experience. Alas, how much time have I lost and wasted, which, had I been wise—I would have devoted to reading and studying the Bible! But my evil *heart* obstructs the dictates of my *judgment*, I often feel a reluctance to read this *book of books*, and a disposition to hew out *broken cisterns* which afford me no water, while the *fountain of living waters* are close within my reach!

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