

THE SCRIPTURES AND SIN

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There is grave reason to believe that much Bible reading and Bible study of the last few years has been of no spiritual profit to those who engaged in it. Yea, we go futher; we greatly fear that in many instances it has proved a curse rather than a blessing. This is strong language, we are well aware, yet no stronger than the case calls for.

Divine gifts may be misused, and Divine mercies abused. That this has been so in the present instance is evident by the fruits produced. Even the natural man may (and often does) take up the study of the Scriptures with the same enthusiasm and pleasure as he might of the sciences. Where this is the case, his store of knowledge is increased, and so also is his pride. Like a chemist engaged in making interesting experiments, the intellectual searcher of the Word is quite elated when he makes some discovery in it; but the joy of the latter is no more spiritual than would be that of the former. So, too, just as the successes of the chemist generally increase his sense of self-importance and cause him to look with disdain upon others more ignorant than himself, such, alas, is often the case with those who have investigated the subjects of Bible numerices, typology, prophecy, etc.

The Word of God may be taken up from various motives. Some read it to satisfy their literary pride. In certain circles it has become both the respectable and popular thing to obtain a general acquaintance with the contents of the Bible, simply because it is regarded as an educational defect to be ignorant thereof. Some read it to satisfy their sense of curiosity, as they might any other book of note.

Others read it to satisfy their sectarian pride. They consider it a duty to be well versed in the particular tenets of their own denomination and so search eagerly for prooftexts in support of "*our* doctrines." Yet others read it for the purpose of being able to argue successfully with those who differ from them. But in all this there is no thought of *God*, no yearning for *spiritual* edification, and therefore no real benefit to the *soul*.

Of what, then, does a true profiting from the Word consist? Does not II Tim. 3:16-17, furnish a clear answer to our question? There we read: "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works." Observe what is here omitted: the Holy Scriptures are given us not for intellectual gratification and carnal speculation, but to furnish unto "all good works," and that by teaching, reprovng, and correcting us. Let us endeavour to amplify this by the help of other passages.

1. An individual is spiritually profited when the Word **convicts him of sin**. This is its first office: to reveal our depravity, to expose our vileness, to make known our wickedness. A man's moral life may be irreproachable, his dealings with his fellows faultless; but when the Holy Spirit applies the Word to his heart and conscience, opening his sin-blinded eyes to see his relation and attitude *to God*, he cries, "Woe is me, for I am undone." It is in this way that each truly saved soul is brought to realize his need of Christ. "They that are whole need not a physician, but they who are sick." Yet it is not until the Spirit applies the Word in Divine power that any individual is made to feel he *is* sick, sick unto death.

Such conviction that brings home to the heart the awful ravages which sin has wrought in the human constitution is not to be restricted to the initial experience which immediately precedes conversion. Each time that *God* blesses His Word to my heart, I am made to feel how far, far short I come of the standard which He has set before me, namely: "Be ye holy in *all* manner of

conversation” (I Pet. 1:15). Here, then, is the first test to apply: as I read of the sad failures of different ones in Scripture, does it make me realize how sadly like unto them I am? As I read of the blessed and perfect life of Christ, does it make me recognize how terribly unlike Him I am?

2. An individual is spiritually profited when the Word makes him **sorrow for sin**. Of the stony-ground hearer it is said that he “heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; yet hath he not root in himself” (Matt. 13:20,21); but of those who were convicted under the preaching of Peter it is recorded that “they were *pricked* in their heart” (Acts 2:37).

The same contrast exists today. Many will listen to a flowery sermon, or an address on “dispensational truth” that displays oratorical powers or exhibits the intellectual skill of the speaker, but which, usually, contains no searching application to the conscience, and it is received with approbation; but no one is humbled before God or brought into a closer walk with Him through it. But let a faithful servant of the Lord (who by grace is not seeking to acquire a reputation for his “brilliance”) bring the teaching of Scripture to bear upon character and conduct, exposing the sad failures of even the best of God’s people, and, though the crowd will despise the messenger, the truly regenerate will be thankful for the message which causes them to mourn before God and cry: “Oh, wretched man that I am.” So it is in the private reading of the Word. It is when the Holy Spirit applies it in such a way that I am made to see *and feel* my inward corruptions that I am really blessed.

What a word is that in Jer. 31:19: “After that I was instructed, I smote upon my thigh: I was ashamed, yea, even confounded!” Do you, my reader, know anything of such an experience? Does your study of the Word produce a broken heart and lead to a *humbling* of yourself before God? Does it convict you of your sins in such a way that you are brought to *daily* repentance before Him? The paschal lamb had to be eaten with “bitter herbs” (Exo. 12:8); so as we really feed on the Word, the Holy Spirit makes it “bitter” to us *before* it becomes sweet to our taste.

Note the order in Rev. 10:9, “And I went unto the angel, and said unto him, Give me the little book, and he said unto me, Take it, and eat it up; and it shall make thy belly bitter, but it shall be in thy mouth sweet as honey.” This is ever the experimental order: there must be mourning before comfort (Matt. 5:4); humbling before exalting (I Pet. 5:6).

3. An individual is spiritually profited when the Word leads to **confession of sin**. The Scriptures are profitable for “reproof” (II Tim. 3:16), and an honest soul will acknowledge its faults. Of the carnal it is said: “For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved” (John 3:20). “God be merciful unto me a sinner” is the cry of a renewed heart, and every time we are quickened by the Word (Psa. 119) there is fresh revealing to us and a fresh owning by us of our transgressions before God. “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy” (Prov. 28:13). There can be no spiritual prosperity or fruitfulness (Psalm 1:3) while we conceal within our breasts our guilty secrets; only as they are freely owned before God, and that in detail, shall we enjoy His mercy.

There is no real peace for the conscience and no rest for the heart while we carry the burden of unconfessed sin. Relief comes when it is fully unbosomed to God. Mark well the experience of David: “When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer” (Psalm 32:3-4). Is this figurative but forcible language unintelligible unto you? Or does your own spiritual history explain it? Ah, there is many a verse of Scripture which no commentary save that of

personal experience can satisfactorily interpret. Blessed indeed is the immediate sequel here: “I acknowledged my sin unto Thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord; and Thou *forgavest* the iniquity of my sin” (Psalm 32:5).

4. An individual is spiritually profited when the Word produces in him a deeper hatred of sin. “Ye that love the Lord, hate evil” (Psalm 97:10). “We cannot love God without hating that which He hates. We are not only to avoid evil, and refuse to continue in it, but we must be up in arms against it, and bear towards it a hearty indignation” (C.H. Spurgeon). One of the surest tests to apply to the professed conversion is the heart’s attitude towards sin. Where the principle of holiness has been planted, there will necessarily be a loathing of all that is unholy. If our hatred of evil be genuine, we are thankful when the Word reproves even the evil which we suspected not.

This was the experience of David: “Through Thy precepts I get understanding: therefore I hate every false way” (Psa. 119:104). Observe well, it is not merely “I abstain from,” but “I hate;” not only “some,” or “many,” but “every false way;” and not only “every evil,” but “every false way.” “Therefore I esteem all Thy precepts concerning all things to be right, and I hate every false way” (Psa. 119:128). But it is the very opposite with the wicked: “Seeing thou hatest instruction, and castest My words behind thee” (Psa. 50:17). In Prov. 8:13, we read: “The fear of the Lord is to hate evil,” and this godly fear comes through reading the Word: see Deut. 17:18-19. Rightly has it been said, “Till sin be hated, it cannot be mortified; you will never cry against it, as the Jews did against Christ—Crucify it, Crucify it, till sin be really abhorred as He was” (E. Reyner, 1635).

5. An individual is spiritually profited when the Word causes a forsaking of sin. “Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity” (II Tim. 2:19). The more the Word is read with the definite object of discovering what is pleasing and what is displeasing to the Lord, the more will His will become known; and if our hearts are right with Him the more will our ways be conformed thereto. There will be a “walking in the truth” (III John 4). At the close of II Cor. 6, some precious promises are given to those who separate themselves from unbelievers. Observe, there, the *application* which the Holy Spirit makes of them. He does not say: “Having therefore these promises, be comforted and become complacent thereby, but: “Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit” (II Cor. 7:1)

“Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you” (John 15:3). Here is another important rule by which we should frequently test ourselves: Is the reading and studying of God’s Word producing a purging of my ways? Of old the question was asked, “Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way?” And the Divine answer is “by taking heed thereto according to Thy word.” Yes, not simply by reading, believing, or memorizing it, but by the personal application of the Word to our “way.” It is by “taking heed” to such exhortations as “flee fornication” (I Cor. 6:18), “flee from idolatry” (I Cor. 10:14), “flee these things”—a covetous love for money (I Tim. 6:11), “flee also youthful lusts” (II Tim. 2:22), that the Christian is brought into practical separation from evil; for sin has not only to be confessed but “forsaken” (Prov. 28:13).

6. An individual is spiritually profited when the Word fortifies against sin. The Holy Scriptures are given to us not only for the purpose of revealing our innate sinfulness, and the many, many ways in which we “come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23), but also to teach us how to obtain deliverance from sin, how to be kept from displeasing God. “Thy Word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against Thee” (Psa. 119:11). This is what each of us is required to do: “Receive, I pray thee, the law from His mouth, and lay up His words in thine heart” (Job 22:22). It

is particularly the commandments, the warnings, the exhortations, we need to make our own and treasure; to memorize them, meditate upon them, pray over them, and put them into practice. The only effective way of keeping a plot of ground from being overgrown by weeds is to sow good seed therein: "Overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12:21). So the more Christ's Word dwells in us "richly" (Col. 3:16), the less room will there be for the exercise of sin in our hearts and lives.

It is not sufficient merely to assent to the veracity of the Scriptures, they require to be received into the affections. It is unspeakably solemn to note that the Holy Spirit specifies as the ground of apostasy: "Because the love of the Truth they received not" (II Thess. 2:10, Gk.). "If it lie only in the tongue or in the mind, only to make it a matter of talk and speculation, it will soon be gone. The seed which lies on the surface, the fowls in the air will pick up. Therefore hide it deeply; let it get from the ear into the mind, from the mind into the heart; let it soak in further and further. It is only when it hath a prevailing sovereignty in the heart that we receive it in the love of it—when it is dearer than our dearest lusts, then it will stick to us" (Thomas Manton).

Nothing else will preserve from the infections of this world, deliver from the temptations of Satan, and be so effective a preservative against sin, as the Word of God received into the affections. "The law of his God is in his heart; none of his steps shall slide" (Psalm 37:31). As long as the Truth is active within us, stirring the conscience, and is really loved by us, we shall be kept from falling. When Joseph was tempted by Potiphar's wife, he said, "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (Gen. 39:9). The Word was in his heart, and therefore had prevailing power over his lusts. The ineffable holiness, the mighty power of God, who is able both to save and to destroy. None of us knows when he may be tempted, therefore it is necessary to be prepared against it. "Who among you will give ear...and hear *for the time to come*?" (Isa. 42:23). Yes, we are to anticipate the future and be fortified against it, by storing up the Word in our hearts for coming emergencies.

7. An individual is spiritually profited when the Word causes him to **practice the opposite of sin**. "Sin is the transgression of the law" (I John 3:4). God says "Thou shalt," sin says "I will not;" God says "Thou shalt not," sin says "I will." Thus, sin is rebellion against God, the determination to have my own way (Isaiah 53:6). Therefore sin is a species of anarchy in the spiritual realm, and may be likened unto the waving of the red flag in the face of God. Now the opposite of sinning against God is submission to Him, as the opposite of lawlessness is subjection to the law. Thus, to practice the opposition of sin is to walk in the path of obedience. This is another chief reason why the Scriptures were given: to make known the path which is pleasing to God for us. They are profitable not only for doctrine and reproof, but correction, and also for "instruction in righteousness."

Here, then, is another important rule by which we should frequently test ourselves. Are my thoughts being formed, my heart controlled, and my ways and works regulated by God's Word? This is what the Lord requires: "Be ye doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving our own selves" (James 1:22). This is how gratitude to and affection for Christ are to be expressed: "If ye love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15). For this, Divine assistance is needed. David prayed "Make me to go in the path of Thy commandments (Psa. 119:35), "We need not only *light* to know our way, but a *heart* to walk in it. Direction is necessary because of the blindness of our minds; and the effectual impulsions of grace are necessary because of the wickedness of our hearts. It will not answer our duty to have a naked notion of truths, unless we embrace and pursue them" (Thomas Manton). Note it is "the path of Thy commandments:" not a self-chosen course, but a definitely marked one; not a public "road," but a private "path."

There are other ways of being spiritually profited from God's Word than those we have named, and some of them we hope to consider (D.V.) in a future article. But let both writer and reader honestly and diligently measure himself, as in the presence of God, by the seven things here enumerated. Has your study of the Bible made you more humble, or more proud—proud of the knowledge you have acquired? Has it raised you in the esteem of your fellow men, or has it led you to take a lower place before God? Has it produced in you a deeper abhorrence and loathing of self, or has it made you more complacent? Has it caused those you mingle with, or perhaps teach, to say, I wish I had your knowledge of the Bible; or does it cause you to pray, Lord give me the faith, the grace, the holiness Thou hast granted my friend, or teacher? "Meditate upon these things: give thyself wholly to them; that thy profiting may appear unto all?" (I Tim. 4:15).