

READING THE SCRIPTURES

By John Angell James

My Dear Friends,

The subject of this Address is a very common one; for I do not hunt after novelties, but desire to stir up your pure minds in the way of remembrance. Curiosity may be gratified by what is new; but improvement is likely to be promoted by a more devout and practical consideration of what is old. **We all know more than we *do*; and we should be more solicitous to reduce to practice what we already know, than to acquire still more of mere theory.** My object now, is to point out to you, and enjoin upon you, *a profitable method of reading the Scriptures.*

What an inestimable treasure is the sacred volume! Well does it deserve the emphatic title by which it is distinguished from all other works, as "THE *Bible*," which means THE BOOK. Yes, it is indeed *the* book: the one, and only book for man, as an immortal creature, a lost sinner. It is a book containing God's thoughts, expressed in God's words; or as the great John Locke said, in a description, the comprehension and beauty of which have never been surpassed, "It has God for its author, salvation for its object, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its contents."

What a blessing ought it to be accounted, that we have this Divine revelation in the form of *Scriptures*, that is, *writings*, and not merely in oral tradition; that the Divine communications have been translated from the original languages, into our own mother tongue; that we are delivered from the tyranny of the Church of Rome, which denies the unrestricted use of the Scriptures to the people; and that they are now cheapened down, by various means, to be within the reach of the poorest individual. Never was the Bible so low in price, as it is now. It is the cheapest of all cheap books, in an age distinguished for cheap books. Never was the Bible so much talked about as it is now. Sunday schools have produced readers; and Bible Societies have produced purchasers. Ours, by way of eminence, above all

that have preceded it, may be called, so far as these things go, "*The Bible age.*"

From the very nature of things, **preaching** has some advantages over reading; for not only are difficulties solved, seeming contradictions reconciled, and hidden beauties disclosed—but the combined effect of reasoning and rhetoric, aided by countenance, gesture, and voice—must at once awaken and sustain attention, instruct the judgment, captivate the imagination, impress the heart, and excite the conscience. It is therefore of unspeakable importance, constantly to *hear* the word *preached*; for faith comes by hearing; and the *preaching* of the cross is the power of God unto salvation, to those who believe. But still it is an indolent and injurious relinquishment of our own inestimable privilege and indefeasible right to search the Scriptures for ourselves, entirely to substitute hearing for reading; and those people will be found to be the most profitable hearers of the word, who are its most devout and diligent readers.

It cannot be denied, that much of the religion of the present day, is the religion of public meetings and excitement. The closet is a dull scene compared with the place of public resort; the silent page of Scripture a dull teacher, compared with the living voice of the eloquent preacher; and our solitary self dull company, compared with the trooping multitudes of the great congregation. But still, no one can be an eminent Christian, however frequently, admiringly, or pleasantly he hears his favorite minister, who does not converse much with his Bible in secret. He that would grow in grace and in knowledge, must commune daily with prophets and apostles, through the medium of their own inspired productions, he must **drink largely of the pure living waters and undiluted milk of the word**. It will be found to be a weak and sickly piety, unfit to meet the exigencies, to cope with the difficulties, and to maintain the conflicts of the Christian life—that depends for its support, exclusively, upon the hearing of sermons; or even the reading of Christian magazines, tracts, and reviews.

God's word is the food of the soul, and there is more of concentrated nourishment in a single text of Scripture, when it is drawn out by the digestive process of meditation, to

strengthen the heart of the believer, than in many pages of uninspired, though otherwise attractive, and even instructive, composition. God's words are life, and they are spirit. Read the pages of Christian martyrology, and while wondering at the noble heroes that stand before you, and admiring their deeds of deathless fame, you will find the secret of their strength in their intimate acquaintance with the Scriptures; they were *Bible* Christians, and not mere *sermon* Christians. If you were but deeply experienced in the ways of God, on the one hand, and the devices of Satan, on the other, you would easily remember times of conflict and of peril, when the perusal of a single chapter, or even the pondering upon a single verse, without the intervention of a human teacher, sounded like the voice of God and seemed like the coming into your soul of the mightiness of his omnipotence. If, then, you would relish the uncorrupted sweetness of the word; if you would realize all its strength-giving efficacy; if you would grow to the strength and stature of a perfect man in Christ Jesus; if you would be valiant in the fight of faith—you must be much in converse with God alone, through the medium of his own blessed word.

Is not this precious privilege too much neglected by many of you? Does not the Bible lie upon the table, or the shelf, for days, yes weeks, unopened? What excuse have you to offer for so ungrateful a return for this inspired book? Perhaps you say, it is a difficult book to understand. That there are dark, and, to ordinary readers, inexplicable passages, I admit. But how much is there that is clear to the feeblest capacity. And even much that appears dark, to one little accustomed to read the word—would brighten and unfold its meaning upon a more spiritual, more devoted, and habitual attention. **Diligence, prayer, and a holy state of mind, will unlock, to the inquiring believer, most of the hidden treasures of inspiration.** Those who complain of the darkness of the Scriptures, are generally those who have devoted the least time and attention to the *study* of them. Many uninspired books are difficult to those who only dip into them occasionally, but which, to the very same people, become easy, when studied with care. There is such a thing as becoming, by long examination, familiar with an author's style and manner, just as our protracted acquaintance with

an individual enables us to understand the drift of his remarks, better than we did at our first introduction to him. The aid of a commentary may be of service to those who have leisure to peruse it, and the means of purchasing it. Some may now be bought almost as cheap as a Bible without notes used to be.

But, perhaps, you say you have no **time**. No time to read the Bible! No time to read the book of God!—a book written by God *to* you, and *for* you, and *of* you! The only book which can make you wise to salvation! Have you time to eat, and drink, and sleep? And have you no time to read the Scriptures? Have you time to read letters from your friends, and no time to read letters from God! Time to read the *newspaper*, and not time to read the Bible? Do you not feel ashamed at the idea, especially when actually put into language? You *must* find time; and, if in no other way, by redeeming it from sleep, business, recreation, conversation, and other pursuits. How much time would it take daily to read, even with serious attention, a whole chapter? As to the generality of Christians, how many precious fragments of time might be gathered up from other occupations, which are actually wasted—to be employed on this high and holy engagement!

Probably you wish for some DIRECTIONS for your Bible-reading. A **delight** in the reading of the Scriptures, is the best guide. He that is in love with a book, scarcely needs a rule to assist him in the perusal of it. He will carry it about with him; make himself acquainted with the author's design; take it out when a few minutes' leisure present themselves; store its contents in his memory; think of them often; and apply them as occasions may present themselves. **Love to read the Scriptures—and you will be sure to read them with profit.** A real lover of his Bible cannot be an unprofitable one. But if you still wish assistance, take the following rules—

1. Read **INTELLIGENTLY**, as to the design of the sacred volume. If you do not set out with a clear perception of an author's design, you will be in the dark all the way through. And what is the design of the Bible? As it respects **GOD**, it is to reveal himself, not simply in the Unity of his essence, but

also in the Trinity of his personality. "It is God in Christ, reconciling the world to himself; not the *Creating*, but *Redeeming* God, which is the great purpose of revelation. It does reveal, and clearly reveals, God as the Creator—but this is subordinate, in purpose and plan, to the exhibition of God manifest in the flesh, redeeming a lost world from sin, Satan, death, and hell. Christ, as the medium of making God known, by the salvation of man, is the end of the Bible. "Search the Scriptures," said he to the Jews, "for they testify of me," John 5:39. Christ is the Alpha and the omega of revelation. The ceremonial law was the shadow, of which he is the substance—the Prophets testified of him—the Old Testament history contains the records of his ancestors—the Psalms of David celebrate his praises—the evangelists wrote the narrative of his life and death—the Epistles contain the development of his doctrine—and the Apocalypse unfolds his future victories over his foes, and the splendor of his reign to the end of time! All the lines of revelation center in Christ. In all your studies of the word, keep this in mind. Without allegorizing what is plain matter of fact, and nothing more; without spiritualizing what has one literal meaning; still remember that the general design of the Bible is to testify of Christ, and to reveal the moral character of God through him.

But a second design of the Bible regards **MAN**, which is, through this glorious revelation of God, to restore him to the Divine favor and image, which he lost by the fall. Redemption through Christ is not simply to save us from hell, but to restore us to God; not only to his love, but to his likeness. Justification by faith in Christ, is to the end that we might receive sanctification by the Spirit; having these, glorification follows as a consequence. Take in this whole design in reading the Scriptures. Be ever looking for the object of faith, which is the death of Christ; for the object of love, which is the image of Christ; and for the object of hope, which is the coming of Christ. Remember that the Scriptures are given to form a particular character; a character which is distinguished by three things—holiness, spirituality, and heavenly-mindedness. You must read, to *get* this character, to maintain it, to perfect it. The Bible is a mold into which mind, and heart, and actions, fused, shall I say, by the fire of holy love, shall be poured, so as to bring

out a character corresponding to what is there revealed. You must read, to drink into the spirit, to catch the temper, to imbibe the very tone of the Scripture.

It should be a frequent reflection with us, yes, a habitual one, as we take up the Bible, to say, "This book is intended to form in me a particular character, to fashion my whole self after a prescribed manner; and am I, by reading it, and studying it, answering this end? Have I a Bible-character? Is my mind a Bible-mind? Is my heart a Bible-heart? Is my life a Bible-life? As the seal has impressed its own image upon the melted wax, has the Bible impressed its own character on me? Do others see the fruit and effect of my study of the Scriptures in my likeness to the Scriptures? Do I not only *read* the Bible, but *am* I one?—a living, speaking, acting Bible?"

These questions are appropriate and momentous, and show for what purpose, and in what way, you are to peruse the sacred volume: not only for consolation in trouble; not merely for directions in particular emergencies; much less, merely to gratify curiosity in knowing its contents, or to furnish yourselves for theological controversy; but to acquire a holy and heavenly character and life.

2. Read **REVERENTIALLY**, remembering it is the word of God. Let there be a "Thus says the Lord," sounding in your ears. **Realize the fact, that it is God speaking to you in every page! Read with that awe, and reverence, and trembling, with which you would listen—if Jehovah were speaking to you with an audible voice!** I do not like to see the sacred volume treated with disrespect or irreverence, even in the manner of dealing with, or handling it; not from any superstitious feeling, as if there were sanctity in paper and printing—but there is in the contents! And as we are creatures of association of ideas, we are in danger of losing our reverence for the contents, if we treat with disesteem the vehicle which conveys them. How would it aid us in the perusal of the Scriptures, if we paused before we opened them, and reflected thus, "I am now going to hear God speak to me!" Into what a posture of reverential attention, would such a consideration place us. How would it solemnize our minds, check our levity, and prepare us to

receive the truth with all its powerful and holy influence.

3. Our perusal of the Scriptures should be **HABITUAL** and **CONSTANT**; and not merely occasional and accidental. Some rarely take up the Scriptures, but in a season of trial or difficulty, or at a time of leisure, to while away an hour which they know not how otherwise to dispose of. This shows a great neglect, not to say contempt of the Bible. The Scriptures should be, "The Christian's own book," and his "every-day book." There is never a day in his history when he does not need them, and should not use them. David describes the good man as one who delights in the law of the Lord, and meditates therein *day and night*—that is, every day and night. Never let a day pass without reading a portion of Holy Scripture; and ever consider that one duty of the day, and an important one too, has been neglected, if Scripture reading has been omitted. The truth of Scripture is the food of the mind and soul—and we should be as regular in the meals of the soul, as in those of the body.

4. Read the word of God **PRIVATELY**. Do not satisfy yourselves with what you hear at family prayer. You need opportunity for meditation, self-application, self-examination, self-reproof, self-stimulus, and, indeed, the whole business of self-improvement. If you would perform this duty effectually, and enjoy this privilege spiritually, you must have leisure and convenience to pause and ponder; to say, "My soul, mark that! You are lacking in this duty, or committing this sin. This is a message from God unto *you!* This promise, great and precious as it is, belongs to *you!* This consolation is for *you!* Look at that glorious object of faith! Contemplate that boundless prospect of glory!" Ah, you know not the secret of the Lord, which is with those who fear him, if there be nothing of this retirement, nothing of this self-communion over the Bible.

5. Do not read at random, or trust to accident, as the Bible may open, for the portion you peruse; but *read* **CONSECUTIVELY**. You must not dip for a passage; or pick and choose for some comfortable text. This occasions a waste of time, and leads to the neglect of a large portion of the Scriptures. Read regularly through some portion of the word. Here, perhaps, a question will be asked, whether it is

desirable, and a duty, to read regularly through the *whole* Bible. I reply, that some parts of the books of Moses, which contain what may be called the civil laws of the Jews, were intended, if not exclusively, yet principally for that people, and as they do not so much concern us as other parts, they need not of course be so often read—but even these are calculated, when read with a devout mind, to produce, as they were intended to produce—an impression of the holiness of God, the evil of sin, and the necessity of purity both of mind and conduct. Still it must be admitted, that there are other portions of Scripture, whatever important ends these were designed to serve, which tend far more to general edification than Numbers and Leviticus.

While the Old Testament is by no means to be neglected, especially the Psalms, Proverbs and the Prophecies, yet more time should be given to the New Testament. Without intending to disparage any portion of the Holy Scriptures, all of which were "given by inspiration of God, and are profitable for doctrine, for correction, for reproof, for instruction in righteousness," I may observe, that the parts which should be most frequently read, are the books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and Isaiah, in the Old Testament, and the Gospels and Epistles in the New Testament. These should be read through in regular order; but still allotting more time to the New Testament than to the Old.

To those who have much time at command, the Scriptures should be taken up as a book of sacred science, as well as daily practice, to be studied with much devout and solicitous research. Its chronology, geography, natural history, together with the history of the text, all might become matter of pleasant and profitable investigation. And what so worthy of it, as that book which boasts of a Divine authorship, and was written by the finger of God. Horne's "Introduction to the Study of the Scriptures," is a compilation of inestimable value, and by those who can afford to purchase it, and have time to read it, would furnish a wide and instructive range of holy and delightful inquiry. How agreeable an exercise is it to compare spiritual things with spiritual, and to unlock the treasures of the Old Testament, by the key of the apostolic writings; and thus to trace the harmony of God's gracious dispensations to the

children of men, as centering in the person and work of his Son.

As to the study of the symbolical and unfulfilled **prophecies**, contained in the books of Daniel, and the Apocalypse, this, to all who have leisure, is not only a legitimate, but a commendable subject of study, provided they conduct their inquiries with humility, draw their conclusions with caution, hold their opinions with a recollection how liable they are to err, and express their views with that diffidence which the multitudinous varieties of sentiment on this obscure topic seem to require.

But on other, and plainer subjects, there ought to be with all Christians, more of what, is very properly called—the *searching* of the Scriptures. How superficial is the acquaintance of many with this Book of books! How little do they know, because they as little inquire after, the mind of the Spirit! Where is the wish, the effort, and the plan to be mighty in the Scriptures? It is not enough to have a verbal acquaintance with them, to have them stored in the memory; though this may be of great service in scenes of sickness and feebleness of sight, when reading is difficult or impossible—but what is requisite, is **an acquaintance with their spiritual import, and a skill and facility in applying them to all the varieties of the Christian's situation and experience.** For this there must be time, conscientiously set apart, and diligently employed. It will not do to satisfy ourselves with a few snatches of the Bible, in moments of haste. It will not do to be content with a text taken from some "daily portion." It will not do merely to learn and repeat a single passage a day. Oh no, we must be much alone with the Bible—and give ourselves to the delightful task of poring over its pages! Still, however, it becomes us to recollect, that **it is not knowledge alone we should seek—but holiness.** It is with this precious food of Divine truth, as it is with the nutriment of the body, there is both pleasure *in* eating it, as well as strength derived *from* eating it—but it is the latter that is to be regarded as the ultimate end.

6. Let it not be your aim *to read much*—but *to **READ WELL.*** To read well, is to read with understanding, with meditation,

with feeling, with consolation, with improvement. A single verse thus read is better than a whole chapter carelessly and formally gone through. Some people set themselves the daily task of reading so many chapters, and would feel very unhappy if the task were not performed. But this is all. There is no inquiry into meaning, no meditation, no self-application. They know no more when they have finished what they have been reading about, than if they had not read at all. Always look at the heading or title of a chapter before you begin to read it, that you may know what the design of it is; then connect each verse with this design of the whole chapter, and the whole chapter with the design of the whole epistle. It would greatly help you to understand the Epistles, if you ascertain first their design, and occasionally read through a complete epistle at once, observing its own natural divisions, independently of the chapters, which are sometimes very injudiciously divided.

7. It is important, if you would profit, to ***mix FAITH with reading***, as well as hearing. The apostle has beautifully expressed this, where he says, "When you received the word of God which you heard from us, you received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually works in you that believe," 1 Thess. 2:13. Though it is the word of God, sharper than any two-edged sword—it cannot work in us without faith. The reason why it works so little in the way of holiness, consolation, and zeal—is because there is so little faith. It is often read by believers themselves without faith: there is not an act and exercise of faith in it at the time; no felt sense of the truth of the chapter that is thus read; no deep conviction, no practical persuasion, of the Divine authority and power of that promise, command, invitation, or threatening, which may be before the mind. There is the principle of faith in the Bible, as a whole—but not the exercise of faith, at that time, and in reference to that part of the Bible then read. What an impression would the word always produce on us, if we paused to make these two reflections: "This chapter is God's word *to me now*—and all his words are true."

8. We should read the Scriptures ***with earnest PRAYER*** for the teaching of the Spirit. The teaching of the Spirit is not to be expected apart from the word; nor a right understanding

and impression of the word, apart from the teaching of the Spirit. Divine influence is not to be sought or looked for in the way of granting us a new revelation, or new faculties—but in the way of a right direction of our present-faculties, to understand the revelation we already possess. That which makes this influence necessary, is not a defect in the Bible, but in ourselves. The Bible, as a revelation, is all that is necessary. "The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul" but there is a defect of the spiritual, though not mental organ in us, to receive its light. It is no fault of the sun, that a blind man cannot see the great luminary. Our judgments are affected by the state of our hearts. Hence we are liable to err in our minds, because of the imperfections of our hearts. Our corruptions send up exhalations into the higher regions of our minds, and thus the atmosphere becomes cloudy, and prevents the rays of truth from shining into our souls. Hence the need of praying, "Lord, open my eyes, that, I may behold wondrous things out of your law."

None of us will have any more *spiritual* understanding than the Spirit gives us; but then he will give us as much as we seek by earnest and believing prayer. To grow in grace, and in knowledge, we must consult both the book and its Divine Author: the one by study, and the other by prayer. What a privilege should we esteem it, in reference to a human author, if he were to say, "When you want any information on any point of my work, come and ask me for illustration and explanation." God *does* say this to us in reference to *his* book. His Spirit reveals to us his mind and will in the Scriptures. Hence those striking prayers of the apostle, "I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, would give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened so you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the glorious riches of His inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of His power to us who believe, according to the working of His vast strength." (Ephesians 1:17-19)

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