

RODGERS
BAPTIST
CHURCH
SUNDAY
SCHOOL SERIES

MERRY CHRISTMAS AND HAPPY NEW YEAR!



Lessons for Christmas and Bible Sunday | prepared by Bro. Travis Gilbert

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#1 – The Man Who Held Jesus

Luke 2:21-35

The Christmas story is so familiar that taking it for granted comes easy, but there is nothing common about God the Son being made flesh. Our familiarity with Christmas may cause us to miss the mystery of the event, yet the Apostle Paul wrote in **1 Timothy 3:16a**, “*And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh.*” Think about it. God was made flesh! The Creator of the universe became a baby! It seems unbelievable to think that a man could actually hold God in his arms, and yet that is what happened, as recorded in **Luke 2:25-35**. Here we find the story of Simeon, a just and devout man who was at the Temple in Jerusalem. Simeon was an unusual man.

The Unusual Man

He was taught by the Word of God.

“And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name [was] Simeon; and the same man [was] just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel” – **Luke 2:25a**

“The consolation of Israel” is an expression that means “the Messianic hope” and that means that Simeon actually believed that God would fulfill His promises and that Christ would be born.

He was led by the Spirit of God.

“and the Holy Ghost was upon him. And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came by the Spirit into the temple” – **Luke 2:25b-27a**

Simeon's life was filled with joy, and not only joy, but praise to God because he was in the Spirit, controlled by the Spirit of God, and he was filled with worship and adoration to God. Here is a man taught by the Word of God, led by the Spirit of God, and he had the privilege of holding the Son of God in his arms!

Because of the Old Testament custom that said every firstborn male shall be called holy to the Lord, Joseph and Mary brought the baby Jesus to Jerusalem to offer a sacrifice (**vv. 23-24**) on the day that Simeon “just happened” to be at the Temple. Upon seeing the parents with the child, Simeon knew something; he understood that the child he held was the Messiah. The text says “*the Lord's Christ*” (**v. 26**).

Simeon cradled Jesus in his arms, and then he uttered a hymn of praise:

"Mine eyes have seen thy salvation, Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel" – **Luke 2:30-32**

Notice that Simeon sees Christ not only as the King of the Jews, but also King to the Gentiles, and to the world. His glory swallows up all the other glories in the world. Which brings to mind **John 1:14**, "*And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.*"

Three Images

Simeon followed his word of praise with a word of prophecy. In this prophecy he used three images, or illustrations, to convey the significance of this little Baby's birth.

A Stone

The first image was of a stone. He said... "Behold, this [child] **is set** for the fall and rising again of many in Israel" – **v. 34a**

Depicting the Messiah as a foundation stone is not unique to this text alone. This image is commonly used in the New Testament (**Matthew 21:42; Mark 12:10-11; Luke 20:17-18; Acts 4:11; Ephesians 2:20; 1 Peter 2:4-8**). Of course, those passages are based on **Psalm 118:22**, "*The stone [which] the builders refused is become the head [stone] of the corner.*" Jesus quoted that Psalm in **Luke 20:17-18**:

"He beheld them, and said, What is this then that is written, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner? Whosoever shall fall upon that stone shall be broken; but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder."

For those who accept Jesus Christ, He is their firm foundation of refuge and strength; a stone that leads them another step higher in their walk with God. But to those who reject Him, He becomes a stone of stumbling, a rock of offense (**1 Corinthians 1:23**).

Why do people stumble over Christ? Why do they stumble over the cross? Beneath the message of Jesus Christ, there is the awful truth of our own helplessness and sinfulness. The imagery of somebody dying on behalf of others seems repugnant to the human mind. We say to ourselves, "If I am to be saved, I want to save myself." The coming of Christ and the cross of Christ (those two events cannot be separated) run against all of the high ideals mankind has about itself.

As Simeon said, "*Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel.*" For some, He will cause falling. For others, He will cause rising, and that Greek word means resurrection!

A Sign

“And for **a sign** which shall be spoken against” – v. 34b

The Greek word means “miracle.” Jesus Christ’s birth was a miracle. He was (and is) a miracle worker, but He was (and is) “spoken against” or opposed. Just a cursory reading of the New Testament will bear this out. Jesus was opposed all the time. Not much has changed today. There is something within us that says, “We do not want to accept a miracle worker, because if He is who He claims to be, we need to make a decision about Him.”

It is easy for the world to love the baby in the manger, because babies are harmless. Jesus in the manger is a great story, a distant story, involving a poor young woman giving birth in ugly circumstances to a cute and cuddly baby. Baby Jesus would never think of interfering in our lives. Jesus is not just a nativity scene. He is the crucified and risen Christ, the triumphant Christ, the Judge who is about to come, the Christ who calls us to die to self and follow Him. *That* Jesus is opposed.

A Sword

The first two images are of a stone and a sign. The third one is given in **verse 35**:

“(Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.”

Originally, this was specifically directed to Mary. Simeon told this new mother that a sword would enter into her heart. When she was accused of fornication as an unwed mother, her soul was pierced by the sword of *shame*. When Herod slew the male children of Bethlehem while searching for the Christ child, her soul was pierced by the sword of *blame*; after all, it was her son Herod sought.

Simeon, however, was speaking of the cross. Think of Jesus being crucified, and Mary sitting at the foot of the cross, watching her oldest Son die. There she was, the sword of sorrow having pierced her own soul. No doubt, her suffering was great, but it could not somehow help anyone’s salvation. *She was at the cross as a sinner like all the rest of us*, knowing that it would be through her Son that she would be personally redeemed.

Simeon was an unusual man because he was taught by God’s Word and led by God’s Spirit. May we all be so unusual! His prophecy was loaded with three images concerning the Christ child: a stone, a sign, and a sword, and Simeon also teaches us three important lessons.

Three Lessons

#1 – Look for Christ and You will Find Him

Simeon, bless his heart, was looking for the Consolation of Israel. And God graciously and wondrously said, “Simeon, you are looking for it. You shall see it. And you shall hold the consolation of Israel in your very arms.” In the same way, the Apostle Paul says that there is a crown of righteousness awaiting those who love the Lord’s appearing (**2 Timothy 4:8**). Look for Christ and you will find Him.

#2 – Blessings may also be Burdens

Mary was blessed to be chosen by God to give birth to His son. That is what the angel told her (**Luke 1:28**). That is what Elisabeth said about her (**v. 42**). That is what she said about herself (**v. 48**). What a tremendous, indescribable blessing she received! No wonder she broke out in a song of joy.

Little did she know that along with that blessing there would be a burden. Along with that honor, there would be a horror, because the sword would pierce her heart, even though she was right in the middle of the will of God. Blessings do not always equal the absence of burdens.

#3 – All who Hear about Christ Are Affected by Him

Everyone that confronted Jesus Christ in the New Testament either embraced Him and was exalted, or rejected Him and was debased. What is it that Simeon said? *“This child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel.”*

Here is a shocking statement. Give it due (and Biblical) consideration: *Not everybody is better off because Jesus came.* For many people, the coming of Jesus Christ has and will cause them to fall; because having been confronted with the Son of God, they reject Him (**John 3:19-21**). Christ’s first advent was as the baby in Bethlehem. He came in humility and with grace for all who will believe.

The Bible says that His second coming will be in judgment **2 Thessalonians 1:7-9**:

“And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ”

God in Simeon’s arms grew to be a man. Was crucified, raised, ascended, and will return in great glory, and great power. We can sing today, “Silently, how silently the wondrous gift is

given. So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven”¹ because we look at the past. In the future, it will be very, very different.

Therefore, when you think of Christ, is He the one who has caused you to rise, or are you stumbling over Him? Are you falling? Do you say to yourself, “I will not let this Christ break into my life?” If you come that way, you will fall, but if you come with an open heart and say, “I receive Him as my God and my Savior,” then you shall rise.

Neither you nor I will ever hold God in our arms, but we will one day stand before God face to face. If we are clothed in Christ’s righteousness, then that shall be a glorious day. The glory of Christmas is the glory of God’s Son, and that glory is endless.

Do not wait to open your heart to the Christ that Simeon once embraced in his arms!

¹ O Little Town of Bethlehem

#2 – Have a Humble Christmas!

Philippians 2:1-8

I love to wish others to have a “Merry Christmas!” I love to be wished a “Merry Christmas!” I love singing about enjoying a holly, jolly Christmas. You never know if there’ll be snow, but have a cup of cheer (which must mean coffee, maybe cider). And when you walk down the street, saying ‘hello’ to everyone you meet is so pleasant and sweet. Just saying those words – “Merry Christmas” and “Have a holly, jolly Christmas” – brings a smile to my face and a song to my heart.

Have you ever greeted anyone at this time of year with, “Have a humble Christmas.”? I never have. Most likely have not either, because we interpret a humble Christmas as one with few gifts and not a whole lot of cheer, because there are few gifts, or maybe few family members gathered together. No one is interested in having “just” a humble Christmas. If we must, we will make do and be happy for a humble holiday, but we would much rather celebrate a holly, jolly one. Hopefully, after this lesson we will be reminded that a humble Christmas is a merry one too.

One of my favorite Christmas texts puts humility at the heart of the holiday. That text is Philippians 2:1-8. It is good for believers, this Christmas and every Christmas, to marvel at Jesus’ humility, and to seek to emulate that humility more and more. But whenever we speak about humility, and the humility of Christ in particular, there are a couple of problems.

1. First, there is what Christian author Tim Keller calls the “shyness of humility.” He once wrote, “Humility is so shy. If you begin talking about it, it leaves.”² So, if we are not careful, lessons about and desires for humility may be self-defeating. We never want to be proud of our humility, right? Humility is a *shy virtue*, but one that should be characteristic of God’s people.
2. The second problem is that Jesus was not humble for the *same reasons* we are (or should be) humble. Our humility, if there is any at all, is based on our *finiteness*, our *fallibility*, and our *sinfulness*. But the eternal Son of God is *infinite*. He is *infallible*. He is *without sin*. So, unlike our humility, Jesus’ humility originated some other way.

How then can looking at Jesus’ Christmas humility help us?

That is where Philippians 2:1-8, one of the best of all Christmas passages, comes into play. As we read Philippians 2:1-8, look for Jesus’ humility. It will not be hard to find.

“If *there be* therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same

² *Christianity Today*, Dec. 2008, p. 51

love, *being* of one accord, of one mind. *Let nothing be done* through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.”

The Humility of the King

What defines Jesus’ humility is the fact that it is primarily a conscious act of putting Himself in a lowly, servant role for the good of others. His humility is defined by phrases like:

- *“Made Himself of no reputation”* this means that Jesus Christ emptied himself of His divine rights, laid aside His privileges so that He might receive abuse and suffering **for us!**
- *“And took upon Him the form of a servant”* the sovereign Being of all the universe, by whose omnipotent power all things are and are upheld (Hebrews 1:3; Colossians 1:17), this One took the form of a bondservant.
- *“He humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.”* The Lord Jesus did not demand that He be treated according to His rights, He willingly subjected Himself to persecution, even to the point of a humiliating and excruciating death on the cross **for our** sins.

Jesus’ humility was not from a disposition of being finite or fallible or sinful. It was from a heart of infinite perfection and infallible truthfulness and freedom from all sin, which for that very reason *did not need* to be served. Still, He freely and fully overflowed in serving.

This brings us to another Christmas text. This one is in the Gospel of Mark 10:45: *“For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.”*

Jesus’ humility was not a sense of defect in Himself, but a sense of fullness in Himself put at the disposal of others for their good. It was a voluntary lowering of Himself to make the height of His glory available for sinners to enjoy.

Jesus makes the connection between His Christmas lowliness and the good news for us in Matthew 11:28-30:

“Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke *is* easy, and my burden is light.”

His lowliness makes our relief from burdens possible. If He had not made Himself lowly, He would not have been “*obedient unto death, even death on a cross.*” And if He had not been obedient to die for us, we would be crushed under the weight of our sins. He lowered Himself to take our condemnation. God the Father sent His own Son in the likeness of human flesh, as an offering for sin, and the Son condemned sin in the flesh! Romans 8:3, “For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh:”

The Necessary Humility of His Subjects

Now we have more reason to be humble than before. We are finite, fallible, sinful, and therefore have no ground for boasting at all. Our salvation is not owing to our work, but His grace. So boasting is excluded, except for boasting in the cradle and in the cross of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:8-9; Jeremiah 9:23-24; 1 Corinthians 1:31; Galatians 6:14). And the way He accomplished that gracious salvation was through voluntarily coming to this world in human form, and going to our cross.

In addition to finiteness, fallibility, and sinfulness, we have two other huge impulses at work to humble us: free and undeserved grace underneath all our blessings, and the model of self-denying, sacrificial, servanthood that Jesus provides.

We are called to join Jesus in this conscious self-humbling servant-hood.

- Matthew 23:12, “And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.”
- Philippians 2:5, “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus:”

Should be Displayed in His Church

Christmastime inevitably brings with it a sense of unity – call it togetherness if you like – with others. This may also be referred to as “Christmas spirit,” and is experienced by people who are not born-again believers. But this type of sentimental and nostalgic “unity” is short-lived. Usually just through the month of December, if that long.

That is not genuine, Christ-like humility, and the followers of Jesus Christ should be only interested in the real deal. True spiritual unity comes from within; it is a matter of the heart.

Uniformity is the result of outside pressure. Believers should display humility in all aspects of life, but the ideal places for humility to be exhibited are within the home and the local church.

The basic cause of disunity is *selfishness*, and the cause of selfishness is *pride*. There can be no joy – at Christmas or any other time – in the life of the Christian who puts himself above others. “Others” is one of the key ideas in Philippians 2. The believer’s eyes are to be turned away from himself and focused on the needs of others. “*Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.*” (Philippians 2:3)

Please understand that the humble person is not one who thinks poorly of himself; he just does not think of himself more highly than he ought (Romans 12:3). Remember, this is the “shy virtue” of Christmas (and all times). If you know you are humble then you are not. Think about that for a second, and be yielded to Christ as His servant, using what you are and what you have for the glory of God and the good of others. “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus”

Here are four characteristics³ of this “mind” – this attitude.

1. *He thinks of others, not himself* – Philippians 2:5-6
2. *He serves* – Philippians 2:7
3. *He sacrifices* – Philippians 2:8 sacrificial service should be joyfully rendered (Hebrews 12:2). “Ministry that costs nothing accomplishes nothing.”⁴
4. *He glorifies God* – Philippians 2:9-11

Let’s pray that this “shy virtue” would peek out from its quiet place and grant us the garments of lowliness.⁵

Have a humble Christmas!

³ These four characteristics are taken from Warren Wiersbe’s commentary on Philippians – *Be Joyful*.

⁴ J.H. Jowett as quoted by Wiersbe in *Be Joyful*

⁵ 1 Peter 5:5, “*Be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.*”

#3 – Ezra’s Example

Ezra 7:10

At Rodgers Baptist Church we have a blessed tradition of beginning every year with a focus on the centrality of God’s Word, and a challenge to read through the Bible in a year. We call this focus “Bible Sunday.” Obviously, that does not mean the Bible is out of focus the other 51 Sundays of the year. It is not! Another blessed tradition of this church is that we stand on, are rooted in, and faithfully proclaim God’s Word.

For this year’s Bible Sunday lesson I invite you to turn in your Bibles to **Ezra 7:10**. This verse bears testimony of the Old Testament scribe Ezra. Before we read the verse let me explain the difference between an Old Testament scribe and a prophet. They were both messengers of the will of God, but prophets received and proclaimed *new revelations* from the Lord, whereas scribes proclaimed, explained and applied the truths already revealed. That is the position that we are in also. The Bible is all the revelation that we need. There are no *new* revelations from God. God’s revelation to man is found in the Scriptures, and they are complete.

So, let’s read **Ezra 7:10**: “For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do *it*, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.”

Ezra provides an example that Christians need to follow! There are four attributes of Ezra that I want you to notice, and, hopefully, commit yourself to.

Prepare Your Heart

If you are to follow Ezra’s example, you must first prepare your heart. How is that accomplished? You must:

1. Pray for God’s guidance

Jesus says in **Matthew 7:7**: “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.”

Of the many things that we should ask, seek, and knock, God’s wisdom is the greatest. The only way to gain knowledge, wisdom, and discernment is through the Spirit of God. And that starts with prayer.

James 1:5: “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.”

Now, how do you think God will supply you with this abundance of wisdom that He has promised? Do any here believe that you just ask and wait for an anointing of wisdom, knowledge, and discernment? Look to **Proverbs 2:1-6**:

“My son, if thou wilt receive my words, and hide my commandments with thee; So that thou incline thine ear unto wisdom, [and] apply thine heart to understanding; Yea, if thou criest after knowledge, [and] liftest up thy voice for understanding; If thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as [for] hid treasures; Then shalt thou understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God. For the LORD giveth wisdom: out of his mouth [cometh] knowledge and understanding.”

Knowledge, wisdom, discernment, all of these things come from God - *through* the Scripture - and to us. Pray for God's guidance as you prepare to delve into His Word.

2. Confession of Sin

There is a second step of preparation that is necessary before we can pursue the truths found in God's Word, and that is *confession of sin*. That is stated very plainly in two sections of Scripture. Look in **James 1:21**: “Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.”

It is impossible to profitably study the Scriptures with an impure mind.

Once we have prayed for God's guidance and confessed our sins, then we will be prepared to...

Pursue Him in His Word

Ezra sought after the Lord, and the only place you can go to find God is in His Word. Oh, sure, there is evidence of God all around us. God has written two infallible, inerrant, completely true revelations. One is the Bible, and the other is creation. General revelation will point people to God's glory (**Romans 1:20**), but salvation and growth in Christ comes by hearing and heeding His special revelation. All creation is evidence of God's power, but to really find God you must go to the Scriptures. **1 Peter 2:1-2**: “Wherefore laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings, As newborn babes, **desire** the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby:” (emphasis added)

Desire for Scripture

Do you desire Scripture the way a newborn desires milk? If you're going to study the Bible, then you have to desire it. I have heard a story about the famous philosopher Socrates. I don't know if it's true or not, but since it illustrates my point really well I'm going to use it. Socrates was the leading philosopher and teacher of his time and every serious student wanted to be

his pupil. The story states that a young man approached Socrates and said, “Sir, I would like to be your pupil. Would you teach me?”

Socrates just said “Follow me” then turned and walked into the water, and continued walking until he and this young man were both about chin deep in the water. Socrates turned to the young man; put both hands on his head and shoved him under the water, holding him there. Wanting to exercise great respect for the teacher, the young man tried his best quietly to remain below the surface and hold his breath, but after a few moments that became impossible. He began to fight his way back to the surface, with Socrates continuing to hold him underwater. Finally he let go. The young man burst out of the water coughing up water and yelling at the older man. Socrates just looked at him and said, “When you want to know as desperately as you want to breathe, then I’ll be your teacher.”

As newborns desire their mother’s milk we are to desire the pure, spiritual milk of the Word. Ezra “*prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord.*” Ezra had a *desire* for Scripture. He was a serious, diligent student of Scripture. You and I must be also!

The only way to gain knowledge of Scripture is by *reading* it. There is no shortcut to this. It is vital that we spend time daily in the Word of God and in prayer. As pastors we must not only teach and preach the Bible, we must motivate and equip our people to also be students of God’s Word. Our desire, for ourselves and our people, should be to say as the Psalmist did, “*I delight myself in thy statutes: I will not forget thy word*” (119:16).

Something is wrong if Christians come to church, plug into the Bible, and then unplug themselves on the way out; waiting for the next service to reconnect with the Word of God. A daily walk, a right fellowship with the Lord, cannot be accomplished without spending time daily in God’s Word.

Are we, like Ezra, pursuing the depth of truths found in God’s Word? Oh, how we need to be!

Practice and Proclaim Biblical Truth

Not only should we pursue biblical truth as did Ezra, but we should also practice and proclaim the truths that we discover. Our text simply says, “*Ezra prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it...*” If we desire our families and the people in our churches to put into practice the truths of God’s Word, then we must set the example. We learn the Word to live the Word. “*Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves,*” is the charge we have been given in **James 1:22**. The ultimate goal of Bible study is not increased knowledge but increased holiness and Christlikeness.

“*Ezra prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.*” Ezra practiced what he preached! I encourage you to read the book of **Ezra**

and see for yourself how this man always put his faith and trust in the Lord for all matters. How he always did that which God commanded through Scripture no matter what the circumstances might be. Ezra was the first of the expository preachers. Listen to this passage from **Nehemiah 8**:

"And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month. And he read therein before the street that was before the water gate from the morning until midday, And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people; (for he was above all the people;) and when he opened it, all the people stood up: And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground. So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading."

What a preacher! Ezra was not ashamed to proclaim the Word of God. I find it curious when people claim to have a love for the Bible, and claim to be in it daily, and yet never practice or proclaim what they claim to cherish.

Beloved, we need to follow **Ezra's Example**. We need to **prepare** our hearts by asking for God's guidance and through confession of our sin. We must diligently **pursue** God's truths. *"Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of Truth."* **2 Timothy 2:15**. And, lastly but so important, we must be committed to **practice** those truths *"Be ye doers of the Word and not hearers only"* and we must **proclaim** - teach- others those truths that we have diligently sought and learned.

Are you following **Ezra's example**? If not, why don't you commit yourself to begin today?

Appendix: How About You?⁶

The great tragedy among Christians today is that too many of us are under the Word of God, but not in it for ourselves. What about you? Do you regularly read and study the Bible on your own? Or are you part of the majority of people who rarely if ever open the Bible for themselves? Here's a simple exercise to help you evaluate your Bible reading habits.

How often do you read the Bible? (choose one)

- Never
- Once a month
- Once a week
- Two or Three times a week
- Every day

When you read it, what is the average time spent reading? (choose one)

- 5 minutes
- 15 minutes
- 30 minutes
- 45 minutes
- 1 hour
- More than an hour

Here are a few reasons that people give for not reading the Bible. Check the ones that express why you do not read the Bible more than you do.

_____ The Bible seems confusing and hard to understand. I don't know how to make sense of it.

_____ I feel guilty when I read the Bible.

_____ The Bible is hopelessly out-of-date. It may have some interesting stories, but it has little significance or relevance for life today.

_____ I rely on my pastor or minister to explain the Bible to me. If I need to know something, he will tell me about it.

⁶ Howard G. Hendricks, *Living by the Book: the Art and Science of Reading the Bible*, (Moody, revised ed. 2007), p. 20

_____ I have doubts about the Bible's reliability.

_____ I don't have time. I'm just too busy.

_____ The Bible seems boring to me.

_____ The Bible is full of myths and half-truths. Why study something that lacks credibility?

_____ I don't read, period! It's not just the Bible, I don't read anything.

Read, Record, Reflect⁷

Would you like to start gaining more from your time in the Scriptures? Here are three habits to cultivate that will increase your productivity. Use them every time you open your Bible.

READ – This may seem obvious. Yet too many “readers” are nothing but browsers. They turn pages the way they flip through channels on a TV set, looking for something to catch their interest. The Word doesn't lend itself to that sort of approach. It requires conscious, concentrated effort. So read portions of the Bible over and over. The more you read them, the more clear they will become.

RECORD – In other words, write some notes. Jot down what you see in the text. Keep a record of your insights and questions. I don't know how many times someone has said to me, “Prof, what I have to write down is not very good.” Yet the fact is, you can't build on something you don't have. So start where you are, even with very elementary things. Everyone starts at the same place. But be sure to write it down. Use a legal pad or notebook to record what you see. In your own words, summarize your observations and insights so that later they will come back to you. Doing so will help you remember what you've discovered and use it.

REFLECT – That is, take some time to think about what you've seen. Ask yourself: What's going on in this passage? What is it telling me about God? About myself? What do I need to do on the basis of what I'm reading here? As we're going to see, reflection, or meditation, is vital to understanding and applying God's Word.

⁷ Ibid., p. 44

