



C.S. LEWIS INSTITUTE

HOW TO READ THE BIBLE

CHARLES SPURGEON (1834 – 1892)

ENGLISH BAPTIST PREACHER

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“Till I come, give attendance to reading.”

— *1 Timothy 4:13.*



Of course this counsel and exhortation is intended primarily as a direction to Christian ministers and especially to young Christian ministers. They must read much if they are to be profitable to others as preachers. There used to be a very stupid conceit in some sections of the church, that if a minister read extensively, he would only give forth stale truth, or what some simpletons called, “dead men’s brains.” Men have now learned, however, that he will be most fresh and original in his own thoughts who most diligently cultivates his mind by studying and pondering the thoughts of other minds. He who never quotes, will never be quoted, and he who does not read is not very likely to be read. Of course the first thing the minister needs is to be taught of the Spirit, but then the question is — How does the Spirit teach? He teaches, no doubt, mainly through the word and through our own experimental acquaintance with that word. But if He pleases to reveal a truth of God to another man, and I will not read that truth as it has been recorded by that other man, I have neglected the teaching of the Spirit of God. You know, with regard to the Savior’s miracles, that there was not one of them that was unnecessary. He never did a thing by miracle which could have been performed by the ordinary laws of nature. So it is with the

Give attendance to reading” is an exhortation which I would press upon most of you, especially those of you who have leisure and who are not called to exhausting labors which take up all your time.





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teaching of the Spirit — I have no right to expect that the Spirit will reveal truth to me without the use of a book when I can find it out for myself with the book. “The Holy Spirit helps our infirmities,” but not our idleness! He is given to us on purpose that He may help us when we are weak, but not that we may be indulged where we are slothful. I have sometimes had the unutterable misery of listening to a sermon which has been professedly dictated by the Spirit of God, but in which it was clear that the preacher had never thought upon the subject before he spoke — and I can only say that I was quite at a loss to perceive any peculiar beauty in the sermon, nor did I see anything at all which made it a source of edification superior to a sermon which had been prepared by someone else. I thought I detected a good many traits of human ignorance — and but very few traces of the working of the Holy Spirit.

There are many young fellows here tonight who are preparing for the ministry. I shall not, however, enlarge on this point, but shall only press on their earnest consideration and their most devout meditation. This inspired exhortation, which is not mine, nor even an apostle’s only, but the exhortation of the Holy Spirit of God through the apostle — “Give attendance to reading.” If, brothers, you would bless God’s church and train up a band of really intelligent Christians, do not be always appealing only to the emotions, but also give out good, sound, strong gospel doctrine — and illustrate the doctrine, so as to expound and comment to others. Do this especially by reading the words of the greatest masters in Scripture theology — and these will prove your delightful and dear companions and your splendid helpers in making your ministry richly profitable to your hearers.

This, however, is not our special subject for tonight. This same exhortation so peculiarly suitable to the minister, will suit all his hearers, too, because the ministry is not a religious caste peculiar to some few, but we are, all of us, to teach others according as God shall teach us! And in order that we may be useful in our sphere, as the minister is in his, we must adopt the same means



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to fit ourselves for our high privilege and to prepare us to be used by God. As the minister without reading will have but little power, so will it be with Christians in general. “Give attendance to reading” is an exhortation which I would press upon most of you, especially those of you who have leisure and who are not called to exhausting labors which take up all your time. I am not, however, going to keep so closely to my text as merely to exhort you to read. I want to ask you to read God’s Word! That seems to me to be the Christian’s book. You may read other books and your mind may thereby be well-furnished with spiritual things, but if you keep to the Word of God, though you may be deficient in many points of a liberal education, you will not be deficient in the education that will fit you for blessed service here, for the service of skies, for communion with God on earth and communion with Christ in glory!

My objective this evening is to say a few things about how to read the Bible. Last Thursday night we spoke at length upon God’s Word as to its excellences. Tonight I think it fitting that we should speak a little about how to read that word with greatest profit to our souls. In doing so we shall hope to consider seven precepts all bearing powerfully upon this important matter.

Our first precept shall be — I. READ AND DEPEND on the Spirit of God. How often do we open the sacred book and read a chapter through, perhaps at family prayer, or perhaps in our own private devotions and, having read from the first verse to the last, we shut up the book thinking we have done something very right and very proper — and in a vague way somehow profitable to us? Very right and very proper, indeed, and yet, right and proper as the thing is, we may really have gained nothing thereby! We may, in fact, have only drilled ourselves in the merely external part of religion and may not have enjoyed anything spiritual, or anything that can be beneficial to our souls if we have forgotten the divine spirit through whom the word has come to us!



If God shines not upon the word when we read it, then the word shines not back upon us, but becomes a dark word to us, or as one says, "Rather an obscuration than a revelation, rather concealing God from us, than revealing Him to us."



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Ought we not even to remember that in order to properly understand the holy word we need to have the Holy Spirit to be His own expositor? The hymn says concerning providence — “God is His own interpreter And He will make it plain” and certainly it is so with regard to the Scriptures! Commentators and expositors are very useful, indeed, but the best expositor is always the author of a book, himself. If I had a book which I did not quite understand, it would be a very great convenience to me to live next door to the author, for then I could run in and ask him what he meant. This is just your position, Christian! The book will sometimes puzzle you, but the divine author, who must know His own meaning, is always ready to lead you into its meaning! He dwells in you, and shall be with you, and Christ Jesus said, “When He, the Spirit of truth is come, He shall lead you into all truth.”

But to understand the word is not enough. We also need that He makes us to feel its power. How can we do this except through the Holy Spirit? “Your word has quickened me,” O God, but it is only as You did quicken me through it. The Word of God is to be read literally, but, “it is the letter that kills.” Only “the Spirit gives life” and, excellent as are its statements, yet even they have no spiritual force in themselves! Unless the Holy Spirit shall fill them, even they shall become as wells without water and as clouds without rain. Have you not often found it so yourselves? I appeal now to your own experience. You have sometimes read a portion of Scripture and the page has seemed to glow, your heart has burned within you and you have said that the word came home to you with power.

Just so, but it was the Holy Spirit who was bringing it home to your spirit in its true power and making it a sweet savor of life unto life to you! At other times, you may have read the very same page and painfully missed the sweetness which once you had tasted — and lost the lovely light that once flashed from it upon your mind’s eye!



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Everything must depend upon the Spirit speaking through it, for even the light of the Word of God is, to a great extent, but moonlight. That is to say, it is a reflection of the light which streams from God, Himself, who is the one true source of light. If God shines not upon the word when we read it, then the word shines not back upon us, but becomes a dark word to us, or as one says, “Rather an obscuration than a revelation, rather concealing God from us, than revealing Him to us.” Look up, reader! The next time the book is in your hands, look up before you open it — and while your eyes are running down the page, look up and pray that God would shine upon it! And when the chapter is finished and you put the book away, take a minute, again, to look up and ask His blessing. If by reading the Scriptures we were only always reminded of the Holy Spirit. If we got no other good from the Scripture, itself, except the turning of our souls to think upon that divine and blessed one, that would be, in itself, an inestimable blessing! Do read, then, thoughtfully remembering the great author.

Our second precept is — II. READ AND MEDITATE.

There is no exercise more out of fashion, nowadays, than meditation! And yet, to use Brookes’ expression, “it is a soul fattening duty.” The cattle crop the grass, but the nutrition comes from the chewing of the cud! Reading is the gathering together of our food, but meditation is the chewing of the cud, the digesting, and the assimilating of the truth of God! I quarry out the truth when I read, but I smelt the ore and get the pure gold out of it when I meditate! Ruth gleaned, but afterwards she threshed. The reader is the gleaner, but he who meditates is the thresher, too. For lack of meditation the truth of God runs by us and we miss and lose it. Our treacherous memory is like a sieve — and what we hear and what we read runs through it and leaves but little behind — and that little is often unprofitable to us by reason of our lack of diligence to get thoroughly at it. I often find it very profitable to get



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a text as a sweet morsel under my tongue in the morning and to keep the flavor of it, if I can, in my mouth all day!

I like to turn it over and over again in my mind, for any one text of the Scriptures you will find to be like the kaleidoscope. Turn it one way and you say, “What a fair truth of God is this!” Turn it another way and you see the same truth, but under how different an aspect! Turn it yet once more — and keep doing it all day — and you will be amazed and delighted to find in how many lights the same truth will appear and what wonderful permutations and combinations you can find in it! When you have been doing this all day, you will be compelled to feel that there is an infinity about even one text, so that you can never completely comprehend it but find it still is beyond you! If you get a passage of Scripture given you, do not quickly give it up because you do not immediately seize its force and fullness. The manna which fell in the wilderness would not keep sweet beyond one day — if kept over unto the second, it bred worms and stank. But there was one portion of manna which was put into a golden pot and laid up in the Ark of the Covenant which never lost its sweetness and heavenly nutriment! And there is a way of keeping the precious portions of God’s Word that are given you today, in such a manner that you may go in the strength of it for forty days and continue to find fresh food in the same text day after day, and even month after month! But this is only to be done by meditating upon it. Our hymn has a fable in it when it says that the — “Spicy breezes Blow soft over Ceylon’s isle.”

Voyagers who have been there, tell us that they have never smelt “the spicy breezes,” for the cinnamon yields no perfume till it is bruised and broken! And certainly God’s Word is exceedingly full of perfume, but not till it has been graciously bruised by reverent and loving meditation. You cannot get the sweetness and fragrance from it till you have smitten it again and again in the mortar of thought with the pestle of recollection. Meditate, then, upon these things!



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“But how can we meditate,” asks one, “when we have so many things to think of?” But “one thing is necessary,” and it is necessary that the Christian should mediate upon the things of God! I know you must give your minds to many things and I cannot ask you not to do so, but whenever you have time to rest, then let your minds come back to the old home. The birds of the air are all day long picking up their food, but they go straight away to their roost at night, and so when the day’s business is over and the daily bread has been gained, fly to your nest and rest your soul in some precious portion of God’s Word. During the day, too, whenever you are freed from anxiety, let your mind dart upwards — and it will help you to do so if you take a text and make it as wings that enable you to fly to ponder heavenly things. Read and meditate!

The third rule for our guide should be — III. READ AND APPLY.

What I mean is just this. Do not read the Bible as a book for other people. Do not read it merely to say, “Yes, it is true. Very true. I believe its doctrines to be the revelation of the infallible mind of God, Himself.” But also endeavor in reading a page of the Scriptures, always to see how much it belongs to you. For some of you there is very little in the Word of God except threats. Pray God to help you to feel the solemnity even of the threats, for if you feel deeply the threats, now, you may be delivered from the tragic fulfillment of them by-and-by! If you are made to tremble under God’s Word, you may never be made to tremble under God’s hand. If you feel the wrath to come, now, you may never have to feel it in the next world. Ask God that His threats may drive you out of your sins and drive you to seek pardon in Christ. Then when you read descriptions of the human heart and the Fall, the corruption and the depravity of our nature, look and see yourselves as in a mirror and say of each man as you hear of his sin, “I am such a man as this was, and if I do not fall into precisely the same sin, yet the possibility and peril of it is in my heart and I could do so, but for God’s restraining grace.” Take



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the very histories home to your heart and find a point in them, either of encouragement or of warning for yourselves. As for the doctrines, remember that a doctrine kills except as it is personally grasped and as you feel your interest in it. I have known some rejoice greatly in the doctrine of election who were never elected, and some who were very pleased with the doctrine of justification by faith, but who had no faith by which to be justified! I have known of some, too, who gloried in final perseverance, but who, if they had finally persevered would certainly have been in hell, for they were on the road there! It is one thing to know these truths of God, and even to fight for them with the zeal and bitterness of a controversialist, but it is quite another thing to enjoy them as our own heritage and our portion forever! Ask the Lord to show you your interest in every truth and do not be satisfied until you have an assured personal interest in them! Especially let this be so with the promises. “I will never leave you, nor forsake you!” Well, it is a very fine promise, but if it is read to me thus — “I will never leave you, nor forsake you,” what a transformed and glorified promise it then becomes! Stout old Martin Luther used to say, “All vital religion is in the personal and possessive pronouns.” Is it not so? “When you pass through the river I will be with you, the floods shall not overflow you!” Oh, truly, such a promise is as a cluster of Eshcol, but it is in Eschol’s valley and I cannot reach it there! The promise applied is the cluster brought to me just where I am and I can receive it and delight myself in its luscious sweetness!

Take care, none the less, to seek for the application of precepts. Some are always looking out for other people’s duty and are great judges and critics for what others ought to do. “Who are you that judges another man?” To his own master he stands or falls. See what precepts are binding upon yourself and then, as a child of God, be your feet swift to run in the way of His commandments. Read the Bible as a man reads his relation’s will — to find what legacy there is in it for himself. Do with the Bible as the sick man

A text is like a treasure chest which is locked — and prayer is the key to open it — and then we get God's treasure! The text is God's letter, full of loving words, but prayer must break the seal.





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does with the doctor's prescription — follow it by personally doing what it bids you. Ask God not to let your Bible be another man's Bible, but your own Bible — God's own mouth speaking to your soul of the things which make for your peace.

Fourthly — and this is very hard work — IV. READ AND PRACTICE. If you do not do this, you are reading to your own condemnation! If you read, "He that believes on Him is not condemned," if you believe not, then you are "condemned already," because you have not believed on the Son of God! The gospel is a very solemn thing to every man because if it is not a savor of life unto life, since it must always be a savor of some sort — it therefore becomes a savor of death unto death! Some seem as if they read the Bible in order to know how not to do — the more God commands, the more they will not obey! Though He draws them, they will not come to Him. And when He calls them, they will give Him no answer. A sorry, sorry heart is that which so uses God's Word as to make it an aggravation of its sin! Our life ought to be — and if God's grace is much in it, it will be — a new translation of the Bible. Speak of bringing the Bible down into the vernacular! Well, this is it! The worldling's Bible is the Christian. He never reads the book, but he reads the disciple of Christ and he judges the Christian religion by the lives of its professors! The world will learn better and will more likely be brought to know Christ when the lives of Christians are better, and when the Bible of the Christian life shall be more in accordance with the Bible of Christian doctrine! God make us holy! Sanctify us, spirit, soul and body, and then we shall be made finely serviceable both to the church and to the world! Read and practice! But we shall only be able to do this as God the Holy Spirit shall help us.

Then let us — V. READ AND PRAY. This is, perhaps, coming back almost to the first point, that is, read with dependence on the Holy Spirit. But I desire to impress a rather different thought upon your souls. Martin Luther says he learned more by prayer than he ever



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learned in any other way. A stone-breaker was one day on his knees breaking flints when a minister came by and said, “I see you are doing what I often do, breaking up hard things.” “Yes, sir,” was the answer, “and I am doing it in the way in which you must do it, on my knees.”

A passage in Scripture will often open up when you pray over it, which will defy mere criticism or looking to expositors. You put the text into action and then you comprehend it. I suppose if a man were studying anatomy and had never seen the body in life, he might not be able to know what a certain ligature was for, or such a bone — but if he could set that body moving, then he might understand the use of all the different parts, supposing he were able to see them. So when a text of Scripture lies, as it were, dead before us, we may not be able to understand it — but when by prayer the text grows into life and we set it in motion — we comprehend it at once! We may hammer away at a text sometimes in meditation and strike it again and again, and yet it may not yield to us, but we cry to God, and immediately the text opens and we see concealed in it wondrous treasures of divine wisdom and of grace!

But the prayer should not be merely that we may understand the text. I think we should pray over every passage in order that we may be enabled to get out of it what God would impart to us. A text is like a treasure chest which is locked — and prayer is the key to open it — and then we get God’s treasure! The text is God’s letter, full of loving words, but prayer must break the seal. When reading goes with praying and praying goes with reading, then a man goes on both his feet, the bird flies with both his wings! To only read is unprofitable — to pray without reading is not so soul-enriching, but when the two run together, they are like the horses pulling the chariot and they speed along right merrily!

Read and pray Christian! But take care you do not read without watering your reading with your prayer. Paul may plant and Apollos





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may water, but God gives the increase! And even in this blessed book, Moses may plant and David may water, but prayer must cry to God or else the increase will not come!

Now in the sixth place — VI. READ AND TRY. Try what you hear. Try what you profess. Try what you read. Goldsmiths keep bottles of acid by which they test everything that is offered them for sale, to see whether it is gold or merely tinsel. And the Christian should keep God's Word near at hand and treasured in the soul, to test thereby all that he hears. "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good." Many hearers believe all that is said because of the person who declares it to them. This is not according to Christ's mind! We ought to receive nothing as vital religious truth except it is sent us from above! And however much we may respect the pastor or the teacher, we must not so give up our judgment to any man as to receive his teaching merely because he chooses to utter it. Bring every form of the truth of God that is delivered to you, though it may glitter with oratory and seem reasonable and proper, to the test of Scripture! It is very difficult, however, to get men to do this. They seem to fancy that you have sinister motives the moment you tell them so. There is a conservatism in the nature of us all with regard to our religious faith which is right enough if it were balanced by another principle. To hold fast what I know is right, but to be willing to receive or to do anything that God would teach me to receive or do is more right still. I must know what it is to which I hold fast, or else I may be injuring myself by the fixedness by which I stand to what I have learned. The woman of Samaria said, "Our fathers worshiped God in this mountain." That is the argument of numbers of persons. "Our fathers did such-and-such." This would be a capital argument supposing that our fathers were always right, but a very absurd argument supposing that they were wrong! I hope we are not like that early Saxon who asked where his father and all his ancestors had gone — and when he was told they were no doubt lost — he replied to the



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missionary that he would rather go where they were than become a Christian and be separated from them!

There are some who seem to be of this blood and boast in it. Their ancestors believed this or that, and they desire to follow them. Many there are who profess doctrines they have never learned and which they do not really know and grasp. They have the shell but they never reach the kernel. Is not this the case with many of us here tonight? If you even have a doctrine of God in your mind, find out the text or texts which prove it! If there should happen to be other texts which seem to point the other way, do not cut and pare any of them down, but accept all and wait until the Spirit reveals wherein they really agree! Scripture is not to fit your opinions, but your opinions to conform to the blessed word! There is a fable of a foolish gardener who had a tree that would persist in growing oddly. He did not like to restrain it and, therefore, had a wall built for it to grow upon. I think the man was far wiser who let the wall alone and changed the tree! There are people who are very apt to alter Scripture to suit their views, pulling out one word until it is never so long, dropping another, or completely changing the meaning of it, though everybody knows that it is the forced and unnatural one, or else tinkering up a text till it will fit some crank or peculiarity of theirs. This is not reverence! It is not treating God's Word as it ought to be treated. God's Word is no nose of wax to be shaped according to our fancies — or anybody else's. Though nobody else should say what he means, God always does. He would not have us talk in language that is capable of half-a-dozen meanings — and He does not talk so Himself. He speaks so plainly that if we are candid and desire to know what He means, it is not difficult to do so, especially if we go to Him for it. Let us, then, take this advice and try the spirits whether they are of God and, like the noble Bereans, search the Scriptures whether these things are so — and so read the Scriptures and try what we read.



It is quite possible that the very person who, as it were by chance, is sitting next to you tonight, is the person whom God has predestinated to be blessed and to be blessed by you!



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And, lastly, the text is significantly followed by, “Give attendance to reading, to exhortation.” I will, therefore, say in the seventh place — VII. READ AND TELL OUT what you read. This will be an effectual way of imprinting it upon your own memory. When you read a passage of Scripture and have any enjoyment therein, go to your sick neighbor and tell what God has said to you. If you meet an ignorant one when you know somewhat of the things of God, tell them to him. Nations are enriched by the interchanges of commerce and so are Christians! We each have something that another has not and he has something that we need. Let us trade together. “Then they that feared the Lord spoke often, one to another,” and it is very good that they should do so. Our talk is, alas, too often very frivolous — there is much chaff but little wheat. If we would but talk more of Scripture and establish it as a fashion among Christians, we would grow much faster and stronger, and be wiser in the things the kingdom.

I know one who, when he was a young man, read all day until evening came and then went every evening and preached. The preaching in the evening of what he had read during the day stamped and fastened the truths of God upon his own mind and made them unspeakably profitable to him! When you have read for an hour or so, spend another half-hour in communicating to a child, or a servant, or a seeker, or to some bed-ridden saint the thing that has enriched and helped you.

How I would press this upon you, everyone, my dear brothers and sisters, who are members of this church. We owe very many of the conversions that have been worked here to the personal exertions of our church members. God owns our ministry, but He also owns yours. It is to our delight at church meetings that when converts come, they often have to say that the word preached from the pulpit was blessed to them, and yet I think that almost as often they say it was the Word of God spoken in some of the



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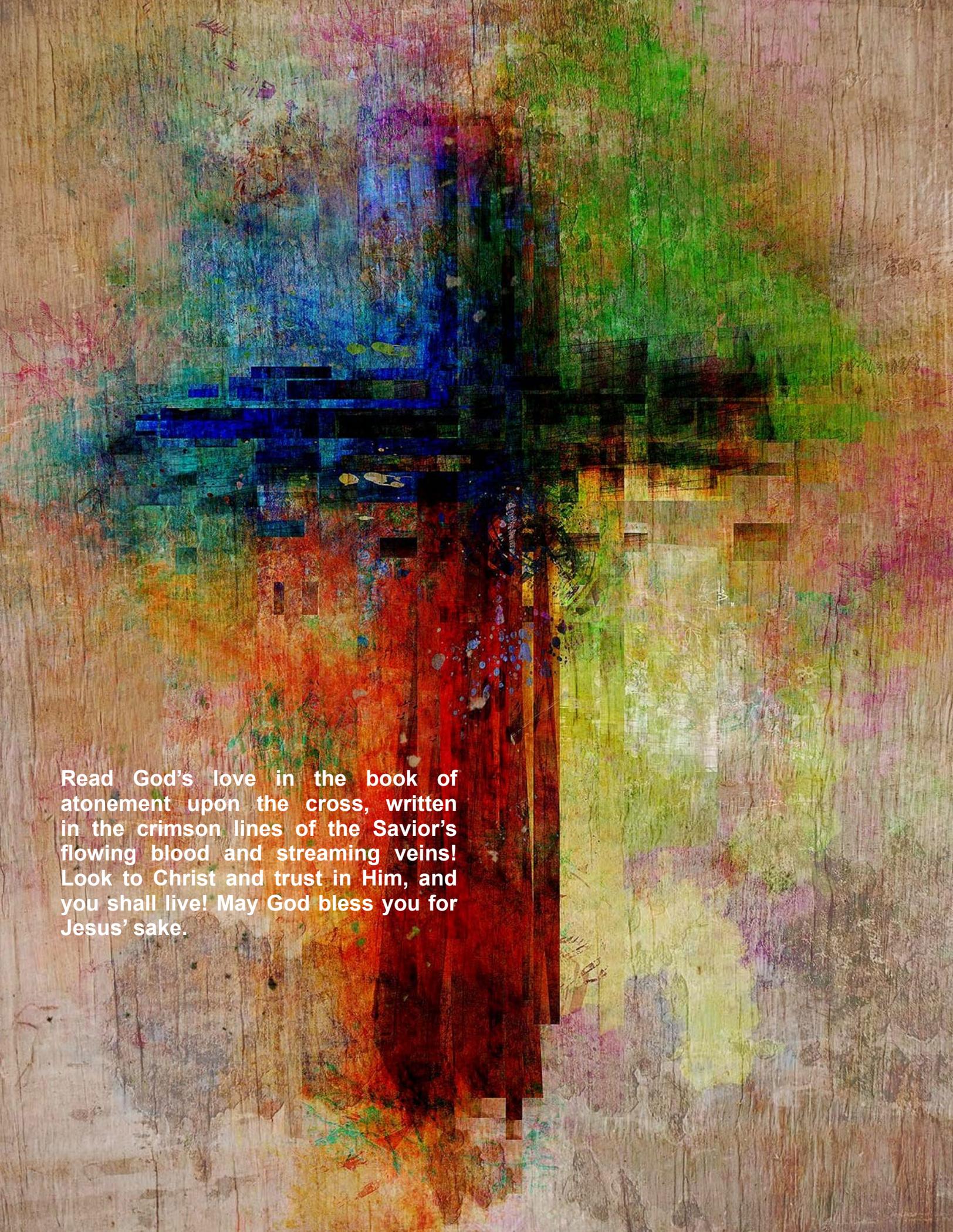
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classes, or in the pews — for not a few of you have been spiritual parents to strangers who have dropped in! Continue doing this! Let our congregation be full of these spiritual sharpshooters who shall pick out, each man his man, and who shall fire with the gun of the gospel directly at each individual!

Of course, if you know nothing, you can tell nothing. If you have never read anything which by the blessing of God has been brought powerfully home to your own soul, do not attempt to speak to others. There must be something begun in your own soul, first, but if you have been brought into personal contact with divine truth, let it be the first impulse of your soul to — “Tell to the sinners round, What a dear Savior you have found.”

The woman of Samaria left her water pot and went into the city, and said, “Come, see a man that told me all things that ever I did; is not this the Christ?” My beloved, let us do the same! I do not know a living thing, even a wild flower in the hedge, but seeks to prolong the existence of its species. The foxglove sheds its seeds all down the banks — no matter how tiny the flower may be, it seeks to produce its like. So you, Christian, who are the noblest work of God, should not be satisfied unless your life is a continually spreading around of the truth of God which has been made vital to you and will be new life to others!

What a grand crown and close to this night’s service it would be could we be used of God to bring a soul from darkness to light, and from slavery to liberty! We cannot do it of ourselves, but God may help us. Would you not walk a mile, yes, many miles to do it? Well, you need not walk miles! It is quite possible that the very person who, as it were by chance, is sitting next to you tonight, is the person whom God has predestinated to be blessed and to be blessed by you! At any rate, try it. There shall be nothing lost, there may be much gained. Why has God taught the truth to you? For your own good? Yes, but you are not to be selfish! Be you, at



Read God's love in the book of atonement upon the cross, written in the crimson lines of the Savior's flowing blood and streaming veins! Look to Christ and trust in Him, and you shall live! May God bless you for Jesus' sake.



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least, as unselfish as the three lepers who, when they found the Syrian camp deserted and an abundance of gold and silver, said, “We do not well to stay here. This is a day of good tidings; let us go in the city and tell.” Dear friend, you do not well if you read only for yourself! Having read, go out and tell what you have read, and the blessing shall come into your own bosom, even if it goes not out to others! And you shall be blessed and God shall be glorified!

I would press this, in conclusion, upon some of you who are not converted. Often men have come to Christ by reading the Scriptures. Attend upon a preached ministry, but do also read and search the Scriptures. I recollect when I was seeking Christ. I read Doddridge’s *Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*, but the book muddled me much, though it is a very admirable book in some respects. Then I read Alleine’s *Alarm*, and then Baxter’s *Call to the Unconverted*, and all these only plowed my heart more and more. But the comfort which I got came out of God’s Word. It was from that precious text, “Look unto Me and be you saved, all you ends of the earth.” Then I got light! Turn you away from all human books to the divine book, and from all human helpers to Him upon whom help is laid and who is mighty to save! Read God’s love in the book of atonement upon the cross, written in the crimson lines of the Savior’s flowing blood and streaming veins! Look to Christ and trust in Him, and you shall live! May God bless you for Jesus’ sake.

The sermon is adapted for a modern audience and made available by Eternal Life Ministries of Fayetteville, AR, here: [*How to Read the Bible*](#). ■



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ENGLISH BAPTIST PREACHER



Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834 – 1892), known by many as “The Prince of Preachers” was an English Baptist preacher at the historic Metropolitan Tabernacle in London for 38 years. He also wrote many timeless works, most notably sermons, commentaries, and devotionals. Two of his greatest works are All of Grace and Morning and Evening.