

Studying and Applying God's Word

“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.”

—*Matthew 11:29*

IN ALL PROBABILITY, FEW individuals of rational mind would fail to appreciate the scriptural counsel, “Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding.” (Prov. 4:7) The dictionary

defines wisdom as the power of true and just discernment of a high degree of knowledge. Understanding is described as the sum of the mental powers by which knowledge is acquired, retained and extended; the power of apprehending relations and making inferences from them.

Although there are shades of difference between the terms wisdom and understanding, inherent in the acquisition of either is the process of diligent study. The attainment of success in virtually every secular field of endeavor depends largely upon the

degree to which one is committed to study. For the Christian, study is an important ingredient in following the Master's admonition, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."—Matt. 6:33

THE OBEDIENCE OF CHRIST

As consecrated followers of Christ, one of the important concepts that we must internalize is that of sacrifice. In a society such as ours where we are inundated with advertising about various creature comforts, the word "sacrifice" may not have too much real meaning. Yet, if we are followers of Christ and engaging in self-denial, we should be very wary about the accumulation of personal possessions or by cultivating earthly interests at the expense of the New Creature. (II Cor. 5:17) Many of the Lord's people have family responsibilities and obligations which cannot be sacrificed legitimately. With regard to our own personal time and needs, however, if done in a proper spirit, the Lord would be pleased to accept such sacrifices as a demonstration of our love for him. "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."—Rom. 13:14, *Revised Standard Version*

There are many potential distractions all about us. These will tend to keep us from bending our energies towards maintaining our sacrificial course with regard to putting as much on the altar as we possibly can, especially the good things that are pleasing to the eye. Obviously, there are many pleasant things which each one who is rightly exercised has a right to enjoy. Perhaps one of the simplest guides that we can use to determine what we

should or should not do is by asking ourselves this: Will certain experiences that we desire and would like to participate in enhance our Christian walk or will they simply satisfy our flesh? If they are designed to promote our growth and development as a New Creature, we are surely doing what merits God's approval. With regard to our freedom in making these decisions, the following verses express the matter well. "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not. ... Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God."—I Cor. 10:23,31

GODLY SUBMISSION

One of the many exhortations to guide Christians into doing the will of God is as follows: "Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, existing in the form of God, counted not the being on an equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, becoming obedient even unto death, yea, the death of the cross." (Phil. 2:5-8, *American Standard Version*) The matter of subjugating our personal wills to that of the Heavenly Father is an extraordinary accomplishment. We often have our own ideas about matters that are not necessarily supported by Scripture, in contrast with our Lord, who always yielded himself to divine authority and instruction.

Another practice worthy of emulation for consecrated believers relates to criticizing others. "For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn

the world; but that the world through him might be saved.” (John 3:17) We are to imitate the spirit of Christ as closely as we can, and although the Master could read the hearts of others, he died for all, including the Pharisees whom he rebuked for their hypocrisy. Our actions and attitudes should not be as the Pharisee toward the publican in terms of being self-righteous. (Luke 18:11) As long as we are in the flesh, we need continued striving against such a propensity and seek the prompt removal of any defilement upon the imputed righteous garment provided through the merit of Christ’s blood.—Rom. 5:8,9

SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Progress in the Christian way is dependent upon Bible study, for it is through this endeavor that we feed upon the precious promises of God which nourish and give us strength. (II Pet. 1:4) The Bible emphasizes that “every scripture inspired of God is also profitable,” and indeed is necessary, if all our needs as his children are to be supplied. (II Tim. 3:16, ASV) The word “scripture” simply means writing, and not all writing is inspired by God. However, all words inspired by God are profitable for the purposes the Heavenly Father designs for his people.

The apostles encouraged Christians in the Early Church to study the inspired Word of God. At that time the Old Testament was almost the only Scriptures they had, because various portions of the New Testament were just being written and circulated in the form of letters or epistles. However, the Old Testament contained God’s promises of the Messiah

and of the kingdom which he would establish. It also foretold the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow. Although not understood by the ancients, the Old Testament also proclaimed that the Messiah would have joint-heirs who would live and reign with him in the kingdom. (Dan. 9:25,26; Isa. 9:6,7; 53:1-12; Ps. 45:9-15) This is the great mystery which was kept hidden for ages but revealed to the Early Church by the apostles.—Eph. 3:4-6

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

At the onset of the present Gospel Age, truth seekers were encouraged to prove for themselves that what they were being told by the apostles was really true. We note the following account. “And the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night unto Berea: who coming thither went into the synagogue of the Jews. These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.” (Acts 17:10,11) Thus, those Jews who listened to Paul at Berea and heeded this admonition were complimented for it. Although the Thessalonian brethren were apparently not as close students of the Bible as those in Berea, nevertheless, they also proved to be very zealous in bearing witness to the Gospel message.—I Thess. 1:3-9

It is a mistaken notion, all too prevalent today, that zealous study of the Bible in order to know and to be established in the teachings of God’s plan is not important. The apostles did not have this viewpoint. Paul exhorted Timothy that he should “take heed” to himself and to “the doctrine,” that

by so doing he would save himself as well as those to whom he ministered. (I Tim. 4:16) This makes salvation itself dependent upon taking proper heed to the import of the Scriptures. Such a viewpoint is in harmony with Jesus' words when he prayed, "This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent." (John 17:3) The only way to know God is through instruction in the divine Word which reveals his eternal purposes.

PURPOSEFUL STUDY

There is little spiritual profit in studying the Bible haphazardly. Paul admonished Timothy that in studying, or striving, to show himself approved to God, he should be "rightly handling the word of truth." (II Tim. 2:15, *RSV*) This admonition precedes a reference to an error which was being preached by some at that time; namely, that the resurrection had already occurred. (vss. 16-18) The Bible emphatically teaches the doctrine of the resurrection, both of the saintly and the world, but there is a due time in the plan of God for this to take place. (Acts 24:15; I Cor. 15:20-23) Those in the Early Church who diligently studied the Word of Truth could not be induced to believe that the promised resurrection was already past.

Not only are there time divisions in the plan of God which must be noted in our study of the Bible, but there is a different reward promised to the faithful of this age from that which will be offered to mankind in general during the coming Messianic kingdom upon the earth. The church is promised "glory and honour and immortality," while in the next age

those who obey will be restored to perfect life as human beings on the earth. (Rom. 2:7; Isa. 35:1-10; Rev. 21:2-4) If we fail to note this when we study the Bible, it will oftentimes seem to contradict itself.

Much of the language of the Bible is symbolic, while also a great deal of its testimony is presented without figurative significance. We need to discern the difference between literal and metaphorical language in our study of the Scriptures, or else again it will appear as though its testimony is contradictory. If we rightly handle the Word of Truth along these various lines, it will reveal God's wonderful plan to us in a harmonious manner. This, in turn, will induce healthy spiritual growth as we yield ourselves to the Bible's holy influence.

CHALLENGES TO OBEDIENCE

As consecrated believers we have the imputed robe of Christ's righteousness to cover our fleshly imperfections and tendencies. (Isa. 61:10; Rom. 4:7,8,16,23,24) Yet, our fallen sinful condition remains, except to the degree our new mind exercises self-control; and we may be sure that Satan will do all in his power to ensnare us. (I Cor. 9:27; I Pet. 5:8) Such testing may even be permitted to grow more intense as we near the end of our earthly sojourn. For example, the matter of not reacting in anger provides a severe test to believers when they are unjustly treated in an evil manner. Addressing this, Jesus said, "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven."—Matt. 5:11,12

All of us occasionally receive ill-treatment at the hands of others. When we do what is right and are slandered because of it, do we feel blessed and joyful, or angry? Here is sage counsel: "This is thank-worthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully. For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God. For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously." (I Pet. 2:19-23) We have many challenging experiences, and our success in becoming a more than conqueror in large measure is dependent upon internalizing the fruits and graces of the Spirit as well as having clarity on intellectual aspects of the Truth.—Rom. 8:35-39; Gal. 5:22-25; II Pet. 1:2-12

OUR SOURCE OF STRENGTH

The Word of God is the source from which true Christians derive their strength. It commends itself by providing direction, hope, peace, and understanding to all who are spiritually enlightened and apply its precepts in their lives. Although the Bible has a generally elevating influence upon all who carefully read its pages, it is primarily designed to benefit those who have received its teachings and import to the intent that they have yielded their own will to that of seeking the Heavenly Father's

will in all of life's affairs. It is for this reason that we also read, "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned."—I Cor. 2:14

Those who fully appreciate the importance of studying God's Word are engaged in the process of being changed from earthly to spiritual mindedness so that their lives can more nearly reflect the Christlike character. Such individuals, having accepted the present invitation to become disciples of Christ through self-denial and sacrifice, find the need to follow this admonition of Paul: "Be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God."—Rom. 12:2

DOCTRINE

The importance of study is all encompassing and comprises the Christian's work of a lifetime. Four aspects related to this subject are: doctrine, prophecy, service, and imbibing divine principles. Doctrine refers to teaching, and if the believer is to be guided properly, he must refer to God's counsel as revealed in the Scriptures. During Jesus' ministry, the people marveled at his "gracious words." (Luke 4:22) He properly credited the heavenly Father as the fountain from which his words flowed. After expounding to the people at the Feast of Tabernacles, the Master declared, "My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me. If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself."—John 7:16,17

Thus it should be also with each faithful follower of Christ. To appreciate the attributes and character of God and to comprehend the harmonious grandeur of his magnificent plan of salvation, which includes such themes as the ransom, resurrection, justification, sanctification, the call of the church, the nature of Christ, and other fundamental teachings, one must first be emptied of self and demonstrate a meek and humble attitude. Under the Holy Spirit's influence, Christians will be directed to examine carefully what the Bible teaches on these subjects. While it is true that God has raised up human agencies since Pentecost such as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers, for the "edifying of the body of Christ," individual diligence and personal study are necessary in order to make the Truth one's own.—Eph. 4:11,12

Among the many exhortations given by the Apostle Paul regarding doctrine, we read, "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good." (I Thess. 5:21) The assimilation of scriptural instruction was deemed necessary to be kept free from the errors promulgated by false teachers after the apostles fell asleep in death. The many conflicting ideas which presently exist among Christians demonstrate that in these "last days" believers must be circumspect and rely upon a "thus saith the Lord" as a basis for their faith.—II Tim. 3:1-5; Isa. 44:6

PROPHECY

The study of prophecy would surely be of interest to the child of God who yearns for the kingdom for which Jesus taught his disciples to pray. (Matt. 6:10) Prior to his crucifixion the Master gave many

signs concerning his Second Advent and the preparatory work which would be accomplished before this present social order would give way to a reign of righteousness. (Matt. 24:27-44; Luke 21:25-33) Under divine guidance, both Old and New Testament writers recorded future events. Since many of these were fulfilled in the past, believers today can have confidence that if they “watch” soberly and prayerfully, they will recognize prophetic unfolding at the time when they are due to be understood.—I Thess. 5:6; I Pet. 4:7

One prophecy which seems to be descriptive of our day relates to the time of the end when many would “run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased.” (Dan. 12:4) Although Daniel desired to understand the meaning of his prophetic utterances, they were not due to be comprehended at that time but were reserved until our day for the benefit of faithful Christians who would be engaged in searching the Scriptures. God said to him, “Go thy way, Daniel: for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end. ... None of the wicked shall understand; but the wise shall understand.”—vss. 9,10

The restoration of the Edenic paradise on a worldwide scale is a hope which Bible students have proclaimed as the answer to the misery and suffering which mankind has endured since Adam’s fall into sin. Recognizing that only a comparatively small number from among humanity will strive seriously to emulate the life which Jesus lived while he was on earth, consecrated believers rejoice that the Scriptures reveal the promised future opportunity of life on earth for every obedient individual, and not merely the saintly few which will live in heaven.

“He shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you: Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution [Greek: restoration] of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.” (Acts 3:20,21) Since all God’s holy prophets have declared there would be a time of restoration which would offer future blessings to mankind, the sincere Christian should certainly desire to proclaim these truths so that others might be comforted. A conviction based upon other prophecies, that the time for the fulfillment of these promises is close at hand, makes the study of these matters even more urgent. —Mark 13:29-31

SERVICE

Service in the cause of Christ is an indispensable privilege of all believers who desire to manifest an appreciation of the Heavenly Father’s love in giving his Son to be their Savior and Redeemer. The Lord’s followers, in studying the Scriptures, find many passages which indicate the responsibility and privilege of preaching the Gospel as a form of Christian service. (Isa. 52:7; Matt. 24:14; 28:19,20) Although the majority of the Lord’s people are not engaged in a public ministry, each believer will look for service opportunities on every suitable occasion in accordance with the Apostle Paul’s admonition, “As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.” —Gal. 6:10

The Scriptures give many examples of service which might be performed to assist others. A partial list includes: meeting regularly with fellow Christians

to encourage their faithfulness to God; sympathizing with those who are undergoing heavy burdens; being a good listener; pointing to scriptural references which might afford comfort; inquiring as to whether you can be of special assistance and following through on the offer; remembering to pray for others both in their trials and when the Heavenly Father blesses their endeavors along some line of service; testifying of personal experiences to encourage others to learn lessons which they can apply in their lives; and sacrificing in the use of resources to help further the cause of Christ. If any true follower of Christ feels he or she has no opportunity for Christian service, a prayerful consideration of what the Bible declares on this subject should prove most profitable.

DIVINE PRINCIPLES

The study of divine principles is a critical undertaking for all believers who wish to be conformed to the Master's image. Since we have a God who operates by a set of righteous principles, it is incumbent upon his people to probe the Scriptures in order to discover a lifestyle which would be pleasing to the Creator in accordance with his will as revealed by the Holy Spirit. Frequently the same principle is indicated in different parts of the Bible. One such example is that confession of sin is a prerequisite to forgiveness. (Ps. 32:5; Isa. 55:7; Prov. 28:13; I John 1:9) A few of the many other principles which the Scriptures reveal and commend themselves for the Christian's study include:

- Obedience is more acceptable than sacrifice.
(I Sam. 15:22)

- We reap what we sow. (Gal. 6:7)
- Justice is the foundation of God's throne. (Ps. 89:14)
- Humility precedes exaltation. (James 4:10)
- Cross bearing is required for discipleship. (Luke 14:27)
- Everyone is accountable to God. (Rom. 14:12)
- The merciful shall receive mercy. (Matt. 5:7)
- God is love. (I John 4:16)

The importance of study should be deemed as self-evident to Christians. It is not to be considered merely an academic venture for the purpose of acquiring factual information, but rather an integral feature of one's spiritual development and acceptability to the Heavenly Father. One Scripture in particular seems to encapsulate the motive which should spur each believer to engage in a comprehensive study of the many facets of the divine revelation as contained in the Bible: "Study and do your best to present yourself to God approved, a workman tested by trial who has no reason to be ashamed, accurately handling and skillfully teaching the word of truth." (II Tim. 2:15, *Amplified Bible*) What purpose for study could be loftier than that? ■