

## **How to read the word of God: Some highlights from the life of the early fathers**

Approaches to reading the bible are numerous and hugely variant in our current generation. Yet, there seems to be two main approaches that are most prevalent in most of the spiritual circles and these are:

**A.** An approach that advocates the necessity of reading the bible slowly and carefully while meditating on every word or passage; the focus is on the quality rather than the quantity.

This approach favors reading only a short passage or one chapter daily where the reader meditates carefully on all the words to understand them and come out with the lessons learned from that passage.

**B.** The other approach, which is more common and is widely spread both in the east and west, is the scholastic analytical approach which studies and interprets the word of God.

This approach focuses on the importance of reading and understanding the word of God through studying the historical and geographical backgrounds, the language origins, the meanings of names, the significance of numbers and symbols and what they refer to, and so on. It favors summing up a chapter or a book of Scripture into main points; studying the reasons, causes, and lessons to be learned; and making tables of comparison.

All the above is great and blessed.

*Yet*, do we realize that the first approach has led the Church and God's people to great poverty in their fellowship with the word of God? In addition to this poverty, there is also the danger of the interference of personal preferences and convictions in understanding and interpreting the biblical passages.

The safeguard in this matter is to read and understand the Scriptures with a kindled spirit in an atmosphere of prayer so that all the understanding and meditation would well out from the spring of the spirit and not from the activity of one's soul and personal preferences. In following this approach, there is also a tendency to ignore the biblical passages that are difficult to understand.

In the book of Nehemiah (8: 1 – 12), for example, we read how the people of Israel gathered in an atmosphere of prayer, worship, and bowing down in the presence of God while Ezra, the scribe, and the Levites read from the Book of the Law of Moses from morning until midday, that is, for several successive hours. This kind of reading resulted in great conviction and the people wept; and then this was quickly transformed into amazing and holy spiritual joy.

The danger of the second approach based on intellectual analysis is that it is a purely intellectual one, relying on the mental activity and putting the word of God under the authority of the mind alone. This in turn limits the word of God so much; it limits its meanings and effectiveness restricting it to a very narrow sphere. So, for example, if someone conducts a thorough study of a certain book of the Scripture, he would then think that he has covered this book of Scripture completely and therefore he cannot receive anything new by reading it again!

On a broader level and in addition to the above mentioned limitation, we would also wonder how can the word of God be effective and live for every generation, everywhere and at all times, and to all the different sectors of people alike with the variations of their intellectual abilities and gifts (Hebrews 4: 12) if we can restrict its meanings and ideas in points and specific interpretations which limit its broadness and hence its effectiveness for the people? It is written: *'I have seen a limit to all perfection, but your commandment is exceedingly broad'* (Psalm 119: 96). The word of God has no limits because it is the utterance of the infinite God and it bears His unlimited mind. Therefore, it is suitable and valid for all times and every place and for all people alike. It can be understood at various

levels which suit the beginner and the spiritually mature, the uneducated and the highly educated with excelling intellectual abilities. As we mature spiritually, we understand the word of God and view it in a new way; we understand its mysteries and meanings as if we were reading it for the first time. We would continue to progressively grow in this knowledge until the coming age: *'Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known'* (1Corinthians 13: 12).

This leads us to an important question in this context.

*How did the early fathers of the Church view the bible and how did they deal with it?*

The fathers of the early centuries were distinguished by their deep knowledge of the word of God and being filled with it as the Scriptures say: *'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly'* (Colossians 3: 16). Therefore, they became the experts of their generation and the reference for the nobles of their age who sought their guidance in all matters. They were the pillars of the ecumenical synods where the council would not meet without their presence nor decisions were taken without their counsel.

*How did these great fathers of the Church deal with the word of God and what was their relationship with it and their conviction about it?*

The early fathers of the Church realized the mystical work of the word of God. This is based on its work inside man and not dependent on the activity of one's mind and soul. For them, this mystical work is so broad in its dimensions and meaning.

Below we shall shed some light on the mystical work of the word of God through some highlights from the life of the early fathers:

#### **A. The word of God is the 'breath of God' (2Timothy 3: 16)**

The early fathers realized that the Holy Scriptures are the *'breath of God'* which comes from God Himself. Therefore, they read it in faith and awareness that by so doing they allow the breath of God to enter into them; and hence, they receive the life of God in them. And indeed the word of God revived them, strengthened their bones, kindled their spirits, quenched the thirst of their souls, filled them with eternal life, and even transformed them into the image of God because it is the breath of God which bears His life!

They used to read the books of the Scripture, especially the gospels, while standing in a state of worship. This worship approach in reading the bible is accompanied with many prostrations; they did so to prepare themselves for receiving the grace and the gift of the word of God and absorbing the life of God in it.

**B. The word of God has a purifying and sanctifying effect for the inner soul and the places**

According to the conviction of the early fathers, the word of God has a sanctifying and purifying work inside man. A good illustration is the well-known story about one of the monks who went to his spiritual father complaining that he does not understand the words he reads in the bible and hence reading is in vain and not necessary. So, his spiritual father asked him to bring a bucket that has holes, fill it with water and take it to a far place. He asked him to do this several times. Then, he finally asked him: 'did any water stay in the bucket?' The monk replied: 'No, the water leaked from the bucket.' Then, the father told him to look carefully at the bucket and what has happened to it. He drew his attention that the bucket has been completely cleaned from all the dust and dirt that were hanging to it. The father then continued saying: *'Similarly, my son, the fallen soul cannot keep the water of life or perceive the mysteries of the word of God initially. Yet, at the beginning, the work of the word of God in the soul is to purify it and cleanse it until there are no more holes or gaps. If one continues in this regularly, it leads to 'enlightenment,' after which the spiritual mind starts to perceive and understand the hidden meanings and treasures behind the words of the Scriptures and the great mysteries of the word of God.'*

Beside realizing the inner purifying effect of the word of God, the early fathers also realised that reading the word of God out loud leads to the sanctification and cleansing of the place where the worshipping reader is and not only inner sanctification.

Therefore, they learned how to sanctify their places through worship and reading the word of God a lot in these places.

### **C. The word of God is the ‘manna’ which nourishes the spirit**

The early fathers viewed the words of the Scripture as the *‘hidden manna’*, that is, a mystical food that nourishes and revives their spirits and helps their spirits to grow. Therefore, they were characterized by the feature of *‘chewing on the word of God’*. As the flesh needs to eat regularly in order to grow in a healthy way, the inner man needs food to grow; the food of the inner man is *the Holy Scriptures*. According to the early fathers, ‘chewing on the word of God’ means reading it regularly and intensely and then reading it again and again whether they understand what they read or they do not. They did so without referring to bible commentaries or explanations<sup>1</sup>. This is because they believed that *the word of God explains itself by itself*. So, if one wants to know the meaning or the significance of a word in the Scriptures, he can do so by finding all the meanings and occurrences of this word in the different biblical passages because God’s mind is one and the same in both Testaments. Because they read the books of the Scriptures repeatedly and they chewed on them, the whole bible opened up and was revealed before them like one coherent and complete text. Therefore, in their replies to questions asked by those who seek their counsel or even their replies refuting heresies, the early fathers took the person through a linked chain of biblical verses and passages in both Testaments. As a result, all doubts, the darkness of the mind and the fleshly wisdom disappeared.

The early fathers memorized several books of the Scriptures by heart. In their biographies, we often read that such and such father has memorized all the New Testament and some of

---

<sup>1</sup> This of course does not negate the fact that one can refer to some commentaries and explanations to help him know the necessary background of every book of Scripture. Yet, one should not stop at that level. One should be aware that this background is merely an introduction or a starting point after which he needs to enter into the stage of ‘chewing on the word of God’

the books of the Old Testament by heart; or that father has memorized the epistles, the gospels, the prophetic books and the book of Psalms.

The bible was the food on which they nourished and chewed on for long successive hours without boredom or inconsistency.

#### **D. The word of God and acquiring the prophetic Spirit**

The early fathers realized the importance of acquiring the prophetic Spirit through reading and chewing on the Holy Scriptures, especially the prophetic books.

According to the New Testament, the prophetic Spirit does not refer to telling future matters, *'but he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation (encouragement) and comfort to men'* (1Corinthians 14: 3).

Therefore, the prophetic Spirit refers to whatever helps man understand God's will and the correct picture that God desires for our spiritual life. In addition to this, the prophetic Spirit helps man acquire spiritual insight and discernment. We are in great need for this kind of fine discernment in a generation where the schools of thought and the disparity in the spiritual approaches have increased. This requires divine light that separates and judges confusing matters: *'But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one'* (1Corinthians 2: 15).

In the biography of Saint Shenouda, the Archimandrite (348-466 A.D.), we read wondrous mysteries about the fellowship of the early fathers with the word of God and specifically with this prophetic Spirit.

One of the stories relates that while one of the brothers was reading in the books of the prophets, father Shenouda saw that the prophet of each book of the Scriptures came and stood next to this brother until he completed reading his prophecy and then the prophet would sit next to the brother. This continued until the brother reached the book of Malachi. The brother then fell asleep because he was awake all night reading. But, the prophet

Malachi did not leave him; he stood next to him waiting. So, the prophet Ezekiel told father Shenouda: 'please, wake up the brother so that he would finish reading the book of our brother Malachi so that Malachi would come and sit with us.' Father Shenouda woke him up and the brother completed reading the book of Malachi. Then the prophet left him and joined the rest of the prophets who went on talking to father Shenouda about the great wonders of God.

How amazing these things are! Yet, they reveal to us depths in the life of the early fathers and how they invited the spirit of the prophet, the writer of the book of Scripture, to accompany them while reading so that they may receive the prophetic Spirit that inspired the prophet in writing his prophecy.

Therefore, when any of the fathers struggled to understand some biblical passages, they used to ask the writer of the book to help them understand the parts they struggled with. This often happened whether in a visible or a non-visible way!

#### **E. Spiritual hunger and transformation into Christlikeness**

One of the important things regarding the early fathers' relationship with the word of God is that their great eagerness and love for the word of God welled out of their deep spiritual hunger; their unceasing desire to know God, His will and His ways; the desire to be transformed into His image and their longing for the formation of Christ within them.

Therefore, they refused to reply anyone who came to them asking about biblical matters for the purpose of mental disputes or for merely gaining spiritual knowledge without having a desire to change. For them, such a person works in the trade of the people of the world. In other words, he wants to gain this biblical knowledge to boast and show off or even to transfer it to others as mere teaching and knowledge –trading with it as the people of the world do –without first being transformed by it!

As a result, the early fathers did not adopt the approach of studying the word of God to gain mental knowledge –as is the case nowadays. They were hungry for God and for knowing Him and His ways through the Holy Scriptures.

In this respect, Saint Augustin used to say:

*'as I read the Scriptures,*

*I see the baby Jesus wrapped in the pages of the book.'*

*This is how the early fathers lived and this is the extent of love they had for the word of God!*



## Ways of Reading the Bible (Early Fathers)

Now, I would like to share with you the practical side: how the worshippers of the Early Church dealt (or used) the bible in their daily spiritual life.

I can state 12 different ways!!

### 1) Usual (common) way

Let us begin with this: just to read and read and examine the passage or chapter, trying to hear God speaking to oneself through his daily circumstances.

Therefore, it is important to link our bible reading with our own circumstances so that the Word of God is opened more and more and we can find divine instruction for our own situations.

### 2) Meditations, Contemplation

Ps 119: 15 *"I will meditate on Your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways"* (ESV)

- The word used here is in Hebrew: See-akh = to ponder, commune, converse (with yourself, hence out loud). It is mentioned → 20 times in the entire bible // 14 in Psalms (word of prayer).

Joshua 1: 8 *"This book of Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, that you shall observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success."*

- The word here is (in Hebrew) = ha gah → (haw gaw) → murmur.

Mentioned: - 25 times in all bible (10 times in Psalms)

Usually they ruminate (cud) the word again and again - sometimes with short statements of prayer with the aim of letting it sink down in inner man (releasing its manifold actions: cleansing, enlightenment, transformation).

### 3) Reading much:

- Many chapters in one sitting or more preferably reading a whole book in one sitting.
- The aim here is:

**a.** To get the full idea of the book - its theme and the message God is delivering in different situations (every time is unique). It helps to understand God's mind and God's ways.

**b.** Realizing that the whole bible is actually one continuous story of God's love and mercy for humankind.

**c.** Moreover, we notice that there is no titles or special names for the books, only the writer (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Mark, John). This means that the title is left for everyone to put it according to his own perception → this leads to a full Divine library with different books having different titles and themes.

Whenever I face a challenge or be in a special need, I turn to the corresponding book and read it again and again to discover the proper direction, I have to take in my situation).

**d.** Also, this rich times of reading the Word helps a lot renewing the mind and cleansing the soul bringing inner healing and restoration

*"Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." (Col 3: 16)*

*"He sent His Word and healed them" (Ps 107: 20)*

*"For they (words of wisdom) are life to those who find it and health to all their flesh" (Prov 4: 22)*

### 4) Worshipping Reading:

We have already mentioned this in prayer.

Just to remind you:

- Every book in the Bible still carries the anointing that came on its writer (prophets, evangelists, historians, poets etc..). Understanding this truth and working on it can

allow a person to receive from the same anointing preserved in a particular book

- Accordingly:
  - Reading prophetic books on a regular basis → prophetic anointing
  - Reading Gospels on a regular basis → apostolic anointing
  - Reading Historical books on a regular basis → Wisdom of God and learning His ways
  - Reading Poetic books on a regular basis → God's love and wisdom
- Interestingly enough, they used to say some special statements to conclude their readings and these statements differ from book to book showing their deep understanding of God's economy in the Scripture and reflecting their interaction during reading.

As examples of:

- Reading the Old Testaments, they conclude with this statement: "Glory be to the Trinity." Why do they conclude with this phrase? It is because the Holy Trinity was not revealed in the Old Testament, as if they are identifying themselves with the writers of the Old Testament who were hoping for the full revelation of the Person of God being under their special anointing.
- Reading Gospels, they conclude saying: "Glory be to God" because God's glory was revealed to us through Christ.
- Reading the epistles of Paul, they conclude saying: "the grace of God the Father be with us." This is because Apostle Paul was the one who taught us about the grace of God.
- Reading other epistles of the New Testament, they conclude saying: "Do not love the world nor the things which are in the world, the world passes away and all its desires but he who does the will of God abides forever."

This is because the content of these epistles is mainly directed towards proper Christian conduct.

- Reading the book of Acts, they conclude saying: "The Word of God shall grow, multiply, be mighty and be confirmed in the Holy Church of God" because the work of the Holy Spirit is still going on.

- Reading the book of Revelation, they conclude saying: "He who has ears let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches!"

### **5) Reading the Story of the Men of God:**

- Like the life of Abraham, Moses, Paul etc.
- The purpose here is to get inspired by the main blessings and anointing of these men of God.

- Examples:

Abraham → Gen 12-24 → life of faith

Moses → Ex 1-24 → Man of concern for his people, zeal

David → 1 Sam 16- 2 Sam → Worshipper, classic picture of the man of God

Elijah → 1Kings 17 - 2 Kings → fire

### **6) Gazing into Jesus → Disclosing the mystery of Christ**

- They used to read the New Testament weekly!
- They learnt how to follow Jesus' footsteps (sometimes part of chapter or many chapters) → they learnt to live a day with Jesus.
- To see how has He dealt with different people in different situations
- They read His story, pray it and absorb it so that His lifestyle is printed and imparted into their lives.

### **7) Reading the bible as spiritual food to feed their inner man**

It simply means eating the Word of God, even let it bypass the mid and get settled down into their spiritual bellies

Jer 15: 16

*"Your words were found and I ate them and Your word was to me joy and rejoicing of my heart"*

Also → Eze 3: 2,3 Rev 10: 9, 10

## 8) Reading the bible out loud (slowly with low voice)

- What is the idea and purpose here?
- 2 main ideas:
  - a. Activating the spiritual senses. They used to say that the bible must be read with all the senses: we use our eyes, ears, taste...  
Yes we read, we hear the Holy Spirit speaking to our hearts, we taste in spirit the different savors of the Word.
  - b. In addition to that, the proclaimed Word of God sanctifies their being, their places and increases their spiritual authority.  
It is well known that the "Spoken Word" has its own authority. God distinguishes Man with the power of utterance.

### Nehemiah 9: 3

*"And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of Law of the Lord their God for a quarter of a day; for another quarter of it they made confession and worshipped the Lord their God."*

### 2 Chronicles 34: 30

*"And the king went up to the house of the Lord with all the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem...the priests and the Levites, and all the people, great and small. And he read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant which had been found in the house of the Lord."*

### 1 Tim 4: 13

*"till I come, give attention to reading, exhortation, to doctrine."*

## 9) Breath of God

2 Tim 3: 16 *"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness."*

(Inspiration = Breath).

Inspiration → releases divine life }

Imparts God's life into us

## 10) The Word of God and the Spirit of God

- Usually they say: you can't read the Word of God without being aware that the Spirit of God is nearby to help you
- In what way does the Spirit of God help?
  - He is the Eye witness i.e. He is the One who was there in all the events of the bible witnessing, leading and controlling everything.
  - As an Eye witness, He can take me in Spirit to the place and time of an event and let me be part of it. I can see, hear and even share in what is going on!

In 15: 26 (ESV) "*But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, He will bear witness about me*"

## 11) Literal Immersing in the Word of God

- Reading the Bible (different books from both Testaments) for many hours. A well-known experience called "vigil night" is to spend 12 hours from sunset to sunrise reading the Scripture.
- They said, we are really immersed into the world and a lot of defiling effects are sweeping our lives. So we need to do counteraction by immersing in the Word of God to get cleansed, enlightened and revived (the world defiles us, darkens our minds and senses and brings death to our inner man).
- Again, being filled with the Word in such a way brings special measure of discerning and leads us to be filled with the will of God.

Thus we can truly say that we have the mind of Christ 1 Cor. 2: 16

*"For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ."*

## 12) Two levels of reading the Bible

**Direct:** direct understanding and applying the Word of God in our daily life. This is very important to show us the biblical standards of the proper Christian conduct.

**Deep:** When the hidden secrets and mysteries of the Word begin to be disclosed. This mature solid food strengthens the inner man and leads to full maturity. This brings glory to God.

*This point needs more elaboration:*

I'll give examples from some bible stories and how the worshipers of early centuries understood them.

**1. Zacchaeus Lk 19: 1-10**

When they read this story, they knew that it is a real one.

The direct reaction (understanding and application) is to search their hearts for every wrong doings and repent. They also may notice his zeal and humility towards the event of the visit of Jesus to his place. However, deep down, they could see other meanings. Example: he was small in stature (short) so they react saying in their prayers: "Yes Lord my spiritual stature is so small and short, please come and pay a visit to my inner life."

**2. Blind people healed by the touch or a word from Jesus**

They will react saying: "Lord, I need you to restore my inner sight. Give me discerning and let me be able to behold Your glory."

**3. Samaritan Woman:**

The direct meaning is clear: Jesus is leading this woman to know Him and to know the secret of praying in Spirit.

Still deep within the story, they could find other mysteries. It is well known that Samaritan people only knows and accepts the authority of the 5 books of Moses → no other books are accepted. Therefore, they could see different dimensions in the story (not denying any of the direct facts).

However, they say: "the story helps me to understand the level of spiritual attitude of the soul. The 5 husbands refer to my soul who is still living at the level of the Old Testament not knowing the other one → Jesus.

He said to her "the 6th, the one with you now (referring to Himself) is not your husband. You need to know Him as a Savior and to unite with Him."

Finally, the Book of John is the book where I can put myself in place of Jesus!