

“Speak, Lord, for Your servant hears” (1Sam.3: 9)

+ Lecture V: How to Read the Holy Bible +

There are generally three approaches to reading the Holy Bible: First, one can read the Holy Book to learn about its content, stories, commandments, etc. Second, one can stop at a certain verse or story and meditate on it for spiritual benefit. Finally, one can read and study deeply the Holy Bible using references such as Bible dictionaries, atlases, encyclopedias, etc. It is important if not imperative to have a continuous relation with the Holy word of God. We need to have a consistent reading schedule that combines both the Old and New Testaments. We need (as much as possible) combine the above reading approaches; at least the first two. We mentioned in the introduction 7 reasons why Satan has a problem with the Holy word of God these are the same reasons why you should have a strong and deep relation with your Holy Bible.

I) Guidelines for reading the Holy Bible:

Start your reading with a short **prayer** to prepare yourself and to ask for God’s guidance, say with king David, “Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law” (Ps.119: 18). Our Lord said, “The words that I speak to you are spirit and they are life” (Jn.6: 63). Therefore, you need to realize that you are not talking about your physical eyes here because you can see the letters fine but it’s your spiritual ones that need opening. You need to read God’s words with the due **fear** as the Church teaches us when the deacon says, ‘stand up with the fear of God and let us hear the Holy Gospel’, also as king David said, “my heart stands in awe of Your word” (Ps.119: 161). The Lord also said, “But on this one I will look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word” (Is.66: 2). This Holy fear is manifest in the way you are sitting and the way you are dressed when you read the Holy Scriptures, girls are strongly encouraged to cover their heads. Also it is not appropriate to be eating or drinking while reading. With fear comes **humility** for our Lord Jesus Christ said that secrets are hidden from the wise and prudent but are revealed to babes (Matt.11: 25), also St. James said, “receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls” (Jam.1: 21). Humility is the protector against heresy because in your humility you will not disobey the Church Tradition, “lean not on your own understanding” (Prov.3: 5). Read the Holy word of God with **willingness to obey** remembering the word of St. James, “be doers of the word, and not hearers only deceiving yourselves” (Jam.1: 22). There is a **personal message** for you in the Holy Bible **look for it** and be **happy** when you find it and mention it to God in your prayers saying, “Remember the word to Your servant, upon which You have caused me to hope” (Ps.119: 49). Try to **memorize** the word of God and to repeat it in your heart especially the psalms also it is very beneficial to **write** down certain verses in your own handwriting (not typing) and to post them in your room, on your computer, etc. For example: Post “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God”(Matt.4: 4) on the refrigerator, “If anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was” (Jam.1: 23-24) on your mirror, and “Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?”(Matt.6: 30, 31) on your ‘full’ closet, etc.

II) How to Read the Bible: (adapted from an article by H.G. Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia)

“If an earthly king, our emperor,” wrote St. Tikhon of Zadonsk (1724-83), “wrote you a letter, would you not read it with joy? Certainly, with great rejoicing and careful attention.” But what, he asks, is our attitude toward the letter that has been addressed to us by no one less than God Himself? “You have been sent a letter, not by an earthly emperor, but by the King of Heaven. And yet you almost despise such gift, so priceless a treasure.” To open and read this letter, St. Tikhon adds, is to enter into a personal conversation face-to-face with the living God. “Whenever you read the Gospel, Christ Himself is speaking to you. And while you read, you are praying and talking to Him.”

Such exactly is our Orthodox attitude to the reading of Scripture. I am to see the Bible as God’s personal letter sent specifically to myself. The words are not intended merely for others, far away and long ago, but they are written particularly and directly to me, here and now. Whenever we open our Bible, we are engaging in a creative dialogue with the savior. In listening, we also respond. “Speak, for Your servant hears” we reply to God as we read (1Sam.3: 10); “Here am I” (Is.6: 8).

+ Our reading of Scripture should be:

1. Obedient.
2. Ecclesial (in union with the Church).
3. Christ-centered.
4. Personal.

Reading the Bible with Obedience

First of all, we see Scripture as inspired by God, and we approach it in a spirit of *obedience*. Since it is divinely inspired, the Bible possesses a fundamental unity, a total coherence, because the same Spirit speaks on every page. We do not refer to it as ‘the books’ in the plural. We call it ‘the Bible’, ‘the Book’, in the singular. It is one book, one Holy Scripture, with the same message throughout, one composite and yet a single story from Genesis to Revelation.

Obedient receptivity to God’s word means above all two things: *a sense of wonder* and *an attitude of listening*. (1) *Wonder* is easily quenched. Do we not feel all too often, as we read the Bible, that it has become overly familiar, even boring? Have we not lost our alertness, our sense of expectation? How far are we changed by what we read? Continually, we need to cleanse the doors of our perception and to look with new eyes, in awe and amazement, at the miracle that is set before us - the ever-present miracle of God’s divine word of salvation expressed in human language. As Plato remarked, “The beginning of truth is to wonder at things.”

Some years ago I had a dream that I still remember vividly. I was back in the house where, for three years as a child, I lived in boarding school. A friend took me first through the rooms already familiar to me from the waking life of my childhood. Then, in my dream we entered other rooms that I had never seen before – spacious, elegant, filled with light. Finally, we came to a strange chapel, with golden mosaics gleaming in the candlelight. “How strange,” I said to my companion, “that I have lived here for so long, and yet I never knew about the existence of all these rooms.” And he replied, “But it is always so.” I awoke, and, behold, it was a dream.

Should we not react in the presence of the Bible with exactly the same surprise, the same feeling of joy and discovery that I experienced in my dream? There are so many rooms in Scripture that we have never as yet entered. There is so much for us still to explore.

(2) If obedience means wonder, it also means *listening*. Such indeed is the literal meaning of the word for “obey” in both Greek and Latin – to hear. The trouble is that most of us are better at talking than at listening. One of the primary requirements, if we are to acquire a “scriptural mind,” is to stop talking and to start listening. When we enter an Orthodox Church decorated in the traditional way, and look up towards the sanctuary, we see there in the apse the figure of the Mother of God with her hands raised to heaven – the ancient scriptural manner of praying that many still use today. Such is also to be our attitude to Scripture – an attitude of openness and attentive receptivity, our hands invisibly outstretched to heaven.

As we read our Bible, then, we are to model ourselves in this way on the Blessed Virgin Mary, for she is supremely the one who listens. At the Annunciation, listening to the angel, she responds obediently, “Let it be to me according to your word” (Lk.1: 38). Had she not first listened to God’s word and received it spiritually in her heart, she would never have borne the Word of God bodily in her womb. Receptive listening continues to be her attitude throughout the Gospel story. At Christ’s nativity, after the adoration of the shepherds, “Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart” (Lk.2: 19). After the visit to Jerusalem when Jesus was twelve years old, “His mother kept all these things in her heart” (Lk.2: 51). The vital importance of listening is also indicated in the last words attributed to the Theotokos in Holy Scripture, at the wedding of Cana of Galilee. “Whatever He says to you, do it” (Jn.2: 5), she says to the servants and to each one of us. In all this the Virgin serves as a mirror and living icon of the biblical Christian. Hearing God’s word, we are to be like her: pondering, keeping all these things in our hearts, doing whatever He tells us. We are to listen in obedience while God speaks.

Understanding the Bible through the Church

Our approach to the Bible is not only obedient but also ecclesial. The words of Scripture, while addressed to us personally, are yet at the same time addressed to us as members of a community. Book and Church are not to be separated.

The interdependence of Church and Bible is evident in at least two ways. First, we *receive* Scripture through and in the Church. The Church tells us what is Scripture. In the first three centuries of Christian history, a lengthy process of sifting and testing was needed in order to distinguish between that which is authentically “canonical” Scripture, bearing authoritative witness to Christ’s person and message, and that which is “apocryphal,” useful perhaps for teaching, but not a normative source of doctrine. Thus, the Church has decided which books form the Canon of the New Testament. A book is not part of Holy Scripture because of any particular theory about its date and authorship, but because the Church treats it as canonical. Secondly, we *interpret* Scripture through and in the Church. If it is the Church that tells us what is scripture, equally it is the Church that tells us how Scripture is to be understood. The words of Scripture are not always self-explanatory. The Bible has a marvelous underlying simplicity, but when studied in detail it can prove a difficult book. God does indeed speak directly to the heart of each one of us during our Scripture reading but we also need guidance.

And our guide is the Church. We make full use of Biblical commentaries and of the findings of modern research. But we submit individual opinions, whether our own or those of the scholars, to the judgment of the Church.

We read the Bible personally, but not as isolated individuals. We say not “I” but “we.” We read as members of a family, the family of the Orthodox Catholic (universal) Church. We read in communion with all other members of the Body of Christ in all parts of the world and in all generations of time. This communal or *catholic* approach to the Bible is underlined in one of the questions asked of a convert at the reception service used in the Russian Church: “Do you acknowledge that the Holy Scripture must be accepted and interpreted in accordance with the belief which has been handed down by the Holy Fathers, and which the Holy Orthodox Church, our Mother, has always held and still does hold?” The decisive criterion for our understanding of what Scripture means is *the mind of the Church*.

To discover this “mind of the Church,” where do we begin? A first step is to see how Scripture is used in worship. How in particular are biblical lessons chosen for reading at the different feasts? A second step is to consult the writings of the Church Fathers, especially St. John Chrysostom. How do they analyze and apply the text of Scripture? An ecclesial manner of reading the Bible is in this way both *liturgical* and *patristic*. How can we develop this ecclesial and liturgical way of reading Scripture in the Bible study circles within our parishes? One person can be given the task of noting whenever a particular passage is used for a festival or saint’s day, and the group can then discuss together the reasons why it has been so chosen. Others in the group may be assigned to do homework among the Fathers, relying above all upon the biblical homilies of St. John Chrysostom, which are available in English translation in the series *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, reissued by Eerdmans. Initially we may be disappointed: the Father’s manner of thinking and speaking is often strikingly different from our own today. But there is gold in the patristic texts, if only we have the persistence and imagination to discover it.

Christ, the Heart of the Bible

The third requirement in our reading of Scripture is that it should be *Christ-centered*. He is the unifying thread that runs through the entirety of the Bible from the first sentence to the last. Jesus meets us on every page. It all ties up because of Him. “In Him all things hold together” (Col.1: 17 NRSV).

Orthodoxy makes extensive use of the “typological” method of interpretation, whereby “types” of Christ, signs and symbols of His work, are to be detected throughout the OT. Melchizedek, for example, the priest-king of Salem who offered bread and wine to Abraham (Gen.14: 18), is regarded as a “type” of Christ not only by the Fathers but equally in the NT itself (Heb.5: 6; 7: 1-9). The rock that flowed with water in the wilderness of Sinai (Ex.17: 6; Num.30: 7-11) is likewise a symbol of Christ (1Cor.10: 4).

We can discover many other correspondences between the OT and NT by using a biblical concordance. Often the best commentary of all is simply a concordance, or an edition of the Bible with well-chosen marginal cross-references. Only connect. It all ties up. In the words of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, “A Christian is the one who, wherever he looks, finds everywhere Christ, and rejoices in Him.” This is true in particular of the biblical Christian. Wherever he looks, on every page, he finds everywhere Christ.

The Bible as Personal

According to St. Mark the Monk (“Mark the Ascetic,” fifth/sixth century), “He who is humble in his thoughts and engaged in spiritual work, when he reads the Holy Scriptures, will apply everything to himself and not to his neighbor.” We are to look throughout Scripture for a *personal* application. Our question is not simply “What does it mean?” but “What does it mean for me?” As St. Tikhon insists, “Christ Himself is speaking to *you*.” Scripture is a direct, intimate dialogue between the savior and myself – Christ addressing me and my heart responding. That is the fourth criterion in our Bible reading.

I am to see all narratives in Scripture as part of my own personal story. The description of Adam’s fall is equally an account of something in my own experience. Who is Adam? His name means simply “man,” “human”: it is I who am Adam. It is to me that God says, “Where are *you*?” (Gen.3: 9). We often ask, “Where is God?” But the real question is the one that God puts to the Adam in each one of us: “where are *you*?”

Who is Cain, the murderer of his brother? It is I. God’s challenge, “Where is Abel your brother?” (Gen.4: 9), is addressed to the Cain in each one of us. The way to God lies through love for other people, and there is no other way. Disowning my sister or brother, I replace the image of God with the mark of Cain, and deny my essential humanity.

Betrayal, for instance, is part of the personal story of everyone. Have we not all betrayed others at some time in our life, and have we not all known what it is to be betrayed? And does not the memory of these moments leave deep, continuing scars on our psyche? Reading, then, the account of St. Peter’s betrayal of Jesus and his restoration after the resurrection, we can see ourselves as each an actor in the story. Imagining what both Peter and Christ experienced at the moment immediately after the betrayal, we make their feelings our own. I am Peter; in the situation of betrayal, can I also be Christ? Reflecting likewise on the moment of reconciliation – seeing how the risen Savior with love utterly devoid of sentimentality restored the fallen Peter to fellowship, seeing how Peter on his side had the humility and courage to accept his restoration – we ask ourselves: how Christ like am I to those who betrayed me? And – after my own acts of betrayal, am I able to accept the forgiveness of others – am I able to forgive myself?

A personal approach of this kind means that in reading the Bible we are not simply detached and objective observers, absorbing information, taking note of facts. The Bible is not merely a work of literature or a collection of historical documents, although certainly it can be approached on that level. It is, much more fundamentally, a *sacred* book, addressed to *believers*, to be read with faith and love. We shall not profit fully from reading the Gospels unless we are in love with Christ. “Heart speaks to heart:” I enter into the living truth of Scripture only when my heart responds with love to the heart of God.

Reading Scripture in this way – in obedience, as a member of the Church, finding Christ everywhere, and seeing everything as part of my own personal story – we shall sense something of the power and healing to be found in the Bible. Yet always in our biblical voyage of exploration we are only at the very beginning. We are like someone launching out in a tiny boat across a limitless ocean. But, however great the journey, we can embark on it today, at this very hour, in this very moment.
