

Eight Reasons to Open the Book

M. W. Bassford, 11-13-11

The devil attacks all of us in many different ways, but if I had to pick the single biggest spiritual obstacle for the most people in this congregation, I would pick lack of time. As the hymn says, we have to take time to be holy, and yet, that time is often hard to find. In the current unhealthy economic climate, many brethren are spending more and more hours on the job because they're afraid that if they don't, they soon won't have a job at all. We fear for our children and their future, so we cram as many activities as we can in their lives, because if little Timmy isn't doing both youth soccer AND the chess club, he'll never get into U of I. Naturally, their busy schedules make our schedules even busier, so we spend the whole day racing around at a dead run. We're like one of those gerbils on an exercise wheel. We're scrambling all the time, but we never seem to get anywhere.

When we live life at this frenetic pace, our relationships suffer. This is true of our friendships and our marriages, but it is equally true of our relationship with God. We think we don't have time to come to every night of the gospel meeting, to get involved in other activities of the church, or even to pray or study the Bible.

Friends, that's right where the devil wants us to be. We can't grow if we aren't spending more time with God than that, and we may very well be dying. However, it's not realistic to make wholesale changes to our schedules immediately. Instead, we need to look to steal minutes for the Lord, bit by bit, until our lives are back in balance. One of the best ways to accomplish this is through Bible study. Even fifteen minutes of reading can give us enough spiritual meat to chew on for an entire day. Let's look, then, at eight reasons to open the book.

Basic Goals

The first reason, and one we don't often think about, is **TO BECOME FREE**. Jesus raises this idea in John 8:31-32. We often think of the word as a very restrictive thing, because it tells us about all the things that people in the world do that we can't. The devil wants us to think that way, that being a Christian is boring because we have to color inside the lines all the time. In reality, though, it is the devil who offers slavery, and Christ who offers us freedom. When we learn the truth, it frees us from so many things. It frees us from all the entanglements that Satan uses sin to allure us into. It frees us from anxiety about tomorrow, because it contains God's promise that He will take care of us. It frees us from insecurity and self-doubt because of its message of God's unfailing love. It even frees us from the fear of death because of the hope it offers of eternal life. When I talk to brethren who are struggling with their faith, it's so striking to me how evident the loss of freedom is in their lives. They feel trapped and suffocated by the lives they're leading, and they will say so, but they don't realize that the reason why they're trapped is that they've lost touch with God. We can't find freedom in the world. We can only find it in the word.

Second, we need to search the Scripture in order **TO LEARN WISDOM**. David emphasizes the wisdom-giving benefits of the word in Psalm 119:99. I often wonder, friends, how much better my life would have been if only I had known 20 years ago what I know now. I could have avoided so many sins, I could have been spared the consequences of so many bad decisions and ill-considered words, if only I had thought more about what the long-term results of my short-term choices would be. Experience is a sound teacher, but it is often a painful one. I suspect that just about everyone here has similar regrets. If we don't want to go through that same painful learning process over and over again, if we don't want to have exactly the same regrets 20 years from now, there's only one way to break the cycle, and that's through the word. In this life, there are no new temptations. There are no new mistakes. Every single situation we might find ourselves in is covered by God's word, and if we just listen to the word, we will learn how to handle ourselves in that situation. If we will only study, we can learn what the right answer is without having to get kicked in the teeth by the wrong answer. How wonderful it would be to look back 20 years from now and not see a single decision in those two decades that I regretted! I can't get there on my own. I've already displayed the shortcomings of my own wisdom. However, I can get there through the word.

As part of this, we should turn to the word **TO AVOID EVIL**. Paul points to this function of the Scripture in 1 Corinthians 10:11-12. There is truly nothing new under the sun, and that is doubly true of sin. The devil hasn't tried anything different in thousands of years. Why should he? Human beings keep on destroying themselves with the same old sins like waves of lemmings rushing off a cliff. Sure, some of the details change. They didn't have Internet pornography in the days of King David. However, the basic story stays the same, and without even a single mouse click, the story of David and Bathsheba can teach us all we need to know about the dangers of lust.

Over and over, sin after sin, the Scripture drives home the same basic message. Sin looks good, but it's bad for us. It will mess us up, and if we keep on fooling around with it, it's going to kill us. No matter what sin we try, no matter how carefully we plan and conceal it, we can be sure that it will find us out. If we will only keep that in mind, the devil won't be able to overcome us, and the more we study the word, the less we will forget.

Conversely, the word is also able **TO REINFORCE VIRTUE**. Let's read about this together in 2 Peter 1:10-12. It's not enough for us to learn once what God wants us to do. Instead, we must regularly, constantly re-learn it, because the more we return to those same, familiar Bible concepts, the more likely we are to put them into practice in our lives. This sermon is an example of this fact. Is there anyone in the congregation who has not heard before that we ought to study the word more? And yet, at the same time, is there any one of us who believes that we are already reading the Scripture enough, that we wouldn't benefit from increased study? We know this already, yet we still need to be reminded, we still need to be stirred up, to do it. Brethren, the same thing is true of every single commandment in the Bible. We need to be stirred up to do all of them, and one of the best ways to get stirred up is to read it for ourselves. All other things being equal, the more we study, the better Christians we will be.

Advanced Goals

On a less functional level, we need to turn to the word if we want **TO LEARN ABOUT JESUS**. Luke mentions this point almost in passing in Acts 1:1-2. The gospels were all written to tell us about Jesus, and other than a few sentences in other first-century sources, the New Testament is our only source of information about Him. We cannot approach Jesus except through the word. Because of this, Jesus is only going to be as important to us as the Bible is important to us. If we claim to be a disciple of Christ, but we don't seek Him in His word, we're in the same boat as the man who claims to be a football fan, but never reads about or watches games. We might be self-deceived, but we are certainly wrong. On the other hand, if we want to know more about Jesus, if we feel the need for greater love for Him and closeness with Him in our spiritual lives, we can find that in the Scripture. We can read story after story that tell us how amazing our Lord is, both in works and in character. Unless we encounter Jesus in the word, we will spend our spiritual lives trying to grow close to a stranger.

In a similar way, we can also rely on the word **TO STRENGTHEN FAITH**. Paul points this out plainly in Romans 10:17. If we find ourselves questioning God's existence or God's love, the cure for the disease is in the Scripture. The devil is constantly working on each one of us. Every day, he wants to see if he can get us to pray a little bit less, to think about God a little bit less, to be a little bit less thankful for all God has done. His goal is to erode our belief a little bit more each day until there's nothing left, until we have fallen away almost without realizing it. I guarantee you that he is trying this strategy with every Christian in the room right now. In the face of this constant assault, the only way for us to maintain and build our faith is through the word. Our assemblies help in this process, but if we really want to make ourselves devil-proof, we have to get into the word on our own.

Likewise, the word will help us **TO GAIN HOPE**. In proof of this, let's look together at Romans 15:4. Here, as elsewhere, when the Bible talks about hope, it doesn't refer to wishful thinking, as when I say, "I hope that Mizzou will win a national championship this year." It would be nice, but I'm not holding my breath. By contrast, Biblical hope is a confident expectation, an assurance founded on the promises of God.

This hope can be present on two different levels. First, we can hope in God in this life. In Romans 15, this specific hope is what Paul is talking about. It all begins with our faithfulness to God. If we are obedient, we can have the hope that God will provide for us. He will make sure that we and our families will have the things we need, as long as we seek His kingdom first. He will see to it that our efforts to be righteous will bear fruit in our relationships with others. He will protect us so that we will never face a trial we cannot overcome through Him.

Even more important than that hope, though, is the hope of eternal life. Recently, I myself have had to realize the importance of this. Sometimes, I get the idea that a lot of other Christians think it's easy to be a preacher, that preachers just bop along on a spiritual high all the time, that we don't face the challenges that "ordinary" Christians face. Of course, it doesn't work like that. I have my spiritual highs and spiritual lows just like anybody else does, and recently, as I've been coming to grips with my mother's death, I found my own hope being challenged. Even though I had and have no doubt that my mother has inherited eternal life, I began wrestling with the fear that for me, this limited life was all there was. I know that doesn't make any sense, but the devil's lies don't have to make sense to be effective. The fact that I was thinking that way at all should have clued me in that I wasn't spending enough time with the word. Once I fixed my word problem, my hope problems went away too.

Finally, we can use the word **TO FIND JOY**. We read this in just about so many words in Psalm 19:8. It's funny. All the time we spend at work, all the time we spend on our children's activities, all the time we spend on a thousand frenzied forms of "recreation", all of those things are our attempt to find happiness for ourselves and our families. And yet, even though all of those earthly activities promise so much joy, they deliver so little. They're the spiritual equivalent of Chinese food. You feel stuffed when you're done eating, but an hour later, you're starving again. If we want real joy in our lives, lasting joy, joy that can endure the fiercest earthly trials, we can only find that joy in the word, because it is there that we can seek and find God. If we rely on Him, we cannot be disappointed.