

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, October 22, 1989, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

PSALM 119:130

“The unfolding of Thy words gives light;
it imparts understanding to the simple.”
(Revised Standard Version)

HOW TO APPROACH THE BIBLE

This statement of the Psalmist is really saying to us that the Bible, the Word of God, is the one and only book in the world that satisfactorily enlightens us as to the meaning of our human existence.

Do you want to know the answers to the three ultimate questions:

Where did I come from?

Why am I here? and

Where am I going?

You will find the answers only as God unfolds His Word to you and enlightens your mind and heart through your reading of and reflection upon and obedience to that Word.

We are told that such an “unfolding” of God’s Word enlightens us by imparting “understanding” to the “simple.” Now this doesn’t mean the “simple-minded,” in the sense of the mentally deficient; it means the “simple-hearted” -- those who are humble, those who know they don’t have all the answers, those who know that without God they can’t solve their own problems or work out their own salvation.

The trouble with modern Western man is that he suffers from a false sophistication and an overweening self-satisfaction that makes him think he has life by the tail and doesn’t need God any more. To such conceit and to such arrogance God will never speak. He will remain silent, just as our Lord remained silent when questioned by King Herod who was arrogant, conceited and sinful. In Luke 23:9 we read, “Herod questioned Him at some length, but Jesus made no answer.” What a terrible thing to be confronted by a silent God Who will not speak to us because He knows we will not listen!

“The unfolding of Thy words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple.”

How do we experience this “unfolding” of God’s Word which gives us “understanding” of ultimate reality? In a word, how ought we to approach our reading and study of the Bible?

Well, you can make a great many different approaches to any book. For instance, here is someone reading Julius Caesar. He may be in Senior High studying it for his final exams, or he may be a university student studying it at a much higher level. Or the reader may be a psychologist making a study of the morbid psychology of Cassius. Or he may be a historian, seeing what light it sheds on Roman history. Or he may be a Shakespearean specialist seeking to discover what insight it gives concerning the meter of Shakespeare. Or, last but by no means least, it may be a person who is reading the play just because he enjoys it.

Now what about the Bible?

1. Well, the first approach to the Bible is obviously the literary approach. And if we make the literary approach, it means that we read the Bible as literature; and we need to do that because there is an ignorance of the Bible today which is quite startling. I find that a great number of church people, and they're not all young, just don't know the great stories of the Bible, especially the Old Testament stories.

John Masefield, the late poet laureate of England, used to tell how he received a letter from a university graduate, believe it or not, and the letter said, "Dear Mr. Masefield, I have just discovered a quotation which I think is rather beautiful. I wonder if you could tell me what book it is in, and where I might possibly get a copy. The quotation is -- 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.'"!!

Now let me say this. If you're going to approach the Bible as literature, then don't read the Bible nine or ten verses at a time. Sit down and read a whole book like "Mark" through at one sitting. If you read a novel, let's say a detective story by Agatha Christie, you don't read half a page tonight, and another page next week. You read the whole book as quickly as you can. And if you're going to read the Bible, don't look on it as a Book in which you do nothing but intensive Bible study. Don't look on it simply as a Book from which you take passages to teach children lessons, or as a Book from which texts are taken for the preaching of sermons. Take it as a book you read as you would read any other book -- for the sheer enjoyment of it, as one of the great masterpieces of world literature. Read it like that, and it may well become a new book for you — especially if you read it in a modern translation. In this connection, I strongly recommend The Living Bible which reads so easily, and which, although it is a paraphrase of the original text, is nevertheless amazingly true to the meaning of the original, and in many instances, makes crystal clear what is otherwise obscure in some other translations.

2. Now in the second place, I think we have got to make a linguistic approach to the Bible, that is to say, we have got to find out just exactly what this Book is saying.

Now let me take an example of this. In the King James translation Paul three times in his letters speaks of "the earnest of the Holy Spirit." (2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5; Ephesians 1:14). And you say, "What on earth does this word 'earnest' mean?" Well, it is the Greek word "arrabon" -- and an "arrabon" was the first installment of a payment, and it was the guarantee that the final and complete payment would certainly be made. It is a business word. Here is an amusing example of how much of a business word it really was. A village in Egypt was having a village

festival, and they had engaged a troupe of dancing girls, and they pay the girls so much as “arrabon,” as a guarantee that when they have finished their engagement on the stage, they will receive the rest of their pay! So “arrabon” really means a down payment. And what do you think the word “arrabona” means in modern Greek? It means an engagement ring! When a boy slips that ring on his beloved’s finger, that is his guarantee that he is going to marry her.

So, when Paul calls the Holy Spirit, or life in the Spirit, an “arrabon,” the “earnest,” what he is saying is this: life in the Spirit here on earth is simply the first installment, the down payment, the guarantee of that wonderful life which is still to come for the Christian! You taste eternal life, and you are sure of eternal life in Heaven, even while you are here on earth, and you have this assurance of faith when you are sure of the Holy Spirit at work in your life.

So, when you come upon a word, say in the New Testament, that you don’t understand — a word such as “earnest” - turn to a book like Dr. William Barclay’s New Testament Words (\$3.95 paperback) - and you will make some thrilling linguistic discoveries; and you will discover that the Bible is really the most exciting book in the world!

3. Now the third approach to the Bible is what we might call the historical approach.

And the historical approach to the Bible always puts whatever happens into its correct historical perspective, so that you may understand it ever so much better.

Let us take the case of Jesus lashing out at the money changers and the pigeon sellers, and casting them out of the Temple at Jerusalem. Why did He do this? Well, there were two reasons:

a. Every Jew had to pay a Temple tax, and the Temple tax amounted to about 20 cents, which was two days’ pay for a Jewish peasant. Now normally any currency would do in Palestine -- Greek, Egyptian, Roman, anything at all. But the Temple tax could only be paid in two kinds of shekels, Galilean shekels and shekels of the Sanctuary, and for this reason: all other currency had kings’ heads on them, and a king’s head was to a Jew a “graven image”, and you could pay your Temple tax only with a coin which had no king’s head on it. In the Temple courtyard, they set up stalls where people could get their money changed. Suppose a man came up with an Egyptian coin worth 50 cents. They would take it from him and they would say, “Now that will cost you five cents to change it.” So, he would say, “Here you are,” and they would take his five cents. Then he would say, “I want my proper Temple coins now, please.” And they would look at him innocently and say, “Oh, that will cost you another nickel to get your change.” And so, every time a poor pilgrim changed a coin it cost him two nickels, a day’s wages, just to get the coin changed and to get his money back; and out of this racket a Temple banker would make the equivalent of \$175,000 a year! It was a shameful exploitation of poor pilgrims.

b. Again, Jesus lashed out at the people who sold the pigeons which were used as sacrificial animals in the Temple worship. No wonder He vented His wrath on them. You could buy a pigeon outside the Temple, but it wasn’t worth your while to do so. You see, the Temple authorities had appointed Temple inspectors, and these inspectors were to make sure that all the sacrificial animals or birds were without spot or blemish. And if you had bought the thing outside, you could bet your bottom dollar that the Temple inspector would find a fault, a flaw in

it, and he would say, "I'm terribly sorry, friend, but I really can't pass this bird. If you're wise, you'll go to our shop here in the Temple courtyard. Our shop only sells birds which have already been examined and passed, and you won't have any trouble at all!" Fine. But when you went to the Temple shop, a pigeon which outside the Temple would have cost you a dime, inside the Temple would cost you as much as \$2.00. And so, the people who changed the money, and the people who sold the sacrificial animals were just engaging in a despicable but lucrative racket, and were fleecing the people right, left and center. And the action of our Lord therefore demonstrates His passion for social justice. It shows how He was out to protect the poor worshipper, and to make sure that he could worship God without being gouged like that.

I wonder how Jesus would react today, for example, in California where illegal Mexican immigrants are welcome: welcome to do the backbreaking work of stoop labor in the fields for a pittance, welcome as household help who dare not complain about long hours and low pay for fear they may be sent back, welcome to labor in garment industry sweatshops at half the legal minimum wage, and yet unable to join a union since an anonymous call from their boss to the Immigration Service would mean their expulsion. It is ironic but true that it is illegal for them to work, but it is not illegal for bosses to hire illegal aliens! I think you and I know how Jesus would address that situation!

So, we can make the literary approach to the Bible, the linguistic approach, the historical approach.

4. And last of all, and this is very important, we must make the devotional approach to the Bible. When you start on Bible study, especially if you're an enquiring student, you might sometimes come to the conclusion that the Bible is just a collection of problems, the problem of this, that, and the other thing. But it is not. The Bible is meant, above all else, to be a Book on which we feed our souls. And therefore, always at the end of our study, there must come the devotional approach -- the approach whereby we strengthen our heart, and enrich our mind, and thus are made better able to live life under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and according to God's "game plan" as outlined in Scripture.

There is an old story, it has often been told, but it illustrates perfectly what I'm trying to say at this point. There was a party in London, and at one point in the evening it was decided that everyone should recite something. Well, they all said their piece, and they came to a famous actor, and he recited the 23rd Psalm. And when he had finished, there was thunderous applause. And next there came an old minister, and the actor said, "Sir, I'd love to hear your rendering of this psalm." The old man began, and almost immediately the assembled guests were spellbound. And when he had finished, there was a silence which was far more eloquent than any applause. And in the silence, the great actor turned to the old man, and he said, "Sir, I know the psalm, but you know the Shepherd."

Now that is precisely why we read and study God's precious Word -- to find the Living Word, CHRIST, within the written Word, the Bible. We do it, not simply to know the Psalm, but supremely to know the Shepherd.

Make a premature New Year's resolution. Promise the Lord that you will never allow a

day to pass without spending some time reading His Word. It could revolutionize your life for 1990 and ever afterwards. And if you're really serious, take and use a copy of "Daily Bread," which will enable you systematically to read through the entire Bible in a year, which means reading approximately four chapters a day.

I suspect that all of us find many portions of the Bible hard to understand. But within the last ten years numerous helpful study Bibles have been made available to us. The two that I find indispensable are --

a. The N.I.V. Study Bible. It contains informative introductions to each book of the Bible, and at the bottom of each page, notes on each verse, which clearly explain the meaning. There are also maps, charts, time-lines and a concordance.

b. The Life Application Bible, which contains The Living Bible translation. The great benefit of this Bible is that the notes at the bottom of each page seek to directly apply the message of the Bible to our individual lives. "What is this verse saying to me, and what is it challenging me to do?" I find this extremely challenging and helpful.

With these two Bibles by your side you will have all the commentaries you need to enable you to understand what the Word of God is saying to you.

Why not buy copies of these Bibles as Christmas gifts for your loved ones this year? We have an outlet in Texas where we can purchase them at a greatly reduced rate. Hardback copies of each of them sell for \$27.00 which includes postage. We will order them for you if you give us your name.

So, may God richly bless you as you promise Him that you will really use this priceless means of grace - His own holy WORD!

AMEN.