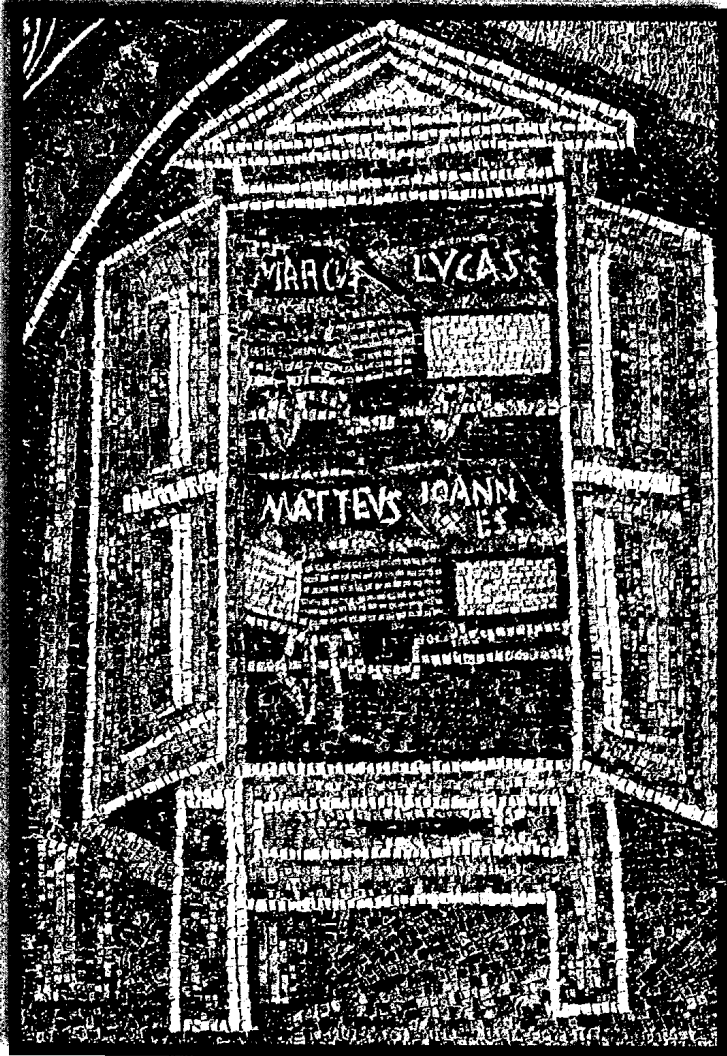


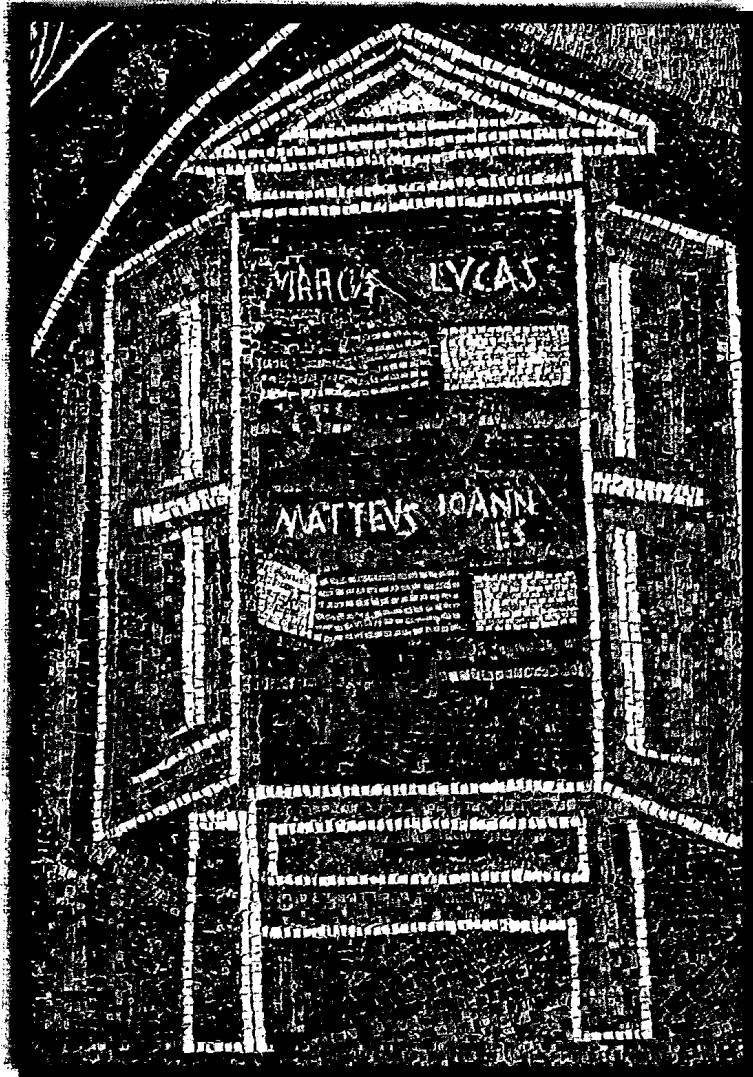
Fr. Matta El-Meskeen

How to read the Bible



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MONASTERY OF ST. MACARIUS
Scetis

How To Read The Bible

FATHER MATTA EL MESKEEN
The Spiritual Father of the Monastery of St. Macarius the Great

كيف تقرأ الكتاب المقدس (إنجليزي)

Father Matta El-Meskeen

How to read the Bible

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HOW TO READ THE BIBLE

The Bible in relation to the reader:

The Bible is different from all other books; other books are written by man, but the Bible not only contains the sayings and commandments of God, but was also written entirely under divine inspiration. So we might say that it is God's book, which He gave to man to lead him into everlasting life.

In the Old and New Testaments, although the dialogue, events, history and all the stories, centre on man, it is in fact God who is veiled in them, for the Bible describes God to us and reveals Him through events. Yet we were not given a complete picture in one generation, or one book, or even over the whole extended period, for it is with great difficulty that the Bible struggles to give us a simplified mental image of God by relating His direct dealings with man over a period of five thousand years. This is so that no man in any age need be deprived of perceiving something about God that will satisfy his need, so much so that each one experiences such a flood of joy that he believes he has come to know God and completely comprehended Him. But whoever has the intellectual audacity to try to supercede his human limitations by searching within himself to perceive a perfect image of God, is doomed to failure and loses the ability to attain even the small things appropriate to his stature.

It is immeasurably difficult for man to comprehend Him whose days have neither beginning nor end, for God is perfect and, while it is

true that we may perceive Him, His perfection is unfathomable, and so it is with all His works.

As well as revealing God and introducing Him to us, the Bible tries in many ways to prepare man inwardly to receive Him. Although it may appear outwardly that it is man who makes his way towards God, the joyful and wonderful truth is that it is God who comes to man, as a lover and deeply loving father. "If any man loves me let him keep my words, and my Father will love him and we will come and make our dwelling with him" (Jn. 14:23). This is why the Lord commands us to prepare our hearts for His blessed coming. "My heart is ready, O God. My heart is ready" (Ps. 57:7).

So we see that the Bible as a whole reveals God mysteriously and prepares us to receive Him in our hearts, that we may live with Him from this moment on as a preparation for what will be at the end of time, when God will be revealed openly and we shall meet Him face to face to live with Him for ever.

The reader in relation to the Bible:

There are two ways of reading:

The first is when a man reads and puts himself and his mind in control of the text, trying to subject its meaning to his own understanding and then comparing it with the understanding of others.

The second is when a man reads putting the text on a level above himself and trying to bring his mind into submission to its meaning, and even setting the text up as a judge over him, counting it as the highest criterion.

The first way is suitable for any book in the world, whether it be a work of science or of literature.

The second is indispensable in reading the Bible.

The first way gives man mastery over the world, which is his natural role.

The second gives God mastery as the all-wise and all-powerful Creator.

But if man confuses the roles of these two methods, he stands to lose from them both, for if he reads science and literature as he should read the Gospel, he grows small in stature, his academic ability diminishes and his dignity among the rest of creation dwindles.

And if he reads the Bible as he should read science, he understands and feels God to be small, the divine being appears limited and His awesomeness fades. Man acquires a false sense of his own superiority over divine things and this is the very same forbidden thing that Adam committed in the beginning.

Spiritual understanding and intellectual memorization:

Thus in reading the Bible we aim at understanding and not at research, investigation or study, for the Bible is to be understood, not investigated. It is therefore appropriate here to point to the difference between spiritual understanding and intellectual memorization.

Spiritual understanding centres on the acceptance of a divine truth, which steadily grows, rising on the horizon of the mind till it pervades it all. If the mind and its reactions are brought into willing obedience to that truth, the divine truth continues to permeate the mind even more and the mind develops with it endlessly, "to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fulness of God" (Eph. 3:19).

It is clear from this verse that the knowledge and love of God, and divine things in general, are immeasurably above the level of knowledge, that is human knowledge. It is therefore futile and foolish for man to try to "investigate" the things of God in an attempt to grasp them and make them yield to his intellectual powers.

On the contrary it is man who must yield to the love of God so that his mind may be open to the divine truth. It is then that he will be prepared to receive surpassing knowledge. "That being rooted and grounded in love, you may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth" (Eph. 3:17-18).

Intellectual memorization demands that a man pass from a state of submission to the truth (through understanding) to a state of mastery over it and possession of it. It requires that the mind progress step by step through investigation until it is on a level with the truth, then little by little rise above it until it can control it, recalling it and repeating it at will as if the truth were a possession and the mind its owner.

Thus memorization is a matter of determining the truth, summing it up and defining it as closely as possible, so that the mind may absorb it and store it away. That is to say, intellectual memorization is the reverse of spiritual understanding, for spiritual understanding expands with the truth, and the truth expands with it "into all the fulness of God," that is to infinity. Intellectual memorization therefore weakens divine truth, and strips it of its power and breadth, and so it is not a suitable way of approach to the Bible, and brings minimal results.

Spiritual memorization:

There is another way of memorizing the word of God, by which a man may recall and review the text, though not whenever and however he wishes, but rather whenever and however God wishes. This is spiritual, not intellectual memorization, and God grants it by His Spirit to those who understand His words, "The Comforter, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my Name, will teach you all things and remind you of all that I have told you" (Jn. 14:26).

Just as God gives spiritual understanding to those who ask sincerely and honestly to know Him, "upon which their minds are opened to understand the text," so also spiritual memorization is a spiritual work which God gives to those who have been granted to be witnesses for Him. When the Holy Spirit recalls certain words, to us, He does so in depth and breadth, not simply reminding us of the text of a verse, but giving with it irresistible wisdom and spiritual power to bring out the glory of the verse and the power of God in it. A spirit of censure is

also sent with the words to prick the heart.

Thus there is a striking difference between intellectual memorization by rote and recollection through the Holy Spirit.

Nevertheless man must be prepared for this spiritual recollection by keeping his heart conscious of the word of God through pondering upon it frequently and storing it up in his heart out of love and delight. "Thy words were found, and I ate them" (Jer. 15:16) and they were "sweeter than honey to my mouth" (Ps. 119:103). He constantly recited it to himself: "on His law he meditated day and night" (Ps. 1:2), and every time he comes across a profitable word he impresses it on his heart: "I have laid up thy words in my heart, that I may not sin against Thee" (Ps. 119:11), just as God warns us to talk of them "when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes" (Dt. 6:8-9).

Now there is a great difference between a man who recites and meditates on the word of God because it is sweet and beneficial to his soul and rejoices his heart and comforts his spirit, and one who meditates on it in order to repeat it to other people so that he shall stand out as a teacher and skilful servant of the Gospel. For the first, the word remains for it builds an awareness of heart or a relationship with God, for the second it simply passes into the intellectual memory where he can use it to build relationships with people!

So if a man tries to read the Bible and memorize verses to use them to teach people and give a spoken witness, before submitting himself to the divine truth, acting according to it and opening his mind to receive spiritual understanding, he only gains knowledge and does not give a fruitful witness, no matter how many verses or orderly proofs he may present with great intellectual skill, for the Spirit will have left him. The worst use we can make of the Bible is to use it simply as a source of proof verses.

Spiritual understanding of the sayings, commandments and teaching of God is our entrance into the mystery of the Gospel: "it was

given to you that you might know the mysteries of the kingdom of God.” And the sign of spiritual understanding is a man’s sense that there is within him an inexhaustible spring of spiritual insights into the word of God and that each truth is related to all the rest. In his heart he is able to relate every verse he reads to another verse and every insight broadens into harmony with another, so that the Gospel easily becomes a unified whole.

This position is not attained only by those who have spent long years reading the Bible. It may be that someone who has only a few months’ experience with it, may be given this sense, so that using the few verses he is familiar with he is able to speak zealously of God with a sincerity and power that attract the hearts of others to God. For such a man it is enough to read a verse once for it to be indelibly imprinted on his heart for ever, for the word of God is spiritual; it is even in some sense a spirit, as the Lord says: “The words that I spoke to you are spirit and life.”

A practical introduction to understanding the Gospel:

There is no intellectual means of entering into the Gospels, for the Gospel is spiritual. It must be obeyed and lived through the spirit before it can be understood. If anyone living outside the Gospel tries to understand it he will stumble and fall, and if he dares to try to teach it, he will be a stumbling block to those who follow him. But if anyone has true zeal, burning love and total obedience to God and carries out just one of the commandments of the Gospel precisely, he enters into the mystery of the Gospel without being aware of it.

The first thing he discovers is God’s faithfulness in fulfilling His promises in his own soul. This makes his mind eager to receive the spark of living faith that settles in the heart and kindles there a great fire of love and fear of God. A man’s spiritual experience increases and the level of his understanding of the Gospel deepens according to the degree to which he carries out its commandments faithfully and precisely.

A sincere and humble acceptance of obedience to God, springing from a heart undefiled by falsehood, hypocrisy, love of display or exhibitionism and not looking for any particular results, may be considered the beginning of the true way to the knowledge of God. This is because man's intention is tested by temptations as he tries to carry out the commandments; he is helped according to the degree of his faith and perseverance, and in so far as he receives help, his trust increases and his knowledge of God and His ways grows surer.

All this is to say the spiritual understanding of the Gospel and of God is the result of the formation of a relationship with God through obedience to His commandments. This is not simply an understanding of texts and verses, but an understanding of the power of the word and knowledge of the life that springs from the verse based on experience, trust, evidence and an unshakable faith in God.

A fine example of reading and understanding the Gospel:

The greatest commandment by which man may experience the providence of God, and by obedience to which he may obtain spiritual power which unveils to him the mysteries and secrets of the Bible and lights the way ahead, is that he should leave everything and follow Christ. For this commandment sums up the whole Gospel! This is the verse that St. Antony heard. It touched him deeply, and he carried it out with precise determination. Through doing so he attained a life that was in accordance with the Gospel, and understanding, knowledge and recollection of the Bible that astonished the scholars and theologians, as we know from St. Athanasius the Great. And all this in spite of the fact that St. Antony could neither read nor write.

Many of the Fathers followed the same pattern and the same marvels took place in them, for they attained the heights of knowledge of the Bible, of God, and spiritual direction, though they themselves were illiterate. Among them were the great ascetics Pambo and Paphnutius, the disciple of Macarius the Great, of whom Palladius says that he had

the grace of the knowledge of the holy books and was an able expositor, though he could not read or write.

Many others in the world, both men and women, educated and uneducated, have entered into the mystery of the Gospel through one of the many commandments, such as voluntary poverty and simplicity of life, refusing to set money aside for emergencies, and putting their faith in God before all other considerations. Through this they have tasted the wonders of God, their minds have been opened, they have perceived the mystery of the divine plan and understood God's words as people who lived them out in experience and fulfilled them. In this way they were able to evangelize with great faith and courage. Others have entered into the rejection of worldly pleasures and lifeless pastimes. They have experienced the power of the word of God and found in it great comfort and delight. They have understood how a man lives by the word more than by food and medicine; they have known God and tasted Him and their minds have been illumined by His words.

Yet others have entered into the mystery of the Gospel through secret acts of sacrifice, giving their money, energy or time to serve the poor, the deprived, the afflicted and those bowed down by various tragedies. They have acted in silent courage, giving all they possess, bearing all they are able. Such as these have acquired knowledge, perception and understanding of the Gospel and the commandments of the Lord, but not the understanding that comes from meditating on the beauty of the words and the exposition of their meaning. It is rather the understanding that springs from experience and is transformed into eternal life, forming a living relationship between man and Christ.

Academic meditation and practical meditation:

There is an academic understanding of meditation on the Bible and a practical understanding of it.

Academic meditation is the product of ideas resulting from study,

research, pondering the meanings of the verses and their relation to each other and arriving at the facts by a process of logical deduction.

Practical meditation comes through inspiration which the soul perceives as a result of its experience and its trials and struggles with the truth that have taken place in the course of following the commandments of the Gospel. This is also supplemented by the illuminations and promptings of the Spirit which man receives in their due time without having previously acquired knowledge of the things revealed to him.

Academic meditation on the Bible stimulates the mind, but leaves the spirit unmoved; it makes the listener desire the truth, without showing him how to enter into it; it provides us with an image of God but cannot bring us face to face with Him.

This division of academic meditation from spiritual experience and the secret fulfilling of the commandments, leads to a worship that is merely formal and a false intellectual devotion to the Gospel. "This is a people that honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."

Regrettable as it is, this type of reading, understanding, exposition and teaching of the Bible, has precedence in our church, and indeed throughout the world, at the present time. The Gospel has been reduced to a source from which one may quote verses or prove principles, and the ideas it contains have become academic points to support sermons and articles. So the Gospel has become a reliable way of gaining fame and academic degrees and the admiration of the world, though the basis of the Gospel and the truth it contains is the enemy of fame and false worldly knowledge, and the enemy of the admiration of men. The Church thus suffers a great loss when it abandons the practical teaching of the Bible and is concerned with the academic.

As for practical meditation on the Bible it is attained by receiving the divine truth through secret obedience to the commandments and as a result of the faithful clinging of the heart to God in seemly fear and

true humility. This builds a practical and sure relationship with God.

That is to say that practical meditation builds an inner life with God which impregnates a man's words and thoughts and teachings with divine power. Thus with a single word he may convey the truth to the listener, as did the Fathers, who lived the Gospel with all their heart and mind and power. Their words were not eloquent and full of high-flown meditations, but they convey the mystery, for they had power to give new life to the listener.

In the sayings of the ascetic Fathers of the fourth century and later this was the normal pattern of instruction: a novice would go to the old Father and say, "Speak me a word that I may live." The old man would say very little to him, but because of the power of his experience and the grace it brought, this little would be enough for the novice to live by and overcome all the difficulties he faced. This is the truest picture there is of how the Gospel should be understood and preached. How appropriate for us today are the words of the Apostle: "If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them."

The power of a life of practical simplicity:

If we look back to the early days of the Church, we are astonished at its power, and especially that of the newly-founded churches. In spite of the fact that the people were simple and ignorant of the Bible—for manuscripts were only rarely possessed by individuals—and in spite of the newness of their faith in Christ and the deep influence of their old pagan customs, their spiritual life and their demonstrations of faith, love and zeal, were a fine example of a powerful life lived according to the precepts of the Gospel, a model for practical understanding of the meaning of eternal life, the kingdom of God, living by faith, dying to the world, faithfulness to Christ, expectation of His second coming and a living faith in the resurrection. Even up to the present time, we still draw on their faith and tradition, and understand only with difficulty the letters that were written to them, which they understood easily and lived out.

The secret of all this is that they lived by what they heard. Every commandment fell on faithful hearts prepared to act on it sincerely. All the words of Christ entered deep into the fabric of daily life. The Gospel was translated into work and life.

Those simple people understood the Gospel. They understood it was a life to be lived, not principles to be discussed and they refused to understand it on a purely academic level. Up to this day faithful followers of Christ still draw life for themselves from the living spring of the understanding of those early Christians.

These early communities, burning with love for Christ, had no creeds, no patology, no expositions of scripture, but the few words of Christ that reached their ears, immediately became their creed, needing no explanations or teaching or interpretation, but needing, as they saw it, to be experienced and lived. Through experience they would discover the power of the words and bring to light the mysteries they contained. And so their zeal and love and faith in Christ and the Gospel would grow.

When they heard, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," they sold everything and laid the money at the feet of the Apostles.

When they heard, "Blessed are those who mourn now," they despised all suffering and weariness in the service of the Lord.

When they heard, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake," they bore the cruellest humiliations and insults and attacks.

When they heard, "Watch and pray," they met in the catacombs to watch and pray all night.

When they heard, "Love your enemies," history recorded no resistance put up by the Christians, whether positive or negative, against their persecutors. And they bowed their necks to the sword in humility and obedience to honour the words of Christ.

This was for them the meaning of reading the Gospel and understanding it. There was born in them a hunger and thirst for the righteousness of God and this is why the Holy Spirit was at His most

active in working with them. He would give power to the word, strengthen their hearts, support them in weakness, lead them in the darkness, comfort them in distress, and accompany them along the way till they gave up their spirit into the hand of its Creator with great glory.

Reading without practical application and reading with it:

Reading remains useless, and understanding powerless, and memorization a mere repetition of empty words, unless one puts himself under obedience to the commandment he reads and the word becomes a law of life, no matter what sacrifice, cost, hardship or scorn he may bear. And the Lord Jesus says even more than this; He says that whoever reads his words and understands them, but does not obey them will suffer destruction and great loss, as a man who builds his house on the sand. "And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon sand; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it" (Mt. 7:26-27).

Perhaps you may say, with me, that it would have been better if he had never built—or heard or known or learnt anything.

The life of the Pharisees and Sadducees was like this: minute obedience to the law, skilled explanations and expositions of the commandments, legal opinions so detailed that they went beyond the truth and the simplicity of the Spirit, along with dead works and a life that was spiritually desolate. "And behold, a lawyer stood up to put Him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? How do you read?" And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself." And He said to him, "You have answered right; do this and you will live." (Lk. 10:25-28).

But the Lord compares whoever hears the word and obeys it with a man who built his house on the rock. This is a pointer to the fact that

the power of the word is dependent entirely on one's practical experience of it, for one can only receive and know help in difficulty and danger, and the mysterious aid of the Holy Spirit, through sincere obedience to the precepts of the Gospel. A word on a man's lips, if he truly lives by it, is like a house built on a rock; it is firm and has nothing to fear from shocks. "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock" (Mt. 7:24-25). And here perhaps you may say with me, "If only my house could be built on the rock, and my reading and understanding and knowledge of the Gospel be used for living, rather than as a subject for talking, preaching, conversation and meditation."

A grievous example of great knowledge without action:

Balaam was a man of vision, who could see into the future and had prophetic powers, so he would hear and speak of the great works of God. But he was rejected and became a terrifying warning, and example of those who speak the word of God, are able to reveal mysteries, give true prophecies, pronounce blessings and offer sacrifices, like Balaam, while their hearts are unclean, secretly living far from God. Listen to what he says of himself: "The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor, the oracle of the man whose eye is opened, the oracle of him who hears the words of God, and knows the knowledge of the Most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty, falling down, but having his eyes uncovered" (Num. 24:15-16). But all these gifts were not enough to turn Balaam's heart away from a life of evil. Balaam fell into a grave error, as the holy apostles, Jude in his epistle, Peter in his second epistle and John in the Book of Revelation, say. Even though outwardly he blessed the people of God, he was secretly working against them by wicked consultation, and was pleased to receive a reward for that sin.

Balaam attained the highest level of knowledge, understanding, vision and prophecy accessible to a spiritual man, but his behaviour

was no better than that of the most evil and deceitful of men. His story clearly shows that the understanding and teaching of spiritual matters, even to the level of prophecy, if not supported by a holy life and conduct, in integrity and the fear of God, cannot save us from the curse and death which set the seal on the life of Balaam.

“Take heed how you hear”:

Before you read the Bible or hear the word of God, look within yourself to see where the word of God will come to rest. Here we go back to the well-loved parable of the sower:

“The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, that they may not believe and be saved.”

“And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy; but these have no root, they believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away.”

“And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature.”

“And as for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bring forth fruit with patience.” (Lk. 8:12-15).

“Take heed then how you hear” (Lk. 8:18).

When it comes to hearing the Gospel there are four kinds of listeners. They do not need to be explained or clarified, because the Lord Jesus explained them Himself, so look and see how the Lord says you should hear. Is it with a heart that spends all day along the roadside? Or with a heart that has no depth because it is afraid to sit alone and examine its life? Or with a heart inclined to set aside money as insurance for the future? Or with a heart always loaded with imaginary cares?

Take heed how you should hear the Gospel. It seems that the Lord wants to say that one hears with his heart rather than his ears, and that the inner life affects the word of God, either killing it, or making it live

and thrive. So whoever wants to hear the word well, understand it and hold it fast in an honest and good heart, should prepare his heart inwardly so that the word may safely take root there, finding in his heart faithfulness to God and truthfulness in word and promise. It is absolutely impossible that anyone should understand what he hears of the word of God, if he is not completely honest before God and has determined to surrender his life, his responsibilities, his interests, his money, his future and his own honour and lay them at God's feet.

For how can a man who is afraid of the future understand when the Lord says, "Take no thought for tomorrow," and "Take no thought for your life"?

And how can he who is concerned for his honour understand the cross?

And how can he who is afraid of sickness or death understand the resurrection?

He who asks to read the Gospel is in fact asking for eternal life, and he who asks for eternal life has to take a clear stand with regard to his present life!

Forgetfulness of the Word is a psychological deception:

There is no finer illustration than that of James the Apostle, when he describes the man who hears the word of the Gospel and forgets it as being like one who sees his face in a mirror, but as soon as he leaves the mirror forgets what he looks like. For whoever disregards the word he hears, immediately loses his self-perception.

One kind of man listens to the Gospel, receives the word and stores it up in his heart. He is constantly aware of the instruction he has received and sets it before him like a mirror, using it continuously to correct his speech and thoughts and actions.

Another kind of man listens to the Gospel, but not a single word of what he hears stays in his heart, because it is oblivious and irresponsible, and concerned with matters more important to it than the Gospel and eternal life; they may be his work, his troubles, his pleasures, concerns that he may consider to be in God's service. Or

there may be nothing at all in his heart, and this is also a disaster, for while he is reading the Gospel, he may be so moved that he sighs or even weeps, but afterwards he becomes involved in his own affairs and forgets his sighs and tears. A man like this may imagine that his forgetfulness is beyond his own control, but this is a psychological trick. The truth is that the soul wants to forget the Gospel because it does not like it.

One may read the Gospel regularly every day, but feel that there is an unbridgeable gap between what he reads every day and what he does every day. This unbridgeable gap is dug by forgetfulness. As the days go by, reading the Gospel becomes no more powerful or effective, and no change of life, or even progress along the path, takes place.

This forgetfulness is what James the Apostle considers self-deception!

“Receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who observes his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like” (Jas. 1:21-24).

The uncircumcised ear:

This significant spiritual expression was spoken by St. Stephen the martyr to the council set up to judge him, when he felt that they were resisting the Holy Spirit to satisfy their own purposes.

“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit” (Acts 7:51).

The Holy Spirit speaks to us through the Gospel, but only the circumcised ear can hear His voice, that is the ear whose foreskin has been removed; by the foreskin St. Stephen means lack of submission to God and having a heart too far from God to hear His voice. Those who have uncircumcised ears or hearts are strangers among the people of God. They do not understand His commandments or respond to

them, because they regard themselves as having no commitment to obey.

He whose ear is uncircumcised neither hears the Spirit, nor is influenced by Him, nor responds to Him, because by his own will he has refused to put himself under submission to the Holy Spirit out of fear of Him. He fears that the Spirit may ask him to give up things or positions or principles or relationships, which he finds beneficial or pleasurable and important to him personally. To give them up would be a loss he does not want to accept, so he is afraid of the Holy Spirit lest He should ask him to act against himself or against the world, for his self is dear to him and the world is his delight. A man who has an uncircumcised ear is he who has not cut off the foreskin of his self and does not want to cut the foreskin of the world from either his heart or his ear. He is not prepared to sacrifice anything ever, or at least, he is not prepared to sacrifice everything for God. He hears the Holy Spirit, but pays Him no heed, trying every time to stifle the voice of his conscience. He has from the start excused himself from the responsibility of listening to the voice of God.

This situation had earlier been described by the Prophet Isaiah and the Lord Himself made a revealing comment on it: "Seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are heavy of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should perceive with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn for me to heal them" (Mt. 13:13-15, Is. 6:9).

Here the Lord exposes the intention of His hearers. They gave the appearance of reading and listening to the commandments of God, but in fact they were determined not to be influenced. So they closed their eyes and ears, so that they should neither see nor hear. The Lord exposed their reason for this; it was that they were afraid lest the voice of God should sound so clear and the censure of the Holy Spirit become so convincing that they would be forced to give up their ~~erroneous positions and embezzled possessions, the plans they had~~ made for their future and the sinful relationships for which they had

sold their souls, and not only their souls, but also eternal life and even God Himself. They, like many of us, did not refuse to read or hear the Gospel, but when they came to certain passages, certain voices or certain commandments, they would become confused, and pass them over quickly, and close their eyes, escaping anxiously from the voice of the Holy Spirit. This is where the uncircumcised ear shows itself, for it is disturbed by the voice of God and avoids it, just as the snake stops its ears so as not to hear the voice of the magician and obey and submit to it. "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth?" (Gal. 3:1).

Let us stop a while and return together, dear reader, to the passages and verses and commandments we have deliberately avoided with cowardly determination. Our hearts would protest at our obstinacy, and tremble and beat fast and painfully, for we were aware that we were resisting the Holy Spirit and putting ourselves in danger of death and estrangement from God by this deviousness. Let us quickly correct our attitude to the voice of God! Perhaps now is the time to take our self by storm, break its obstinacy and pride, cut off its pleasures and fears and turn to follow the voice of God. "Remember then from what you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent" (Rev. 2:5).

It may be that you are afraid to face your desire for greatness and leadership, or your impurity or your enmity, malice and hatred towards others who threaten your own interests, or your treachery, or your cruelty, injustice or crooked judgements, or your dishonesty, stealing, wrongful acquisition of goods, cheating and love of undeserved gain, or your lying, or your lack of trust in God and reliance on money and insurance for the future, or it may be more than all these, since you are running away with all your being from the face of God. You have no foothold on safe ground and you are trying now to hide your face from Him who sits upon the throne, "closing your eyes lest you see!" (cf. Lk. 8:10). In this situation, reading the Gospel is of no avail, and hearing it only brings judgement.

But the circumcised ear has had its foreskin removed, and there is no longer a barrier preventing it from hearing the voice of God, like the ear of the young Samuel, who lived in purity and humility in the sanctuary, "Speak, Lord, for your servant heareth." The ear is open to the authority of the Gospel and joyfully submissive to the voice of God, alert to hear His call, ready to respond no matter what may be demanded. For he whose ear is circumcised is very courageous and able to take action against himself in obedience to the voice of the Almighty. The heart that is ready to accept the great demands of God is able to hear every inflexion in the voice of God and does not miss a single word.

If, after all this, you ask, "How can I acquire an ear that can hear the voice of God?", I would answer, "Prepare yourself first to receive His demands and requests and directions, and be ready in your heart to carry them out, no matter what the cost. Immediately you will have an ear that hears the voice of Almighty God!" "Morning by morning he awakens, he awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught. The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious" (Is. 50:4-5).

The voice of the Son of God:

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me" (Rev. 3:20). The Lord does not only knock at the heart's door, He even calls His sheep by name, so that we may hear and open up to let Him into our lives, to share with us the tears of our supper and then to share with us His wedding feast.

We do not need to go in search of God, as if He were in hiding far away; in this way we simply exhaust ourselves in searching, imagining, meditating and scrutinizing books. The whole time He is standing before us at the door of our heart, never going away. The knocks of His hand at the door are His words, and He never stops knocking, all the days of our life, so that the spirit may wake from its slumber and distinguish the voice of its Lover.

We do not need to resort to fervent pleas and tears and emotional

supplications that the Lord may come to us, for He is always present and is knocking even now. And He will not stop, because He wants to enter our lives, for He finds His own rest with us and His greatest joy is to share with us our cross and our dark night, for He still loves the cross.

But it is we who do not rightly value His voice, mistakenly making little of it and distaining it.

Mary Magdalene underwent the same temptation when she sat weeping at the tomb, and thought the Lord standing before her was the gardener, so that she kept begging him to give her the body of Jesus that she might wrap it in a shroud. When the Lord lost patience He called her by name and immediately she recognized Him. How often have we stood weeping looking far away up to heaven where we think the Lord Jesus lives! He is present and standing before us and all that prevents us from encountering Him is our heart's lack of perception! How often have we stood praying before Him, begging Him to speak to us, hoping that we might hear Him, but it was useless! He never stops calling us by name and nothing prevents us from hearing His voice, but our preoccupation with our own daily problems.

The mistake we make is that we want to see Him in time in the midst of the daily events that fill our mental and emotional emptiness. But in fact the Lord is present now beyond all these things, beyond time and event, which He controls according to His own wise plan. The alert and simple soul notices the touch of His hand writing the story of its salvation through the years and the succession of events. Our successes and our failures work together in a positive way guided by the Almighty for our salvation. Temporal losses are not spiritual losses, and trouble, sadness, pain and sickness are the language of divine providence, its secret code, which when deciphered in the Spirit spells resurrection, joy and eternal glory.

The other mistake we make is that we want to hear the voice of the Son of God with our physical ear, speaking a human language with the voice of a man! But the voice of the Son of God cannot be so

limited. It is a power that moves the soul, raises it up and refreshes it. It is a deep incomprehensible peace. It is rest and comfort. It is life itself in its limitless breadth and height. So where are the words in which His language and voice may be expressed?

God speaks, and every man on the face of the earth can hear His voice, understand and respond, as if he is being called personally by name. His voice is the voice of all the ages; it does not fade or die upon the breeze, nor is it restricted, nor does it return to Him empty. And there will come a time when He will call and the whole of creation will rise from its death.

“If any man hears my voice...” But no one can hear the voice of the Son of God except him who is raised in spirit to the level where God can direct and call him, the level of the Kingdom and life with God. That is, the level above daily events. There he can receive from Him instruction for his life and a plan for his salvation through these very daily events, and even using them. No one can hear the voice of the Son of God except him who opens his heart and mind to understand His language, whose words and tones are made of love, tenderness, peace, kindness and constant fatherly care, no matter how cruel life and its circumstances may appear to be.

If your ear is so spiritually trained to understand the symbols of the divine message as they appear in temporal events, you will hear the Lord's hand knocking at the door as you read the words. He will be knocking at your door, sometimes gently, sometimes hard, and you will hear His voice through the clamour and the storms, as well as through a gentle breeze. He calls you to open the door for Him, to receive from Him the mystery of His wedding feast, after sharing with you the bread of your tears.

The Lord is near. He is humble and His voice is low, lower than the voice of man, but deep, deeper than eternity itself.

Doing honour to the reading and hearing of the Gospel:

THE MAN WHO IS ALIVE TO GOD DOES NOT ALLOW THE WORD OF THE GOSPEL to slip away from him or be forgotten. Rather, in respect, reverence

and fear he makes it as a crown for his head and sets it over his whole life.

The zeal of the pious is very evident when they are listening to the Gospel. They look as if they have entered into the presence of God, or as if they are standing around the altar about to receive the body and blood. It is not that they have simply cultivated the custom of honouring the Gospel or appearing to do so, as the hypocrites do, but rather that they receive from it power upon power, as if they were hearing the voice of God Himself.

All this was very clear in the early Church, and the Church still observes the same zeal, reverence and veneration at the reading and hearing of the Gospel. The tradition of the Church has preserved certain significant gestures, and so it is that the priest would never read the Gospel in church before offering a special prayer, that he and the congregation might be made worthy to hear the Holy Gospel. Before he begins to read, the deacon calls on the whole congregation to stand in the fear of God to hear the Gospel and the whole congregation responds to his call and glorifies God. Also, the priest takes off his shoes to read the Gospel, for he is standing in the presence of God. Then, after the reading, the whole congregation files past to kiss the Gospel, held open in the priest's hand, with joy and tears. In the early Church the people would do this out of their zeal, fear and love for the Gospel, and it has remained as a ritual in the Church.

He who has tasted the power of the Gospel in his life does not consider this excessive, but does even more to show his veneration:

There are those who always fast to read the Gospel.

There are those who, when they read the Gospel alone, always kneel.

There are those who always read it with weeping and tears.

And God's directions to man are most often given through the reading and hearing of the Gospel, when one is in a state of humility and prayer with an open heart.



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L.E. 2.00

**Deisis,
Fresco dating from the 10th/11th century,
the Monastery of St. Macarius.**