

God made life, and God alone can tell us its meaning. If we are to make sense of life in this world, then we must know about God. And if we want to know about God, we must turn to the Bible.

## READ THE BIBLE

So let us read the Bible—if we can. But can we? Many of us have lost the ability. When we open our Bibles, we do so in a frame of mind that forms an insurmountable barrier to reading it at all. This may sound startling, but it is true. Let me explain.

When you read a book, you treat it as a unit. You look for the plot, or the main thread of the argument, and follow it through to the end. You let the author's mind lead yours. Whether or not you allow yourself to “dip” before settling down to absorb the book, you know that you will not have understood it till you have read it from start to finish. If it is a book you want to master, you set aside time for a careful, unhurried journey through it.

But when we come to Holy Scripture, our behavior is different. To start with, we are not in the habit of treating it as a book—a unit—at all; we approach it simply as a collection of separate stories and sayings. We take it for granted that these items represent either moral advice or comfort for those in trouble. So we read the Bible in small doses, a few verses at a time. We do not go through individual books, let alone the two Testaments, as a whole. We browse through the rich old

Jacobean periods of the *King James Version*, or the informalities of *The Living Bible*, waiting for something to strike us. When the words bring a soothing thought or a pleasant picture, we believe the Bible has done its job. We have come to view the Bible not as a book, but as a collection of beautiful and suggestive snippets, and it is as such that we use it.

The result is that, in the ordinary sense of “read,” we never read the Bible at all. We take it for granted that we are handling Holy Writ in the truly religious way, but this use of it is in fact merely superstitious. It is, I grant, the way of natural religiosity. But it is not the way of true religion.

God does not mean Bible reading to function simply as a drug for fretful minds. The reading of Scripture is intended to awaken our minds, not to send them to sleep. God asks us to approach Scripture as his *Word*—a message addressed to rational creatures, people with minds; a message we cannot expect to understand without thinking about it. “Come now, and let us reason together,” said God to Judah through Isaiah (Isa. 1:18), and he says the same to us every time we take up his book. He has taught us to pray for divine enlightenment as we read. “Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law” (Ps. 119:18). This is a prayer for God to give us insight as we think about his Word. But we effectively prevent God answering this prayer if after praying we blank out and stop thinking as we read.

God wants us to read the Bible as a *book*—a single story with a single theme. I am not forgetting that the Bible consists of many separate units (66 to be exact), and that some of those units are themselves composites (such as the Psalter, which consists of 150 separate prayers and hymns). For all that, however, the Bible comes to us as the product of a single mind, the mind of God. It proves its unity over and over again by the amazing way it links together, one part throwing light on another part. So we should read it as a whole. And as we read we are to ask: What is the plot of this book? What is its subject? What is it about? Unless we ask these questions, we will never see what it is saying to us about our lives. When we reach this point, we shall find that God's message to us is more drastic, and at the same time more heartening, than any that human religiosity could conceive.

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# *How To Read the Bible*