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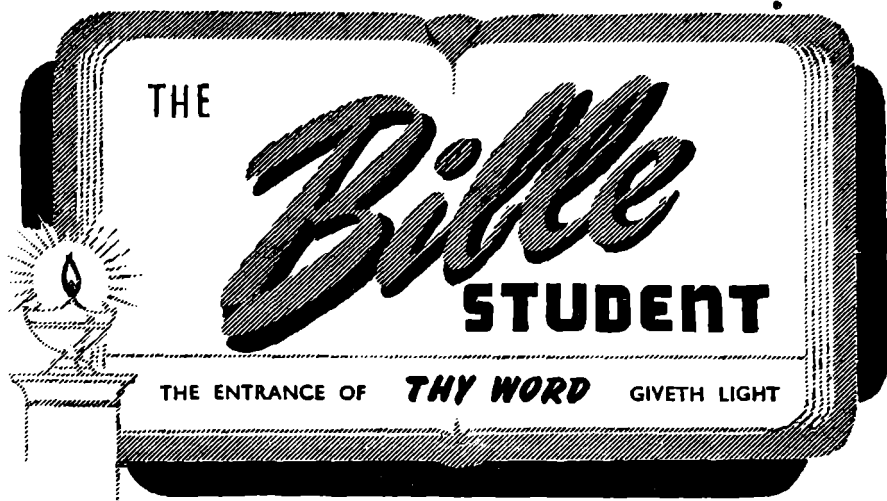
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Vol. XXIII. No. 1

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Editor: A. McDONALD REDWOOD

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NEW SERIES

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VOL. XXIII No. 1

'GIVE HEED TO READING. . .'

EDITORIAL

The phrase is found in 1 Tim. 4:13, and the verse is worth quoting in full: 'Till I come, give heed to reading, to exhortation, to teaching' (R.V.). It is this particular phrase on the reading of the Scriptures, to which we would draw attention first. The apostle has in mind the *public* reading of the Old Testament, as may be gathered from the other two occurrences of the noun *anagnōsis*, in Acts 13:15—'after the reading of the Law'; and similarly in 2 Cor. 3:14. For us today it is of course applicable to the New Testament also as being equally the Word of God, their subsequent reaction of rage against Him was aroused not and of more precise relevance to the Christian church.

I. This reading of the O.T. in the Synagogues held a very important place in Jewish religious life. Even to this day the custom is still maintained in any really devout community of Jews. Paul was doubtless an adept in the use of the rich cadences and inflexions of the Hebrew language, and his Rabbinical training would have taught him to make the fullest use of such training in his ministry. It is not hard to imagine that after his conversion his public reading of the Old Testament would have an additional impressiveness and appeal in the hearts of his hearers.

Again, that must have been a thrilling experience in the little Synagogue in Nazareth, when Jesus Himself 'stood up to read' on the Sabbath day (Luke 4:16). The writer remarks that when He sat down, after the reading, 'the eyes of all were rivetted upon Him'. Had any of their Rabbis ever read Isaiah's wonderful utterances with such feeling and impressiveness before? Of course by His reading, but by His unthinkable claim, 'this day is *this scripture fulfilled* in your ears'! But it was *that reading* that arrested them first and held them spellbound.

Let us take the lesson to ourselves, specially such as are called to the high vocation of ministering the Word of God in various ways. This reading of the Bible in gatherings of whatever kind, should be considered as of the highest value. However brilliant may be the discourse, sermon, or exposition to follow, it should be the first aim of every preacher to make this part of his ministry as impressive and appealing as may be possible. We have to remember that the Word as it stands holds within itself the power to convict the conscience and convert the soul, because in reality it is the WORD OF GOD, the medium through which the Spirit of God works His miracles of saving grace. And by a little special attention to such matters as the correct use of the voice, a clear enunciation and expression of the words and sentences, it is possible to lay initial hold upon the attention of and kindle interest in the hearers. 'Joshua . . . *read in the book*, in the law of God, *distinctly*, and gave the sense so that they *understood the reading*' (Neh. 8:8).

Yet it is not the mere display of elocutionary gift, which we have in mind. Rather, the thought is that our public reading of the Bible (as much as preaching from it) should somehow demonstrate our own inward joy and delight in this great literature of the soul. If our own heart has been thrilled first in our private reading, it needs no 'working up' of emotion when we thus read it out to others, for in doing so we can be moved afresh by the Spirit's unction, and unaffectedly yet surely we communicate the same unction to the hearers. The Word 'comes alive' to them in turn; they are the more ready to listen to what we have to say about it.

'A famous English elocutionist was once honoured by some admirers with a banquet. During the course of the evening he was asked to give a reading. He chose the twenty-third Psalm, and as he read, he brought out the beauty of the words with the clear enunciation, delicate expression and skilful phrasing of his art. His hearers were delighted and applauded enthusiastically.

Later, an old minister in the group, out of deference to his eighty-five years, was asked to speak. He chose to *read* the Psalm. With a voice ringing with assurance and vibrant with love, he spoke the words. When he had concluded, there was no applause, but there was scarcely a dry eye in the room. At the close of the programme, the elocutionist stepped over to the minister,

grasped his hand, and said earnestly, "Sir, I know the *Psalm*, but you *know the Shepherd*".

II. But there is another side to this matter also; one which in fact is of prior importance, we might say supreme importance. We refer to that all-essential necessity of reading the Word first of all *in private*, for our own soul's nourishment and enlightenment and inspiration. This is the primary necessity surely, for it is the foundation of all effective public ministry. It is impossible to imagine any real spiritual work for God being done apart from the personal study and meditation of the Word of the Spirit.

This becomes the more apparent if we consider a moment the other two matters the apostle urges in this verse, viz. 'take heed to *exhortation*, and to *doctrine*'. The former word (*paraklēsis*), is sometimes translated 'consolation' (Acts 15:31; 2 Cor. 1:6; etc.), but it actually means any exposition of the Word which is directed to the enlightening of the mind and uplifting of the heart (cf. Acts 13:15; Heb. 12:5; 13:22). The other word, 'doctrine', is more definitely *teaching*, the imparting of the truths of Scripture for growth in knowledge and understanding. The reading of the Scriptures in public has these ends in view.

Hence the apostle's appeal to '*give heed*' goes deeper than appears at first sight. The Lord Himself uses the same verb several times when He uttered His warnings (e.g. Matt. 7:15; 6:6, 11, 12; Luke 21:34). Peter also urges that, 'having the word of prophecy', we do well to 'take heed' to it (2 Pet. 1:19). It implies the necessity on our part of effort, earnestness, concentration, for the task it sets before us. In the same spirit Paul urges these matters upon Timothy, and upon all who follow in his vocation—till our work is done and we pass on to our reward on high.

That brings us back then to the important matter of reading the Bible *in private*, for the nourishment of our own souls as well as the enlightenment of our spiritual faculties. Here is the foundation which must be laid first, ere we begin to try to 'build up' souls for God and His kingdom. Nothing can take the place of this. Commentaries, lectures, Bible study courses, etc., are most helpful—but *nothing* will yield such rich dividends as the patient, prayerful reading of the Holy Scriptures for ourselves, in the quietness of God's presence and under the gracious help of His Holy Spirit.

The common excuse is, 'There isn't time for such reading.' But is this really true? Some time ago we came across the following statement in the pages of a Bible School leaflet, which is worth looking into: 'Most of the epistles could be put into a newspaper column or two. A few columns could embrace the longest of these letters. The average Christian spends much more time each day over his newspaper than is required to read an epistle of average length.' It can be shewn that seven of the 27 books of the N.T. can be read carefully in less than half an hour each. Five (viz. Romans, the two Corinthian epistles, Hebrews, Revelation) in one hour each. Matthew can be read in two hours; Mark in one hour and three-quarters; Luke in two hours and a quarter; John, in one and three-quarter hours. Other testimonies and facts could be given to prove how possible and how worthwhile this reading can become, but we have later in this issue given in full the personal testimony of one of the outstanding Gospel preachers and teachers of the day, only recently called home to glory whilst on a preaching tour in New Zealand, Dr Harry Ironside. We invite the reader's attention to that testimony.

There is, however, one remaining point which may be profitably remarked on in closing: Dwell for a moment on the opening clause of the verse, '*Till I Come*'! Is there not a familiar ring about it? It might have been said by the Lord Himself ere He parted from His disciples at the Ascension. Of course, the immediate application is to Paul's intention to visit Ephesus shortly, in anticipation of which the apostle encourages his young disciple to the work in hand. But, dismissing that application at the moment, we can profitably indulge the notion of its becoming a very real challenge to our own consciences today—for it is certain the Lord Himself is coming very soon, sooner than we think. He uses the same words both before His ascension and after (see John 21:22; Rev. 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20). That is, time is short, 'I come quickly'; buy up the opportunities of the present moment with utmost concentration, '*till I come*'! '*And say unto Archippus (of the present day and moment), Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfil it.*'