

How Should One Read or Listen to the Sacred Scriptures?

How should one read the sacred Scriptures? Or, if one does not do the reading himself, how ought he to listen to the reading of the sacred Scriptures? It is essential to be aware that in reading or listening with a proper disposition, one receives the fruit of salvation from his reading or listening; on the other hand, if one reads or listens to the sacred Scriptures in an improper manner, one brings harm upon the soul instead of the benefit of salvation.

One ought to read or listen to the sacred Scriptures—in that they are the word of God—with reverence and with prayer to God that He grant the grace of understanding. Since the sacred Scriptures were written down under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, we can understand them correctly only with the assistance of the Spirit of God. *The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, the apostle Paul teaches, for they are foolishness unto him, neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned* (I Cor 2:14).

By *natural man* the apostle means one who does not have the Spirit of God within him, but judges spiritual things by the understanding of his reason, without submitting himself to faith. Just as, in the visible world, we cannot see and recognize external objects if the light of the sun does not shine and show them to us, so also, in the spiritual life, we can understand and perceive spiritual subjects only in the light of the Spirit of God. Our mind can only comprehend divine teaching when the grace of the Holy Spirit enlightens it.

Therefore, in approaching the reading or hearing of the sacred Scriptures, we must entreat God with reverence, that He illumine our mind with the grace of His Spirit and grant that we may understand the teaching of the word of God unto our edification.

That our reverence before God may be genuine and our prayer earnest, we must possess sincere humility in our soul, that we may read or listen to the sacred Scriptures with the heartfelt desire to derive from them instruction in the Faith and the incentive to live a pious and virtuous life.

God has given us His word, not for us merely to acquaint ourselves with divine teaching out of curiosity, and not that, having acquired an understanding of the sublime truths of that teaching, we may take pride in them as our personal treasure. This would be a misuse of the divine gift and a sin which is offensive to God. God has given us the sacred Scriptures that we may employ them for the salvation of our souls, unto the glory of His name. God reveals the knowledge of the truths of salvation only to the humble, while He hides them from the proud, as the Saviour, glorifying the heavenly Father, says: *I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because Thou hast hidden these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes* (Mt 11:25), that is, to those who listen to the word of God with child-like humility and simplicity. The apostle Peter teaches: *God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble* (I Pet 5:5).

One must understand the sacred Scriptures as the Holy Church explains them, and as the holy fathers and teachers of the Church understood them. When one reads the word of God attentively and reverently, there will be much therein which is clear and understandable, yet you will also find much that is not easily comprehended. Concerning that which is not clear and

understandable to you, ask the pastors and teachers of the Church, but do not take it upon yourself to interpret it in the way it appears to you.

In reading or listening to the sacred Scriptures one ought not to desire to understand everything that is said there; rather, it is necessary to take unto one's edification, with reverence and thankfulness to the all-good heavenly Father, that which is accessible to our understanding, under the guidance of the Holy Church. In the word of God there are many mysteries which are inaccessible to man's understanding. The word of God, like a spiritual light, reveals to us the invisible, spiritual world.

Just as in this world, which lies spread out before us, we see and understand only a little, only a portion—we see only what is around us, and even then only the external aspect of things, while what is within, we do not see. In the sky we see the sun, the moon and the stars, but what exactly are these luminaries? What is on them? What is inside them? This we do not see. Thus it is also in the word of God: spiritual subjects are only partly revealed to us, and we understand them only in part; but beyond them there is the unbounded expanse of that which is hidden. Be not troubled in mind over what is unattainable, but give thanks unto God for what is revealed to you.

When a man standing in a river thirsts, he need not drink the whole river. It is enough for him to drink only so much water as is necessary to quench his thirst. Thus also it is not necessary for you to know everything or even to know a great deal; but it is necessary for you to know what is essential for your salvation.

Our Lord and Saviour says: *Blessed are they that hear the word of God, and keep it* (Lk 11:28). Blessed are they who listen to the teaching of the word of God with reverence and submit to it, keeping it in their thoughts, desires, words, and deeds, and who strive, both openly and secretly, to serve the Lord God, ever fulfilling His commandments. And blessed will you be also, if you strive to listen to the word of God and to keep the commandments of God. You will be blessed because even on earth you will live with God, and beyond the grave eternal rewards will await you in the mansions of heaven, where you will be everlastingly blessed, glorifying God: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

*This is an anonymous article, probably written by an Orthodox bishop in pre-revolutionary Russia. It was first translated into English by Reader Isaac Lambertsen and published in a bilingual booklet entitled *Evangel'skiya Chteniya—Gospel Readings*, St. Alexander Nevsky Church, Howell, New Jersey, 1993. It is reprinted here with the kind permission of Protopriest Valery Lukianov.*