

Our Need of Scripture

by J. I. Packer

“Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psa 119:105).

See the psalmist’s picture. He has to travel. (Scripture regularly pictures life as a journey.) He was in the dark, unable to see the way to go and bound to get lost and hurt if he advanced blindly. (This pictures our natural ignorance of God’s will for our lives, our inability to guess it and the certainty in practice of our missing it.) But a lamp (think of a flashlight) has been handed to him. Now he can pick out the path before him, step by step, and stick to it, though darkness still surrounds him. (This pictures what God’s word does for us, showing us how to live.) The psalmist’s cry is one of praise, thanks, admonition, testimony and confidence--praise that God glorifies his grace by giving men so precious a gift as his word; thanks because he knows how much he himself needed it, and how lost he was without it; admonition to himself and any who might read his psalm always to value God’s word at its true worth and to make full use of it for the purpose for which it was given; testimony to the fact that already in his experience it had proved its power; and confidence that this would continue.

The psalmist would have committed to memory the Pentateuch, the law of Moses in its narrative context, and in his meditations would be working from that. We are privileged to have the entire Bible available to us in printed form. How well do we know it? How much do we love it? Happy are we if we have learned, in defiance of modern skepticism, to make the psalmist’s words and meaning our own.

Some 170 of the psalm’s 176 verses celebrate the ministry of God’s revealed word in the godly man’s life as his source of guidance, hope, strength, correction, humility, purity and joy. Psalm 19:7-14 and 2 Timothy 3:15-17 more briefly do the same thing. Do we know anything of what Paul and the psalmists knew of the power of Scripture to reshape, redirect and renew disordered lives?

Why does contact with God’s scriptural word transform some people while leaving others cold? First, some let the written word lead them to the living Word, Jesus Christ, to whom it constantly points us; others don’t. Second, not all come to the Bible hungry and expectant, conscious of daily need to hear God speak. “Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it,” says God (Psa 81:10). The open mouth is a gesture of hunger and dependence. “With open mouth I pant, because I long for thy commandments,” says the psalmist (Psa 119:131). Desire for God, springing from a sense of our need of him, is the factor that decides how much or how little impact Scripture will make upon us. Bible reader check your heart!

What Bishop J. C. Ryle wrote in a tract over a century ago remains wholly relevant:

You live in a world where your soul is in constant danger. Enemies are round you on every side. Your own heart is deceitful. Bad examples are numerous. Satan is always laboring to lead you astray. Above all false doctrine and false teachers of every kind abound. This is your great danger.

To be safe you must be well armed. You must provide yourself with the weapons which God has given you for your help. You must store your mind with Holy Scripture. This is to be well armed.

Arm yourself with a thorough knowledge of the written word of God. Read your Bible regularly. Become familiar with your Bible...Neglect your Bible and nothing that I know of can prevent you from error if a plausible advocate of false teaching shall happen to meet you. Make it a rule to believe nothing except it can be proved from Scripture. The Bible alone is infallible...Do you really use your Bible as much as you ought?

There are many today, who believe the Bible, yet read it very little. Does your conscience tell you that you are one of these persons?

If so, you are the man that is likely to get little help from the Bible in time of need. Trial is a sifting experience...Your store of Bible consolations may one day run very low.

If so, you are the man that is unlikely to become established in the truth. I shall not be surprised to hear that you are troubled with doubts and questions about assurance, grace, faith, perseverance, etc. The devil is an old and cunning enemy. He can quote Scripture readily enough when he pleases. Now you are not sufficiently ready with your weapons to fight a good fight with him...Your sword is held loosely in your hand.

If so, you are the man that is likely to make mistakes in life. I shall not wonder if I am told that you have problems in your marriage, problems with your children, problems about the conduct of your family and about the company you keep. The world you steer through is full of rocks, shoals and sandbanks. You are not sufficiently familiar either with lighthouses or charts.

If so, you are the man who is likely to be carried away by some false teacher for a time. It will not surprise me if I hear that one of these clever eloquent men who can make a convincing presentation is leading you into error. You are in need of ballast (truth); no wonder if you are tossed to and fro like a cork on the waves.

All these are uncomfortable situations. I want you to escape them all. Take the advice I offer you today. Do not merely read your Bible a little--but read it a great deal...Remember your many enemies. Be armed!

[Note: Excerpt from God's Words: Studies of Key Bible Themes]