
DIRECTIONS FOR PROFITABLE READING THE HOLY SCRIPTURES

By Richard Baxter¹

Seeing the diversity of men's tempers and understandings is so exceedingly great, that it is impossible that any thing should be pleasing and suitable to some, which shall not be disliked and quarrelled with by others; and seeing in the Scriptures there are many things hard to be understood, which the unlearned and unstable wrest to their own destruction, 2 Pet. 3:16; and the word is to some the savour of death unto death, 2 Cor. 2:16; you have therefore need to be careful in reading it. And as Christ saith, "Take heed how you hear," Luke 8:18; so I say, Take heed how you read.

Direction I. Bring not an evil heart of unbelief. Open the Bible with holy reverence as the book of God, indited² by the Holy Ghost. Remember that the doctrine of the New Testament was revealed by the Son of God, who was purposely sent from heaven to be the light of the world, and to make known to men the will of God, and the matters of their salvation. Bethink you well, if God should but send a book or letter to you by an angel, how reverently you would receive it! How carefully you would peruse it; and regard it above all the books in the world! And how much rather should you do so, by that book which is indited by the Holy Ghost, and recordeth the doctrine of Christ himself, whose authority is greater than all the angels! Read it not therefore as a common book, with a common and unreverent heart; but in the dread and love of God the author.

Direction II. Remember that it is the very law of God which you must live by, and be judged by at last. And therefore read with a full resolution to obey whatever it commandeth, though flesh, and men, and devils contradict it. Let there be no secret exceptions in your heart, to balk out³ any of its precepts, and shift off that part of obedience which the flesh accounteth difficult or dear.

Direction III. Remember that it is the will and testament of your Lord, and the covenant of most full and gracious promises; which all your comforts, and all your hopes of pardon and everlasting life, are built upon. Read it therefore with love and great delight. Value it a thousandfold more than you would do the letters of your dearest friend, or the deeds by which you hold your lands, or any thing else of low concernment. If the law was sweeter to David than honey, and better than thousands of gold and silver, and was his delight and meditation all the day,⁴ oh what should the sweet and precious gospel be to us!

¹From Richard Baxter (1615-91), *A Christian Directory* (London, 1673); printed as vol. I of *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter* (London, 1707); reprint of the 19th century ed. (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1990), pp. 477-78.

² *Obs.*, dictated.

³ *Obs.*, to check, hinder, thwart.

⁴Ps. 119:103; Ps. 19:10; 119:72, 127; Ps. 119:97.

Direction IV. Remember that it is a doctrine of unseen things, and of the greatest mysteries; and therefore come not to it with arrogance as a judge, but with humility as a learner or disciple; and if any thing seem difficult or improbable to you, suspect your own unfurnished understanding, and not the sacred word of God. If a learner in any art or science, will suspect his teacher and his books, whenever he is stalled, or meeteth with that which seemeth unlikely to him, his pride would keep possession for his ignorance, and his folly were like to be incurable.

Direction V. Remember that it is a universal law and doctrine, written for the most ignorant as well as for the curious;⁵ and therefore must be suited in plainness to the capacity of the simple, and yet have matter to exercise the most subtle wits; and that God would have the style to savour more of the innocent weakness of the instruments, than the matter. Therefore be not offended or troubled when the style doth seem less polite than you might think beseemed the Holy Ghost; nor at the plainness of some parts, or the mysteriousness of others; but adore the wisdom and tender condescension of God to his poor creatures.

Direction VI. Bring not a carnal mind, which savoureth only fleshly things, and is enslaved to those sins which the Scripture doth condemn: “For the carnal mind is enmity against God, and neither is nor can be subject to his law,” Rom. 8:7-8. “And the things of God are not discerned by the mere natural man, for they are foolishness to him, and they must be spiritually discerned,” 2 Cor. 2:14: and enmity is an ill expositor. It will be quarrelling with all, and making faults in the word which findeth so many faults in you. It will hate that word which cometh to deprive you of your most sweet and dearly beloved sin. Or, if you have such a carnal mind and enmity, believe it not, any more than a partial and wicked enemy should be believed against God himself; who better understandeth what he hath written, than any of his foolish enemies.

Direction VII. Compare one place of Scripture with another, and expound the darkest by the help of the plainest, and the fewer expressions by the more frequent and ordinary, and the doubtfuler points by those which are most certain; and not on the contrary.

Direction VIII. Presume not on the strength of your own understanding, but humbly pray to God for light; and before and after you read the Scripture, pray earnestly that the Spirit which did indite it, may expound it to you, and keep you from unbelief and error, and lead you into the truth.⁶

Direction IX. Read some of the best annotations or expositors; who being better acquainted with the phrase of the Scripture than yourselves, may help to clear your understanding. When Philip asked the eunuch that read Isa. 53, “Understandest thou what thou readeest? he said, How can I except some man should guide me?” Acts 8:30-31. Make use of your guides, if you would not err.

Direction X. When you are stalled by any difficulty which over-matcheth you, note it down, and propound it to your pastor, and crave his help, or (if the minister of that place be ignorant and unable) go to some one that God hath furnished for such work. And if, after all, some things remain still dark and difficult, remember your imperfection, and wait on God for further light, and thankfully make use of all the rest of the Scripture which is plain. . . .

⁵Obs., ingenious, skillful, clever, expert.

⁶1 Cor. 2:10, 12; 12:8-10.