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How to Read the Bible

Part 2

by *Walter F. Specht*

There are sincere persons who seek help from the Bible by allowing it to open at random. Then they blindly place their finger on a verse, or allow their eyes to fall on the first words that come into view. But as a way of ascertaining God's will for a human life, this random method may prove very disappointing, as the following story illustrates.

There was a young man who was in search of guidance for his lifework. He opened his Bible at random and placed his finger on the supposed answer which read that Judas "went and hanged himself" (Matt. 27:5). He tried again and was more alarmed when he read, "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37). Perhaps if he had tried a third time he would have read, "What you are going to do, do quickly" (John 13:27).

The random search may often lead to helpful passages, but this is not because of the method. It is only because the words of the Bible are so meaningful. Would it not be much better to become familiar with the great teachings of the Scriptures which can then, under the guidance of the Spirit, be applied to specific problems? In gaining an overall knowledge of the Word there is no better way than reading the entire Bible.

But where should one begin in reading the Bible? Many would-be readers have become discouraged by a wrong start. On the surface it seems logical to begin reading with Genesis 1:1 and continue right through to Revelation 22:21. Isn't this the sensible and logical way to read a book?

But the Bible is not just a book. It is a library of books, and how does one go about reading a library? Certainly not by reading the books in the order in which they appear on the library shelves, or the order in which they are listed in the card catalogue. Experienced readers may well read the books in the order in which they appear in our English version, but a first-time reader would do better to begin with the New Testament. This is so because the New Testament immediately sets before him the Gospel.

And what is the Gospel? It is "the joyous proclamation of God's redemptive activity in Christ Jesus on behalf of man enslaved by sin." It is the good news that God has sent His Son to

redeem us. It is no wonder that William Tyndale, the real father of our English New Testament, wrote in his prologue that the word "Gospel" signifies, "good, mery, glad and joyfull tydinge, that maketh a mannes hert glad, and maketh hym synge, daunce, and leepe for joye." The new reader should let his soul thrill with the gospel story of Jesus—His life, His work, His teachings, His death and resurrection.

But with which book in the New Testament should he begin? Experienced Bible students suggest that the ideal book with which to begin is the Gospel of Mark. But why Mark? This gospel is not only regarded as the oldest of the four gospels, but it is the shortest, the simplest, and the most narrative of the four. "Every scene is one of life, of action, of vigor." It

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presents a thrilling story with zest and enthusiasm. Its style is clean, vigorous, direct, simple, concise, and vivid. Many see behind it the keen-eyed observations and personal reminiscences of one of Jesus' leading disciples, Simon Peter. No wonder it contains such vivid touches of realism.

If you have never had the thrill of reading this gospel through at a single sitting, try it today. You can read it aloud in about an hour and a half. You can read it silently to yourself in half that time. And what a story it tells of the life of strenuous activity of Him who "came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45)!

You are now ready to read the Gospel of Matthew, the gospel that emphasizes Jesus' teachings. It contains 1,068 verses and 644 of these, more than half the total, contain sayings of Jesus. These sayings of Jesus had authority from the earliest Christian times. Those who regarded Jesus as Lord and Messiah could not but place His words on as high a level as anything the prophets of old had said. The whole of Matthew is built around five of Jesus' great discourses. The first of these is the Sermon on the Mount, which Dr. Edgar Johnson Goodspeed called "the most striking and compre-

hensive statement of Christian ethics ever made."

Matthew's gospel contains fifteen of Jesus' matchless parables, ten of which are found only in this gospel. Of all the gospels, Matthew has the strongest emphasis on last-day events, especially in the Olivet Discourse (chapters 24, 25), which foretells the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the present

Matthew has the strongest emphasis on last-day events.

age, and gives signs of the nearness of both events. And so for a marvelous account of Jesus' matchless teachings, read the Gospel of Matthew. In it you can listen to the world's greatest Teacher!

You are now ready for the most literary of the gospels written by a Greek physician, Luke. A noted French writer called his gospel, "the most beautiful book in the world." Luke's literary artistry is revealed in his charming nativity stories and the tale of Jesus' visit as a boy to the Temple in Jerusalem. Nearly half of his gospel consists of material not found in any other gospel. In this material are thirteen matchless parables, including the Good Samaritan, the Lost Sheep, the Prodigal Son, the Rich Man and Lazarus, and the Pharisee and the Publican. We also owe to Luke some of the earliest Christian hymns. What a charming gospel this cultured physician has given us!

In actuality Luke's gospel is the first volume of a larger work which traces the rise and spread of Christianity

Acts—the most exciting piece of history ever written.

from Jerusalem to Rome. Scholars refer to the complete work as Luke-Acts of which the third gospel is volume one, and the Acts of the Apostles, volume two. Acts has been called "the most exciting piece of history ever written." "Luke was the first historian of Christianity and the founder of church history." The book of Acts shows how Christianity began

as a Jewish sect which gradually broke through its Jewish limits and spread in ever-widening circles until it reached Rome. But this did not come about by human planning, but through the direction of the Holy Spirit who filled the Christian community with light and life from above.

After you have read Mark, Matthew, and Luke-Acts, in that order, you would do well to turn to the Gospel of John—the most prized book in all the Bible by many people. This simple gospel is nothing less than sublime. In writing it, the apostle John had a central purpose in mind which he clearly states in John 20:30, 31: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name."

By "signs" John means especially Jesus' miracles. A sign is a visible evidence of the presence and purpose of God. Jesus' signs were acts through which He showed forth the mystery of who He was. They were manifestations of meaning of His ministry, and showed forth His glory (John 2:11). Exclusive of the post-resurrection miracle of the catch of fish in John 21,

The Gospel of John is rich in words of comfort, guidance, and revelation.

there are only seven miracles given in this gospel. John selected these seven because they were in a special way signs, by which those who had eyes to see were brought to faith in the full significance of Jesus as the Savior of the world.

One of the purposes of these signs was to inspire faith—faith in Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God. The result of such faith is life—eternal life through Christ. What a rich spiritual feast awaits the careful reader of this gospel. It is rich in words of comfort, guidance, and revelation.

In summary, these five books in this order: Mark, Matthew, Luke-Acts, and John, constitute the best way to begin reading the Bible.

All Bible references are taken from the Revised Standard Version.