

## Read scripture like a letter from a lover

One must read the Bible as a young man reads a letter from his beloved. "It is written for me," declared Kierkegaard.

When this happens, our scientific knowledge of the passage recedes into the background and gives way to a direct, prayerful listening to the message from God. We are listening directly to God through the inspired page before us. The critical ear has given way to the receptive ear. We slowly read, ponder and pray the passage, in no hurry to finish it, ready to pause and listen for a long time, should we feel inclined not to move on.

Of course the preliminary reading has been useful in its time, but now it is left behind as we give full rein to our desire to be with God, listening to his will for us, not critically but in obedience. The essence of this sort of reading is to read slowly and openly. We have to read slowly, because quick reading detects only the surface meaning of any passage; deeper meanings take time to surface in our minds.

When I get a letter from someone who means much to me, I open and read it eagerly, but then I do not throw it away. I keep it, and later in the day will read it again. I repeat this lovingly for days on end. Each time I read the letter, I see more meaning in it, because I have been analyzing it for hidden information: Why did she say that? Why did she not answer the question I put to her? Why did she end in that way? The more I read the letter, the more I see in it. It becomes less a question of reading and more a question of meditative pondering, even a loving communion with the absent correspondent.

This loving process is what the monastic tradition calls 'lectio divina.' It is both slow, as described above, and open, because one reads not for the sake of taking information into oneself but in order to go outward to one's absent friend in silent communion.

Von Hugel likened this meditative reading to "dissolving a lozenge on the tongue." All spiritual books need to be read in this way, but especially the Bible, which is God's Word. In *From Faith to Faith*, W.W.E. Orchard describes his old grandfather, a simple laboring man and a nonconformist, in the English tradition.

"When he came home from work, after his meal, he shaved, dressed himself more carefully, and then settled down to the Bible, set under the lamp on the table before him. When the Book had been opened at the proper place, his spectacles had to be carefully polished, to the accompaniment of anticipatory sighs over the treasures he was about to explore. The spectacles being then as carefully adjusted, a verse was slowly read half aloud to himself. Deeper sighs then followed, perhaps accompanied by the exclamation, "This Blessed Book!" Further reflections would bring forth joyful tears, which meant that the spectacles had to be wiped again, and so on, but always with the same deliberation.

A visiting minister used to tell how, coming in upon him one evening during these pious exercises (for he was slightly deaf, which made it possible for him to sometimes be observed unknown). He inquired what was giving him such evident joy, and was told that it was the Romans 8. 'I have been on it all week,' he explained. 'And how far have you got?' 'The fifth verse,' was the reply; and this was Thursday night!

This is spiritual reading of the deepest kind, reading which has passed from meditation to contemplation under the influence of the inspired Word of God."

*From Simple Prayer*  
*Fr. John Dalrymple*