

Dear Friends,

With this week's Gleanings, it is my hope to spend some time helping us become better acquainted with our New Testament. This week's theme focuses on the need for a thorough and faithful--for a lifetime, not a convenient season--study of its contents. When the angel directed John to "eat up" the little book, he followed the symbolism of many other Scriptures that equate spiritual writings or teachings to food.

Paul followed this theme of studious discipleship when he taught Timothy.

Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.
(2 Timothy 2:15 KJV)

When Paul wrote "Study," he chose a word that involves diligence, earnest devotion, and promptness in our study of Scripture. There may be some value in speed reading large segments of Scripture if you maintain sharp focus and retain much of what you read. But to "Study" requires a probing pursuit of the Holy Spirit's intended message and meaning in the Scriptures.

Let me give you some faulty examples of failure to study as Paul here directs. I've known preachers who did much more "Cramming" for their Sunday sermon than "Studying" the Scriptures. My advice to young preachers--or old for that

matter--is to study Scripture daily for your personal discipleship and spiritual health. If you follow that motive, the Lord will guide you to the message He wants you to preach to His people. Another faulty approach to both study and preaching appears in a popular "Study aid," *Treasure of Scripture Knowledge*." This book is something of a massive concordance. It proposes to contain a list of every significant word in the Bible, listed in book, chapter, and verse order. Thus, if you look up the word "Faith" in "TSK," you'll find every listing of the word in the Bible in the order in which the word appears from Genesis to Revelation. I've known more than one preacher who wasted his time through the week, arrived at Saturday evening with minimal study of Scripture during the week, so, in desperation, he pulled his copy of "TSK" off the shelf, picked a word that interested him, reviewed the various appearances of that word, and focused on a few of them for his Sunday sermon. Where is anything remotely akin to "Study" in this exercise? What the people hear on Sunday morning from this man will be the sermon equivalent to a cheap TV dinner, rapidly heated in a microwave oven and thrown on the table for them. God's children should be fed gourmet spiritual food from God's amazing Bible storehouse, but a man only grasps that quality of spiritual thought--and food--by devoted daily study.

What is said of the unstudious preacher may equally be said of many folks in the pew. Quietly pause and spend a few moments reflecting on how much time you devoted in the last week to truly studying (Not speed reading) your Bible. An hour? Less? If the folks in the pew fail to devote adequate time to their

studies, they will never develop a taste for spiritual gourmet truths. They may actually come to think TV dinner quality is the best God can give them. What a sad loss.

If I can write anything to encourage you to respect your Bible more, and to become more acquainted with it, my effort will be a blessing to you and to me. Please pray that we both grow together in this study.

New Testament—Digest it

And I went unto the angel, and said unto him, Give me the little book. And he said unto me, Take it, and eat it up; and it shall make thy belly bitter, but it shall be in thy mouth sweet as honey. And I took the little book out of the angel's hand, and ate it up; and it was in my mouth sweet as honey: and as soon as I had eaten it, my belly was bitter. And he said unto me, Thou must prophesy again before many peoples, and nations, and tongues, and kings. (Revelation 10:9-11 KJV 1900)

When I first started speaking in the church, my uncle and mentor in the ministry, would often take me with him to church meetings. From the time we got in his car till we reached our destination, he taught me non-stop. One of his recurring themes was the necessity to study Scripture and to interpret it respectfully and contextually. I later heard of a sermon he preached, the charge to a young preacher at his ordination. My uncle read these verses from Revelation,

held his Bible up to the young man, and solemnly charged him, "Take this Book and eat it up." That preacher told me about this experience several years later. The point still burned in his mind. Life experience and observation, rightly interpreted, will always reflect Scripture's teaching. A man who has no fire to study his Bible leaves me questioning if he has a call to the ministry. We must eat this Book **daily** if we hope to have any kind of edifying message for the people to whom we preach. The angel made the point to John. Only after he had eaten and digested the "little book" was he told that he must "...*prophesy again*..." The symbolism of eating this "Little book" obviously compares it to food. We need daily intake of fresh healthy food to sustain our bodies. If a preacher hopes to edify, truly teach and leave his congregation better for their hearing his messages, he must study, truly study, daily. He can't study the Bible intensely for a few years and then coast through the remainder of his life and ministry with little to no study. His preaching will become like stale food, leftovers that have been warmed over too many times. Eventually food spoils, and so does a man's spiritual mind if he fails to continue his intense study till the day he leaves this world for glory. If a man hopes to have edifying, fresh, nutritious gospel food for the people in his preaching, he can never leave the "Kitchen" of intense daily study of Scripture.

In Ezekiel 2-3, the prophet was commanded to eat a scroll before he took God's message to the people. This scroll, reflecting the message God would send to His rebellious people, was one of "...*lamentation, and mourning, and woe*." (Ezekiel 2:10b KJV) Several other Old

Testament passages equate the content of a “Book” to food. Consider the following two examples.

How sweet are thy words unto my taste! yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth! (Psalm 119:103 KJV)

Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart: for I am called by thy name, O LORD God of hosts. (Jeremiah 15:16 KJV)

And the capstone passage in Jesus’ words, repeated to Peter three times.

So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jona, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my lambs. (John 21:15 KJV)

Consider Jesus’ words as another reminder that our preaching is comparable to food. For a preacher to drag out ten- or twenty-year-old studies and attempt to preach his thoughts to people is comparable to serving a guest in your home twenty year old left overs! Or if the man regularly preaches to the same congregation, he serves the same gospel “Meal” repeatedly for twenty years! I recall a preacher from my youth who started his Sunday sermon with the confession that he hadn’t studied as he should in the last week, so he would just let his Bible open, and he’d preach from the first verse he noticed on the open page. Talk about tempting the Lord. (2 Timothy 2:15 KJV) Even

as a child, I thought the man's idea was rather hypocritical. Why would a man boast of not studying his Bible and then proceed to take the congregation's time? More revealing yet, I heard this man introduce his Sunday sermon probably a half-dozen times over my early years with this same idea, and every single time his Bible "Dropped open" to the same page, and he preached ***the same sermon, almost word for word, from the same verse.*** Talk about worn out leftovers, I rest my case.

When we eat food, our first impression is the texture and taste as it enters our mouth. Many flavors and textures leave a good first impression in our mouth, but their nutritional value is not measured in our mouth, but in our digestive system. The passages cited above all refer to the "Taste" of the Lord's words to us. What happens when we get them down into our daily grind of life? Do we truly absorb them into our being and manifest their spiritual and ethical content in our conduct? If so, we shall appreciate John's confession. What was sweet and pleasant in our spiritual "Mouth," becomes painfully difficult when we truly absorb it into our being and live by it.

When I eat something that I regard as delicious, I think about learning the recipe and cooking it. I want to repeat that pleasant experience. I have present thoughts of spending some time with you surveying our New Testament to help each of us, myself included, become more familiar with this incredible Book we call our New Testament.

Yes, the Old Testament is no less part of our Bible than the New. However, it records the history of God's people in a different age, along with God's dealings with His people in that time, an age that He used to build His people to and

prepare them for the “New Testament” age in which we live. Therefore, my focus shall be on the New Testament. I’ve often found it both interesting and, at times, disappointing to observe how a new believer begins his/her study of Scripture. The most common approach is likely to start with Genesis and plan to read the Bible through to Revelation. I’d venture that most of the time these readers crash when they get to Leviticus, and seldom complete their good intentions. I also recall giving a Bible to a new believer who thumbed through it and immediately marked Daniel as his beginning point to read. There is value and spiritual insight to be gained by any Old Testament study, but a believer in today’s world should start his/her study where we live, in the New Testament era. Set your spiritual study anchor deeply in New Testament ground before you expand to the Old Testament.

As you read about the life of Jesus during His time as a man, study carefully how He lived, how He interacted with others, especially with His own followers. Was he overbearing and “Pushy,” or was He gentle and gracious? By His directive, “**Follow me**,” He teaches us to learn His lifestyle and strive to imitate it in our own lives. Ah, be prepared. As you begin to ponder living according to His example, you’ll get your first response to His “Gospel diet” in your spiritual tummy. You’ll likely be quite surprised at how bitter the experience will be. As a basic starting point, spend an extended time studying Jesus’ first “Sermon” recorded in Matthew chapters 5-7. He spoke this sermon specifically to His disciples. (Matthew 5:1-2 KJV) If we hope to live as His disciples, we need to profoundly “Digest” these three chapters into our thinking and our conduct. From

Jesus' description of those whom He regards as "Blessed," people whom He "Blesses," prepare yourself for one surprise after another. The hungry are blessed, not the full? The poor are blessed, not the wealthy? In delving into Jesus and His ways, we enter a new world where things are so different from what we've thought and done. But the result to those who "Eat up" His words and teachings into their own lives will affirm John's experience. As you begin to truly practice what He taught, you'll feel the churning bitter in your spiritual "Belly," but take heart. You have started a new diet, a new lifestyle that will grow you spiritually stronger, healthier, and, for the first time, truly "Blessed." Never look back.

Take further encouragement. When Paul wrote Timothy regarding the young preacher's early experience learning Scripture under his mother's and grandmother's teaching, he took the point further. Paul wrote of "**All scripture**" being given by "**inspiration of God.**" Paul specifically defined God's intended reading audience of Scripture.

That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works. (2 Timothy 3:17 KJV)

The divine intent of Scripture is to provide believers, the "**man** (Or woman) **of God**" with everything they need to know good works from bad works, and to learn how to "Digest," to practice them in our daily life. No believer ever has the excuse of "Ignorance" for failing to practice the Lord's teachings. The Lord gave us His "Little Book" full of wise and gracious truths that we need to learn and to

practice. We need to “Eat it up.” Give a young child the choice of ice cream or fresh vegetables, and hands down most children will choose ice cream. The Lord has given us all our spiritual diet in this “Little Book,” not just the vegetables or the ice cream. And He gives it to each of us with the same instructions He gave to John, “Eat it up.” Don’t eat up just one part of it. Eat it all up, preferably in the proportion God gave it in that “little book.”

If you saw a sign for a new restaurant opening soon, you’d search to see their menu. And if you saw two new restaurants opening side by side, one with a menu featuring nutritious healthy foods and the other featuring prime steak and lobster, which restaurant might succeed, and which might fail? Sadly, the healthy food restaurant would likely struggle and eventually close its doors. In that rich instructive Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made a similar observation regarding spiritual things.

Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it. (Matthew 7:13-14 KJV)

“Strait” is not an old spelling of “Straight.” The English word means difficult. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary includes “...difficult or distressing circumstances” in its definition of the word. And that is Jesus’ precise point. The entrance into the God-honoring, truly living-to-the-glory-of-God lifestyle is difficult and distressing, especially as we typically compare it to our comfortable, self-first way

of living and thinking. Further, Jesus cautions, the path of this way to the spiritual “Good life” is narrow. It isn’t wide enough for Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount way and our opinion and pride. It is only wide enough for His way of thinking and living. Every time we attempt to dilute His way with our own, we abandon that way, and with that action, we also abandon the blessings that accompany that way. Choose carefully. Choose Him and His way ***alone***.

Elder Joe Holder