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The Royal Poinciana Chapel

Sermon By

Dr. Richard M. Cromie

Sixty Coconut Row, Palm Beach, Florida 33480

"HOW TO FIND WHAT YOU NEED IN THE BIBLE"

Text: "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the people of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."

-- II Timothy 3:16-17

Not long ago the Chaplain and Professor of Christian Morals at Harvard University, Dr. Peter J. Gomes, wrote a book about the Bible called The Good Book. His purpose was to put the Holy Scripture before his readers: not with any particular axe to grind, nor as a scholarly intellectual pursuit, but as a readable book, with a common theme, intended to bring us closer to the Word of God. That conclusion will sound familiar to most of you, but it was and is primarily a message for the increasing number of modern scholars and others who have moved away from the Bible, and have taken on more scientific and more exciting pursuits.

Gomes is a controversial theologian, as you probably know, but not in this book. In my opinion, he fulfills his purpose. Most people know precious little about the Bible, even some regular church attenders. He is convincing in teaching that you have to read the Bible with your head as well as with your heart: feelings are fine, but you need to bring your concentration.

His second goal is to alert Scripture readers that you have to work at understanding the Bible. It is not a "Reader's Digest sort of enterprise." We like shorthand versions and condensed books. But the Bible was not watered down to make it easy to read and comprehend. While it is accessible to all, it takes hard work and thought to make it come alive. You cannot just let the pages fall open randomly and expect to find the guidance you are looking for; much like you cannot leaf through a computer manual and hope to land on the right page. You

have to know where to go in the Bible to find what you need for the living of your days. The Bible contains 3,556,480 letters, 733,746 words, 31,163 verses, 1,189 chapters, two Testaments, and 66 books. It takes a while to sort through it all.

Now, if you are listening, this matter is far more important than it might sound. The Bible in all of its chapters and verses and books is the Word of God. How it came to be the Word of God is a long and interesting story. But, since God has not chosen to come down out of heaven and speak to us one by one, although some people seem to feel they have a special line in that regard, our text teaches that He has chosen to speak to us through the chapters and verses of the Bible. It would be a mistake not to try to find out what He is saying there.

I often tell people that I am never so devoted a Christian as when I am reading the Scriptures. When I get confused or worried, I sit down and open my Bible and listen for God's Word. I read it carefully, but mainly I try to listen to what God is saying to me. This is God's Word.

If you want to know about Scotland, you read a book about Old Scotia. If you want to get the most out of your computer, you must read the instruction manual. (Are you listening?) Here's the bottom line: "If you want to know what God is saying to you, your number one place to look is in the Holy Scriptures." But, as with your owner's manual in your new car, you need to know what you are

looking for and how to find it.

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Decades ago, Chicago Professor Mortimer Adler wrote a classic called How To Read A Book. It has been updated and revised several times. It captivated me when I first read it back in college. It still offers a simple message: the faster we rush on into the multi-media-computer-cyber world, the farther we go away from the thoughtful inspiration found in books. The road to the future, Adler warned, is tended by an increasingly illiterate generation. As the Pennsylvania Dutch say it, "The hurrieder we go, the behinder we get." We do. It is true everywhere, but it is also true with the Bible.

As the world's problems go, that sounds rather tame. But, our failure to read it is related to dozens of other problems around the globe. Our failure to stretch our minds wastes the best resource on Earth. As my professor Dr. Emmanuel Kannwischer used to bark at the end of every philosophical lecture: "Never forget: Man's chief glory is to think!" I never forgot. Man's chief glory and woman's too . . . is to think! Some days I try to move apart from the rush of things and just think.

Researchers say that most humans use less than one one-hundredth of their potential mental capabilities. "Nothing beats brains," my father used to say, and nothing does. But, like the muscles of the body, the brain must be fed and exercised. It is hard work to read a good book properly, to receive its message and to wrestle with its ideas. Adler adds: "But, unless you stretch, you cannot learn. The mind, as the muscles, will atrophy, if not used."

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Let me give you a personal example and parallel. Now don't anybody laugh. I was late getting into the Personal Home Computer world, and I am still not an expert, partly because I have a wife at home and a secretary at the office who are superb. That

makes my life easier. But I thought it was high time that the good Reverend himself caught up with the world. So I bought a brandy new Dell Computer. Some of you who have Dell stock will appreciate my choice. As it looks now I probably would have done better if I had bought Dell stock rather than my Dell Computer!

But anyway, I purchased a 400 Megahertz Pentium II Processor-based system with 11.5 gigabytes, ultra ATA hard drive, and 64 megabytes of new 100 megahertz SD-RAM. (I barely know what any of that means; I read it off the manual.) I also have a Canon multi-pass C5000 color printer that doubles as a copier and triples as a fax. (How do you like that?) I also have two little speakers with stereo sound. I have Encarta 97 Encyclopedia software thanks to my friend Lloyd Ludwig, and I have a lot of other stuff.

But, one day I was having lunch with a friend who was thinking of getting into the computer world. He said, "What do you use your computer for?" I couldn't answer at first. With all the possible power, I finally confessed that mainly I send E-mails to a few friends and I receive a "Joke-of-the-Day," each and every day. Sometimes they are too bad to share with anyone. He said, "What else?" I said, "Well . . . that's about it." Here I have this fantabulous piece of equipment with endless possibilities, and I read out a joke or two each morning. Yep.

What Adler meant about our minds, is what I mean about my computer: I have barely skimmed the top of its power. What is true there with me is infinitely truer with the Bible with the most of us: a whole host of mighty and magnificent ideas are there . . . and we barely scratch the surface. 85% of active church-goers failed the following test, with questions like: 1) How many books are in the Bible, Old and New? 2) How many Gospels? 3) How many books of prophecy? 4) How many books are in the Torah? Etc.

"Especially in our middle and later years," the professor added, "it is critical to continue to expand

our mental vigor. Through the decades we face a constant bombardment of our senses from radio, television, newspapers, magazines, employment, retirement, declining health and memory. As external stimuli; they seem paramount. But, it is the inward resources which we need." He concludes, "if we lack resources within ourselves, we cease to grow intellectually, morally and spiritually. And, when we cease to grow, we begin to die." That's sad. George Szell used to say "Most people die with their music still in them...."

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Well, that is our introduction. Let me finish with a three-part sermon:

I. Point One: You should read the Bible! That was the great issue of the Reformation: The Bible belongs to the people, not to the Church fathers, not to the Priests and Bishops, but to you and me. Men were tortured and executed so that we could be free to open the Bible and interpret its word for our lives. James Russell Lowell wrote: "Thoughts that men's hearts once died for, we now breathe cheaply in the common air." We do.

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In preparation for this sermon I have been reviewing the development of the Word of God. For a long time there was no Bible, not as we know it. The Old Testament books originally were large scrolls; almost impossible to carry, and supremely difficult to unroll. They have been lost along the way. Then a collection of Old Testament books were brought together about 250 B.C. That is the only Scripture Jesus knew, the Old Testament.

Much later came the New Testament. For decades following the death of Jesus nothing was written down. Apparently there were just some collections of notes and the memoirs of those who were there. Then as the eye witnesses began to grow older, some began to write down their recollections of the Lord. Those written stories then began to circulate. Similarly, the letters of St. Paul were passed from

church to church, but there was no Bible as we know it.

Oddly, the first man to collect some of the writings together was Marcion (85-160 A.D.). He was a most unorthodox theologian, a rank heretic. He discarded almost all of the collections of letters and stories. His Bible included only the Gospel of Luke and a couple of letters of St. Paul. It was not accepted by the Church. He was ex-communicated.

Then about 200 A.D. a respected theologian named Origen, tried to set forth an acceptable New Testament. No one listened. About 100 years later, Athanasius, a small Egyptian Bishop, who had plenty of enemies, fought for the purity of the New Testament. In 367 A.D. in his Christmas letter (Can you imagine?) he listed 27 books and letters which he said were authentic, they were exactly the same ones as we now have in our New Testament. Then the Council of Constantinople verified that the books mentioned by Athanasius would do as a New Testament. His main purpose was to exclude the hundreds of other writings that purported to be accurate regarding the life of Jesus.

Then the Dark Ages fell upon Europe. Jerome translated the Bible into Latin, the first Vulgate version. Many others followed with their translations: like Cadmon, the Venerable Bede, then the first whole English Bible by John Wycliffe. Oh dear, he was persecuted for that.

Then William Tyndale translated the entire 27 books into English. He was betrayed and strangled and burned at the stake for doing that. Miles Coverdale later completed his work. Then came The Great Bible, the Geneva Bible, the Bishop's Bible, all in the 16th Century, until James VI authorized a new translation in 1611 where roughly 50 scholars put it all together for the famous King James Bible, which remains valid to this day.

Amazing. Today there are now dozens and dozens of different translations of the Bible. You can choose the one you want to use. Whatever else you do this coming week, do me a favor . . . or better,

do yourself a favor, pick up a Bible, the King James or the Revised Standard, the Good News for Modern Man, any translation, and sit down and read it. I am suggesting that you curl up with a Bible for the sheer pleasure of enjoying it. It has survived for thousands of years, mostly, I think, on the basis of its tremendous stories. First: Read it as a book.

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II. But second, read it on the lookout for the Word of God. I said "Word" with a capital "W." Sometimes God speaks in the words of the Bible; sometimes He speaks beyond them. It is a mystery how He chooses to communicate. It helps me to think of reading the Bible as a conversation with God. Suppose you were God and you wanted to convey a personal word to your children. And, you decided to inspire some authors to write it down. Read it with ears and eyes wide open, looking for what God has to say to you.

Back in the late Nineteenth Century the Bible fell out of fashion. Form criticism was flexing its literary muscles to prove that the Bible was not what it purported to be. The Earth was not made in six days, they said. Geological studies show that. And, Moses could not have written the material published under his name in Genesis. It arose much later. David could not possibly have written all of the Psalms. St. Paul did not write the Epistles credited to him. Matthew did not write Matthew, they said. John was dead long before the Gospel of John could have been written. And there were two authors in Isaiah, maybe three . . . maybe more, etc., etc., etc.

Then came Dr. Karl Barth, a German, the first neo-Orthodox Theologian. He stood up in his pulpit at Safenwil and preached the Word. His first and still famous book was published in 1917, A Commentary on the Book of Romans. He did not argue for the Bible. He testified. He wrote "If you try reading the Bible, you will hear the Word of God." It does not matter what you think or feel about this criticism or that. It does not even matter

if they are right or wrong. It is God we are looking for with His Word.

Barth said that life is like walking on a tightrope, across a huge chasm, like the Wallendas cross the top of the arena on a single wire. He said reading the Bible is much like that. You take one little step after another, cautiously. As you read the Bible, God will give you the vision and the courage to take the next step and then the next, until you are safely on the other side.

You do not have to defend the Bible. When Sigmund Freud published a book proving that Moses did not exist, one British theologian quipped, "Don't worry, I think Moses can take care of himself." Billy Graham once wrote that his success as a preacher came when he quit trying to defend the Bible and he started to preach it. The Bible can take care of itself.

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So, our question was: "How do you find what you need in the Bible?" That's our question. Here we are, almost ready to go home and I have not yet answered it. Well, I have answered in part: First, you need to go to the Bible. (It's elementary my dear Watson, elementary.) Set aside a time every day, as little as 10 minutes if you like, one-half hour would be better, and read it. Start at the beginning of Genesis if you like. Read 10 minutes worth of Genesis. If you get fascinated, keep reading. If you decide to read the Bible cover to cover I recommend you go quickly by the places that are difficult to read and understand. Be on the lookout for the positive Word of God.

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If you want to pick and choose, rather than cover to cover, I recommend that you first read the four Gospels, the stories of Jesus. Those take about an hour and one-half. Start with Mark, the easiest to read; then Matthew, Luke and John. Notice how they merge even though they are four different books. They tell a single story: the Good News of

Jesus Christ.

Then, I would go back to Genesis and read the first 11 chapters. Those are the amazing stories of how the earth began, how man, woman, and sin came to be. You will be intrigued. We call those chapters pre-history. Others, less sympathetic, call them myth. But God's Word is there. The author is trying to tell you that God made the world and He made it good. The rest is up to you.

The remaining chapters of Genesis tell grand and wonderful stories of the Patriarchs. In Exodus you read of Moses, and the parting of the Red Sea and the Ten Commandments. Then the long historical run from the 12th Century to the Sixth Century B.C., beginning with Joshua, ending with captivity. The book of Ruth is a great joy to read.

Don't miss the Psalms. The Proverbs are fun. The books of prophecy are important, all 16 of them, even if some of the minor prophets are confusing. In the New Testament, read the book of Romans, Paul's letter, the greatest theological book ever written. Then read Paul's letter to the Philippians, it's a friendly book. Then read the book of James. If you feel strong, end with a quick reading of the book of Revelation.

Then as you have particular needs or interests, search for them. Get a good one-volume Commentary to help you. There are several. Back in the 12th Century a Jewish scholar, Moses Maimonides, published what he called A Guide For the Perplexed. He was trying to help his Old Testament readers to understand the unity of the Word. He succeeded. Through the centuries his work is still a joy to read. It is long, in two volumes, but it is worth a look. I visited his tomb when I was in Israel and found a common bond.

Let me end with the words of our text: "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the children of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."

That's the purpose. That's what we need to be complete spiritually, and ready for every good work in Christ. That is the purpose of the Bible, for now and evermore. Amen.

SUGGESTED BIBLE READINGS

Genesis 1:1-31	The world God made is good
Joshua 1:1-10	God will be with you
I Kings 2:1-4	A father's final words
Job 38 ff.	God's answer to Job's "Why?"
Psalms 8	The glory of man
Psalms 23	The Shepherd's Psalm
Psalms 39:4-13	This fleeting life
Psalms 46	God is our refuge and strength
Psalms 90	As the generations pass
Psalms 121	Lift up your eyes
Proverbs 31:10-31	A good woman
Ecclesiastes 3:1-15	A time to die
Ezekiel 37:1-10	The dry bones come to life
Matthew 5:1-14	The Beatitudes
Matthew 28:1-10	The Easter Story
John 14:1-12	Let not your heart be troubled
Romans 8:28-39	What shall we say to these things
I Corinthians 13	The gift of love
I Corinthians 15:12-28	The resurrection of Jesus
II Corinthians 5:1-10	A house not made with hands
Colossians 3:12-17	Patience and gratitude
Philippians 4:4-9	Rejoice in the Lord
I Thessalonians 4:13-18	Grieve not as others do
I Timothy 6:11-16	Fight the good fight
II Timothy 4:1-8	Paul's final words
I John 4:7-21	Let us love one another
Revelation 21:1-4	A new heaven
Revelation 22:1-5	The Lord will be their light

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