

How to Read the Word

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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“Teach me, O Lord, the way of Your statutes, and I shall keep it to the end.
Give me understanding, and I shall keep Your law; indeed, I shall observe it with
my whole heart.” – Psalm 119:34-35

Recent sermons here have focused on what it means to be a church, and to have the church with-
in us. And since the church communicates with heaven, and ultimately with the Lord through
the Word, one of the clear, vital responsibilities for church members is that we read the Word.

It seems like a no-brainer, and of course you’ve all heard this countless times in your church life.
But – and this may also seem like a silly question – how exactly should we read the Word? IS
there a right way, or are there many ways, and if there are many ways, why would you choose
one way over another? Reading is reading, right? Either you understand it or you don’t, right?

Well, actually, there are specific benefits to each of the many ways we can read the Word; one
way isn’t *always* better than another, and some ways work better for some people than others,
and some work better for some situations than others. Think, for example, of a time of deep
grief or sadness in your life: is that a time to try to read the Word for understanding, or is that a
time to read for comfort and a sense of the Lord’s love and compassion? Again, think about be-
ing confronted with a major, life-changing decision: will you not want to read more for under-
standing in that case, and look for principles that can guide you in your decision?

Consider, too, that there are literally dozens of translations of the Word from its original Hebrew
and Aramaic, or Greek. Reading in one can give you a much different feeling and impression
than reading in another – and every one can be useful, if only for broadening your perspective on
what is meant. After all, if you really want to read the WORD you will have to learn Hebrew
and Greek, otherwise you are inevitably going to miss some nuances, or even get some quite
wrong impressions. They say translation is the art of failure, because no one language can per-
fectly capture all the subtleties of another. This is why Muslims say that the only way TRULY
to read the *Koran* is to read it in Arabic.

But let’s say you just want to cultivate a new or stronger habit of reading regularly, despite the
variations in the issues you have to face. The purpose of this sermon is to show you options and
offer support for a way that could make this easier for you than you may have thought possible.

First, consider the difference between reading every word slowly, carefully and thoughtfully,
versus reading quickly and touching lightly on the individual words while focusing on the *gen-
eral ideas* in the text. If we read slowly and carefully we might cover only one chapter in 20 or
30 minutes, whereas if we read quickly for the general sense of it we might cover five or six
chapters in the same half hour. Which is better? Either way takes a special kind of discipline,
and either way can provide important spiritual benefits – often in surprising ways.

To take the first method to an extreme, you might sit down and read no more than two or three
verses, but read them intently, repeatedly, and with careful reflection on every word. In a way

this is more like a guided meditation than anything else, but it can yield insights that provide for a world of inspiration. Again, you might do this in a sequential way, slowly, slowly working your way through whole chapters and books of the Word, or you might open the Word at random and just pick what is given to you in Providence, as if by chance. *This* may not be the best way *long term*, but it can be useful on occasion, when you're not sure quite where to start. You'll just need to be careful not to trust this method for providing answers to specific questions: that would be like consulting a Ouija board, which invites the influence of evil spirits and seriously messes with your freedom and rationality. But it can be helpful if you are simply asking the Lord what *He* wants you to think about.

On the other hand a more cursory reading of longer sections in the Word can bring it all to life in a way that the detailed reading doesn't. This may seem counterintuitive, and in fact it can be a real struggle to let go of your attention to and curiosity about specific words. But there's more to these accounts than just information: there's a world of affection and a direct link through that affection to the spiritual world, and to the Lord. So it can be valuable in a different kind of way to get a general overview, to see the whole flow of the stories and lessons, even from one lesson to another. For example, we understand that true, literal history in the Word begins with the story of Abram's journey from Haran down into Canaan, and then continues with the births and lives of his sons, Ishmael and Isaac, his troubled relationship with his brother, Lot, and the disturbing competition between Isaac's twin sons, Jacob and Esau. That whole series occupies just 20 pages in Genesis, *and yet how many of you have read it all in one sitting?* What general perception of the literal and spiritual senses of those stories might you get if you read it that way?

Reading Jeremiah the same way, covering maybe 20 pages at a time, you might get a very different impression of the prophet himself, and what he was facing, than you do by reading a chapter at a time, and this in turn might open your eyes to a new appreciation of *the Lord's* life in His constant effort to reform and save us from our own foolish ways.

And what about the Gospels? Pastor Mac mentioned Mark last week as the shortest and most accessible gospel, at 16 chapters and only about 22 pages. But Luke is also a very moving gospel, with 24 longer chapters but it's still under 40 pages overall. Reading 40 pages of a novel in one sitting is easy: why not Luke? You can always go back and re-read for the details. But reading *through* without pausing might give you a stronger, clearer sense of the Lord's Divine Humanity than you could get any other way, apart from a study of the *Arcana*, since Luke focuses more than any other evangelist on that Humanity.

But let's step back for a minute and reflect on some other options you have for reading the Word – and the Heavenly Doctrines. Some of you are very disciplined about reading on your own on a daily basis – most likely at a certain time of the day, morning or evening, and you look forward to that time for all sorts of reasons. But others among you – and perhaps ironically I include myself in this category – find it difficult to maintain that discipline. We know we should be reading and we actually want to do it, but something – either internal or external – always seems to derail the effort. For us the commitment to read and discuss what we read *together* is critical. And in fact, this is one of the uses of the church: we support one another in doing the things we know we ought to be doing.

So we might join a study group – or take the initiative to start one. Three years ago some of us, meeting every two weeks, read through all of the *Acts* and the *Epistles* together and learned a

LOT. Two years ago we did a summary review of all of the Prophets. And last year we read through the entire 5 ½ volumes of the *Apocalypse Explained* and the two volumes of the *Apocalypse Revealed* as we studied *the Book of Revelation*. These were all richly rewarding sessions, and not just because we read together, but because we shared our insights into the meaning and application of what we read, and challenged each other to see the Lord's love and wisdom all through the readings.

This brings up still another way to read – in groups. In this method, let's say there are 8 people in a circle; one person reads a selection from the Word, perhaps from one of the Psalms and then one by one the others comment on what stood out for them in it. When that cycle is finished someone reads the same passage *again*. It is amazing how much more everyone gets out of the second reading than they did the first time. But the exercise is not over yet! After all this the group members are invited to comment *again*, the passage might be read a third time, and *again* it is amazing how the insights grow.

In this method it can be helpful if each time the passage is read it is read with an emphasis on different words, as this can invite unexpected perceptions of what is there. We could try this right now if you're willing. But to keep it brief let's have just three comments after each reading. Here's a selection from Psalm 37:3-4:

Trust in the Lord, and do good;
Dwell in the land, and feed on His faithfulness.
Delight yourself also in the Lord,
And He shall give you the desires of your heart.

So... what were the first things you noticed or thought of when you heard this?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Okay, now listen again and see what comes to mind.

Trust in the Lord, and do good;
Dwell in the land, and feed on His faithfulness.
Delight yourself also in the Lord,
And He shall give you the desires of your heart.

Would anyone like to offer a new thought or reflection?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Again, this is just a demonstration, but it's easy to see how valuable it can be when we collaborate on our reading and share our insights. And of course we shouldn't be surprised at this, since we know the Lord speaks to us through our affections – which are different for everyone – and that there are whole societies of angels associated with every verse of the Scriptures. We'll conclude this exercise, then, by reading our two verses one last time:

Trust in the Lord, and do good;
Dwell in the land, and feed on His faithfulness.
Delight yourself also in the Lord,
And He shall give you the desires of your heart.

Reviewing now, we've discussed four specific ways to read the Word: very slowly with a focus on details, more quickly with a focus on generals, in groups looking toward discussion, and in groups actually reading aloud with comments on short segments. Now let's consider how reading can turn into serious study and even deeper reflection.

Many Bibles contain cross references from one passage to others on similar themes. There are also literally hundreds of reference books including topical indexes and concordances that can guide you to passages throughout the Word on any given word or concept. If something – say, forgiveness – particularly interests you at any given time it is a simple matter to get hold of one of these references and compare passages on that topic for a more or less comprehensive understanding of it. Again, if you have a specific decision to make, about marriage, say, or divorce, or what constitutes genuine charity, you might find cross references like this invaluable, not just in the literal sense of the Word but of course in the heavenly doctrines, too.

Of course you may not have time for such a deep study very often, but to think you don't have time at all, or that you're not up to it, is just a lame excuse. We spend time on what is important to us, and there are times and situations when this kind of study is really important. And of course, we ministers are here to help you.

Still, there's one more way of reading the Word that's worth mentioning. Developed by an Australian New Church minister named David Millar, it is called "Logopraxis" and you can easily find it explained in words and videos on the Internet. The term comes from the Latin, *logos*, meaning the Word and *praxis*, meaning practice. In simplest terms, it is a 6-step method of reading that focuses on deriving clear *principles* from any given text, and then developing specific personal *tasks* that can be addressed based on those principles over a period of weeks – individually and in a small sharing group. People who follow this systematic process find that it not only brings the Word to life for them, it also builds a deeper sort of community with others who share the same desire to feel the Lord's presence in the way they live from day to day. Perhaps this is something a few of you would like to try in the fall?

In any case, however we do it, in the New Church we are clearly taught that reading the Word is the only truly reliable way for us to be connected with the Lord and the angels of heaven. It is WHY we have writing in the first place and it is WHY we learn to read. Of course it is good that we can read all sorts of other things, too, but we should never forget that the most important book for all of us to read – over and over again – is the Word. And not only will it become more familiar the more we read it, we will understand it better and better and see how it all fits together so that we have a solid foundation for our lives in heaven, for the angels who are with us, and for the insights we can get about how it all applies to us in its spiritual sense.

Amen.

Lessons: *Psalm 119:33-40 & 105-107*
Luke 8:1-15 and Doctrine of the Word #37, 38 & 62