

DAILY READINGS

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Introduction

Robert Hall once gave his hearers the advice: "Never be without a book, in daily reading, of a direct Scriptural and devotional tendency." Over the years, many believers have proved the soundness of this advice, and have found *Daily Readings* or *Devotionals* great helps both in secret "trysting" with God and as focal points for thought, discussion, prayer and praise in family worship. Because we are so sluggish in spiritual matters, as Calvin would say, we need such goads to prod us into duty. Besides, those of us who have found them a means of blessing ourselves are happy to recommend them to others, that they too, may come to share our profit and joy. May He who has the tongue of the learned speak to us through them, that those who already trust and love Him may come to trust and love Him more, and that those who do not know Him may come to know Him, whom to know is eternal life.

Bible Readings

In a category of its own stands such a collection as Bagster's *Daily Light*. Though now printed *en masse* in the NIV, Bagster in the AV may still be found in Charity- and Second Hand Bookshops. (Also, it is now reprinted by the Trinitarian Bible Society in the AV, prices from £4.99 to £14.99 – Ed). Its compiler has strung together well-chosen Bible texts related to the same topic, each reading being headed by a key verse or phrase. The readings for February 5 – "The judgment seat" (2 Corinthians 5:10), April 18 – "Everlasting consolation" (2 Thessalonians 2:16) and November 30 – "We glory in tribulation" (Romans 5:3) are typical.

To gain most profit from such high concentration of Bible texts, we need to beg God for light beforehand; refuse to rush, be distracted or skim over the surface as we read; and join obedience to meditation and prayer afterwards. He who has promised that we shall find Him when we seek Him with our whole heart will not send us away empty.

Extra-Biblical Authors

The number of Daily Readings compiled from extra-Biblical authors is legion. Our quotations from a very small selection should not be construed as a disparagement of other collections we do not mention. Resisting the invidious tendency to compare the relative qualities of different authors, we shall simply select a few gems that we have found most edifying.

(1) Doctrinal Precision and Fullness

In some daily readings, the most noteworthy quality is the precision and fullness of their doctrinal statements.

A brief extract from Eric Russell's *Day by Day with J.C. Ryle* (Christian Focus Publications) exemplifies this trait. Commenting on John 1:14, Ryle characteristically says: "The plain meaning of these words is, that our divine Saviour really took human nature upon Him, in order to save sinners . . . This union of two natures in Christ's one Person is doubtless one of the great mysteries of the Christian religion. It needs to be carefully stated. It is just one of those great truths which are not meant to be curiously pried into, but to be reverently believed." By quoting the "wise and judicious" Second of the Church of England's Thirty-nine Articles immediately afterwards, the good first Bishop of Liverpool adds fullness to his precision. (Reading for January 2).

The daily readings in William Jay's *Morning and Evening Exercises* are mini-sermons, in which his chosen text is usually expounded and applied briefly, clearly and sweetly. In the morning reading for June 22, based on John 4:3-4, he informs us that the Saviour "must needs go through Samaria" because He had already "designed" the conversion of "this poor woman"

and of “many of the Samaritans.” A practical lesson on God’s providence: “Nothing takes place by chance,” then leads him to his main theme: the grace of Christ. This grace is *free*, he explains, “in selecting this wicked wretch” for salvation, “in spite of her unworthiness, and without her desire.” It is *gentle*, “in having recourse to no means of alarm, no violence.” It is *powerful*, because it gained a notable victory “over the corruptions of her heart.” It is *effective*, for “she not only believes with the heart, but [also] confesses with the mouth.” Indeed, no sooner is she herself “enlightened” than she becomes “inflamed” with the desire to see her companions in sin converted. One other valuable lesson emerges before the reading’s end: “They who speak from experience seldom speak in vain.”

Ever since the day he found it such a liberating truth, the Reformer Martin Luther hammered home the Biblical doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone. In *A Daily Devotional entitled By Faith Alone* (Zondervan) its human aspect finds simple and clear expression: “The Christian life has two dimensions: the first is faith, and the second is good works . . . But the first dimension . . . - faith - is more essential . . . People of the world, however, adore good works. They regard them to be far higher than faith . . . But . . . if we esteem them too highly, good works can become the greatest idolatry . . . Faith should be first. After faith is preached, then we should teach good works. It is faith - *without* good works and *prior* to good works - that takes us to heaven. We come to God through faith alone.” (Reading for January 1).

(2) Experiential Breadth and Depth

A further edifying feature of many daily readings is the vast breadth and penetrating depth of the spiritual experience they cover. In this connection few, if any, excel the Puritans. In an extract from Randall Pederson’s *Day by Day with the English Puritans* (Hendrickson), John Flavel displays the gradual nature of sanctification: “It is true, indeed, that Christ is perfectly and completely applied to the soul in the first act for righteousness. ‘Justification being a relative change, properly admits of no degrees, but is perfected together and at once in one only act . . .’ says William Ames. But the application of Christ to us for wisdom and sanctification is not perfected in one single act, but rises by many and slow degrees to its just perfection . . . The knowledge of Christ grows upon the soul as the morning light, from its first spring to the perfect day. (Proverbs 4:18).” What admirable teaching against the heresy of “instant sanctification” and on the basic distinction between God’s *act* of grace in justification and His *work* of grace in sanctification! (Daily Reading for March 9).

For many fine examples of penetrating depth we may turn to I.D.E. Thomas’s *Daily Devotions from the Puritans* (Gwasg Bryntirion Press). In the reading for 4th August Richard Mayo remarks from Proverbs 6:16,17: “Pride is a sin that is most hateful to God: He hates all sin, but more especially this sin . . . He hates a proud look, but He hates more a proud heart: ‘Every one that is proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord.’” Two ingredients in particular render pride “abominable beyond measure”: (1) its antiquity - “It was the first enemy that God ever had,” being the peculiar sin of both the fallen angels and our first parents; (2) its pregnancy - “It is a big-bellied sin; most of the sins that are in the world are the offspring and issue of pride.” What heart-searching considerations does this sensitive man of God place before us!

With typical calm solemnity, Jonathan Edwards interfuses doctrine and experience as if he were reading the Bible and our hearts at the same time. “If you were brought to see God’s sovereignty,” he claims, “you would see that He might show you mercy if He pleased, as well as that He might refuse if He pleased . . . Self-righteous men under the fear of hell are not fully convinced of either. They are not convinced that God may refuse them mercy; it seems to them very hard that He should cast them down into hell, and that He should have no regard to their good works. Nor yet are they convinced that God may show them mercy . . . they are so great sinners . . . They are afraid there are no hopes for them . . . they fear He is irreconcilable . . . And thus they are tossed between two opinions . . . sometimes thinking that God ought to

show them mercy for their works . . . and other times arguing that they are such great sinners that there are no hopes." (*Day by Day with Jonathan Edwards* - Randall Pederson. Hendrickson).

Martin Luther's spiritual discernment finds frank expression in his crisp comments on Matthew 6:7,8. "We should pray," he counsels, "with few words, but with deep, meaningful thoughts. The fewer the words, the better the prayer. The more words, the worse the prayer. Few words and deep meaning are Christian. Many words and little meaning are pagan . . . To pray in truth [John 4:24] is very different from a fake prayer." Showy "mumbling and babbling" prayers indicate "no respect for God. To those who are watching and listening, it looks [and sounds] like prayer." But it is not so. True spiritual prayer "comes from the sighing and yearning of the depths of the heart." In short, he says bluntly, "unspiritual prayer produces hypocrites and a false sense of security. Spiritual prayer produces true believers and reverent children of God" (*By Faith Alone*. Reading for March 9).

Charles Haddon Spurgeon is always experiential and spiritual. Examples of his unique bent of mind are scattered around his collection *Morning and Evening* (Hendrickson). For those who appreciate his unusual approach to Scripture, his treatment of the world's way of honouring Christ (April 7, Morning), of living dogs and dead lions (September 30, Evening) and of the superiority of believers' knowledge of Christ to that of His mother Mary (June 24, Morning) is fascinating.

His best comments, however, may be found on such texts as "Sanctify them through thy truth; thy word is truth" (John 17:17). "Sanctification," he says, "begins in regeneration," when "the Spirit of God infuses into man that new living principle by which he becomes 'a new creature' in Christ Jesus.'" It then proceeds "in two ways - mortification, whereby the lusts of the flesh are subdued and kept under; and vivification, by which the life which God has put within us is made to be a well of water springing up unto everlasting life." This good work of grace is "carried on every day in what is called 'perseverance,'" another word for the way in which the Lord preserves His people in a state of grace till He brings them to glory. The agency God uses is always His Word: "Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth." In employing it, "the Spirit of God brings to our minds the precepts and doctrines of truth, and applies them with power" to the heart and life. "We only progress in sound living as we progress in sound understanding." No error is "a mere matter of opinion." So, he urges his readers in conclusion: "Hold fast the truth, for by so holding the truth shall you be sanctified by the Spirit of God." (Morning Reading for July 4).

Octavius Winslow's *Morning Thoughts* and *Evening Thoughts* (Reformation Heritage Books) also exemplify the experiential approach. This "devotional author" *par excellence* always speaks from the heart to the heart, and urges us to have direct dealings with Christ. Take, for instance, his remarks for the evening of July 14: "Oh, what glory is brought to Jesus by a life of faith! Who can fully measure it? Taking to Him the corruption as it is discovered, the guilt as it rises, the grief as it is felt, the cross as it is experienced, the wound as it is received," we should follow the example of John the Baptist's disciples on hearing of their master's death, when they "went and poured their grief in Jesus' ear and laid their deep sorrow on his heart . . . Truly this is precious faith."

James Smith's *Daily Remembrancer* (K & M Books) is packed with suggestive sermon material, all blending doctrine, experience and practice. The reading for the evening of February 24, on the text "Therefore glorify God" (1 Corinthians 6.20), is full of good things. First, he states the comprehensive principle that the glorification of God "is the great end of all things." Then he aims at conviction of sin: "We are created for His glory, but we sinned and came short of it.

We came short of the glory of His law, in not obeying it; . . . of His image, not resembling it; . . . of His favour, not desiring it; and . . . of His presence, not seeking it."

Next he points us to the only Deliverer: "But Jesus died for us, paying the price of our ransom, wrought out a perfect righteousness, and saves us with an everlasting salvation." Then follows the practical inference for believers: "Therefore we are not our own, but are bought with a price, and should now glorify God in our bodies, and in our spirits, which are God's. To glorify God, therefore, is the only legitimate business of life." From this point Smith proceeds to instruct us how we do so: by "believing His doctrine, trusting His promises, and obeying His precepts;" benefiting others "for His sake; especially by visiting, relieving and comforting His poor saints; also by spreading His gospel, by governing our tempers, training up our families in His fear, and seeking the honour of His name in all we do." Finally he exclaims: "To glorify God is our duty, our reasonable service. O may it be our pleasure and delight!" Like so many other offerings in this delightful collection, this reading is a miniature sermon.

In Marylynn Rouse's compilation *365 Days with Newton* (Day One), the converted blasphemer and slave trader evidently speaks from personal experience. His knowledge of man's depraved heart and Satan's devices is profound. In the reading for 27 April, he perceptively links "the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" (1 John 2:16) with the three motives in Eve's sin (Genesis 3:6). Then he searchingly draws out the following lesson: "Observe, when the heart is resolved upon sin, every pretence . . . becomes a strong argument for compliance. When Satan has gained the will and made us careless of God's command and authority, his work is done. The grossest temptations will then be welcome." How else, he adds indignantly, could we imagine "there was something good and desirable in drunkenness, uncleanness, blasphemy and other vile abominations?" (Daily Reading for 27 April).

(3) Practical Application

As we have already anticipated, most authors of our selected daily readings regard their meditations as incomplete without some form of practical application. James Smith is no exception. In writing on Paul's confession: "I obtained mercy" (1 Timothy 1:13), he not only observes doctrinally that "mercy is free for the vilest," and that "the Lord has mercy on sinners just because He will have mercy;" he also charges the message home by asking: "Reader, have you obtained mercy? Has mercy had the same effect on you as it had on Paul?" Such pointed personal challenges are calculated, in the hand of the Holy Spirit, to alarm, awaken and lead us to cry: Have mercy, Lord, on me. (*Daily Remembrancer*. Evening Reading for June 19).

The Reformer John Calvin's determination to bring everything to a practical issue may be found everywhere in his *Institutes*, commentaries and sermons. A fine example is afforded by his remarks on John 10:1, in which the rapid move from doctrine to practice is striking. No sooner has Calvin informed us that Christ compares the Church to a sheepfold, and Himself to its door, "because there is no other entrance into the Church but by Himself," than he immediately adds: "Hence it follows that they alone are good shepherds who lead men straight to Christ," and that only those "who devote themselves to Christ alone" truly belong to His flock. (*Day by Day with John Calvin*. Hendrickson. Reading for July 15).

Calvin makes a similar quick transition in the chosen reading for January 31. Here we may see why Calvin was described as "the conscience of Europe." "One of the requisites of legitimate prayer," he insists, "is repentance. Hence the common declaration of Scripture: God does not listen to the wicked; their prayers, as well as their sacrifices, are an abomination to Him. For it is right that those who seal up their hearts should find the ears of God closed against them; that those who by their hard-heartedness provoke His severity should find Him inflexible."

Relating his remarks to Isaiah 1:15; 29:13; Jeremiah 11:7,8,11; and James 4:3; Calvin concludes with the demand: "Let everyone, therefore, who prepares to pray, feel dissatisfied with what is wrong in his condition, and assume, which he cannot do without repentance, the character and feelings of a poor beggar" (*op. cit.* Reading for January 31).

Martin Manser's *Draw Near to God, Daily readings from Matthew Henry* (Bryntirion Press) abounds with choice remarks from this prince of English commentators. Without the least display of learning, Henry often brings the precise meaning of the Hebrew and Greek text to bear on the lessons he is teaching. We find a good example of this as he contrasts the true humility of our Lord in washing His disciples' feet (John 13:3-5) with Peter's false humility in refusing to be washed (John 13:8): "*Thou shalt by no means wash my feet; no, never.* So it is in the original. It is the language of a fixed resolution." But "under this show of humility there was a real contradiction to the will of the Lord Jesus." Henry's practical conclusion is final: "All those, and those only, that are spiritually washed by Christ, have a part in Christ." And as this washing includes both His act of justifying and His work of sanctifying, "we cannot partake of His glory if we partake not of His merit and righteousness, and of His Spirit and grace" (Readings for May 19 and 20).

Conclusion

As we urge our readers to act on Robert Hall's advice, and patiently work through some sound and savoury daily readings, we return to Holy Scripture itself for our final reading. It is found in the Trinitarian Bible Society's booklet *Continue in Prayer: The thirty-first day*. (The Readings are arranged for a month, not a year).

"My voice shalt Thou hear in the morning, O LORD: in the morning will I direct my prayer unto Thee, and will look up. *Psalms 5:3.*

The LORD is my light and my salvation: whom shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? *Psalms 27:1.*

One thing have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to enquire in His temple. For in the time of trouble He shall hide me in His pavilion: in the secret of His tabernacle shall He hide me, He shall set me upon a rock. *Psalms 27:1,4,5.*

Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you perfect in every good work to do His will, working in you that which is well-pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. *Hebrews 13:20-22.*