

THY WORD

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Psalm 119:11

The year was 1849. The place -- a Philadelphia bookstore. The proprietor, a rather aged man with tinges of silver in his hair, was straightening and dusting his stock when an eager eyed boy of 11 stepped up to him and said, "Sir, I'd like to buy a Bible." He walked over to the window and pointed to a small red leather Bible on display. The proprietor smiled at the misguided enthusiasm of the boy and said, "But, son, the price of that Bible is \$2.75. Don't you think you ought to look for a less expensive one?"

The lad's eyes grew large with wonder. \$2.75! It was a staggering figure for anyone back in the year 1849. How would a young lad of 11 acquire such a sum? He thought for a moment and then answered deliberately, "No, sir, I want that one. I can't pay for it all at once, but I work after school in the brick yard, and if you will let me, I'd like to pay for it a little at a time."

The bookseller studied the boy for a moment and there was a look of sincerity in the youngster's face that touched the old man's heart. He walked over to the display window, removed the red leather Bible from the stand, and placing it in the boy's hand said, "Son, you shall have this Bible and you may pay for it anyway you can."

The boy's hands hovered over the shiny cover of the book for a moment as if he were afraid to touch it for fear of harming it. Then with an earnest "thank you" he thrust it under his arm and dashed out of the store. He worked especially hard that year and, faithful to his promise, he came in each Saturday with a fist full of pennies until finally the Bible he had treasured was completely paid for.

As the years flew by he continued to work hard and save his pennies and finally, at the age of 22, he took his meager savings and opened up a small department store. He was very young and yet

he possessed a maturity and wisdom beyond his years. When pressed for the source of his strength he would always point to that small red leather Bible which held a conspicuous place on his office desk.

He was not an immediate success. His early business years were beset with continual trouble and anguish. Three times he was on the verge of bankruptcy, but he always refused to give up. He read his little Bible incessantly. Its heart lifting words instilled in him the renewed faith and courage to keep trying. Finally, his knowledge of that book and his faith in the God it revealed, pulled him through and he became one of our nation's leading merchants and most prominent citizens.

Wherever he went, his Bible went with him as a valued friend and constant companion. And to the very end of his days, John Wannamaker gave this testimony:

AThat little red Bible was the greatest, the most important and most far-reaching purchase I ever made. Every other investment in my life has seemed to be only secondary.®

Sir Walter Scott had an equally high evaluation of the Bible and, as he laid dying, he called to his son and said, ABoy, bring me the Book.® His son asked, AWhich book, Father?® Sir Walter Scott replied, AThere is only one Book.®

And millions of us would agree. But what is there about the Bible which sets it apart from all other books? What is the secret of its appeal? What mark of distinction stamps it, and causes the Bible to stand in solitary grandeur as high above all other books, as the heavens are above the earth?

The answer is found in our text which contains the simple assertion of the psalmist who says with unmistakable clarity and unshakable certainty:

AThy word.® AThy word.® AThy word.®

At Thy Word.®

David viewed the Holy Scripture as more than a museum of Oriental curios. More than a collection of pleasant platitudes. To David it was the very *word* of God. He believed those scrolls were God's special revelation of himself in language, and held the answers to all the central questions he was asking.

And what were the questions which flooded David's mind? Where they not the questions you who and I are asking today? Questions about God. Who he is? What he is like? Where does he live? Is he interested in me? How can I know him? Those are the things David wanted to know and those are the things *we* want to know. And, those are the things the Bible clearly tells us.

If it were not for the Bible we wouldn't know how to talk to God in prayer.

If it were not for the Bible we would know that God is love and that as a father cares for his children so, too, the Lord cares for those who belong to him!

If it were not for the Bible we would have no authoritative knowledge of the after life. No clear-cut meaning to history. No blessed assurance that, come what may, God has his hand upon the affairs of mankind and that what was *meant* to be in the beginning, *will* be in the end.

If it were not for the Bible we would be left groping in the darkness of our sin without any hope or joy or peace.

If it were not for the Bible there would be no bridge of love between a finite man and an infinite God.

If it were not for the Bible there would be no salvation story, for it is here and here alone we are told that

A God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.®

There is everything in this book. As someone has said,

ADo you want romance? Then read the story of Jacob and Rachel.

Are you interested in adventure? Then turn to the story of Gideon or Joshua.

Are you fascinated by mysteries? Then study the writings of Exekiel, Daniel or the book of Revelation.

Are you concerned about ethics? Then apply the proverbs of Solomon or the Sermon on the Mount.

Are you searching for drama? Then reflect on that moving pageant of life=s trials and victories contained in the oldest book of the Bible -- Job.®

It=s all here. Every experience, every trial, every temptation, every hunger and longing, every hope and dream of man and God is contained within this book the psalmist called

AThy word... *Thy* word... *Thy word.*®

Martin Luther read the Bible and out of his study came the ringing cry: AThe just shall live by faith.®

John Bunyan read the Bible and as it burned its message into his heart he put pen to parchment and wrote a book called APilgrim=s Progress.®

Wesley read the Bible and was possessed with such burning zeal he spent his lifetime trekking weary miles through the wilderness and countryside to make its gospel known.

John Knox read the Bible, and as the heavenly heat of this book fired his heart he cried: AGod, give me Scotland or I die.®

Beloved, this is no ordinary book. For, though it has been

ADampened by the dew of sorrow,
drenched by the tears of motherhood,
soaked by the blood of battle,
flooded by the tide of unbelief,
deluged by the icy waters of skepticism

and burned by what seemed to be the very fires of hell B
the Bible lives on!@

There is only one explanation as to why this is so. It's found in the simple assertion of the psalmist when moved by the Holy Spirit he wrote:

AThy word... *Thy* word... Thy *word*.@

For the Bible is not the work of men, it is the very word of God.

But David knew that to possess the Bible is one thing and to *be* processed *by* the Bible is quite another. So he did not stop with a brief but glowing evaluation of its worth and, to the powerful assertion *Athy word*@, he added

AHave I Hid In My Heart.@

I would guess we could go into almost any home in our city and find a Bible. To most folks it is a standard household fixture. They would not think of being without one. People praise it. Recommend it. Urge their children to read it. Buy it for others B and sometimes for themselves. But when the truth is told I am afraid the Bible is more often praised, recommended, bought and given B than it is read!

Sometimes I wonder if many people don't own a Bible out of mere superstition. Dr. Bill Hodges a medical missionary to the island of Haiti reports the sale of Bibles is extremely high in spite of the fact that the island people have a relatively low rate of literacy. When the American Bible society began to investigate they found that while some purchasers really wanted to read the Bible, most of the people looked upon it to as a fetish and wanted it for magical purposes. They felt that the mere presence of a Bible in their hut or home would be some kind of protection against the evil spirits. Occasionally, they would cut out a leaf and boil it in water as a medicine brew for sickness.

Well, we can shake our head in bewilderment at their superstitious ignorance, but is it really

much different here in America? For, while the Bible is by all odds our nation's leading best seller, it is the most owned and least used book on the Americans scene.

One reason, of course, is that up until now it has not been an easy book to read. There are many difficult and obscure passages. But as Mark Twain once observed,

It isn't the parts of the Bible I do *not* understand that cause me trouble,
but rather the parts I *do* understand and don't obey.®

Perhaps it would help if we could think of the Bible as a tool. A complicated tool in some ways, but an automobile is complicated too, and yet millions of people use their cars with great ease. If one of your neighbors bought a new car and then just sat around and admired it you would think him daffy. Yet many of us buy a handsome Bible and never read it.

There's only one reason for owning an automobile and that's to take you somewhere. Similarly, there is only one reason for owning a Bible -- and that's to take you somewhere -- to God! For as someone has said,

Like an automobile, this book is an instrument of concentrated power which, in the right hands, can't take a person where he otherwise might never have hoped to go.®

Dr. Maltie Babcock put it this way:

The Bible is not a thing to be worshiped. It is something to be used. An untutored chap from the jungle or bushland might bowed down to a telescope, but an astronomer knows better. He knows it is not to be looked *at*. It is to be looked *through*.

To bind a Bible beautifully, to lift it reverently, to speak of it with admiration, to guard it with all care, is to miss the point. Look through it. Find God with it. See what God was to the people of the Bible and then let him be the same to you. See the proofs of his power and then prove that power *for* yourself, *in* yourself.®

In other words, hide the Bible in your heart.

Read the Bible Slowly

One of the ways you can hide it in your heart is to read it carefully and slowly. Instead of taking a bunch of hurried snapshots, begin to take some time exposures which will allow all the deeper truths contained therein to be impressed upon your heart.

Let the Bible speak to you. Encourage you. Correct you. This is God's word and when he commands you should obey. When he guides you should follow. When he convicts you should repent. When he offers help you should build your hope upon his promises.

But the Bible cannot speak to your heart unless your heart is open to it. It cannot control your will unless your will is subjected to it. It cannot challenge your intellect unless your mind is filled with it. It cannot bless your life *as* God intended it to be blessed *unless*, like the psalmist, you hide it in your heart. Until you know what it *says*!

Now, to be sure, there is a need for penetrating, scholarly study of the Bible. But that is not the great need for most of us. What *most* of us need is a simple, practical, workable knowledge of what it says as a whole.

God does not expect you to approach to Bible with the attitude of a seminary professor. But, he does expect you to use it as a primary source of spiritual nourishment and *that* necessitates that you have some semblance of understanding of what it says.

As someone has pointed out,

@The Bible is not to just a shelf of medicines for emergencies;
more accurately it is daily food for daily needs.@

And if you are going to have a strong, healthy, well developed soul you must feed daily upon the meat of the word., the staff of life.

Look For One Verse Which Speaks To You

A second way in which you can make practical use of this Book is to read until some one verse stands out in a special way to meet a special need.

It isn't important how many times you've been through the Bible,
but it's terribly important how many times the Bible has been through you.®

I often begin to read a chapter and stop my reading after one verse, because *that* verse has met the need which drove me to the Book in the first place.

Sometimes, I find it necessary to read further than just the first, or 10th, or even 50th verse. So I keep on reading until one verse stands out with special meaning. Then, I isolate that verse.

Sometimes I memorize it or write it down so I can carry it with me. On other occasions, I put it in a conspicuous place like my desk, or on my dashboard or in my date book where I can refer to it again and again throughout the day.

Many people have what they call their Refrigerator verse® (or verses) which means it is a portion of Scripture which they copy and put on their refrigerator door, held there by Scotch tape or small magnet. One man I know found it useful to type out a verse of Scripture and put it on the steering wheel of his car. I often carry a Scripture reference about -- on a 3 by 5 filing card B in my jacket pocket.

But regardless of how it is done, the great value of such a practice is that you cease being general and become specific in your use of the promises of God. By taking one passage... isolating it from the rest... letting it sink in... inscribing it upon your memory... allowing it to roll around in your mind... you gradually begin to center down, as the Quakers put it. You become possessed and obsessed by the knowledge that God is with *you*, not for just an hour on Sunday when you sit in church, but throughout the entire week.

You begin to realize that he is on 24-hour duty. That God is with you, in you, by you, and above

you around the clock. For Psalm 121 says:

The Lord is your keeper and he that keeps you will not slumber or sleep@

Can't you see how that kind of living, conscious relationship with the God of your Bible and in the Bible of your God will ultimately lead to the abundant... victorious... triumphant life you really want?

Well, the psalmist realized that and so he said:

The word have I hid in my heart...@

That I Might Not Sin Against Thee.@

David took the right thing, God's word -- and he put it in the right place, his heart -- to achieve the right purpose, a noble and upright life. And again, isn't that what you want to live? A noble and upright life!

You may not be guilty the gross... earthy... fleshy things most people think of when they mention sin. On the other and, you may! But either way, you B and I -- sin just the same and our sin does real and devastating damage to the image of God in us.

We all struggle with what Paul identified as the sin that doth so easily beset us.@ The key to victory over sin lies in hiding the word of God in our heart that we might not sin against him or ourselves or others. Let's assume, for the moment, that you aren't guilty of any gross and fleshy sins. But what about the so-called innocuous sin of

Living Blind.

What about going through life without any sense of guidance or direction? Of bulling your way through obstacles as if you were the master of your fate. As if you were the Captain of your soul? Are you guilty of that sin? The sin of living blind.?

Well, the Bible speaks to people like that when it says,

ALean not on your own understanding. In all your ways
acknowledge him and he will direct your path@ (Prov 3:5,6).

What a word for people who are living blind! Or what about the sin of --

Uncertainty About Your Faith And Where It Is Leading You.

Are you guilty of that? The other day I was out calling and had difficulty finding an obscure street. I pulled up to a stop light, rolled my window down and asked the man sitting in the car next to be me if he knew where that street was. He said, AI live on it! Follow me and I=I lead you there.@

So, instead of Adigging out@ as soon as the light turned green, I let him get ahead of me. When he turned, I turned. When he stopped, I stopped. Finally, he pulled up to a corner, pointed to a street sign and it was exactly where I wanted to go.

The Bible can work like that. It doesn't give you a set of instructions that says: ADo *this* on Monday and *that* on Tuesday and you will inherit eternal life.@ Instead, it introduces you to Jesus Christ and he says, AFollow me, for I *am* the way!@ Or how about --

Living Under The Weight Of Fear.

The Bible has something to say about that, too.

AGod has not given us a spirit of fear,
but of power, love and a sound mind (2 Tim 1:7).

There have been many times in my life when I had to deal with fear in one form or another. Let me tell you about one. It happened at a time when I didn't know what I *now* know about obedience. I thought to give all was to lose all. I thought for sure that if I really gave my life unconditionally to God it would mean something terrible. Like being a missionary in some jungle full of slithery, slimy snakes! And believe me, if there=s one thing I=m afraid of, its snakes. So I told God I would not be a missionary. I told him I=d do anything and be anything but that.

For a time I got away with it. But one night, while I was still in seminary, I was sitting in a church listening to a guest preacher. He hadn't said anything about doing missionary work. As a matter of fact, he wasn't preaching to Christian at all. He was preaching to people who had never been born again. Yet, throughout the sermon it seemed as if God was saying to me, "John, it's you I want."

When the invitation came I began to pray for a young fellow in the choir with whom I had been working. But even as I prayed it seemed as if God said, "Don't worry about him. It's you I want."

I shook off the voice and began to pray for a young mother whom the pastor and I had been trying to reach. And again God said, "Don't worry about her. It's you I want."

So I began to argue with God. Have you ever done that? Well, I recommend it. As "Cherry" Parker has said,

"Prayer can never be all it is meant to be until it becomes an exercise in honesty. So be honest with God. He knows it all, anyway, *and understands*."

I told God all the reasons why I would not make a good missionary. After I had listed them he said quietly, "I know all about that. It's you I want."

I looked at the girl beside me. We had talked about this, for neither of us had fully surrendered our lives as yet. She had said she wasn't interested in becoming a missionary either. And so, as the invitation hymn continued: "Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling" I said, "God, I can't leave her. I love her and need her." And God said, "I know about that, too. It's you I want."

Finally, I couldn't put him off any longer and I started down the aisle. I don't usually cry. Tears do not come easily for me. But that night I've wept uncontrollably. As soon as the service was over I slipped out of the church. I didn't want anyone to see me. I didn't want to talk to anybody. I was scared to death. I had told God that if he wanted me, I'd be a missionary and all I could

see were those awful snakes!

I jumped in my car, drove home, went to my room and threw myself on the bed. As I lay there shaking with a combination of tears and fears God spoke to me through a verse of Scripture which I had learned as a child. Through disuse it had become lost in my subconscious and had lain there like a seed in fallow ground waiting for a moment when it could burst into life again.

The verse was Joshua 1:9 --

Have not I commanded thee, be strong and the good courage,
be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed for the Lord thy God
is with thee whithersoever thou goest.®

As those blessed words began to grip my soul, fear vanished. Peace came. And, in a moment, I was asleep.

It was shortly thereafter that I learned a very important lesson about obedience.

God is not in the business of making people miserable or placing them in situations for which they are not suited or gifted and therefore will not fit.

I learned that God did not want me to be a missionary. He wanted me to say I was willing to be a missionary if that's what he wanted. In other words, he wanted me to trust and obey him.

Completely! He wanted full control. He wanted me to say:

Where ever it leads... whatever it costs... thy will be done.®

What happened to the girl who was standing by my side? This morning she is my wife. Shortly thereafter she, too, came to a time of more complete surrender when she decided to let God *be* God in her life, too.

Thy word have I hid in my heart and that I might not sin against thee.®

The right thing, in the right place, for the right purpose. God's word in your heart that you might live a clean and noble life. This morning I recommend this Book to you. The Book of a needy and searching heart. Buy it. Treasure it. Read it. Probe it. Memorize it. Use it. Get to know the Lord Jesus whom it reveals and give him first place in your life. That's the secret of an

abundant and eternal life.

AThy word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against thee.®