

A Written Record

Deuteronomy 17:14–15, 18–19; 2 Timothy 3:14–4:2

I came across something this week that is disturbing. According to recent studies, more than half of American adults read *below a sixth-grade level!* That translates to about 130 million people who can't accurately read a job application, medical instructions, or a simple ballot.

But what's more important than job applications, medical instructions and ballots? The Bible! Sad to say, the modern drop in literacy is producing a generation that has no first-hand acquaintance with the Word of God, leaving people vulnerable to soul-destroying error. "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Hosea 4:6).

For the first 2500 years of human history the knowledge of God was transmitted orally, from one generation to another. But after God appeared to Moses at the burning bush and called him to deliver his people from slavery, he instructed him to write down his words. Israel had hardly arrived in the Sinai Peninsula when the Amalekites came out to attack them. Israel's defense was led by Joshua, while Moses stood on top of a hill and lifted up his hands in prayer. As long as Moses held up his hands, Israel prevailed. But when he got tired, and his hands slumped, Amalek prevailed. So while Moses prayed, Aaron and Hur held up his hands, and God gave his people victory. Israel was a slave people, not trained soldiers. Yet with God's help they defeated a powerful army. So in Exodus 17:14 we read that "the LORD said to Moses, *Write this for a memorial in a book . . .* for I will utterly put out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven." Moses is told to document God's mighty acts.

Later, the LORD descended in a cloud and stood with Moses up on Mount Sinai, giving him his law. In time "the LORD said to Moses, 'Write these words, for according to the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel'" (Ex. 34:27). The LORD commanded Moses to write his words, to preserve them for future generations. The phrase "according to the *tenor* of these words" is an interesting phrase that's mostly omitted in the modern translations. In English the term *tenor* can mean *the drift of something spoken or written*. But God is not saying something like "as long as you give the basic idea, that's good enough for me." Moses' job was to faithfully express the will of God and not add his own opinion. The Hebrew word is not abstract or difficult. "The *tenor* of these words" is literally "upon the *mouth* of these words." In other words, whatever Moses heard from the LORD's mouth he was faithfully to transmit to the people.

So here are two commands to Moses: "write this for a memorial in a book" and "write these words that you hear at my mouth." Who's idea was it for Moses to write the Bible? Plainly, God's! As Peter testified, "prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit"

(2 Pet. 1:21). The Bible did not originate in the will of man! It is a supernatural book, and whoever ignores it does so at his own peril.

For our Old Testament text this morning we read from Deuteronomy 17.

Whenever a new king would assume the throne it was specified that “he shall write for himself a copy of this law in a book, from the one before the priests, the Levites. And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life.” Every new king at the beginning of his reign was to write out his own copy of God’s law from the official copy maintained by the priests. He was to read it every day of his life. If he did this, then God would bless Israel and protect his people from foreign enemies. The king was to be a literate person, understanding written communication. He was to have a working knowledge of the Bible and understand its teachings. Moreover, the people themselves were to be a people of the Book, knowing God’s will, and able to hold their civil and religious leaders to account.

Make no mistake: God intended that his covenant people be *literate*, that is, able to understand the written Word. And so it is today. God wants *you* to be literate, able to read and write. A drop in literacy puts God’s people in a very precarious situation. God’s people are *destroyed* for lack of knowledge. It has been observed that the Christian faith is only one generation away from disappearing entirely. Will your commitment to the Book help make sure that doesn’t happen?

How well do *you* read? Do you read *books*—physical, bound books? Do you have a Bible? If you don’t, talk to me, and I’ll help you get one. Do you know your way around the Bible? Can you say the books of the Bible? Do you know how to look up Bible verses? Do you have a general idea about biblical history, and know how the various Bible books fit into it? Can you recognize the types of biblical literature—narrative, law, poetry, prophecy, gospel, epistle—and know how to understand them? Do you read your Bible every day?

Moreover, if you don’t read your Bible, why not? Do you consider it unimportant? Are you just too busy? If so, what does this say about your priorities? Is God really your God?

How did the Bible come to be? Our New Testament text tells the story, and it would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of this key text. Paul writes to Timothy, a young pastor. In one of the most important statements in the whole Bible he reminds him that “from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.” The word translated “childhood” has the meaning *unborn child, infant*—a very young child.¹ Timothy was a covenant child. He had the great privilege of growing up in a believing home. Easton notes that his mother, Eunice, and his grandmother, Lois, are mentioned as eminent for their piety.² Elsewhere we read

¹ Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich lexicon, βρέφος (Logos Bible Software)

² 2 Tim. 1:5

that he was “the son of a certain Jewish woman who believed, but his father was Greek.”³ The implication is that his father was not a believer. Timothy’s earliest memories were hearing his mother and grandmother speak the words of Scripture in the home. Here were women who took seriously the biblical instruction: “my words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed’s seed, saith the LORD” (Isa. 59:21). My dear hearer, the Word of God is not to depart out of your mouth. It is to be in your mouth constantly. You should be known as a person who quotes the Holy Scriptures. Who knows what a great effect that can have on your friends and loved ones? I tell expectant parents that the greatest gift they can give their new baby is the gift of hearing the Word of God in their parents’ own voice from their earliest memories. That gift is priceless! We are told that babies *in utero* get used to the sound of their parents’ voices, even before they are born. There is nothing better than for parents and baby to bond under the sound of God’s Holy Word. Eunice and Lois were godly women who intentionally exposed little Timothy to the Word of God, expressed in their own voices. It is highly unlikely that their home had the complete scrolls of the Hebrew Bible! Rather, they listened attentively as the Scriptures were read and expounded in the synagogue. Over time they committed them to memory and recited them to young Timothy. What a godly heritage!

Many of you are professing members of the covenant community. You’ve professed that you “believe the Bible to be the Word of God, and its doctrine of salvation to be the true doctrine of salvation.” But do your children know that is what you profess? Likely they were not around when you made that profession publicly. That would have been before they were born. Is that profession merely old news, or is it something that you renew regularly—daily—in your own family, in front of your children? If you are a grandmother or grandfather, do your grandchildren know that you believe the Bible to be the Word of God? What better way to communicate that than to demonstrate by the words you speak that such is your living faith!

Here is the Bible’s teaching concerning itself: “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” The word translated “given by inspiration of God” is a single word in Greek.⁴ It is a compound word meaning *God-breathed*. The written Scriptures are just as authoritative as if God were standing right before us, speaking his very words. What are you doing with such a treasure? When we hear

³ Acts 16:1

⁴ θεόπνευστος

it preached we should pay attention with diligence, preparation and prayer; receive it with faith and love, lay it up in our hearts, and practice it in our lives.⁵

A biblical worship service contains a sermon by a minister of the Word, lawfully called, and under the continuing oversight of his presbytery. When we hear the Word preached we must receive it as our spiritual birthright; treasure it as the very Word of God; and give our full attention to it. We should be convinced of its truthfulness and intent upon putting its precepts into practice. What we should *not* do is let our minds wander, dismiss its teachings as mere opinions, or forget what we have heard as soon as the service is over. Rather, we should meditate and reflect upon it afterwards. It is helpful to jot down some of the things we have heard and review them during the week following.

O people of God, as we have opportunity, let us devote ourselves to become better readers, treasuring the Word because God gave it to us in written form. Our spiritual forefathers expressed it this way in the Westminster Confession of Faith (1.10): “The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the *Scripture*.⁶ The written Scriptures are an incomparable treasure. We should treat them as such and solve all controversies of religion by appeal to them.

This past week I received an email from a Roman Catholic news organization that is very committed to the pro-life cause—a very worthy cause indeed. But this newsletter had a very troubling statement: “Satan . . . knows that he will be crushed under Our Lady’s immaculate heel.” When I read that, I thought to myself, *but isn’t that a promise given to the church?* Indeed it is! The apostle Paul promised the church that “the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly” (Rom. 16:20). Nothing about “our Lady,” nothing about her “immaculate” heel. The idea that the virgin Mary was sinless is not taught in Holy Scripture. It was not necessary for our Lord’s mother to be sinless in order for the incarnate Christ to be born sinless. Mary herself, while earnestly desiring the glory of God (“My soul doth magnify the Lord”), states, “and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my *Savior*.⁷” Mary’s choice of words was intentional. Her human spirit, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, rejoiced in God her “Savior.”⁷ Mary, like each and every one of us, needed a Savior—and that Savior is Christ. Christ Jesus came into the world to *save sinners!* Oh, brothers and sisters, let us learn the doctrines of Holy Scripture and appeal to them as the final authority on all controversies of religion.

⁵ Adapted from Shorter Catechism 90, <https://opc.org/sc.html>

⁶ https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_01

⁷ Luke 1:47

All praise to God for his written Word! Christianity is not a mystical religion but a religion based on truth! Let us all endeavor to become the best readers we can be, treasuring the great gift of the Bible.

If God has given you the ability to read, then he expects you to develop that ability. Don't say to yourself, "I'm just not a reader; I will never be a reader." You can become a better reader! It just takes practice. Read the Bible aloud every day, asking the Lord's help, and you will get better at it. Don't settle for mediocrity; ask God to help you become the best you can be. As Paul told Timothy, "Till I come, give attention to *reading*, to exhortation, to doctrine. Do not neglect the gift that is in you" (1 Tim. 4:13–14). How can you become a better reader? *Practice!*

Just yesterday I read an article by a doctor, encouraging older people to stay mentally active and engage in creative activities like music, dance, art, or gaming. Staying mentally active can help a person's brain stay up to seven years biologically younger than one's actual age, strengthening communication between brain regions responsible for attention, coordination, and problem-solving, and helping a person maintain clarity and focus.

Don't sit in front of the TV and veg out. Read! Summarize key points in your own words. Explain them to someone, or write them down. Look up unfamiliar words in a dictionary. Compare translations. Work to understand the message. If more than half of American adults read below a sixth-grade level, determine to be the exception!

In Colonial New England there was a great emphasis on universal literacy, largely based on the Puritan belief in the importance of Bible reading. A 1642 New England law stated, "See that all youth under family government be taught to read perfectly in the English tongue." By 1647 the Massachusetts General Court passed what was called the "Old Deluder Act," calling for the establishment of grammar schools to thwart "one chief project of that old deluder, Satan, to keep men from knowledge of Scriptures." The New England Primer taught the ABCs with memorable couplets such as "In Adam's fall we sinnèd all" (for the letter A) and "Thy life to mend, this Book attend" (for letter B).⁸ Literacy rates among adult white males were estimated to be between 70% in the colonies and nearly 100% in New England. Sadly, it is much lower today.

Smart phones, used wisely, provide resources at our fingertips to help us study Scripture, but they can be a terrible time-waster, and we need to recognize that. Your phone can read written text aloud—a benefit for the blind, but a crutch for the seeing.

Christianity is not a religion based on oral tradition but on the "Holy *Scriptures*"—writings! Written documents can last for centuries—think of the

⁸ <https://newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/old-deluder-satan-act-made-sure-puritan-children-got-educated/>
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Magna Carta—while oral traditions change with each retelling. Written records provide a fixed account of events, eliminating the variations that can occur in oral storytelling. Written documents can be stored in libraries and archives, allowing for easier retrieval and reference, compared to oral traditions, which rely on memory. The lack of a permanent record or physical archive means history is lost if the teller dies or forgets. The God of heaven gave us his written Word, and expects us to read it.

As the assistant clerk of presbytery I have a part in preparing presbytery minutes. Most of presbytery's decisions are unanimous, but occasionally a controversial matter will come up, and there will be split decisions. Careful record-keeping is important, and especially so when there is a divided vote. All minutes must be approved by the body. Once approved, they are the official record for what happened at the meeting. General Assembly minutes are printed in a book and distributed to all ministers and sessions. In the event of a catastrophe, some of the printed volumes will survive as a testimony to how the Lord led his church. Such minutes are akin to the court records of King Ahasuerus of Persia at the time of Queen Esther. Esther 6 records: "That night the king could not sleep. So one was commanded to bring the book of the records of the chronicles; and they were read before the king." The king wanted to hear the chronicles to help him go to sleep. The Bible has its First and Second Chronicles. Scripture is a written record—an *inspired* written record.

Do you treasure your Bible? Do you want to understand it better? God promises to help. Adopt the biblical prayer, "Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law" (Ps. 119:18). This is a prayer that God promises to answer!

For months now, my daughter Jessica has been asking me about my mother. What kind of a woman was she? What are some of the details of her life? She has been pestering me to write my memoirs of my mother. This past week she was helping to clean one of our bedrooms and she came across a book that contained my mother's handwritten notes on her life. It is a little like a baby book that a young mother might maintain to record her new baby's progress, but this one was for grandparents. What are some of her childhood memories? What were some of the things she was interested in during her teen years? How did she meet her husband? What were her memories of her children during their early years? When my daughter came across this book, she was amazed. She took it home to read it for herself.

Dear saint of God, the Holy Bible is the written record of his dealings with us, his people. May our heavenly Father give us all a deep desire to know the details of the story of his great love for us. Amen.