

## A Burning Flame

### *An Invitation to a Lifetime of Learning*

"Education is not the filling of a bucket, but the lighting of a fire." So said one who is arguably the best poet (writing in the English language) that the twentieth century produced, William Butler Yeats. What might this burning flame look like? God commands us to love Him with our minds, to take every thought captive to obey Him, to grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Let us first look at what we need to embark on this lifelong journey of growth and learning, then at what the journey itself involves.

### **Four Things We Don't Need...**

A brief story illustrates what we don't need. Some years ago, as a young college professor in Taiwan, I taught perhaps the most exciting class of my entire teaching career. It was a freshmen English conversation class. My main goal was to get these seventeen young Chinese students to open their mouths and speak English, and I could do this in almost any way I wished. We did a wide variety of things together, but the point I want to emphasize is that the class was electrifying. It was different every day, but it was always lots of fun and deeply meaningful. Somehow the "chemistry" was just right—I could do no wrong. Every one of my jokes was hilarious; every one of my ideas worked. The class became almost legendary, even outside the department. It was embarrassing, because the freshmen were divided into three sections who had their conversation classes in three adjoining classrooms. It was always very obvious which classroom was ours—gales of laughter regularly blew out of it that threatened to swamp the other two classes.

I can't remember if I was tempted to think the class was great because I was a great teacher. Some students not in the class might have thought so. In any case, the Lord soon made it obvious to all that this was indeed not the case. The next year one of my classes was also a yearlong conversation class open to anyone, even those outside the department. Several people eagerly signed up, expecting a repeat performance. Guess what! It didn't happen! It became obvious to me, and to all, that it is not just the teacher or the students that make a great group learning experience. This is good news, really, because such a class does not happen very frequently. My first positive point is that learning is not dependent on a good teacher or great classmates. Solid, exciting learning can take place even under crummy teachers, or in the midst of apathetic classmates. It does not necessarily require a school, it might take place while sailing around the world or enduring imprisonment for Jesus Christ. It does not require youth, brilliance or a big budget—it does require a heart completely sold out to Jesus Christ.

Learning is not simply for the young. Someone even said that education is wasted on young people, because they bring a much more limited experience of life to the books they study. As a college teacher, I always enjoyed teaching adults, because somehow they brought a lot more to each class. I couldn't put anything over on them. They kept me honest. So if you are young, by all means plunge into growth and learning with enthusiasm, but as you grow older, don't stop! You might "graduate" from school, but you will never outgrow your need to keep growing. The Proverbs were written that the simple might learn wisdom, but also that the wise

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man might hear and increase in learning. In some ways, the more you know, the more exciting it is to learn more. So at whatever point on this journey you find yourself, the Lord has yet many surprises and delights ahead.

Nor do you need brilliance to enjoy growth and learning. God wants us to develop and fully use the gifts and opportunities He gives us, whatever they may be. If you are not what the world calls "brilliant," if your "school experience" was bitter or frustrating, if you are among that growing legion today marked out as "learning disabled," you are not thereby rendered unable to love God with your mind, or excused from taking every thought captive to obey Christ. On the other hand, if you are "good at school" and find it easy to "get good grades," beware that you do not mistake this for a solid commitment to learning for the Lord's sake. Don't compare yourself to others and either despair or pat yourself on the back. Christ has gifted, called, and commanded each of us. Before Him we stand or fall, and He can make us stand. Determine before the Lord to develop and use fully the gifts He has given you. Let His grace set your limits, and not the praise or criticism of men.

Finally, learning does not necessarily require a lot of money. No one can say, I cannot learn because I cannot afford it. Money spent in this way is often a very wise investment, one that may yield rich returns. But money must by no means be seen as an obstacle to growth and learning.<sup>1</sup> Look at the Lord Jesus Christ! He grew up as the oldest son in a poor family. His earthly "father," Joseph, evidently died when He was still a young man. We know He had four younger brothers and an unspecified number of sisters. Assuming an equal number of boys and girls (not unreasonable), it is very possible that the young man Jesus found Himself laboring as a carpenter to support His widowed mother, Mary, and nine younger siblings: hardly conducive to furthering one's education, at least as the world sees these things. And yet this did not prevent the Lord Jesus from growing in wisdom, stature and in favor with God and man. By twelve He already had understanding that astonished the most learned men of His day, and when His public ministry began at thirty, He had attained a depth and maturity of wisdom and knowledge unique in all of history. True, He was God, but He was also fully man. How did He do it? Without a big budget, for starters! His mind must have been busy meditating on the Scriptures while His hands were busy sawing and sanding. Learning and growth can take place under the most adverse and unusual circumstances—the one essential ingredient is a heart given completely to Jesus Christ.

This is what I mean when I say I hope you will become an "independent" learner. I certainly don't mean independent of God—quite the contrary. Nor do I mean a "solitary" learner—much of our best learning takes place (or should take place) in groups (the family and the church to mention only two). I mean by "independent" what some today mean by "proactive." Our motivation, our desire, our drive comes directly from Jesus Christ: our gratitude for all He has done for us and our love for Him. Growing means growing more like Him, and learning means learning more of Him. At the university where I taught in Taiwan, the teachers would sit down with the incoming students and have a time of free sharing about the

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<sup>1</sup> God has given me a prayer vision/burden which I share with all of you: that God would so bless PHC that it would be affordable even to large families with only one income and without going into debt. God is a big God and He can do this.

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four years to come. I would often say, "Don't be limited by your teachers, your classmates and the 'program' we have set up for you. Take full advantage of these, but realize that learning and growing is bigger than all of them."

## **The One Thing We Do Need...**

That the only essential prerequisite to growth and learning is a heart given completely to Jesus Christ is good news. Because Jesus invites, indeed commands, all men everywhere to give their hearts to Him. He will give us anything else we need to grow in all the ways He wants us to grow, but we must realize that perhaps what we most need is a season of poverty, or a loss of health, or a very demanding earthly employer. (Years ago I worked for four months as a chimney sweep's assistant. The fellow I worked for was proud to have an assistant with three graduate degrees! I learned many invaluable lessons during that time in my life.)

But if God has blessed us with leisure to read and study, where do we begin? Let me suggest that we begin where Jesus began, with a very serious study of the Scriptures that we might understand and obey Them. If we take as our foremost lifetime project to become serious students of the Word of God, we will have the great side benefit of a mind trained to tackle and plumb the depths of any lesser book, no matter how challenging. Let us look at this step by step: first, what might this project look like? then, granted this is a necessary project, is it sufficient? and finally, if it is not, how can it help us with additional projects?

## **A Life-time Student of the Word**

I learned as a new Christian the Navigator "hand" illustration, and after three years of seminary training and many decades of thought and study, I have not been able to improve on it. If you want to make serious study of God's Word a lifetime project, what might that look like? In order to have a firm grasp on any object, you must use your thumb and all four fingers. Imagine your hand grasping a Bible. All five fingers must be present and roughly the same length. Take one away or make one very short and another very long, and your grasp is weakened. So what are the five fingers?

1) LISTEN Listen to good sermons and teachings about the Bible. In other words, learn as much as you can from those whom God has blessed with special insight into the meaning of Scripture. When we are young, this will hopefully be mostly our parents, but as we get older it should include certainly preachers and teachers in our local assembly, but also the writings of the most gifted saints of God throughout church history—the classics of theology and devotion. We can and should learn an enormous amount about the Bible from others. I think that a reasonable goal is to read a good book about the Bible each month if possible.

2) READ This means read your Bible. I think it is an excellent idea to read the entire Bible through at least once each year. To do so you need only read a few chapters each day. This gives you, over time, a very good sense of the overall message and shape of the Scriptures and enables you to answer the question, "What does the Bible say about \_\_\_\_\_?" at least in a provisional way with only a few moments of thought. I further think it is a good idea to read the

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Bible in a different translation or version each year, at least until you get through all the main ones. I would not say, "Read only the *Living Bible*," for example, but I definitely think it is a good idea to read it at least once.

3) **STUDY** Reading is like an aerial photo. Study involves getting down on the ground, perhaps even on our knees and digging into the Bible book by book, chapter by chapter, verse by verse, and even word by word. The best book I have found as guide is *The Joy of Discovery in Bible Study* by Oletta Wald (I am sure there are many others). Get yourself this book (or one like it), a good concordance (Strong's is excellent), a notebook, some uninterrupted time and begin feasting. I would suggest at least one solid hour of inductive Bible study each week as a minimal goal. Also, as specific questions arise, take them to the Scriptures and do a WBS ("What does the Bible Say?"). We are home schooling today in part at least because I did that many years ago. Faced with a choice in a new community, I asked the question, "What does the Bible say about teaching and training our children?" I am still using the notes from that Bible study today.

4) **MEMORIZE** Someone has said that of all forms of Bible study, time spent laying up God's Word in our hearts pays a richer per hour dividend than any other, and I have also found this to be true. If you are young (less than forty years old—let's be Biblical in all things :-), then by all means soak up and memorize as many verses, chapters and books as you can. If you are older (I noticed a distinct change after forty) and your memory is not as absorbent as it was—don't despair. It can still be done: it just takes a lot more time and effort. At very least keep reviewing the treasures you tucked away when you were younger. Shoot for at least two verses a week. If you have not already done so, I highly recommend that you memorize the sixty some verses of the Navigator's *Topical Memory System*. I did as a new Christian and they have blessed me for the past many decades. After that, memorize at least some whole chapters, like Matthew six and Romans six and eight.

5) **MEDITATE** Just as in the human hand the thumb must work in conjunction with the other fingers to firmly grasp anything, so here too. As you listen to a good sermon, as you read the Bible, study and memorize it, by all means **think** about it! Don't do it mindlessly like a robot. One of my life verses is Joshua 1:8 (a *TMS* verse—see above): "This Book of the Law [for us, the whole Bible] shall not depart out of your mouth, but you shall **meditate** on it day and night *that you might be careful to do according to all that is written in it* [emphasis mine]. Then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success." Notice that this meditation is to be day and night, and that it has a very practical focus—**that you might be careful to obey everything the Bible says!** Eastern meditation is an emptying of our minds. Biblical meditation is so filling our minds and hearts with God's Words that we are literally mumbling, musing, muttering them day and night—they are spilling out of our mouths, as it were. We do this that we might understand, and we understand *that we might obey*. Jesus said, "If you know these things, blessed are you if you **do** them" and James, "Be ye **doers** of the Word, and not hearers only." Jesus concluded His magnificent Sermon on the Mount with the two builders: both heard—the one who dug deep and built on the rock **obeyed**.

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This meditation-unto-obedience ought to be literally night and day. We should fall asleep at night meditating on God's Word. If we are wakeful at night, we should meditate, pray and praise. We should wake up in the morning thinking about the Lord. We should probably give to God the first moments of the day in the Bible reading and study talked about above. And we should certainly have God's Word on our minds and in our hearts so we can think about it throughout the day. I have found it very helpful to pick a verse or two from my morning reading and write them on a card that I keep with me all day. A Proverb that says it all is 6:20-22. The first two verses urge us to observe God's Words, binding them continually on our hearts. The final verse gives us the threefold result: "When you walk about, they will guide you [active daytime]; when you sleep, they will watch over you [through the night]; and when you awake, they will talk to you [morning devotions]."

Remember, too, the precious promise of Joshua 1:8—prosperity and good success: not simply the shallow, worldly "prosperity" of an affluent lifestyle—but the deep, abiding prosperity of soul, the *shalom* peace that only God can give and that alone satisfies our deepest desires.

I plead with you to resolve, if you have not already done so, to take both the command and promise of Joshua 1:8 to heart as your lifelong goal and purpose. This involves nothing less than a total commitment to Jesus Christ, to total discipleship, to following Christ no matter what and desiring above all things to grow more like Him day by day. This is phrased in many ways in the Scriptures, but they all come back to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. If you are unwilling to make this total commitment for life, nothing else I say has the least value.

## **The Bible First, But Not the Bible Only...**

Assuming this commitment, let us ask the next question: if I in this way read and study the Scriptures along with a few theological and devotional classics, need or even should I ever read anything else? Some answer this with a decided and serious no. I disagree. A thorough presentation of arguments on both sides would take me way beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say that study of the Book must always be primary (special revelation), but we can also learn much about God and ourselves from a study of other books, and indeed from a study of all of nature as well (general revelation). As a student and teacher of literature, my appreciation for the truths of God's Word has been greatly deepened by a study of literary classics, and not just the "Christian" ones (like *Paradise Lost* by John Milton). Sometimes my greatest insights have come from a study of the most despairing of works. For example, *The Trial* by Franz Kafka, where the protagonist, Joseph K., never knows where he stands and can never get a straightforward answer from any of the mysterious "accusers" so high above him, greatly deepened my appreciation for the way in which the Almighty God of the Bible condescends to speak so clearly, completely and definitively to us in His Word.

Let us say clearly, though, that the serious wrestling with the Scriptures that we are talking about is the absolute best way to prepare ourselves, to train our minds, for the reading, study and appreciation of any merely human classic. If we have even begun to plumb the depths of God's Book, to mine even the tiniest part of its treasures (we can never exhaust them!), we

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will have no difficulty approaching any other merely human book. The reading skills, the inductive study skills, even memorization and meditation skills, will prove excellent allies. Reason honed on a humble study of God's Word will pierce through the most profound human classic. We will find that God's Word is quite literally "unfathomable," but also that even the most impressive "merely human" classic (and there are many such) will quite readily bounce back our signals when we sound its depths. A very significant measure of a book's greatness and worth is the extent to which it repays multiple reading and close study. There are some truly great books out there, but you will find that none even begins to compare to the Book up close and over time.

Let me share briefly, then, a few final thoughts about a lifetime of learning. We can learn a great deal both from listening and reading. MacDonald discusses listening in *Ordering Your Private World*. The best discussion of listening that I have ever read is Stephen Covey's 4th habit (*Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*). I highly recommend it. Two excellent books about reading are *How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading* by Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren and *How to Read Slowly: A Christian Guide to Reading With the Mind* by James W. Sire. They also talk about what constitutes a book worth reading (Sire talks also about magazines and journals). Two more books on this topic I highly recommend are *The Great Conversation* (Volume One of Britannica's fifty four volume *Great Books* collection) and *The Christian Mind: How Should a Christian Think* by Harry Blamires. Let me make two final points about breadth and depth in reading.

## Reading Broadly and Deeply...

My second son and I spent part of a summer surveying a small library. It was fun and I highly recommend it. A whole family could do it together. We first figured out how much time we had and how much of the library we had to cover each visit to get through the whole thing. We then very briefly skimmed through our "quota" each week, trying to spot a few titles of special interest. We then checked these out and took them home. That evening at supper we each introduced our "finds" to the rest of the family and kept the books on a special shelf during the week. We tried, if possible, to read at least one of them before taking them back. In this way we realized more clearly than ever before the breadth of human knowledge and the tremendous variety of books out there. It certainly got us out of our ruts and familiar little literary meadows (should I say ghettos?). We also turned up a few real gems (*Seven Habits*, mentioned above, was one of them).

Now a word about depth. Probably one of the greatest benefits of my Ph.D. studies (and I burn no incense before the Ph.D. altar), is that they once and for all got me over any residual fear of books (those that know me will laugh—"Since when were you ever afraid of books?!"). I realized at some point, in a way I never had before, that books are just books. Take any particular point in space and time, any isolatable historical event, and you realize that there was much that led up to it, much that surrounded it at the time, and much that flowed from it. There are layers and layers and layers of books written about every conceivable thing (and not a few about inconceivable things). You pick up one thread and begin reading, and it leads to you five others, each of which could also lead you to five more.

A couple practical implications.

You will never read them all (especially with the "knowledge explosion" we are in the middle of). If you are diligently following Christ day by day, reading the books He wants you to read, never worry about the ones you can't get to. Pick the ones you do read with care, enjoy them thoroughly, learn as much as you can from them, and don't give a thought to the others.

Another is this. If you approach a new subject and are interested enough to read a book about it, it is not that much harder to read ten books about it. You might think, "It took me hours to read the first one, and he wants me to read nine more?!" [It's a bit like the lady that says, "I have only one child and he runs me off my feet, and you have *how many* children?!"] The math doesn't work that way. When you come to your first book on a new topic, everything is new to you and so it takes a long time to break in and absorb. But you will find that the second book is already very familiar territory, and so you can read it much more quickly. The third through tenth books will be mostly review, with a few new thoughts here and there. It might only take you as long to read books two through nine as it took you to read book one. So what do you gain? After reading the ten books, you can say, "I know subject X, not just what so and so *says* about subject X." The first book you pick up might (probably isn't, but might) be totally unrepresentative and whacko. After the ten books, you will have a much better feel not just for subject X, but also the relative value of each of those ten books on subject X. You can comment not simply on the subject, but also the various treatments of it. It's a kind of check and balance in a fallen world. Only the Bible can be trusted completely. Besides, it's not that hard and it's fun.

To conclude, enjoy good books, but don't make an idol of them. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. That is why it is so important to love God with our minds in the context of loving Him with our heart, soul and strength. Godly balance is all important. Keep God and His Book as foundation, starting point and center always. Finally, don't, like the dead sea, simply take without ever giving. When we listen and read we are receiving from others. This is excellent, but there is a time to speak and to write—to give and to share. This can be done in lots of ways and lots of contexts. Some sample ways? Recommend good books, whet people's appetites, share the gist of a good book or a helpful insight, read aloud, share your enthusiasm or how you have benefited in some way from a life of thoughtful reading rather than the mindless "entertainment" so many are addicted to today, write provocative letters, get *Families Writing* by Peter Stillman and try some of the excellent ideas in it, start a reading or writing club. Some contexts? First of all with your family! Your parents and grandparents, your brothers and sisters and children. But also your brothers and sisters in your local church, or perhaps believers in your city or county, or even your unbelieving neighbors.

Girding up the loins of our minds is one very significant way in which we can be salt and light today. God help us to outlive, outthink and outdie the pagan world around us, that He might be glorified and His kingdom come.