

Receiving the Word to Experience Life

- 1 God's own Word must not be taken
Just as knowledge but as life,
Not alone God's thought conveying,
But Himself to us as life;
Not alone God's mind revealing,
But His Christ as life within,
Not alone the teaching giving,
But experience of Him.
- 2 It is only knowledge to us
If we in the letter read,
But when reading in the spirit
It is truly life indeed.
All the knowledge in the letter
Only brings us into death,
But the Word in spirit taken
Gives to us the quickening breath.
- 3 If we miss the Lord in Scripture,
It is just as knowledge vain;
But when Christ we touch within it,
Then His life we may obtain.
When we read, the Lord not touching,
'Tis but mental stimulus;
But when Christ we touch by reading,
It becometh life in us.
- 4 All the knowledge of the Scriptures
Into life must be transformed,
All the mental understanding
In the spirit must be formed;
All the Scriptural understanding
Must become the life received,
All the knowledge of the letters
In the spirit be conceived.
- 5 Just to touch the Word for knowledge
Is to take the very way
By which Eve was lured by Satan
And by knowledge led astray;
But as life to take the Scripture
Is the tree of life to eat;
Thus the Word we must be taking
In the spirit as our meat. (*Hymns*, #816)

Undeniably the Bible has been revered and treasured as God's own speaking by the believing disciples of Jesus Christ throughout the centuries. Every seeking Christian from the time of the apostles until the present

day has received this book as the only firm basis for the belief and practice of the Christian faith. The Scriptures have been a source of guidance, comfort, and encouragement to Christians of all walks and all religious persuasions for nearly two thousand years.

Still, the way in which we encounter, receive, and experience the contents of the Bible is of crucial importance. The above hymn by Witness Lee is based on the life experiences of one who learned to take in the word of God as spirit and life. The five stanzas progressively emphasize a central point: taking God's word as life, not as knowledge; reading the Word in spirit as the "quickening breath"; touching the Lord Jesus Himself as life in the word; transforming scriptural knowledge into life; and finally, receiving the word as the tree of life to eat as our spiritual food.

The principles advocated in this hymn are wholly gleaned from the pages of the Bible as expressed in the teaching and fellowship of the apostles. The apostle Paul, the paramount pattern of all who have sought after God through Christ, declared that his goal as a lover of the Lord Jesus was "to know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death" (Phil. 3:10).

According to the example of the apostle, the believers' quest is not simply to know something about Christ; it is to know Him personally and intimately to the point of experiencing His resurrection power and His all-inclusive death as the basic factors in our living. To know Him in His resurrection indicates a life that transcends death in all its manifestations and lives to God in all things. To know Him in His death signifies a life of freedom from Satan, the world, death, the flesh, and the self. According to this model, the life of a seeker of Christ is one that enjoys everything that God is—love, light, righteousness, and holiness, including all the divine attributes of God mingled with the human virtues of the God-man, Jesus Christ. At the same time, it is a life in which the death of Christ liberates us from all that is not God Himself. To thus know Christ suggests a dynamic change in the life of the believers. It is possible to enter into another sphere or realm of existence in which God in Christ becomes not only the source and energy of our living but also the

environment and surroundings of our daily existence—in the words of Paul, an existence in the new man where “Christ is all and in all” (Col. 3:10-11).

Since we exist in a world in which we know and test material things by seeing, feeling, hearing, smelling, and tasting, how can we know God who is invisible and seemingly apart from the material world (1 Tim. 1:17)? The hymn affirms that our experiences of the Lord must come through the Bible, the Word of God. The most precious provision with which God has gifted His people on the earth is the Bible. God has ordained that we know Him, understand His purpose, and enter into His kingdom through the hearing of faith (cf. Gal. 3:2, 5), and faith is the result of hearing the words of the Bible:

How then shall they call upon Him into whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe into Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without one who proclaims Him?...So faith comes out of hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. (Rom. 10:14, 17)

In another place Paul urges his hearers to let the word of Christ dwell in them richly (Col. 3:16). In his *Life-study of Colossians*, Witness Lee writes concerning his appreciation of what it means to allow the word to dwell in us richly:

The word of Christ includes the entire New Testament. We need to be filled with this word. This means that we should allow the word of Christ to dwell in us, to inhabit us, to make home in us. The Greek word rendered *dwell* means to be in a house, to inhabit. The word of the Lord must have adequate room within us so that it may operate and minister the riches of Christ into our inner being. Furthermore, the word of Christ must dwell in us richly. The riches of Christ (Eph. 3:8) are in His word. When such a rich word inhabits us, it must inhabit us richly. The word of Christ should have free course within us. We should not simply receive it and then confine it to a small area of our being. On the contrary, it should be given a free course to operate within us. In this way the word will inhabit us and make home in us. (246)

God has spoken to His own people in the Son, the living Word (Heb. 1:1-2), and this speaking is recorded in the word, the Bible. To properly receive it, we must learn to let the written word penetrate us and operate within us, making its home in us. This must be a matter of life, not merely biblical knowledge. Regrettably, many read the Bible as literature only, and others read it for inspiration and comfort, all without interacting with the God who speaks through His Word. Still others study the Scriptures to establish doctrinal tenets for ritual and religious practices without touching the One who is the focus of the word of the God (John 5:39-40).

Therefore, this hymn begins with a prudent word of caution: “God’s own Word must not be taken / Just as knowledge but as life.” The Word of God does more than merely convey God’s thoughts, reveal His mind, or impart proper teachings. Without a doubt, we are given insight into the mind and thought of God, and we receive proper and healthy teaching for our instruction in righteousness and holy living, but there are other important functions of God’s Word. Through the Word of God we receive God Himself as life, we see and know Christ as life within us, and we are brought into the experience of Him. This is the deeper significance of the Bible to those who seek to know the Lord. The Bible is not merely a book of knowledge; it is a book of life, and because it is a book of life, we must receive the Word in the way of life. Consequently, many genuine seekers of the Lord have found that the most effective way to take in the word—to receive and be profited by the Scriptures—is by means of contacting God in the word through prayer.

Although this hymn does not directly address this point, praying to receive the word is an intrinsic and underlying principle of the hymn’s contents and application. For example, the second stanza trumpets the necessity of receiving the word in spirit, not in the letter. This is the same principle clearly sounded out by the apostle Paul, who confirms that “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6). The stanza concludes, “All the knowledge in the letter / Only brings us into death, / But the Word in spirit taken / Gives to us the quickening breath.” What is the significance of the “quicken,” or “life-giving,” breath? Simply speaking, it denotes breathing in the life-giving Spirit of God through prayer. This reflects the essential nature of the Scriptures as the breathing out of God.

Paul reminded Timothy of the effectiveness and worth of the Bible by proclaiming that “all Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16). The Bible is the breathing out of God (*theopneustos*, Gk.). As God’s breathing, it is spirit in its essence. The best way for us to receive the Word of God is by breathing in what He has breathed out. This thought is implied by Paul’s word in Ephesians 6:17-18: “Receive the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which Spirit is the word of God, by means of all prayer and petition, praying at every time in spirit.” “Spirit” in this passage refers to the word of God. The gender of the relative pronoun *which* in Greek matches the gender of *Spirit*, not the gender of *word*. Hence, the sword is the Spirit as contained in the word of God. The way we take the sword of the Spirit is “by means of all prayer,” indicating that prayer is the unique means by which we are able to take up the word of God, which contains and conveys the sword of the Spirit as the offensive armor to defeat God’s enemy. Another noteworthy statement in verse 18 is the phrase *praying at every time*

in spirit. The word *spirit* in this phrase does not designate the Holy Spirit; rather, it is the human spirit exercised to receive the divine speaking in the Bible by contacting the divine Spirit within the Word. To pray “at every time in spirit” implies that we can breathe in the word by prayer when our human spirit touches the divine Spirit. Through prayer we open to and enter into the divine dispensing in the word of God. Hence, “the Word in spirit taken / Gives to us the quickening breath” is experienced when we use our spirit through prayer to enjoy God’s breathed-out Scriptures.

The third stanza directs our attention to Christ Himself as the unique content of the holy Word of God: “If we miss the Lord in Scripture, / It is just as knowledge vain; / But when Christ we touch within it, / Then His life we may obtain.” Significantly, the Lord Jesus is introduced by John as the Word who was God; in this living Word was life, and this life was the light of men (1:1, 4). The life signified here is the divine, eternal life of God.

The Lord found fault with the unbelieving Jews because although they searched the Scriptures, hoping in them to find eternal life, they refused to come to the Lord Himself of whom the Scriptures testify. Believing Christians may fall into the same trap. We may diligently study the Scriptures to know the signs of the times, but in our zeal to know when our Lord is coming again, we may miss entirely His present, personal, and intimate speaking. Others may be eager, even passionate, to discover the secret of living a holy and victorious life yet miss the person who is uniquely able to live such a life through them. If we miss the Lord in our reading of the Bible, the issue of our reading is vain knowledge.

We need to learn to contact the Lord as life in the word. Here we may be helped by an event in the life of the Lord through which He instructed His disciples in John 6 with the profound thought that the way to contact, receive, and enter into the eternal life is by eating Him. Prior to speaking this, the Lord had fed a group of about five thousand men by multiplying five barley loaves and two small fish; this small amount of provision became enough food not only to satisfy the crowd but also to leave twelve baskets full of leftover bread and fish. The following day, when the crowds again sought Him, He warned them not to work for the food which perishes but to work for “the food which abides unto eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you” (v. 27). In response, the Jews made reference to the manna which came down to feed the children of Israel during their sojourn in the wilderness. The Lord replied that the manna was not the true bread from heaven but rather that He Himself was the true bread coming out of heaven from God to give life to the people. This life is the eternal life, which is found in Him alone. To partake of this life, His believers must eat Him;

the Greek word to *eat* indicates “to devour”; later He used an intensified word, *masticate*, which means “to munch, to eat audibly, to crunch,” according to Rienecker (234). In this striking narrative, the Lord Jesus taught His disciples that they must aggressively lay hold of, take in, apprehend, and experience Him in a very tangible way—as bread is eaten, digested, and assimilated. Only in this way can we become partakers of the eternal life. Many of those to whom the Lord presented Himself as the bread of life murmured and turned away from following Him. Today many followers of the Lord are also offended by this teaching and refuse to learn this vital lesson of life.

The Lord answered those who complained of this, saying, “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words which I have spoken to you are spirit and are life” (v. 63). The words spoken by the living Word are spirit and life, and it is the Spirit who gives life. Here three items are associated—word, Spirit, and life—because these three, as one, convey God to us. It was the obvious intention of the Lord to communicate to His followers that the matter of eternal life is not physical but spiritual, and it cannot be obtained by certain kinds of works; it is obtained by an act of faith, a believing into the One whom God has sent. This believing is more than mental assent to the fact of His existence or even intellectual acknowledgment and appreciation of His accomplished redemption. To enter into eternal life, one must partake—eat and drink—of the essence of the One into whom he believes. The meaning of the Lord’s speaking is clear, but for the practical application of this word, we need to consider the testimony of the Bible. Plainly, the way is related to the Spirit, but who is the Spirit, and how do we contact Him?

In the seventh chapter of John we have the revelation concerning the Spirit who was “not yet, because Jesus had not yet been glorified” (v. 39). This is a difficult word to understand. Unmistakably the Spirit of God has been present from the very beginning of the Bible, but here the Spirit is spoken of as being “not yet.” This Spirit who will flow out of the innermost being of the believers is directly identified with the glorification of the Lord Jesus. According to John 12, the Lord was glorified through death and resurrection: “Jesus answered them, saying, The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, Unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it abides alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (vv. 23-24). The Lord’s death (falling into the ground and dying) and His resurrection (bearing much fruit) is the process through which He was glorified. The manifestation of the Spirit is linked to this glorification of the Lord Jesus. Plainly, it is still the Spirit of God who was in the beginning, but something has happened so that this Spirit is able to flow out of the innermost part of the believers.

After the Lord was resurrected, He appeared in a closed room to His disciples and “breathed into them and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit” (20:22). This action of the resurrected Christ indicates that at that moment He breathed Himself as the Spirit into His disciples. From that time, the rivers of living water began to flow out of their innermost being—the essence of the One breathing into them began to pulsate in their being as the energy of life—the eternal life that had been imparted into them. This helps us to realize that the Spirit as a moving, energizing entity was imparted into the believers so that they could begin to live and move by another source of life—the eternal essence of the One who came down out of heaven. The life flow is the Spirit who gives life, or the life-giving Spirit, who is the Lord Himself (1 Cor. 15:45), which Spirit is embodied in the word (Eph. 6:17).

In stanza 4 we touch another facet: “All the knowledge of the Scriptures / Into life must be transformed.” The way in which the sons of Israel read the Old Testament is in contrast to this principle; they missed the Lord utterly in their reading of the Scriptures because of a veil over their heart:

Therefore since we have such hope, we use much boldness, and are not like Moses, who put a veil on his face so that the sons of Israel would not gaze at the end of that which was being done away with. But their thoughts were hardened; for until the present day the same veil remains at the reading of the old covenant, it not being unveiled to them that the veil is being done away with in Christ. Indeed unto this day, whenever Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart; but whenever their heart turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. And the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. (2 Cor. 3:12-17)

When we read the Bible, therefore, we need to learn to turn our heart to the Lord. The turning of our heart is an opening of our entire being to the Lord, allowing Him to speak within us. All the light in the word of God is available to those who respond to His gracious encouragement to enter into close, intimate, importunate, and uninterrupted communion with Christ. It is our great and particular privilege to have an unceasing fellowship with God in prayer and the reading of the Scriptures. Through turning our heart to the Lord, our heart and mind are unveiled and ushered into the realities of the life that lies hidden in the written word. Only those who follow the Lord fully, without reservation, can comprehend and appreciate the riches of Christ that await the discovery by a loving heart that seeks after the Lord.

The Lord has committed Himself neither to the intellectually astute nor even to zealously faithful servants

but to those like Mary, who choose the good part, to sit at the Lord’s feet and listen to His word (Luke 10:39-42). We must not be like the Ephesians who left their first love (Rev. 2:4). The Lord will give Himself without reservation to any who turn to Him. In the same love that brought Him to the cross, He will fellowship with us, unveil us, mold us, sanctify us, and make us fit for His purpose. How strange that some would question the necessity of spending time in prayer with the word. We should commit ourselves entirely to the One who gave up all for us and consider it our greatest joy and privilege to fellowship with Him daily. We should pray: “O Lord, draw me, unveil me, and teach me how to live daily in fellowship with You in Your precious word.”

When our hearts are turned to Him in love, the veils are removed. Then we are able to behold Him in the reading of the Scriptures, and as we behold Him in this loving, unveiled way, we are being transformed—the Scriptures become life to us so that we progressively become the same as He is in life, nature, and expression: “We all with unveiled face, beholding and reflecting like a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Lord Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18). Through reading the Scriptures with a turned heart, the knowledge of the Scriptures is transformed into life.

Loving the Lord is crucial to the transformation of the knowledge of the Scriptures into life. This is confirmed in another place in which the apostle declares:

As it is written, “Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard and which have not come up in man’s heart; things which God has prepared for those who love Him.” But to us God has revealed them through the Spirit, for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among men knows the things of man, except the spirit of man which is in him? In the same way, the things of God also no one has known except the Spirit of God. But we have received not the spirit of the world but the Spirit which is from God, that we may know the things which have been graciously given to us by God. (1 Cor. 2:9-12)

In the above portion of the Word, our understanding and experience of the deep and hidden things of God are directly linked to our having a heart that loves the Lord. A footnote in the Recovery Version explores what it means for us to love God and how our loving Him enables us to enter into the things that He has prepared for us:

To realize and participate in the deep and hidden things God has ordained and prepared for us requires us not only to believe in Him but also to love Him. To fear God, to worship God, and to believe in God (that is, to receive

God) are all inadequate; to love Him is the indispensable requirement. To love God means to set our entire being—spirit, soul, and body, with the heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30)—absolutely on Him, that is, to let our entire being be occupied by Him and lost in Him, so that He becomes everything to us and we are one with Him practically in our daily life. In this way we have the closest and most intimate fellowship with God, and we are able to enter into His heart and apprehend all its secrets (Psa. 73:25; 25:14). Thus, we not only realize but also experience, enjoy, and fully participate in these deep and hidden things of God. (1 Cor. 2:9, note 3)

Ultimately, as the final stanza of the hymn makes clear, every time we come to the word of God, we must take it as the tree of life and not fall into the trap of taking it as the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We are warned that taking the Bible solely in the way of knowledge is to follow the pattern of Eve when she yielded to the tempter's subtlety and ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The significance of the tree of life is profound. The Lord did not present Adam with a law, ritual, or practice. Adam was not required to live up to a certain standard of behavior. Rather, he was presented with an opportunity to receive a life that would supply him with not only strength, comfort, energy, health, joy, and peace but with God Himself to be everything to him and to constitute him so that he could live, move, and have his being in and with God. Just as physical food becomes a part of the eater and is expressed through the eater, so God would have been food to Adam, becoming a part of him with the result that Adam would have become a full expression of God.

Now through redemption and regeneration, the way to the tree of life has been opened again to us. Every time we open the Bible, we are confronted with a choice, one that leads to life and the other that issues in death. The tree of life signifies God in Christ initiating and energizing a living in the divine life. The tree of knowledge signifies Satan instigating and stimulating a living in death. Christ as the tree of life is experienced through a simple and pure heart. Therefore, Paul expressed his fear that the Corinthian believers might somehow, like Eve, be deceived by the serpent in his craftiness, that their "thoughts would be corrupted from the simplicity and the purity toward Christ" (2 Cor. 11:3). We must exercise our spirit to come to the Word in simplicity to eat of the tree of life: "Thus the Word we must be taking / In the spirit as our meat."

Eating the word as the tree of life is related to a crucial principle—dependency. We must depend on the revitalizing substance of the food that we eat for our daily

sustenance. In the physical realm we cannot exist without the regular intake of nourishment. In the same way, we must depend on God in Christ as the tree of life found in the Scriptures for our existence and growth in the spiritual realm. We need to eat to live. Bible reading is not an exercise that we are required to practice for a few minutes each day as an external guidance for our worship and conduct. It is a way of life. Hence, our time in the Word in the morning is not a kind of homage to God before plunging into another day of walking like the Gentiles walk in the vanity of our mind (Eph. 4:17-18). Rather, we feed on His word, and it fuels us, restricts us, cleanses us, cheers us, occupies us, and guides us inwardly as our motivating and vitalizing source toward the consummate goal of God's eternal purpose.

We need to cultivate the way of eating the tree of life, taking in the Word and assimilating it as life. We need to come to the holy Word of God, not as students, not as religious practitioners seeking to enter into some higher or deeper form of worship, not as theologians to interpret and explain the meaning of the Bible, not as historians to explore the lessons learned by those who have preceded, but as eaters and enjoyers.

We were created in the image of God according to His eternal purpose, but we became fallen and in this ruined condition were no longer useful to Him. But we also have been chosen, redeemed, and regenerated in and through the Lord Jesus Christ, and we are destined to be transformed into the very image of Christ. This transformation is aided when we set our entire being on our God by pursuing Him in continual prayer, by turning our heart to the Lord, by reading and praying the Scriptures with an unveiled face, and by letting the word of Christ dwell in us richly, considering, pondering, praying over, memorizing, and allowing the word to permeate and penetrate our inmost parts. This will change the very core of our being to make us the same as He is in mind, emotion, will, conscience, goal, desire, and action. By enjoying the Lord's sweet presence and rich supply as the tree of life, we are practically and organically joined to and mingled with our God who is our life.

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