

## **CHAPTER 4**

# **SPIRITUAL READINGS**

- A) The material of spiritual readings**
- B) The purpose of spiritual readings**
- C) Benefits of spiritual readings**
- D) How to read**
- E) Time of reading and its quantity**

There are various kinds of religious readings, but we are writing here about spiritual readings, which inflame the spirit with God's love, straighten our personalities and purify our souls and bodies from all evil.

## A) THE MATERIAL OF THESE READINGS

**There are three basic sources for spiritual readings, which are:**

**1. The Holy Bible:** The Old and New Testaments, with commentaries, meditations and biographies of the writers of the Book.

**2. The Sayings of the Fathers:** Ascetic books which deal with virtues. These are better read gradually and offered to each person according to his needs.

**3. The Lives of Saints:** Whether they lived in the world or the desert, whether martyrs, monks, ministers, heroes of faith or leaders of Christian thoughts etc.... Reading their biographies offers us living examples of Christian virtues. Mari Isaac said, **“The news of the saints is very desirable in the ears of the meek like watering new plants.”**

## B) THE PURPOSE OF READING

**One has to know the purpose of his reading and always remember it so he may not deviate from it.** For example, reading the Bible has many forms, which may vary from one person to the other. The purpose from reading the Bible is to know its contents, stories, characters, and commandments.

**However, the purpose of another form of reading is to stop at a certain verse, meditate on it, apply it to one's self and benefit spiritually.** These two kinds of reading are included in our discussion and they are different from the third kind of reading which is mainly to study and to deeply know the Bible. This kind of reading involves accuracy in information and does not stop at mere general knowledge, but researches very deeply and accurately to know the meaning of certain words with the help of various dictionaries, references to old translations, making comparisons, and coming out with conclusions.

This study includes the introduction of each book, its geography, symbols, prophecies and proofs. Moreover, it involves explaining difficult verses, which may seem contradictory and solving problems, which may contradict with science, philosophy, physics, astronomy, history, geology, and anthropology.

All this is very useful and important, but it does not fall under our subject, for we are concerned with the meditation of the spirit, not the activity of the mind.

## C) BENEFITS OF SPIRITUAL READING

**Reading, in general, gathers the mind from its wandering and leads it to concentrate on the subject of the reading.** When the topic of reading changes, the kind of thoughts will change also. **Mari Isaac said,** “Remembering virtuous people renews in us the desire of virtue. Likewise, the thoughts of philosophy renews in us evil desires.” **Therefore, spiritual reading does not gather the mind from wandering in material and carnal things, but it lifts it up to the world of the spirit and opens before it the door of divinities to taste how good the Lord is. Therefore, spiritual reading has two benefits: one is negative and the other is positive.**

**1. The Negative Aspect: is to avoid evil or vain thoughts, hence spiritual reading is used as a sword for chastity to attack evil thoughts, and thoughts of anger and to calm the soul.**

**2. The Positive Aspect:** is to lift the thoughts to divine matters. This aspect has many gradual steps, which may allow the person to have his thoughts with continuous unity with God.

**3. Spiritual reading is a door through which the person may be fervent in the soul.** The soul, which became very cold spiritually due to its concern with materialism, or its influence with bad company, may remember God and the saints and its pure nature and may desire to return to that state. Spiritual reading may inflame God's love in the hearts and may instill the desire to imitate the saints and to apply the virtues mentioned in the Bible or the lives of the saints.

**4. Moreover, spiritual reading kills monotony and laziness and facilitates the virtues** in the eyes of the reader and puts in his heart readiness to start working. Hence, the person feels as if fire is pushing him to obtain all the virtues, and all carnal desires become as trifles in his eyes. He despises them and does not remember them any more.

**5. Spiritual reading, which creates the desire to imitate the righteous people, becomes the material for spiritual readings.** Whenever a person reads about a certain virtue in the lives of the saints and he wants to imitate it, he starts training himself in it. Hence, virtue is transferred, through reading, from the book to the notebook of spiritual exercises and becomes part of his life. It is said that the door of virtues is opened to whoever starts spiritual reading.

**6. Whoever reads about God's commandments and the virtues finds in them a true mirror where he can see himself,** or finds a scale where he can evaluate his actions and personality. Therefore, reading becomes a means of examining one's self and afterwards repenting.

**7. Whenever a person reads the biographies of the saints and apostles and looks at the high standards which they have attained after hard labor, patience and struggle,** whenever he puts all these virtues on one side of the scale and puts himself on the other side, he feels how little he is and that he is still a beginner. Hence, reading leads him to true humility, which is built on true knowledge of one's self. The more he reads, the more he becomes humble, for he remembers God's saying, “He who knows more, more is required of him.”

**8. Spiritual reading is also a subject matter for prayer.** The kind of prayer varies according to the kind of reading. **One kind of reading may let the person feel the burden of his sins and weaknesses.** Then he bows down in sorrow and with contrite heart, confessing his sins to God, asking His mercy and forgiveness. **Another kind of reading may stir in a person the love of virtues so he prays with persistence asking God for grace and help so that he may follow the road of our Fathers.** Another kind of reading may stir in the reader the love of others so he lifts up his hands praying for them.

**Another kind of reading may reveal God's beautiful qualities and unlimited greatness** so he kneels down glorifying God for these qualities, feeling his unworthiness to talk with such a Great God, then one starts praising God with expressions of gratitude. Reading is an incentive to prayer. Moreover, it is a subject for prayer. Mari Isaac said, "From reading, one's soul is enlightened in prayer." He explained this by saying, "When one approaches prayer, the memory of what he has read will guide him to what to say."

**9. As a reading is a subject for prayer, it is also a subject for meditation.** You may read a verse from a chapter from the Bible and meditate on it, or you may read a story of the Church Fathers and meditate on the greatness of the grace, which God has granted this father, or you may meditate on how much that father had loved the Lord.

Also, you may reflect on the ladder of virtues which that saint has climbed step by step toward God. You may read a chapter from the Bible and store it in your mind for future contemplation. As the evil proceeds from the evil heart of an evil person, remembering all what he has read from dirty topics or magazines or stories, also the righteous person reads spiritual topics and stores them in his mind. The memory of these readings will nourish his spirit. He finds a subject for meditation in his prayers and quiet time. As a result of these readings, his thoughts will overflow like a good spring of spiritualities.

**10. Spiritual reading is the guide to the road to God.** It reveals to the person the will of God and enlightens his way. The Psalmist said, "Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." (Psalm 119:105) When one reads the Word of God and the biographies of the Fathers, he acquires knowledge and discovers the ways of a pure life. Moreover, reading gives him a kind of discrimination and wisdom, although these are attained fully by experience and application.

**11. There are other advantages for reading which vary according to the occasion and the reasons that lead to them.** There may be a sad soul, wearied from temptations and tribulations that need choosing certain chapters to comfort him or strengthen him. These show him God's help in similar circumstances, or the behavior of the Fathers in more difficult cases, or they may explain to him God's wisdom in allowing these temptations. Hence, his soul rejoices and his sadness is gone.

There may be a person who committed a terrible sin, and afterwards the devil tried to make him fall in despair. Reading about repentance, the lives of penitents and God's acceptance of them brings hope to his heart. Then, he proceeds to God with hope.

A third person may have prayed to God for a specific subject and did not find any answer to his prayer so he may think that God has refused his request or rejected him personally and that God does not listen to him any more. Upon reading a spiritual book or a chapter from the Bible pertaining to his subject, his heart will send the right solution in the appropriate time and in God's own better way.

**12. Spiritual reading strengthens the mind and activates the thoughts.** One thought begets another thought or thoughts. Whoever reads much with meditation, exercises his spiritual senses for spiritual thinking to the content that he finds an atmosphere for spiritual meditation in all subjects of his reading. He may come out with a benefit from any good book he reads, if he reads it in a spiritual manner. He may also find an atmosphere for meditation in any thing he may see because he has practiced spiritual reading.

**13. Spiritual reading is a useful way to pass time, occupy the mind with what is beneficial.** It is a helper in solitude, killing monotony and expelling bad thoughts. It also helps and encourages one to be alert.

## D) HOW TO READ

**1. Start reading by prayer:** so you do not depend on your human mind, which may err but rather ask the Holy Spirit to guide you. Before your spiritual reading, **pray telling God how weak you are and how your understanding and human mind are limited and incapable to reach the Divine words which the prophet David said, "Open my eyes so I may behold wondrous things out of Your law."** (Psalm 119: 18) Ask God to open your mind to understand and open your heart to accept what you understood and to strengthen your will to implement what you have accepted. **Mari Isaac said warning** everyone, "Do not approach the sayings of the mysteries of books without praying, asking God's help and telling God to let you feel the power behind the words." Prayer is the key to real understanding of the Divine books.

**2. Put yourself in the subject of the reading and consider it a special lesson for you personally.** Do what you can do with discrimination. Be sorry for what you cannot do and pity your weaknesses in humility. Tell God your desires and ask the intercession of the saints who excelled in the spiritual road. Keep what you have read in your memory. Probably you will need it later in appropriate circumstances.

**3. During meditation, avoid reading about problems and complicated thoughts.** This is not the time for that, therefore, try to skim them.

**4. Not all the books of the Bible can be a subject for meditation for beginners. Therefore, start meditating in the historical books.** Read in them about the beautiful qualities of God, how God chooses His saints and treats them, and how the saints treat God and people. Following these books, come the educational books.

**5. Remember that reading is a means toward a goal, and is not the goal itself.** Therefore, if you have reached your goal from reading, then put aside the reading and occupy yourself with the purpose for which you have read. Reading is only a match, which inflames the soul with God's love. Therefore, if the soul is inflamed, do not keep busy with the match, but light your lamp with this holy fire and go out with the wise virgins to meet the Bridegroom. Put aside reading, for a while, and do the work of the Spirit which He did in you, whether by meditation, prayer, examination of one's self, weeping for your sins or spiritual exercises. **Never neglect this heat and continue in reading, lest it cools down, and then you seek it but do not find it.**

## **E) TIME OF READING AND ITS QUANTITY**

No doubt, one needs to read with meditation, for this reading is the main factor, which activates the heart and mind and makes one grow in grace. However, one cannot be satisfied with this kind of reading, which may concentrate on only a few verses from the Bible, or else, tens of years may pass without one finishing reading the whole Bible. But one needs to know the whole Bible for many spiritual reasons, for this knowledge strengthens his meditation. When one compares the verses of today's meditation with other verses from previous readings, he may benefit greatly, and the talent of meditation grows in him.

But what should one do, then? Which kind of readings should he choose? There is a third kind of reading whose goal is study and search, and there is not enough time for all that. **What is the solution?**

**The solution is simple and it is one of the following ways:**

**1. Either to combine both readings** so he reads few consecutive chapters, but does not make these his subject for meditation, because his time as a busy person is not enough to meditate on all that. Instead, he can meditate on only a few verses or a main idea. That kind of person can devote half an hour or more each day with twenty minutes for reading and ten minutes for meditation. Then he may increase this time gradually according to his needs and capacities.

**2. The other alternative is to distribute the kinds of readings to different days** and to evaluate him weekly, not daily, recording every day what he has read. This weekly schedule is more beneficial for it allows the reader more freedom. The end result, though, should be inclusive to all elements, not neglecting any.

**3. The third alternative is to specify a special time every day for the meditation reading.** The reading for knowledge should be added on certain days of the week when one has more time, but the weekly quantity should be sufficient.

**4. One should take advantage of opportunities.** When one has more time any day or if one has a vacation, he can read without limiting the quantity of what he reads and studies from

the Bible. He considers these as periods of storage and contemplation, which benefit him when he is extremely busy in other times.

**In any case, one must choose the appropriate time. One should not give God the leftovers of his time** when he is extremely exhausted, busy, or annoyed, lest he does not benefit from reading as he should, or else he may feel that his spiritual reading is a burden upon him.