

## On the Interpretation of the Holy Bible, Part Two

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### The Spiritual Reading of the Holy Scriptures

There is a type of reading we call spiritual or personal, in which the believer reads the text of the Holy Scriptures in a meditative manner, reflecting the words upon his own life. Since *"All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness"* (2 Timothy 3:16), we read the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God addressed to us personally. Believers do not approach the Bible as they would any other book. This is why the Church advises us to pray before reading, invoking the Holy Spirit to grant us the proper understanding that is beneficial for our souls.

St. Tikhon of Zadonsk (+1783) wrote: *"If an earthly king, an emperor, were to write you a letter, would you not read it with joy? You have received a letter—not from an earthly emperor, but from the King of Heaven! Yet you often neglect this priceless gift, this treasure beyond measure."*

He further explains that opening the Scriptures and reading them means entering into a personal, face-to-face conversation with the living God. He continues: *"When you read the Gospel, Christ Himself is speaking to you. And as you read, you are praying and conversing with Him."*

The late metropolitan of my home archdiocese, Youhanna of Latakia, used to say: *"We should read the Bible with the same passion as a lover reads a love letter sent by his beloved."*

St. Mark the Ascetic (5th–6th century) teaches that: *"The one who is humble in his thoughts and engaged in spiritual work applies everything he reads in the Holy Scriptures to himself, not to his neighbor."* We are spiritually nourished when we read the Bible in this way, applying what we read to ourselves. Thus, the key question is not merely, *"What does this passage mean?"* but rather, *"What does it mean for me?"*

St. Tikhon reaffirms this by saying: *"Christ Himself is speaking to you."* The Holy Scriptures are a direct and intimate conversation between the Savior and the soul—Christ addresses me, and my heart responds to Him.

In this type of reading, every story in the Bible becomes a part of my personal life journey. The fall of Adam mirrors my own falls and my refusal to live according to God's will. Adam and Eve are me. When God asks Adam, "*Where are you?*" (Genesis 3:9), He is asking me, and I must answer!

Similarly, when reading the story of Christ calming the storm (Mark 4:35-41), we can see it as a representation of our soul or the Church, being tossed by the waves of trials and tribulations—and Christ as our Savior and Deliverer.

At the Nativity of Christ, we do not merely reflect on His birth in a cave, but we ask ourselves: "*How is Christ born in me today?*" Likewise, we meditate on how we are crucified with Him and how we are raised with Him. When I read Christ's words: "*Give to him who asks of you*" (Matthew 5:42), I ask myself: "*Do I do this? How can I live out this command?*"

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Elder Aemilianos of Simonopetra Monastery on Mount Athos taught that the proper way to read the Bible is to allow God to speak to us through it. He distinguishes between:

- Reading for information or knowledge, which remains at a superficial level,
- And reading to acquire the true essence of Scripture—the Holy Spirit Himself.

He describes this spiritual knowledge as: "*Entering into the life of God and expanding within it; it is the descent of God to dwell among us.*"

He advises: "*Read the Scriptures, but do not forget your sins. Do not reduce the Bible to mere intellectual study, for when you do so, it ceases to be the Word of God and becomes merely a human text. The measure of your reading should be this: that it brings peace to your heart, union with God, love for your neighbor, and awareness of your own sinfulness, making you feel unworthy to stand before God.*"

When we read the Bible in this way, we are enriched by reflecting on those who came before us.

Take, for example, St. Symeon the New Theologian. In one meditation, he reads the Book of Exodus in a spiritual manner, seeing:

- Egypt as a symbol of the land of sin,

- Pharaoh as a representation of Satan,
- And Moses as the guide toward salvation.

He applies these biblical figures to his own spiritual journey and writes:

*"What can I say about what I have seen in Egypt? He came down to me and found me, a poor and lowly slave, and said, 'Come, My child, and I will lead you to God.' But from the depths of my disbelief, I responded, 'What sign do You give me so that I may trust You? Can You truly deliver me from Egypt and snatch me from the grip of the tyrant Pharaoh?' I did what He commanded me. Yet Pharaoh held me tight, and his overseers forced me to labor in the mud and straw."*

In another meditation, he transforms Gospel images into a personal prayer and dialogue with God:

*"Tell me, O listener, what is the mustard seed (Matt. 13:31)? How do you imagine it? This seed is the grace of the Holy Spirit, and the garden is the heart of every person. There, a man plants the seed and hides it deep within himself, tending to it with care until it grows into a great tree, reaching toward the heavens."*

*"Now is the time for work, and the future is the time for the crown. If you are wise, I will be for you in this world the hidden pearl, the grain of wheat, the mustard seed, and the leaven that transforms your dough. I will be for you water and a dewy breeze, a protection and all-sustaining nourishment. If you acknowledge Me here, then there, you will possess Me, and I will be everything for you. But if you depart from this world without knowing My grace, you will find Me there as an unyielding Judge."*

*"O my Christ, O my God! Do not judge me! Do not condemn me, though I have dishonored You greatly. Accept me as the least of Your laborers... (Luke 15:19) Grant me to see You for all eternity!"*

May the Lord grant us the grace to read His Word in this way, that it may lead us to salvation.