

## Puritans on Bible Study

### John Owen

**Owen grew in knowledge of God by obeying what he knew already.**

In other words Owen recognized that holiness was not merely the goal of all true learning; it is also the means of more true learning. This elevated holiness even higher in his life: it was the aim of his life and, in large measure, the means of getting there.

The true notion of holy evangelical truths will not live, at least not flourish, where they are divided from a holy conversation (=life). As we learn all to practice, so we learn much by practice ... and herein alone can we come unto the assurance, that what we know and learn is indeed the truth [cf. John 7:17] ... And hereby will they be led continually into farther degrees of knowledge. For the mind of man is capable of receiving continual supplies in the increase of light and knowledge ... if ... they are improved unto their proper end in obedience unto God. but without this the mind will be quickly stuffed with notions so that no streams can descend into it from the fountain of truth (*Works*, I, p. lxiv-lxv.).

Thus Owen kept the streams of the fountain of truth open by making personal obedience the effect of all that he learned, and the means of more. In all his studies he studied to obey. He never studied just to stock his mind with a new thought or to defeat an argument.

### Jonathan Edwards

**Labor earnestly to know the Scriptures.**

Don't get your vision of God secondhand. Don't even let Edwards or Packer be your primary source of divinity. This was the example Edwards himself sets for us. His early biographer Sereno Dwight said that when he came to his pastorate in Northampton, "he had studied theology, not chiefly in systems or commentaries, but in the Bible, and in the character and mutual relations of God and his creatures, from which all its principles are derived" (*Works*, I, xxxvii).

Edwards once preached a sermon entitled "The Importance and Advantage of a thorough Knowledge of Divine Truth." In it he said, "Be assiduous in reading the Holy Scriptures. This is the fountain whence all knowledge in divinity must be derived. Therefore let not this treasure lie by you neglected" (*Works*, II, 162).

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I think there is reason to believe that Edwards really did follow through on his 28th resolution while he was at Yale.

Resolved: To study the Scriptures so steadily, constantly, and frequently, as that I may find, and plainly perceive, myself to grow in the knowledge of the same.

I find this resolution to be a rebuke, and a great incentive to take stock in my pastoral priorities and my reading priorities. 2 Peter 3:18 says, "Grow in the . . . knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." So Edwards resolved to study the Bible so "steadily and constantly and frequently" that he could see growth.

How many of us have a plan for growing in our grasp of the whole terrain of Scripture? Don't most of us use the Bible as a source for getting sermons and devotionals and personal devotional help? But do we labor over the Scripture in such a way that we can plainly see that today we understand something in it that we did not understand yesterday?

I fear that many of us work at reading books on theology and church life with a view to growing, but have no plan and no sustained effort to move steadily and constantly forward in our understanding of the Bible. Edwards' second exhortation is, this ought not to be so. Study the Bible so steadily and constantly and frequently that you can clearly perceive yourself to grow in them.

(Excerpts from John Piper sermons)