Studying the Bible
Ps. 19: 7-11
Deut. 6
Neh. 8: 1-13
2 Tim. 3: 14 to 4: 5.
Nehemiah VIII: 8.

"They read in the book of the law of God, distinctly and gave the sense and caused them to understand the reading."

Stevenson

There is in possession of the British Queen a diamond of marvellous size and beauty which tradition says was obtained before the Christian Era from the mine of the ruby at millennia...
There is in possession of the British Queen a diamond of marvelous size and beauty, which tradition says was obtained before the Christian Era from the mines of Golconda, exquisitely cut, and valued at millions of dollars, it blazes among the crown jewels. Known by the highly appropriate name of the Koh-i-noor or Mountain of Light.

The Bible is the Christian Kohinoör—chief among the crown jewels—a mountain of light of great antiquity, of priceless worth, of crystal clearness, it attracts the wonder and admiration of the mightiest minds, the homage and adoration of the noblest hearts, in all time. Turn this jewel round; from every new facet breaks a ray of light and beauty.
In the days when copies of God's word were scarce and costly, because slowly made by the pen of the scribe, some other method must have been to render their contents intelligible and familiar to the masses, besides personal revival and study. These were the privilege of but few. The printing press not having multiplied and cheapened the copies of God's Holy Book until a comparatively recent date.

The text furnishes an instance of one of the most natural and common ways of spreading a knowledge of Bible-truth among the multitudes in those days when copies were so rare, namely by a public reading and explanation.
Under Zedekiah, king of Judah 586 B.C. Jerusalem and the temple had been ransacked of their sacred and precious things and the people borne captives to Babylon. There for a half century the children of Israel sang the Lord’s song in a land of strangers and humbly up their neglected harps.

In the opening year of Cyrus reign 536 B.C. he proclaimed to the Jews his royal permission to return to Jerusalem. About 50,000 went back and laid the foundation of the second temple; and after about eighty years, Ezra and about 7000 with him came to Judea.

Nehemiah succeeded Ezra as governor of Jerusalem about 444 B.C.
He turned his attention to the rebuilding of the city walls, holding in one hand implements of work, and in the other weapons of warfare. And now as the historic panorama moves on we are brought face to face with the scene to which the text refers. It is the Feast of Tabernacles, the time corresponding to October 15, about 444 B.C. The first day a Sabbath, the last also a Sabbath. It was customary to observe the festival eight days. The temple courts are not adequate to such an audience as is here gathered, and so the broad avenue before the water gate becomes the place of course. An immense congregation is assembled not only of men and women, but all who could hear with understanding.
Ezra, who is reputed to have furnished us our old Testament Canon, brought the book of the law of Moses and took his stand upon a firm hill of wood constructed for the purpose, having several others on either side of him. With reverence and solemnity he opens the sacred scroll in the sight of the people, and as he unrolls that volume the vast throng rises. Then Ezra blesses Jehovah and the people respond Amen, lifting their hands and bowing their heads and prostrating themselves upon the earth. Then they rise to their feet once more. Their number is so great that Ezra’s voice can reach only a portion of the multitude and so dispersed through the crowd might be seen the thirteen companions of the Scribes with the
Levites, each addressing at the same time a different audience. Imagine yourself one of that great company of Bible students near the murmur of many voices as the teachers explain to the people the words which God is reading. Watch the multitude as from morn to midday men, women, and children stand there, attending to the reading and explanation of God's law—weeping for joy because they understood the words that were declared unto them, and going their way to eat and drink and send portions to the poor and needy, in token of thanksgiving. And remember that this day after day for one week the people patiently and gladly listened to this reading and explanation.
We talk of the Sabbath School as an institution of modern times. But aside from its form, is it a novelty. Here are supplied all the essential elements of a model Bible School. What a multitude of scholars! What variety of age and sex—men, women, and children! What comprehensiveness! all that could hear with understanding. What enthusiasm! Standing for seven successive days in the open air from morn to noon. What simplicity of arrangement! grouped into informal classes clustering about a teacher within range of whose voice they happened to be, what appreciation! listening with tears of joy to the interpretation of God's word, and then going away to send thank offerings.
Here is about this vivid scene of Biblical history, as sublimity and a spirituality which associates with such as the Passover and Pentecost. How melancholy the contrast when we turn our eyes to our own land and time. Our Bible is incomplete. With them even the Old Testament had been but partially written and compiled, lacking at least the stirring chapters of Malachi. If they loved the Old Testament, how does it become us to prize the old and new, mutually complete and attractive. They with but few copies were dependent upon public occasional hearing of the Scriptures. We possess each our own copy and can make it daily our study.
Now few comparatively ever read the Bible through, how much smaller the number that read any portion of it daily, or are really familiar with its contents. When we do read it how often is it merely as a part of a mere routine of duty, hastily and indifferently. The time given to a chapter, or it may be to a half dozen, might profitably be devoted to a single verse, for the studious meditation which brings out one wholesome thought from a verse, is of more value to us than the hurried perusal of a whole chapter or gospel merely as a nun counts her beads and says over her Ave maria's and Pater noster's thought lessly and almost as a matter of penance.
The question with many who consider themselves Bible readers would seem to be not how well but how much, quality overlooked in quantity. Physiological science shows us that a few ounces of good food thoroughly prepared, well cooked and then well masticated is more nutritious to the system, really feeds us more than as many pounds which are but half prepared and swallowed or washed down, unmixed with the secretions given us by nature to secure a good digestion. And similar facts are found to be true of the mind. It is not all Bible reading that feeds the soul; its truth must undergo a process by which it shall be prepared to assimilate with our mental and moral organization.
Francis Bacon says some few books are to be cherished and digested and of all books what is there which contains so much real nourishment for our highest intellectual and spiritual vitality as the word of God. But without prayerful meditation how can there be intelligent appreciation? The fact is we go over chapters instead of going through them—not a lasting impression is left for a useful reflection suggested. Practically we have not read—we have only perused the Bible—as we often indolently look into space without seeing anything, so we read without receiving. We read as though preparing to report to the recording angel so many chapters read or as if simply to quiet conscience.
But the line of thought projected by the text leads us in a special direction—This was an ancient way of reaching the masses—and making clear to all the meaning of the law of God. One of the serious needs of the church in all ages has been the collective study of the Scriptures. Men, women, and children and all who can hear with understanding must be gathered where they can hear God's word, learn the sense and understand the reading. Ezra's method was good only so far as there was no better. Few were able to read for themselves and few were the copies even for the learned. In these days the fact that almost every one can read and has a book of books for himself changes the complexion of the question.
Shall we then depend wholly upon a private, her
donal, study for familiarity with the word of God.
However important this may be it is no proper
Substitute for a more general and united exami
nation of the Bible. Few have the time or resour-
ces necessary for a thorough examination of the
divine word. Books of reference and other aids are
essentials, which do not fall into the hands of ev-
ery person. Moreover, comparison of views is
of immense importance, collision with other
minds throwing out new light.

We do not deny that all that is absolutely
essential to saving faith is clearly revealed to
the most simple-minded reader. But how ma
my things which contribute to spiritual growth even if not requisite to saving grace and which no true Christian can well be content not to understand, and in this as in all else, God promises the largest blessing only upon a faithful use of all our opportunities.

The public preaching & expounding of the gospel helps to acquaint the masses with the body of gospel truth, yet even here are prominent disadvantages. It explains only here and there a text and its connection - a fragment of sacred history, a parable, a miracle, perhaps a whole chapter or even an epistle. But if you will make a calculation, you will be amazed.
to see how very small is the proportion of the entire Bible which a score of years of pulpit ministrations will expound to the public.

Besides this we need something auxiliary to preaching but less formal, not to usurp its place or conflict with it, but to supplement it. The grand end of preaching or sacred oratory is persuasion; instruction is incidental. What we need is some method of Bible study for the grand end of instruction—where one mind is not to do all the study or thinking for the rest but all will be Bible students together, where questions of doubt or difficulty may be proposed and discussed in a free and friendly way.
We need to examine the historical parts of the Bible, systematically, to converse informally upon the miracles and parables, and in a word examine in course with freedom & familiarity the narrative, didactic, logical and philosophical portions of the Bible with the advantages of united study without the restraints of fulminating forms and prophecies. To reach just these results, general education in Bible truth the so-called Sabbath School has been instituted, and when heartily supported nothing does more successfully educate and edify the entire Christian community and complete so fully the labors of the pulpit.
Where it fails to be effective and successful, it is in part from a misconception of its nature and in part from a neglect of its provisions.

Just as it is often misunderstood. It is too often thought of as a school for children, where they may begin at the simplest alphabet of Christian learning and go on up to the profound mysteries of the Apocalypse. After all that is said to impress the idea that it is simply a Bible school for the whole church community, practically, the great bulk of the people still regard it as a school for children. Adults feel generally no pressure of duty or impulse of privilege to ward personal attendance unless they are need.
ed there as teachers or officers, and the very few
who attend as pupils, after the days of boyhood
and girlhood pass, are but exceptions to the almost
universal rule, that in the Sabbath school
you do not find adult students.

Two manifest evils result. First, the great
mass even of the professed people of God do not
avail themselves of any systematic examina-
tion of the Christian Scriptures; and secondly,
their example tends to make the children themselves
forsake the Sabbath School, as soon as they begin
to feel themselves no more merely children. We all
lament the readiness with which young persons
who find themselves approaching their majority
run away from the religious instruction of the Sabbath School. Yet it is not they but the church that is to blame. Every child has more or less of the principle of imitation. He watches his father to see how he does and his ideas of what is manly are gathered from what he sees men do — so of the girl whose notions of manhood and womanliness are to be gathered from the practical life of women about her. Now the boy and girl come to the Sunday School but they look in vain there for their parents; they are at home but they send their children to the School and who can wonder if the children grow up to feel that this is a place fit only for children, intended only
for them. When they begin to outgrow the simplicity of childhood, if they incline from the Sabbath school, and become indifferent to it and at last forsake it entirely, thinking it manly and womanly to stay at home, read books or papers, or take an hour of sleep, instead of observing in their place in their class whence come these curious ideas of manliness or womanliness, but from you who never go, yourself. Tell you haven’t all your counsel to your boy to stay in the Bible class where you placed him when a child; all your pathetic appeals and cogent arguments persuading or convincing him that he ought never to feel too old to go to Sabbath
School will not have as much practical weight as the influence of your personal example in staying away. If you believe the Sabbath-school is not meant for children alone but is designed and adapted for all ages & classes, show your faith by your works and put yourself under its influence. In no other way can we so surely hold the children as by getting the parents. No boy or girl would incline to look upon it as a mere children's institution—a primary department in the great college of Bible learning if he or she can look around and see those in manhood or womanhood, mature middle and even declining years, around him.
It is true that originally the Sabbath School was designed for poor children who had no other religious instruction; but as an institution often widens its field as its history proves its value so is it in this case. The Sabbath School in these days is the church college, in which the youth of the community may have an education in religious truth, and where all alike may join in the study of the Bible. As constituted at present it has an equal claim on all adults and all children, offering a time and place and facilities for an enlarged, general and systematic study of God's word and Christian truth, and I do not believe that where we can attend and do not re
can clear ourselves of positive guilt and sin, in the matter. From youngest to oldest all should go. The pastor should be there if not as nomin al superintendent, certainly as overseer, for the lambs of the flock cannot be exempt from his su pervision. He is responsible for their education in christian precepts and doctrines, to whomever the immediate duty of instructing them may be com mitted. His presence there as often as may consist with other duties will help to give character to the school and cultivate in him the familiar and childlike address which brings him near to the young.
The growing sense of the importance of this Christian school of doctrine and duty has led in hundreds of cases to the appropriation of the entire afternoon of the Lord's day to this informal service, and in some cases it constitutes the only second service of the Lord's day. The best Christians and the most earnest workers in God's cause are foremost in their devotion to the interests of the Sabbath school. It speaks very unfavorably for the piety of any man or woman that they feel no interest in the prosperity of the greatest instrumentality ever devised for the training of mind and heart in Christian truth, the preaching of God's Word only being excepted.
The particular purpose of this sermon need not explain. There is nothing more lamentable about this church than the practical indifference manifested by the membership at large as to the Sabbath School. With a membership larger than most of the churches outside of the cities, in this important department there are few even of the smallest church that cannot show more vitality and efficiency. It is all we can do to keep the School from sinking entirely. Aside from the teachers, there are not two dozen adults out of a congregation of hundreds, that are found in the School in any relation or connection whatever. It seems to me these facts cannot be generally understood.
If they have escaped your notice, such indifference may be accounted for on the ground of carelessness; but to know these things and then to remain indifferent can be no less than criminal. And just now that we are endeavoring from inside the school to reawaken and revive it by a new library, a new system of benevolent collections, and by a few rewards offered for punctuality and effort to commit Scripture and bring into the classes children who at present attend nowhere—mine earnest cooperation from outside. Let not this nursery of the church longer suffer for the want of money or any other means of rendering it efficient; give it also the aid of your sympa
thy and prayers. But to be more definite - in the behalf of the Sabbath School and in the name of Christ I ask you.

First, as parents to see that your own children attend with regularity and punctuality; that they come prepared with their lessons and bring with them all books belonging to the library. In brief, render to them all proper and needed aid in fitting them to be prompt and in every way desirable scholars. There are certainly more children properly under the care of this church than get in to the Sabbath school. A little attention from the parents will secure the attendance of their children and greater regularity in those that come.
But particularly I ask you as far as may be consistent with other positive duties, come yourselves. If you have children bring them with you and stay with them. Become yourself a school even if not needed as a teacher. If you would not have them outgrow the Sabbath School, show them that you have not outgrown it. And you that young men and young women, you who can not even palliate neglect of this great scripture college on the ground of family cares or duties, I earnestly invite you, to come in and join with us in Bible studies. Is it not a shame to any of us to show such practical unenlightened and even contempt for the word of God!
Can we afford to spend six days engrossed in the
world, studying how to make our business or
profession or worldly occupation prosperous and
then neglect upon the only day out of the seven
which God reserves to Himself, the opportunities
afforded for the study of our spiritual interests
and the truth relating to our eternal welfare.
I confess there is nothing so mournfully beyond explanation. So attractive, so important
so profitable, so necessary every way is Bible
study that if duty does not constrain us to
it, it would seem as though delight would
draw us to it—For in this matter however imper
ative the call of duty, the invitation of privilege
is so loud and impassive...
The true spiritual growth of the disciple is impossible without scripture study, and it is not more unreasonable to look for the prosperity of the state without efficient common schools, than to look for the prosperity of the church while these schools of sacred knowledge are in a languishing condition. We want for the sake of the cause of Christ to place this department of Christian instruction upon a surer basis, to kindle the glow of enthusiasm in place of this lamentable indifference. We want you all, so far as providential obstacles do not interpose, to become members of the Sabbath School. No aid you can give is of so much use to us as your actual presence.
It outweighs all words as a testifying to the practical value you attach to the institution as the ally of the pulpit. It tells with emphasis that however well informed in Bible knowledge, you feel how much is yet to be learned. It tends to make the young prize more what their elders still regard too precious to be neglected.

But the most precious result is this: it puts the church of God upon a higher plane of spiritual life. There are a few instances where the almost entire church is to be found in the Sabbath school, from the oldest member to the youngest. In one or two instances I have visited such a school, and a sublimer sight was perhaps neve
Presented to the eye of man - the bulk of an entire church transformed into a school of sacred learning! Yonder is a class of infants scarce out of babyhood, just learning to sing of Jesus and acquiring the rudiments of Christian truth. Further on are the youth - boys and girls who have passed the first principles and are now studying sacred geography, history. Further on are older scholars young men and women in the higher branches, investigating the deeper mysteries of sacred philosophy and theology, the wonders of the miracles, the lessons of the parables, mastering the very science of divine things! While beyond are those in middle life, giving earnest application to those sublime truths which ...
Point to each practical life. Yes and last of all we come to those who like the snow-peaked mountains which lie in the horizon of a landscape—have the marks of a venerable age; they wear the hoary head which is a crown of glory when found in the way of righteousness! Not yet too old to learn of Christ, they never expect to graduate from the Sabbath school until called by promoting grace, to the heavenly school, whose sole teacher is Jesus. It is beyond dispute that the true idea of the Sabbath school is this—the whole church of God engaged in the study of the Bible. And never will the church be what it ought, until this idea is realized! Never will the highest interest of the
Children be secured while there is a practical separation between them and their elders in a matter where so much is to be learned that it cannot be said we, any of us, really know anything. But let the church shew her reverence for the word of God by a general attendance of her membership where that word is carefully studied; let the Sabbath school shew as its regular members, not simply the infant but the man of grey hairs; not simply the youth but the mature-middle aged and as sure as God loves his own word will he honor the united general study of divine truth and blessings shall come down upon Zion such as have not before refreshed and gladdest households.
West Winsted Conn. Sabb. am June 19, 1860

" " " Methodist Repeated, June 24.

Binghamton Sabb. am Oct 13, 1861.

Waterford N.Y. Sabb. am May 10, 1868.