



CHAPTER 1

THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES . . . FOR THE PURPOSE OF
GODLINESS

Ours is an undisciplined age. The old disciplines are breaking down. . . . Above all, the discipline of divine grace is derided as legalism or is entirely unknown to a generation that is largely illiterate in the Scriptures. We need the rugged strength of Christian character that can come only from discipline.

V. RAYMOND EDMAN

Discipline without direction is drudgery.

Imagine six-year-old Kevin, whose parents have enrolled him in music lessons. After school every afternoon, prompted by his mother, he slouches into the living room and strums songs he must practice but doesn't like while watching his buddies play baseball in the park across the street. That's discipline without direction. It's drudgery.

Now suppose Kevin is visited by an angel one afternoon during guitar practice. In a vision, he's transported to Carnegie Hall. He's shown a guitar virtuoso giving a concert. Usually bored by classical music, Kevin is astonished by what he sees and hears. The musician's fingers dance on the strings with fluidity and grace. Kevin thinks of how stupid and clunky his own hands feel when they halt and falter over the chords. The virtuoso blends clean, soaring notes into a musical aroma that wafts from his guitar. Kevin remembers the toneless, irritating discord that comes stumbling out of his.

But Kevin is enchanted. His head tilts to one side as he listens. He drinks in everything. He never imagined that anyone could play the guitar like this.

"What do you think, Kevin?" asks the angel.

The answer is a soft, slow, six-year-old's "W-o-w!"

The vision vanishes, and the angel is again standing in front of Kevin in his living room. "Kevin," says the angel, "the wonderful musician you saw is you in a few years." Then pointing at the guitar, the angel declares, "But you must practice!"

Suddenly the angel disappears and Kevin finds himself alone with his guitar. Do you think his attitude toward practice will be different now? As long as he remembers what he's going to become, Kevin's discipline will have a direction, a goal that will pull him into the future. Yes, effort will be involved, but you could hardly call it drudgery.

When it comes to discipline in the Christian life, many believers feel as Kevin did toward guitar practice—it's discipline without direction. Prayer threatens to be drudgery. The practical value of meditation on Scripture seems uncertain. The real purpose of a discipline such as fasting is often a mystery.

First, we must understand what we shall become. The Bible says of God's elect, "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Romans 8:29). God's eternal plan ensures that every Christian will ultimately conform to Christlikeness. We will be changed "when he appears" so that "we shall be like him" (1 John 3:2). If you are born again (see John 3:3-8), this is no vision; this is you, Christian, as soon as "he appears."

So why talk about discipline? If God has predestined our conformity to Christlikeness, where does discipline fit in? Why not just coast into the promised Christlikeness and forget about discipline?

Although God will grant Christlikeness to us when Jesus returns, until then He intends for us to grow toward it. We aren't merely to wait for holiness; we're to pursue it. "Strive for peace with everyone," we're commanded in Hebrews 12:14, "and for the holiness without which no one will see



the Lord.” Notice carefully what that says: Without holiness—that is, Christlikeness or godliness—no one will see the Lord, regardless of how many times they have been to church or how often they have engaged in religious activities or how spiritual they believe themselves to be.

It’s crucial—*crucial*—to understand that it’s not our pursuit of holiness that qualifies us to see the Lord. Rather, we are qualified to see the Lord *by the Lord*, not by good things we do. We cannot produce enough righteousness to impress God and gain admittance into heaven. Instead we can stand before God only in the righteousness that’s been earned by another, Jesus Christ. Only Jesus lived a life good enough to be accepted by God and worthy of entrance into heaven. And He was able to do so because He was God in the flesh. Living a perfect life qualified Him to be a sacrifice that the Father accepts on behalf of others who by sin disqualify themselves from heaven and a relationship with God. As proof of God’s acceptance of Jesus’ life and sacrifice, God raised Him from the dead. In other words, Jesus lived a perfectly righteous life in complete obedience to the commands of God, and He did so in order to give the credit for all that obedience and righteousness to those who had not kept all of God’s Law, and He died for them on a Roman cross in order to receive the punishment they deserved for all their sins against God’s Law.

As a result, all who come to God trusting in the person and work of Jesus to make them right with God are given the Holy Spirit (see Ephesians 1:13-14). The presence of the *Holy Spirit* causes all those in whom He resides to have new *holy* hungers they didn’t have before. They hunger, for example, for the Holy Word of God—the Bible—that they used to find boring or irrelevant. They have new holy longings, such as the longing to live in a body without sin and to have a mind no longer tempted by sin. They yearn to live in a holy and perfect world with holy and perfect people, and to see at last the One the angels perpetually praise as “holy, holy, holy” (Revelation 4:8). These are some of the holy heartbeats in all those in whom the Holy Spirit resides. Consequently, when the Holy Spirit indwells someone, that person begins to prize and pursue holiness. Thus, as we have seen in Hebrews 12:14, anyone who is not striving for holiness will not see the Lord. And the reason he or she will not see the Lord in eternity is because he or she does not know the Lord now, for those who know Him are given His Holy Spirit, and all those indwelled by the Holy Spirit are compelled to pursue holiness.

And so, the urgent question every Christian should ask is, “How then shall I pursue holiness, the holiness without which I will not see the Lord? How can I become more like Jesus Christ?”

We find a clear answer in 1 Timothy 4:7: “Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness” (NASB). In other words, if your purpose is godliness—and godliness *is* your purpose if you are indwelled by the Holy Spirit, for He makes godliness your purpose—then how do you pursue that purpose? According to this verse, you “discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.”

This verse is the theme for the entire book. In this chapter, I will attempt to unpack its meaning; the rest of the book is an effort to apply it in practical ways. I will refer to the scriptural ways Christians discipline themselves in obedience to this verse as the Spiritual Disciplines. I will maintain that the only road to Christian maturity and godliness (a biblical term synonymous with Christlikeness and holiness) passes through the practice of the Spiritual Disciplines. I will emphasize that godliness is the goal of the Disciplines, and when we remember this, the Spiritual Disciplines become a delight instead of drudgery.

THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES—WHAT ARE THEY?

The Spiritual Disciplines^[1] are those practices found in Scripture that promote spiritual growth among believers in the gospel of Jesus Christ. They are the habits of devotion and experiential Christianity that have been practiced by the people of God since biblical times. The Disciplines could be described in several ways.

First, the Bible prescribes *both personal and interpersonal* Spiritual Disciplines. This book is about personal Spiritual Disciplines, but they are not more important than the interpersonal Spiritual Disciplines, even if they are emphasized more frequently in most of the literature about spiritual growth.^[2] So while some Disciplines are practiced alone, some are to be practiced with others. The former are personal Spiritual Disciplines and the latter are interpersonal Spiritual Disciplines. For example, Christians should read and study the Word of God on their own (personal Spiritual



Disciplines), but they should also hear the Bible read and study it with the church (interpersonal Spiritual Disciplines). Christians should worship God privately, but they should also worship Him publicly with His people. Some Spiritual Disciplines are by nature practiced alone, such as journaling, solitude, and fasting (though individuals sometimes fast in conjunction with a congregational fast). Other Disciplines are by nature congregational, such as fellowship, hearing God's Word preached, and participation in the Lord's Supper—all of which require the presence of people.

Both the personal and interpersonal Disciplines are means of blessings for followers of Jesus and a part of growth in godliness, for the Bible teaches both. Moreover, Jesus practiced both, and becoming like Jesus is the purpose of practicing the Disciplines. So, for instance, the Bible tells us that on at least four occasions Jesus got alone to pray (Matthew 4:1; 14:23; Mark 1:35; Luke 4:42), thereby practicing *personal* Spiritual Disciplines. Conversely, we're told in Luke 4:16, "as was his custom, [Jesus] went to the synagogue on the Sabbath Day," thus engaging in *interpersonal* Spiritual Disciplines.

Each of us is perhaps inclined a little more toward Disciplines that are practiced individually or toward those that are practiced corporately. Some, for instance, might think they could be all that God wants them to be, even without the local church, just by practicing the personal Spiritual Disciplines faithfully. Others may be equally deceived into thinking that they'll make sufficient spiritual progress if they are deeply involved in the life of their church, believing that somehow their participation in meaningful church activities will compensate for the lack of a personal devotional life. To lean too far toward our own personal inclination, however, will get us out of balance and deform our pursuit of holiness. Christians are individuals, but we are also part of the body of Christ. We experience God and we grow in His grace through both personal and interpersonal Spiritual Disciplines. So even though this book is about personal Spiritual Disciplines, understand that Christlikeness also requires the pursuit of God through the interpersonal Spiritual Disciplines.

Second, Spiritual Disciplines are *activities, not attitudes*. Disciplines are practices, not character qualities, graces, or "fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22-23). Disciplines are things you do—such as read, meditate, pray, fast, worship, serve, learn, and so on. The goal of practicing a given Discipline, of course, is not about *doing* as much as it is about *being*, that is, *being* like Jesus. But the biblical way to grow in *being* more like Jesus is through the rightly motivated *doing* of the biblical Spiritual Disciplines. Note it again—"Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness." Godliness—being like Jesus—is the purpose, but the God-given path to that purpose is through certain activities found in Scripture known as the Spiritual Disciplines. To put it another way, there are specific practices we are to do sometimes that cultivate generally being like Jesus all the time. So fasting is a Spiritual Discipline, because that's something you do. Joy, strictly speaking, is not a Spiritual Discipline, because joy is something you experience, not something you do. Fasting itself is not the goal; rather joy is part of the goal of fasting, because joy is a Christlike quality. Joy does not come to you if you are spiritually passive; rather, joy is cultivated, but joy is cultivated by things you do. And the "things you do" that cultivate Christlike joy are the Spiritual Disciplines.

Third, I want to limit the subject matter of this book to those Spiritual Disciplines that are *biblical*, that is, to practices taught or modeled in the Bible. Without this limitation, we leave ourselves open to calling anything we fancy a Spiritual Discipline. Thus some might declare, "Gardening is a Spiritual Discipline for me," or "Exercise is one of my Spiritual Disciplines," or claim that some other hobby or pleasurable habit is a valid Spiritual Discipline. One of the problems with this approach is that it can tempt people to assert something like, "Maybe meditation on Scripture works for you, but gardening does just as much for my soul as the Bible does for yours." And the result is that virtually anything can be designated a Spiritual Discipline, and worse, it means that we determine for ourselves what practices are best for our spiritual health and maturity rather than accepting those God has revealed in Scripture. I believe a case can be made—to a greater or lesser extent for each—that the following personal Spiritual Disciplines are commended in Scripture: Bible intake, prayer, worship, evangelism, service, stewardship, fasting, silence and solitude, journaling, and learning. Is this an exhaustive list? No, I wouldn't presume to maintain that. A survey of other literature on the subject would reveal additional candidates for



consideration as biblical Spiritual Disciplines to be practiced by individual Christians. But I do believe it can be argued that the ones discussed in these pages are the more prominent ones in Scripture.

Fourth, this book takes the position that the Spiritual Disciplines found in Scripture are *sufficient* for knowing and experiencing God, and for growing in Christlikeness. This is based upon the fact that “all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). These verses tell us that Scripture, because it is divinely inspired, provides the guidance Christians need to “be complete, equipped for every good work,” including the good work of pursuing “the purpose of godliness.” So whatever else a person might claim regarding the spiritual benefits he or she receives from a practice not found in the Bible, at the very least we can say this about that activity—it is not necessary. If it were necessary for spiritual maturity and progress in holiness it would have been recorded and promoted in Scripture.

Fifth, the Spiritual Disciplines are practices *derived from the gospel, not divorced from the gospel*. When the Disciplines are rightly practiced, they take us deeper into the gospel of Jesus and its glories, not away from it as though we’ve moved on to more advanced levels of Christianity. New Testament scholar D. A. Carson makes this point eloquently:

The gospel is not a minor theme that deals with the point of entry into the Christian way, to be followed by a lot of material that actually brings about the life transformation. Very large swaths of evangelicalism simply presuppose that this is the case. Preaching the gospel, it is argued, is announcing how to be saved from God’s condemnation; believing the gospel guarantees you won’t go to hell. But for actual transformation to take place, you need to take a lot of discipleship courses, spiritual enrichment courses, “Go deep” spiritual disciplines courses, and the like. You need to learn journaling, or asceticism, or the simple lifestyle, or Scripture memorization; you need to join a small group, an accountability group, or . . . Bible study. Not for a moment would I speak against the potential for good of all of these steps; rather, I am speaking against the tendency to treat these as postgospel disciplines, disciplines divorced from what God has done in Christ Jesus in the gospel of the crucified and resurrected Lord. . . .

Failure to see this point has huge and deleterious consequences. . . . First, if the gospel becomes that by which we slip into the kingdom, but all the business of transformation turns on postgospel disciplines and strategies, then we shall constantly be directing the attention of people *away* from the gospel, *away* from the cross and resurrection. Soon the gospel will be something that we quietly assume is necessary for salvation, but not what we are excited about, not what we are preaching, not the power of God. What is really important are the spiritual disciplines. Of course, when we point this out to someone for whom techniques and disciplines are of paramount importance, there is likely to be instant indignation. *Of course* I believe in the cross and resurrection of Jesus, they say. And doubtless they do. Yet the question remains: What are they excited about? Where do they rest their confidence? On what does their hope of transformation depend? When I read, say, Julian of Norwich, I find an example of just how far an alleged spirituality may be pursued, in medieval form, directly attempting to connect with God *apart* from self-conscious dependence on the substitutionary death and resurrection of Jesus—the very matters the apostle labels “of first importance.” Wherever contemporary pursuit of spirituality becomes similarly distanced from the gospel, it is taking a dangerous turn. [3]

Sixth, the Spiritual Disciplines are *means, not ends*. The end—that is, the purpose of practicing the Disciplines—is godliness. I define *godliness* as both closeness to Christ and conformity to Christ, a conformity that’s both inward and outward, a growing conformity to both the heart of Christ and the life of Christ. This Christlikeness is the goal, the reason we should practice the Disciplines. Without this purpose in our practice, the performance of Spiritual Disciplines—no matter how consistent or vigorous—is vain and nothing more than an empty husk of godliness. So while we cannot be godly without the practice of the Disciplines, we can practice the Disciplines without being godly if we see them as ends



and not means. The next section of the chapter is devoted to developing this crucial aspect of the theology behind the practice of the Spiritual Disciplines.

So the Spiritual Disciplines are those personal and interpersonal activities given by God in the Bible as the sufficient means believers in Jesus Christ are to use in the Spirit-filled, gospel-driven pursuit of godliness, that is, closeness to Christ and conformity to Christ.

THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES—THE MEANS TO GODLINESS

The most important feature of any Spiritual Discipline is its purpose. Just as there is little value in practicing the scales on a guitar or piano apart from the purpose of playing music, so there is little value in practicing Spiritual Disciplines apart from the single purpose that unites them (see Colossians 2:20-23; 1 Timothy 4:8). That purpose is godliness. Thus we are told in 1 Timothy 4:7 to discipline ourselves “for the purpose of *godliness*” (NASB).^[4]

That’s what the godly heroes of Christian history have done. From biblical times to our time, godly people have always been spiritually disciplined people. Call to mind some heroes of church history, people such as Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Bunyan, George Whitefield, Lady Huntingdon, Jonathan and Sarah Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, Lottie Moon, George Müller, Dawson Trotman, Jim and Elisabeth Elliot, and Martyn Lloyd-Jones. How did they develop such a reputation for godliness? It wasn’t as though God somehow anointed them with holiness in ways He hasn’t bestowed on the rest of us. It may be true that He blessed these believers in terms of ministry fruitfulness in ways that He hasn’t conferred upon many others, but in terms of conformity to Christ, they made progress the same way that all Christians do—through the Spiritual Disciplines. And in my own pastoral and personal Christian experience, I can say that I’ve never known a man or woman who came to spiritual maturity except through discipline. Godliness comes through discipline.

Actually, God uses three primary catalysts for changing us and conforming us to Christlikeness, but only one is largely under our control. One catalyst the Lord uses to change us is people. “Iron sharpens iron,” says Proverbs 27:17, “and one man sharpens another.” Sometimes God uses our friends to sharpen us into more Christlike living, and sometimes He uses our enemies to file away our rough, ungodly edges. Parents, children, spouses, coworkers, customers, teachers, neighbors, pastors—God changes us through these people.

Another change agent God uses in our lives is circumstances. The classic text for this is Romans 8:28: “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” Financial pressures, physical conditions, even the weather are used in the hands of Divine Providence to stimulate His elect toward holiness.

Then there is the catalyst of the Spiritual Disciplines. This catalyst differs from the first two in that when He uses the Disciplines, God works primarily from the inside out. When He changes us through people and circumstances, the process works mainly from the outside in. The Spiritual Disciplines also differ from the other two methods of change in that God grants us a greater measure of choice regarding involvement with the Disciplines. We often have little choice regarding the people and circumstances God brings into our lives, but we can decide, for example, whether we will read the Bible or fast today.

So on the one hand, we recognize that even the most iron-willed self-discipline by itself will not make us more holy; instead, it may make us more like the Pharisees. Growth in holiness is a gift from God (see John 17:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; Hebrews 2:11). On the other hand, that doesn’t mean that we’re to do nothing to pursue godliness, just living the life we want until and unless God decides to make us holy. What we are to do is discipline ourselves for the purpose of godliness, practicing the God-given Spiritual Disciplines as a means of receiving His grace and growing in Christlikeness.

In Colossians 1:29 the apostle Paul illustrated how these two—the efforts of a Christian and the work of God—can occur simultaneously in a person indwelt by the Holy Spirit. In this text Paul spoke of his labors to help believers become “mature in Christ,” declaring, “For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me” (Colossians 1:29). Notice that Paul said that he himself was toiling, but he then affirmed that the energy for this struggle came from Christ. That Paul had the desire and the power for ministry was entirely of the grace of God (see Philippians 2:13). And if any



lasting fruit resulted from his labors, Paul gave all the glory to God. But sometimes it surely felt as though all the toil was of Paul, and at the end of each day, Paul was the one who was work-weary.

That's the way it is with the Spiritual Disciplines. The desire and the power for them are produced by the grace of God. But Christians themselves must practice the Disciplines. For example, a deep, insatiable hunger for the Bible is a gift from God, but we are the ones who must turn the pages and read the words. God doesn't pull our passive bodies over to the desk and cause our hands to open the Bible and draw our eyes back and forth over the pages without any effort on our part.

The New Testament was originally written in the Greek language. The word rendered "discipline" in the New American Standard translation is the Greek word *gumnasia* from which our English words *gymnasium* and *gymnastics* derive. This word means "to exercise or discipline," which is why the King James Version renders 1 Timothy 4:7 as "exercise thyself rather unto godliness," the English Standard Version as "train yourself for godliness," and the New International Version as "train yourself to be godly." It's a sweaty word with the smell of the gym to it. So think of the Spiritual Disciplines as spiritual exercises. To go to your favorite spot for prayer or journaling, for example, is the spiritual equivalent of going to a gym and using a weight machine. As physical disciplines like this promote bodily strength, so the Spiritual Disciplines promote godliness.

A Bible story that illustrates another way of thinking of the role of the Spiritual Disciplines is in Luke 19:1-10. It's the famous account of the conversion of the tax collector, Zacchaeus. Because he was so short, Zacchaeus was unable to see Jesus in the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree in order to see Jesus when He passed by. When Jesus came to the place, He looked up, called Zacchaeus by name, and told him to come down. The two went to the tax collector's house, where he believed in Christ for salvation and resolved to give half his possessions to the poor and return with interest all tax money he had wrongfully taken.

Think of the Spiritual Disciplines as ways by which we can spiritually place ourselves in the path of God's grace and seek Him, much like Zacchaeus placed himself physically in Jesus' path and sought Him. The Lord, by His Spirit, still travels down certain paths, paths that He Himself has ordained and revealed in Scripture. We call these paths the Spiritual Disciplines, and if we will place ourselves on these paths and look for Him there by faith, we can expect to encounter Him. For instance, when we come to the Bible, or when we engage in any of the biblical Disciplines—looking by faith to God through them—we can anticipate experiencing God. As with this tax collector, we will find Him willing to have mercy on us and to have communion with us. And in the course of time we, too, will be transformed by Him from one level of Christlikeness to another (see 2 Corinthians 3:18). So again, by means of these Bible-based practices we consciously place ourselves before God in anticipation of enjoying His presence and receiving His transforming grace.

Tom Landry, coach of the Dallas Cowboys football team for most of three decades, said, "The job of a football coach is to make men do what they don't want to do in order to achieve what they've always wanted to be."^[5] In much the same way, Christians are called to make themselves, by the Spirit's power, do what they would not naturally do—practice the Spiritual Disciplines—in order to experience what the Spirit gives them a desire to be, that is, to be with Christ and like Christ. "Discipline yourself," says the Scripture, "for the purpose of godliness" (NASB).

THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES—GOD'S WILL FOR CHRISTIANS

The original language of the words "discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness" (NASB) makes it plain that this is a command of God, not merely a suggestion. Holiness is not an option for those who claim to be children of the Holy One (see 1 Peter 1:15-16), so neither are the means of holiness—that is, the Spiritual Disciplines—an option.

The expectation of disciplined spirituality is implied in Jesus' offer of Matthew 11:29: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me." The same is true in this offer of discipleship: "And he said to all, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me'" (Luke 9:23). These verses tell us that to be a disciple of Jesus means, at the very least, to learn from and follow Him. That's what the twelve apostles of Jesus did—they followed Him around, and as they did, they



learned from Him. But for them to follow Jesus required discipline; they had to go where He went and when. Following Jesus today and learning from Him still involves discipline, for you don't follow someone accidentally—at least not for very long—nor do you learn as much accidentally as you do by discipline. Are you a disciplined follower of Jesus?

That discipline is at the heart of discipleship is validated by 2 Timothy 1:7, which says, “God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.” A key component of this self-control in a follower of Jesus is spiritual self-discipline.^[6] Further, Galatians 5:22-23 declares that one evidence of the influence of this God-given spirit of self-control is greater self-control in our own lives, especially as followers of and learners from Jesus.

The Lord Jesus not only expects these biblical Spiritual Disciplines of those who follow Him, He is the model of discipline for the purpose of godliness. And if we are going to be Christlike, we must live as Christ lived—insofar as sinful humans can. We cannot do what Jesus did as God, but *Christian* living means we should seek to follow His human example of how a person lives in fellowship with the Father. Although Jesus is much more than our example of spirituality—for He is also our Lord, our King, our Savior, our Substitute, our Righteousness, our Judge, and many other things to us—He is not less than our example of spirituality. And when we look to Jesus we see an example of disciplined personal piety, of how to live in consistent communion with God.

Despite the example of Jesus and the teaching of the New Testament about Christianity as a life of disciplined spirituality, many professing Christians are spiritually undisciplined and seem to have little Christlike fruit and power in their lives. However, many of them are remarkably disciplined in other areas of their lives. I've seen men and women who discipline themselves with zeal for the purpose of excelling in their career, but who discipline themselves very little “for the purpose of godliness.” I'm sure you've seen people who will devote time to learning to play an instrument, knowing that it takes countless hours to acquire the skills; who will practice hard to improve their sports performance, knowing it takes work to become proficient; who will commit to a long curriculum of intense study to complete a degree, knowing it takes sacrifice to succeed. Then many of these same people will give up quickly if they find that the Spiritual Disciplines don't come easily, as though becoming like Jesus would not take much effort.

I've seen Christians who are faithful to the church of God, who frequently demonstrate genuine enthusiasm for the things of God, and who are committed to the preaching of the Word of God, yet who trivialize their effectiveness for the kingdom of God through lack of discipline. A woman in her sixties once came to my wife and me for counsel, a woman who had spent a lifetime in conservative Bible-believing churches. Over the decades this faithful worker had served in just about every volunteer ministry position open to her. But through tears she admitted, “I know how to do everything in the church, but I don't know how to read the Bible and pray.” Spiritually such people are a mile wide and an inch deep. There are no deep, time-worn channels of communing discipline between them and God. They have dabbled in everything but disciplined themselves in nothing.

MORE APPLICATION

There is danger in neglecting the Spiritual Disciplines. The greatest danger of neglecting the Spiritual Disciplines is the danger of missing God—forever; not because personal piety earns anyone a place in heaven, but because it characterizes those who are on their way there. In other words, some who fail to practice the Disciplines disregard them because they simply have no appetite for them, and they have no appetite for them because they have no hunger for God. They do not know God, so the God-given means of personally experiencing and enjoying God have little appeal. To them, the Spiritual Disciplines are tedious religious duties to be endured as little as conscience or reputation will allow, not a banquet of God on which their famished souls long to feed as much as possible.

For those who do know God through the gospel of Christ, there's another danger in neglecting the Disciplines. A selection from the pen of a writer many years ago timelessly illustrates the danger. Commenting on the difference between the disciplined and the undisciplined way, he wrote,



Nothing was ever achieved without discipline; and many an athlete and many a man has been ruined because he abandoned discipline and let himself grow slack. Coleridge^[7] is the supreme tragedy of indiscipline. Never did so great a mind produce so little. He left Cambridge University to join the army; but he left the army because, in spite of all his erudition, he could not rub down a horse; he returned to Oxford and left without a degree. He began a paper called *The Watchman* which lived for ten numbers and then died. It has been said of him: “He lost himself in visions of work to be done, that always remained to be done. Coleridge had every poetic gift but one—the gift of sustained and concentrated effort.” In his head and in his mind he had all kinds of books, as he said himself, “completed save for transcription.” “I am on the eve,” he says, “of sending to the press two octavo volumes.” But the books were never composed outside Coleridge’s mind, because he would not face the discipline of sitting down to write them out. No one ever reached any eminence, and no one having reached it ever maintained it, without discipline.^[8]

Likely from your own observations you could name athletes, musicians, or students who displayed enormous potential, but who failed to live up to that God-given potential simply because they could not discipline themselves to practice. Something similar can happen in the spiritual realm to Christians. While few of us will have Coleridge’s intellectual or poetic gifts, all believers have been given spiritual gifts (see 1 Corinthians 12:4-7). The mere presence of spiritual gifts, however, guarantees no more spiritual fruitfulness than Coleridge’s mental gifts assured the production of books and poetry. Just as with athletic, musical, or intellectual gifts, so also spiritual gifts must be developed by discipline in order to bear spiritual fruit. Thus, the danger of neglecting the Spiritual Disciplines is the danger of bearing little spiritual fruit—your life counting little for the sake of the kingdom.

There is freedom in embracing the Spiritual Disciplines. Many hear the term *Spiritual Disciplines* and think of bondage and burdens—things they have to do, not freedom. Nevertheless, there is a freedom in the Christian life that comes not through indolence, but discipline.

We can illustrate this principle by observing the freedom that comes through mastery of any discipline. For instance, watching a consummate guitar player pluck and strum those six strings almost gives the impression that he was born with the instrument attached to his body. He has an intimacy and a freedom with the guitar that make playing the thing look easy. Anyone who’s ever tried to play realizes that such musical liberty and flair with a guitar comes only from decades of disciplined practice. Likewise, freedom through discipline is seen not only in proficient musicians, but also in all-star shortstops, expert carpenters, successful executives, skilled craftsmen, excellent students, and moms who daily manage home and family well.

Freedom through discipline is the idea behind what has become known as “the ten-thousand-hour rule.”^[9] This is an observation based upon research indicating that to become an expert in anything, for anything to become second nature, you must perform that activity—such as playing the guitar—for at least ten thousand hours. And it’s not just a matter of repeating an identical task—such as playing the same song—for something like four hours per day, five days per week, fifty weeks per year for ten years; rather there must also be a deliberate, ongoing effort (usually under the guidance of another) to improve overall performance. Thus in the case of a musician, a wide variety of songs, styles, and drills would be rehearsed so consistently and with such increasing complexity that an ever-developing freedom with the instrument would result.

In one sense we might call discipline “the price” we must pay for freedom. But Elisabeth Elliot is more precise when she explains that “freedom and discipline have come to be regarded as mutually exclusive, when in fact freedom is not at all the opposite, but the final *reward*, of discipline.”^[10] So while stressing that freedom requires discipline, let us not forget to emphasize that discipline rewards us with freedom.

What is this freedom of godliness? Think again of our illustrations. For instance, a guitar virtuoso is “free” to play a difficult arrangement by Segovia while I am not. Why? Because of his years of disciplined practice. Similarly, those who are “free” to quote Scripture are those who have disciplined themselves to



memorize God's Word. We may experience a measure of freedom from spiritual lethargy through the Discipline of fasting. Or we may sense some liberation from self-centeredness while engaged in Disciplines such as worship, service, and evangelism. The freedom of godliness is the freedom to do what God calls us through Scripture to do and the freedom to express the character qualities of Christ through our own personality. This kind of freedom is the "reward" or result of the blessing of God upon our engagement in the Spiritual Disciplines.

But we must remember that the mature freedoms of discipline-nurtured godliness do not develop in a single reading through the Bible or in a few forays through some of the other Disciplines. Scripture reminds us that self-control, such as that expressed through the Spiritual Disciplines, must persevere before it ripens into the mature fruit of godliness. Observe closely the sequence of development in 2 Peter 1:6—"to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness" (NIV). The bridge between Spirit-empowered self-control and godliness is perseverance. Occasional self-control results in occasional godliness. But self-control with perseverance results in more consistent Christlikeness. True godliness requires not merely a ten-thousand-hour pursuit, but a lifetime of perseverance.

There is an invitation to all Christians to enjoy God and the things of God through the Spiritual Disciplines. All in whom the Spirit of God dwells are invited to taste the joy of a Christ-centered, gospel-based, Spiritual Disciplines lifestyle.

Remember Kevin and his guitar? The drudgery of his daily practice would take on an entirely new spirit once he realized that someday he would be playing for a packed house in Carnegie Hall. The discipline of practice would gradually become the means to one of the greatest enjoyments of his life.

Any discipline—from guitar practice to Scripture memory—without direction is drudgery. But the Spiritual Disciplines are never drudgery as long as we practice them with the goal of godliness (that is, closeness to and conformity to Christ) in mind. If your picture of a disciplined Christian is one of a grim, tight-lipped, joyless half-robot, then you've missed the point. Jesus was the most disciplined Man who ever lived and yet the most joyful and truly alive. Though more than our example, nevertheless He is our example of discipline. Let us follow Him to joy through the Spiritual Disciplines. Focus on the person and work of Jesus in each of the Disciplines. Through them, learn from, gaze upon, and enjoy who Jesus is and what He has done. By means of the Disciplines, let the truths of the gospel restore your soul. Engage in the Spiritual Disciplines given by God in Scripture so that you are continually shown your need for Christ and the infinite supply of grace and mercy to be found by faith in Jesus Christ.



CHAPTER 2

BIBLE INTAKE (PART 1) . . . FOR THE PURPOSE OF GODLINESS

The alternative to discipline is disaster.

VANCE HAVNER

Several years ago, I had the privilege of participating in a mission trip to the bush country of East Africa. Four of us from the church I pastored lived in tents in front of a tiny, unfinished, mud-and-sticks church building six miles from the nearest settlement.

I've been overseas enough to know that many customs I have come to identify with Christianity will clash at some points with the culture of our hosts. My experiences have taught me to anticipate swallowing with difficulty some of my American expectations (not to mention a few other things!) about how Christians should live. But I was unprepared for some of my encounters with many of the professing Christians in this equatorial setting. Lying, stealing, and immorality were common and generally accepted, even among the leadership of the church. Theological understanding was as scarce as water, the disease of doctrinal error as common as malaria.

Soon I discovered one of the main reasons this church looked as though it had been started by Corinthian missionaries. No one had a Bible—not the pastor, not a deacon, no one. The pastor had only half-a-dozen sermons, all half-baked over the coals of a few Bible-story recollections. Every sixth week came the same sermon. The only real contact with Scripture happened with the occasional visit of a missionary (the nearest one was one hundred miles away) or when an area denominational worker preached. For almost everyone in the church, these infrequent, vicarious brushes with the Bible were all they'd ever known. Only one man had any measure of spiritual maturity, and that was because he had lived most of his life elsewhere and had attended a Bible-teaching church.

The four of us pooled our resources and bought inexpensive Bibles for many of the church members. After evangelistic visitation each day we led Bible studies for the church in the afternoon and again at night by flashlight. We left with prayers that the Holy Spirit would cause the Word of God to take deep root in this dry, bush-country assembly.

Most of us shake our heads in pity at such sad conditions. Fact is, however, that many of us have more Bibles in our homes than entire churches have in some impoverished or isolated parts of the world. But it's one thing to be unfamiliar with Scripture when you don't own a Bible; it's another when you have a bookshelf full.

No Spiritual Discipline is more important than the intake of God's Word. Nothing can substitute for it. There simply is no healthy Christian life apart from a diet of the milk and meat of Scripture. The reasons for this are obvious. In the Bible God tells us about Himself, and especially about Jesus Christ, the incarnation of God. The Bible unfolds the Law of God to us and shows us how we've all broken it. There we learn how Christ died as a sinless, willing Substitute for breakers of God's Law and how we must repent and believe in Him to be right with God. In the Bible we learn the ways and will of the Lord. We find in Scripture how God wants us to live, and what brings the most joy and satisfaction in life. None of this eternally essential information can be found anywhere else except the Bible. Therefore if we would know God and be godly, we must know the Word of God—intimately.

However, many who yawn with familiarity and nod in agreement to these statements spend no more time with God's Word in an average day than do those with no Bible at all. My pastoral experience bears witness to the validity of surveys that reveal that great numbers of professing Christians know little more about the Bible than poor Christians in remote parts of the world who possess not even a shred of



Scripture. Some wag remarked that the worst dust storm in history would happen if all church members who were neglecting their Bibles dusted them off simultaneously.

So even though we honor God's Word with our lips, we must confess that our hearts—as well as our hands, ears, eyes, and minds—are often far from it. Regardless of how busy we become with all things Christian, we must remember that the most transforming practice available to us is the disciplined intake of Scripture.

Bible intake is not only the most important Spiritual Discipline, it is also the most broad. It actually consists of several subdisciplines. It's much like a university comprised of many colleges, each specializing in a different discipline, yet all united under the general name of the university.

Let's examine the "colleges," or subdisciplines, of Bible intake, proceeding from the least to the most difficult.

HEARING GOD'S WORD

The easiest of the Disciplines related to the intake of God's Word is simply hearing it. Why consider this a Discipline? Because if we don't discipline ourselves to hear God's Word regularly, we may hear it only accidentally, just when we feel like it, or never hear it at all. For most of us, disciplining ourselves to hear God's Word means primarily developing the practice of steadfastly attending a Bible-believing church where the Word of God is faithfully preached.

Jesus once said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" (Luke 11:28). Merely listening to God-inspired words is not the point. The purpose of all methods of Bible intake is to "keep it," that is, to do what God says and thereby develop in Christlikeness. But the method of intake Jesus encourages in this verse is hearing God's Word.

Another passage emphasizing the importance of hearing is Romans 10:17: "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." This doesn't mean that a person can come to faith in Christ through no other means except by hearing Scripture, for multitudes have become believers as Jonathan Edwards did—and many hearing-impaired people have—through reading the Bible. Still, this verse concerns itself with the power of hearing. We may add, however, that most who, like Edwards, were converted while reading Scripture are also like him in that they often heard the proclamation of God's Word prior to conversion. Furthermore, whereas this passage teaches that initial faith in Christ comes from hearing the inspired Word about Jesus Christ, it's also true for Christians that much of the faith we need for day-to-day living after conversion comes from hearing the Bible's message. From a scriptural word about God's provision may come the faith that a family with financial struggles needs. Hearing a biblically based sermon on the love of Christ may be God's means of granting assurance of faith to a downcast believer. I recently heard a recorded message that the Lord used to give me the faith to persevere in a difficult matter. Gifts of faith are often given to those who discipline themselves to hear the Word of God.

There are other ways we may discipline ourselves to hear God's Word in addition to the most important way, namely, hearing it preached as part of a local church ministry. The most obvious of these is by some form of recording of Bible-based content. These can be used in creative ways and times such as while dressing, cooking, commuting, and so on. If you do not have access to the Internet or portable devices with biblical content taken from the Internet, consider radio, including shortwave radio.^[1]

One other text worthy of note on this subject is 1 Timothy 4:13. There the apostle Paul instructed his young friend in the ministry: "Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching." Though a lot more explanation could be given, it's enough to say that it was important in the ministry of Paul and important to the Lord, who inspired these words, for God's people to hear God's Word. Since this is so, it should become a disciplined priority for us to hear it. If someone says, "I don't need to go to church to worship God; I can worship Him on the golf course or at the lake just as well, if not better, than in church," we may agree that our omnipresent God can be worshiped there. But the ongoing worship of God cannot be separated from the Word of God, which you don't expect to be read aloud or preached on the golf course or at the lake. We are to discipline ourselves to go and hear the Word of God.



Incidentally, if you have the privilege of reading God's Word to God's people—whether to an entire congregation or to a small group—learn to read it well. You may not be gifted with a remarkable voice, but you can learn to read the Scriptures expressively. This is an acquired skill, for no one naturally reads well aloud. Far too many read the Bible publicly in such a flat, unenthusiastic way that it sounds like a book no one would want to read on his or her own. Read it for what it is: the living Word of the living God. Practice reading the passage aloud. Listen to it in your favorite recording of the Bible. Use the Scripture reading time in family worship as ongoing training in reading well to others. I just did an Internet search on how to read aloud well. There are plenty of tips and resources available. Resolve to glorify God by being an excellent public reader of His Word. So few do, but what a difference it makes.

A brief word is in order here about preparing ourselves to hear the Word of God. If you enter the typical evangelical church two minutes before the start of the worship service, it sounds almost like you've walked into a gymnasium two minutes before a basketball game. Part of my pastoral heart appreciates the good things represented by people who are glad to see and talk with each other. There is a spirit of family reunion in the air when the family of God gathers together. But I think a larger part of my heart longs for reverence and a spirit of seeking God among those who come to hear His Word.

For a while a congregation of Korean Christians used our church building for their midweek service. I was impressed by the way they entered the worship center. Whether they were first to arrive or came in after the service had already started, as soon as each was seated he or she immediately bowed in prayer for several moments before arranging belongings, unbuttoning a coat, or acknowledging the presence of anyone else. This served as an effective reminder to his or her own heart and to everyone else of his or her main purpose for that time. Most churches I'm familiar with could stand more of this. One way to do so is to celebrate the "family reunion" until shortly before the beginning of worship, then call for a time of quiet reflection and focus a couple of minutes prior to the start of the service.

Similarly, one of the English Puritans, Jeremiah Burroughs, wrote before his death in 1646 the following words of counsel regarding preparation for the Discipline of hearing God's Word:

First, when you come to hear the Word, if you would sanctify God's name, you must possess your souls with what it is you are going to hear, that what you are going to hear is the Word of God. . . . Therefore you find that the Apostle, writing to the Thessalonians, gives them the reason why the Word did them so much good as it did. It was because they heard it as the Word of God, 1 Thess. 2:13, "For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because when ye received the Word of God, which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but (as it is in truth) the Word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe."^[2]

So hearing the Word of God is not merely passive listening; it is a Discipline to be cultivated.

READING GOD'S WORD

If you still doubt that Christians need to be exhorted to discipline themselves to read the Bible, consider this: *USA Today* reported a poll that showed only 11 percent of Americans read the Bible every day. More than half read it less than once a month or never at all.^[3]

Of course, we attempt to comfort ourselves by noting that the poll included all Americans, not just professing Christians. Lamentably, little comfort may be found. A survey taken less than a year earlier by the Barna Research Group among those claiming to be "born-again Christians" disclosed these disheartening numbers: Only 18 percent—less than two of every ten—read the Bible every day. Worst of all, 23 percent—almost one in four professing Christians—say they never read the Word of God.^[4] Polls and surveys come and go, but there's little reason to believe that these numbers fluctuate dramatically over time. Consider these statistics in light of 1 Timothy 4:7, "Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness" (NASB).

Jesus often asked questions about people's understanding of the Scriptures, sometimes beginning with the words, "Have you not read . . . ?" (Matthew 19:4; Mark 12:10). He assumed that those claiming to be the people of God would have read the Word of God. And a case can be made that this question implies a familiarity with the *entire* Word of God.

When Jesus said, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4), surely He intended at the very least for us to read “every word,” for how can we “live . . . by every word that comes from the mouth of God” if we’ve never even *read* “every word that comes from the mouth of God”?

Since “all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16), shouldn’t we read it?

Revelation 1:3 tells us, “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.” God promises that those who read and heed His Word will be blessed. But only those who discipline themselves to do so will receive those blessings.

The main reason, remember, for disciplining ourselves is godliness. We have learned that the Spiritual Disciplines are scriptural paths where we may expect to encounter the transforming grace of God. The most critical Discipline is the intake of God’s Word. No factor is more influential in making us more like the Son of God than the Spirit of God working through the Word of God. If you want to be changed, if you want to become more like Jesus Christ, discipline yourself to read the Bible.

How often should we read it? British preacher John Blanchard, in his book *How to Enjoy Your Bible*, answers,

Surely we only have to be realistic and honest with ourselves to know how regularly we need to turn to the Bible. How often do we face problems, temptation and pressure? *Every day!* Then how often do we need instruction, guidance and greater encouragement? *Every day!* To catch all these felt needs up into an even greater issue, how often do we need to see God’s face, hear his voice, feel his touch, know his power? The answer to all these questions is the same: *every day!* As the American evangelist D. L. Moody put it, “A man can no more take in a supply of grace for the future than he can eat enough for the next six months, or take sufficient air into his lungs at one time to sustain life for a week. We must draw upon God’s boundless store of grace from day to day as we need it.”^[5]

Here are the three most practical suggestions for consistent success in Bible reading. First, find the *time*. Perhaps one of the main reasons Christians never read through the entire Bible is discouragement. Many people have never read a thousand-page book before and get discouraged at the sheer length of the Bible. Do you realize that recorded readings of the Bible have proven that you can read through the entire Book in seventy-one hours? That’s less time than the average American spends in front of the television every month.^[6] In other words, if most people would exchange their TV time for Scripture reading, they’d finish reading the entire Bible in four weeks or less. If that sounds unworkable, consider this: In no more than fifteen minutes a day you can read through the Bible in less than a year’s time. Only five minutes a day takes you through the Bible in less than three years. And yet the majority of Christians never read God’s Word all the way through in a lifetime of decades. So we’re back to the idea that it’s primarily a matter of discipline and motivation.

Discipline yourself to find the *time*. Try to make it the same time every day. If possible, read the Bible at a time other than just before you go to sleep. There’s value in reading the Bible just before you drop off, but if this is the only part of your day when you read Scripture then you should try to find another time. There are at least two reasons for this. First, you will retain very little of what you read when you’re so tired and sleepy. And second, you probably do very little evil in your sleep. You need to encounter Christ in the Scriptures when it will still have an impact on your day.

The second practical suggestion is to find a Bible-reading *plan*. It’s no wonder that those who simply open the Bible at random each day soon drop the discipline. Bible-reading plans abound on the Internet. Many study Bibles contain a reading schedule somewhere within the pages. Most local churches can provide you with a daily reading guide also.

Apart from a specific plan, reading three chapters every day and five on Sundays will take you through the Bible in a year’s time. Read three in the Old Testament and three in the New Testament

every day, and you will finish the Old Testament once and the New Testament four times in a twelve-month span.

My favorite plan involves reading in five places in the Bible each day. I begin in Genesis, Joshua, Job, Isaiah, and Matthew and read an equal number of chapters in each section. A variation of this plan is to read in three places daily, starting in Genesis, Job, and Matthew, respectively. The three sections are roughly the same in length, so you will finish them all about the same time. The great advantage of such a design is its variety. Many who intend to read straight through the Bible become confused in Leviticus, discouraged in Numbers, and give up completely by Deuteronomy. But when you are reading in more than one place each day, the variety makes it easier to keep up the momentum.

Even if you don't read through the Bible in a year's time, keep a record of which books you have read. Put a mark beside a chapter when you read it or by the title of a book in the table of contents when you've completed it. That way, regardless of how long it takes, or in what order they're read, you'll know when you've read every book in the Bible.

The third suggestion is to find at least one word, phrase, or verse to *meditate* on each time you read. We'll look at meditation more closely in the next chapter, but you should recognize now that without meditation you may close your Bible and not be able to remember a single thing you've read. And if that happens, your Bible reading is not likely to change you. Even with a good plan, it can become a mundane chore instead of a Discipline of joy. Take at least one thing you've read and think deeply about it for a few moments. Your insight into Scripture will deepen, and you'll better understand how it applies to your life. And the more you apply the truth of Scripture, the more you'll become like Jesus.

We should all have the following man's passion for reading God's Word. Robert L. Sumner, in *The Wonder of the Word of God*, tells of a man in Kansas City who was severely injured in an explosion. His face was badly disfigured, and he lost his eyesight as well as both hands. He had only recently become a Christian when the accident happened, and one of his greatest disappointments was that he could no longer read the Bible. Then he heard about a lady in England who read Braille with her lips. Hoping to do the same, he sent for some books of the Bible in Braille. But he discovered that the nerve endings in his lips had been too badly damaged to distinguish the characters. One day, as he brought one of the Braille pages to his lips, his tongue happened to touch a few of the raised characters and he could feel them. Like a flash he realized, *I can read the Bible using my tongue*. At the time Sumner wrote his book, the man had read through the entire Bible four times.^[7] If he can do that, can you discipline yourself to read the Bible?

STUDYING GOD'S WORD

If reading the Bible can be compared to cruising the width of a clear, sparkling lake in a motorboat, studying the Bible is like slowly crossing that same lake in a glass-bottomed boat. The motorboat crossing provides an overview of the lake and a swift, passing view of its depths. The glass-bottomed boat of study, however, takes you beneath the surface of Scripture for an unhurried look of clarity and detail that's normally missed by those who simply read the text. As author Jerry Bridges put it, "Reading gives us breadth, but study gives us depth."^[8]

Let's look at three examples of a heart to study the Word of God. The first is the Old Testament figure Ezra: "For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel" (Ezra 7:10). There's an instructive significance to the sequence in this verse. Ezra (1) "set his heart," (2) "to study the Law of the LORD," (3) "and to do it," (4) "and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel." Before he taught the Word of God to the people of God, he practiced what he learned. But Ezra's learning came from a study of the Scriptures. Before he studied, however, he first "set his heart" to study. In other words, Ezra disciplined himself to study God's Word.

A second example is from Acts 17:11. Missionaries Paul and Silas had barely escaped with their lives from Thessalonica after their successful evangelistic work had provoked the Jews there to jealousy. When they repeated the same course of action in Berea, the Jews there responded differently: "Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so." According to the next verse, the result

was that “many of them therefore believed” (verse 12). The willingness to examine the Scriptures is commended here as noble character.

My favorite example of a heart to study the truth of God is in 2 Timothy 4:13. The apostle Paul was in prison and writing the last chapter of his final New Testament letter. Anticipating the arrival of his younger friend Timothy, he wrote, “When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments.” The scrolls and parchments Paul requested almost certainly included copies of the Scriptures. In his cold and miserable confinement, the godly apostle asked for two things: a cloak to wear so his body could be warmed and God’s Word to study so his mind and heart could be warmed. Paul had seen heaven (see 2 Corinthians 12:1-6) and the resurrected Christ (see Acts 9:5), he had experienced the Holy Spirit’s power for miracles (see Acts 14:10) and even for writing Holy Scripture (see 2 Peter 3:16); nevertheless, he continued to study God’s Word until he died. So if Paul, with all his firsthand knowledge of heaven, Jesus, miracles, and more needed to study God’s Word, surely you and I need to study it and should discipline ourselves to do it.

Then why don’t we? Why do so many Christians neglect the study of God’s Word? R. C. Sproul said it painfully well: “Here then, is the real problem of our negligence. We fail in our duty to study God’s Word not so much because it is difficult to understand, not so much because it is dull and boring, but because it is work. Our problem is not a lack of intelligence or a lack of passion. Our problem is that we are lazy.” [9]

Besides laziness, part of the problem for some may be an insecurity about how to study the Bible or even where to begin. Actually, starting is not so difficult. The basic difference between Bible reading and Bible study is simply a pen and paper (or some other means of preserving your thoughts). Write down observations about the text as you read, and record questions that come to your mind. If your Bible has cross-references, [10] look up the ones that relate to the verses that prompt your questions, then record your insights. Find a key word in your reading and use the concordance found in the back of most Bibles to review the other references that use the word, and again note your findings. Another way to begin is to outline a chapter, one paragraph at a time. When you finish that chapter, move on to the next until you’ve outlined the entire book. Before long you’ll have a far stronger grasp on a section of Scripture than you had by just reading it.

As you advance in the study of the Book of God, you will learn the value of in-depth word studies, character studies, topical studies, and book studies. You’ll discover a new richness in the Scripture as your understanding grows of how the grammar, history, culture, and geography surrounding a text factor into its interpretation.

Don’t let a feeling of inadequacy keep you from the delight of learning the Bible on your own. Books, thick and thin, abound on how to study the Bible. They can provide more guidance regarding methods and tools than I can in this chapter. Don’t settle only for spiritual food that’s been “predigested” by others. Experience the joy of discovering biblical insights firsthand through your own Bible study.

MORE APPLICATION

If your growth in godliness were measured by the quality of your Bible intake, what would be the result?

This is an important question, for the truth is, your growth in godliness is greatly affected by the quality of your Bible intake. In His magnificent High Priestly prayer of John 17, Jesus asked this of the Father for us: “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (verse 17). God’s plan for sanctifying us, that is, for making us holy and godly, is accomplished by means of “the truth”—His Word. If we settle for a poor quality intake of hearing, reading, and studying God’s Word, we severely restrict the main flow of God’s sanctifying grace toward us.

As I say this, I realize that it would be easy to cause guilt feelings in us all (myself included) over past failures regarding the intake of God’s Word. Above all, remember that heaven’s door is opened to us not by the works we do (such as our intake of God’s Word), but by the work of God in Jesus Christ. Beyond that, let’s apply the message of Philippians 3:13 to any previous inconsistency with our Bible intake and start “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead” in this area.

This leads us to a final application question.

What is one thing you can do to improve your intake of God's Word? Unless providentially hindered, joining a group of like-minded believers to hear God's Word preached each week should be a minimum. Many Bible-believing churches provide more than one opportunity each week to hear God's Word. You may want to consider recordings of the Bible, as well as Bible teaching on the Internet or radio, as options to increasingly hear God's Word. Set goals of earnestly attempting to read the Bible every day and regularly completing the entire Book. Also, inexpensive workbooks and study guides on every book in the Bible and a multitude of topics are available about anywhere Christian books are sold. Besides launching out individually, join a Bible study group in your church or community, or even start a group study.

Whatever way you choose, discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness by committing to at least one way of improving your intake of the Holy Word of God. For those who use their Bibles little are really not much better off than those who have no Bible at all.

Let's finish this chapter with a substantial word of encouragement. It's from a helpful booklet, *Reading the Bible*, by a Welsh pastor named Geoffrey Thomas. Whenever he writes of reading the Bible, we should also apply his words to hearing and studying it.

Do not expect to master the Bible in a day, or a month, or a year. Rather expect often to be puzzled by its contents. It is not all equally clear. Great men of God often feel like absolute novices when they read the Word. The Apostle Peter said that there were some things hard to understand in the epistles of Paul (2 Peter 3:16). I am glad he wrote those words because I have felt that often. So do not expect always to get an emotional charge or a feeling of quiet peace when you read the Bible. By the grace of God you may expect that to be a frequent experience, but often you will get no emotional response at all.

Let the Word break over your heart and mind again and again as the years go by, and imperceptibly there will come great changes in your attitude and outlook and conduct. You will probably be the last to recognize these. Often you will feel very, very small, because increasingly the God of the Bible will become to you wonderfully great. So go on reading it until you can read no longer, and then you will not need the Bible any more, because when your eyes close for the last time in death, and never again read the Word of God in Scripture you will open them to the Word of God in the flesh, that same Jesus of the Bible whom you have known for so long, standing before you to take you for ever to His eternal home.^[11]

BIBLE INTAKE (PART 2) . . . FOR THE PURPOSE OF GODLINESS

There is discipline involved in Christian growth. The rapidity with which a man grows spiritually and the extent to which he grows, depends upon this discipline. It is the discipline of the means.

RICHARD HALVERSON

Because you are reading this book, it's likely that you are a person who, at least to some degree, already engages in hearing, reading, and studying the Word of God as advocated in the previous chapter. Despite this, there is also a strong possibility that you do not perceive a great deal of fruit being produced in your life from these Disciplines. Your experience does not measure up to your expectation, so perhaps you conclude that you are the problem, that maybe you are a second-rate Christian.

The reality is that *you* may not be the problem at all. The problem may simply be your *method*. I know, for example, many people who read the Bible every day. They may even read multiple chapters of God's Word each morning. But as soon as they close the Bible, on most days they would have to admit that they can't remember a thing they've read.

"I just don't have a good memory," they conclude with a sigh. Or they may believe that they can't remember what they've read because they don't have a high IQ, or didn't have a good education, or they are just too old. Well, I've had some twenty-two-year-old geniuses in my seminary classes who have the same problem. So I would contend that in most cases the reason people can't remember what they read in the Bible is not their age, mental ability, or training, but their method.

Moreover, does anyone want to argue that ordinary people—people with no more than an average intellect or education—are unable to profit satisfyingly from the Bible on a regular basis? Surely not, especially since observation confirms that what the apostle Paul said of the Christians in Corinth is true of Christians everywhere: "For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth" (1 Corinthians 1:26). In other words, since the majority of those God calls are not "wise according to worldly standards," does that mean most Christians can't benefit much from Scripture on an individual basis? No, for doubtless God wants all His children to grow in grace and in their knowledge of Him through His Word.

So what's the problem? Why is it that the words of Scripture can go through our ears or eyes and then out of our minds so quickly and commonly, despite the depth of our devotion to the Bible? The problem is that hearing and reading the Bible, by themselves, usually aren't sufficient for remembering what we've received. They are invaluable and irreplaceable Disciplines, but they are incomplete without other Disciplines of the Word. While hearing and reading plant the seed of Scripture into the soil of our souls, other Disciplines are the water and sun God uses to bring the growth and fruit of Christlikeness in our lives. As the previous pages have indicated, studying the Bible is one way to water and warm the seed planted by hearing or reading. In this chapter are three more important Disciplines for the intake of God's Word that, when rightly practiced, promote the increased knowledge of God and closer conformity to Christ.

MEMORIZING GOD'S WORD—BENEFITS AND METHODS

Many Christians consider the Spiritual Discipline of memorizing God's Word as something tantamount to modern-day martyrdom. Ask them to memorize Bible verses and they react with about as much eagerness as a request for volunteers to face Nero's lions. How come? Perhaps because many associate all memorization with the memory efforts required of them in school. It was work, and most of it was uninteresting and of limited value. Frequently heard, also, is the excuse of having a bad memory. But

what if I offered you one thousand dollars for every verse you could memorize in the next seven days? Do you think your attitude toward Scripture memory and your ability to memorize would improve? Any financial reward would be minimal when compared to the accumulating value of the treasure of God's Word deposited within your mind.

Memorization Supplies Spiritual Power

When Scripture is stored in your mind, it is available for the Holy Spirit to bring to your attention when you need it most. That's why the author of Psalm 119 wrote, "I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you" (verse 11). It's one thing, for instance, to be watching or thinking about something when you know you shouldn't, but there's added power against the temptation when a specific verse can be brought to your mind, like Colossians 3:2: "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth."

When the Holy Spirit brings a definite verse to mind like that, it's an illustration of what Ephesians 6:17 can mean when it refers to "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." A pertinent scriptural truth, brought to your awareness by the Holy Spirit at just the right moment, can be the weapon that makes the difference in a spiritual battle.

There is no better illustration of this than Jesus' confrontation with Satan in the lonely Judean wilderness (see Matthew 4:1-11). Each time the Enemy thrust a temptation at Jesus, He parried it with the Sword of the Spirit. It was the Spirit-prompted recollection of specific texts of Scripture that helped Jesus experience victory. One of the ways we can experience more spiritual victories is to do as Jesus did—memorize Scripture so that it's available within us for the Holy Spirit to bring to our remembrance when it's needed.

Memorization Strengthens Your Faith

What Christian doesn't want his or her faith strengthened? One thing you can do to strengthen it is to discipline yourself to memorize Scripture. Let's walk through Proverbs 22:17-19, which says, "Incline your ear, and hear the words of the wise, and apply your heart to my knowledge, for it will be pleasant if you keep them within you, if all of them are ready on your lips. That your trust may be in the LORD, I have made them known to you today, even to you." To "apply your heart" to the "words of the wise" spoken of here and to "keep them within you" certainly pertains to Scripture memory. Notice the reason given here for keeping the wise words of Scripture within you and "ready on your lips." It's so "that your trust may be in the LORD." Memorizing Scripture strengthens your faith because it repeatedly reinforces the truth, often just when you need to hear it again.

A church I pastored sought to build a new worship center. We believed that in our situation we would most honor God if we built the building without going into debt. There were times when my faith in the Lord's provision began to sink. More often than not, what renewed my faith was the reminder of God's promise in 1 Samuel 2:30: "Those who honor me I will honor." Scripture memory is like reinforcing steel to a sagging faith.

Memorization Prepares Us for Witnessing and Counseling

On the Day of Pentecost (the Jewish holiday being celebrated when the Holy Spirit came in great power upon Jesus' followers), the apostle Peter was suddenly inspired by God to stand and preach to the crowd about Jesus. Much of what he said consisted of quotations from the Old Testament (see Acts 2:14-40). Although there's a qualitative difference between Peter's uniquely inspired sermon and our Spirit-led conversations, his experience illustrates how Scripture memory can prepare us for unexpected witnessing or counseling opportunities that come our way.

Recently, while I was talking to a man about Jesus, he said something that brought to mind a verse I had memorized. I quoted that verse, and it was the turning point in a conversation that resulted in him professing faith in Christ. I often experience something similar in counseling conversations. But until the verses are hidden in the heart, they aren't available to use with the mouth.

Memorization Provides a Means of God's Guidance

The psalmist wrote, “Your testimonies are my delight; they are my counselors” (Psalm 119:24). Just as the Holy Spirit retrieves scriptural truth from our memory banks for use in counseling others, so also will He bring it to our own minds in providing timely guidance for ourselves.

Many times when I have been trying to decide whether to say what I think in a given situation, the Lord brings Ephesians 4:29 to my mind: “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.” I’m sure that sometimes I misunderstand the leading of the Holy Spirit, but His guidance could hardly be more clear than when He brings to mind a verse like that! When it happens, it’s the fruit of disciplined Scripture memory.

Memorization Stimulates Meditation

One of the most underrated benefits of memorizing Scripture is that it provides fuel for meditation. When you have memorized a verse of Scripture, you can meditate on it anywhere at any time during the day or night. If you love God’s Word enough to memorize it, you can become like the writer of Psalm 119:97, who exclaimed, “Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day.” Whether you’re standing in line, taking a walk, driving the car, riding the train, waiting at the airport, cleaning the house, mowing the yard, rocking a baby, or eating a meal, you can benefit from the Spiritual Discipline of meditation if you have made the deposits of memorization.

The Word of God is the “sword of the Spirit,” but if there is no Bible physically accessible to you, then the weapon of the Word must be present in the armory of your mind in order for the Spirit to wield it. Imagine yourself in the midst of a decision and needing guidance, or struggling with a difficult temptation and needing victory. The Holy Spirit enters your mental arsenal and looks around for available weapons, but all He finds is a John 3:16, a Genesis 1:1, and a Great Commission. Those are great swords, but they’re not made for every battle. How do we go about filling our personal spiritual arsenal with a supply of swords for the Holy Spirit to use?

You Can Memorize Scripture

Most people think they have a bad memory, but it’s not true. As we’ve already discovered, most of the time memorizing is mainly a problem of motivation. If you know your birthday, phone number, and address, and can remember the names of your friends and family, then you have a functioning memory and can memorize Scripture. The question becomes whether you are willing to discipline yourself to do it.

When Dawson Trotman, founder of the Christian organization called The Navigators, was converted to faith in Christ in 1926, he began memorizing one Bible verse every day. He was driving a truck for a lumberyard in Los Angeles at the time. While driving around town he would work on his verse for that day. During the first three years of his Christian life he memorized his first thousand verses. If he could memorize over three hundred verses a year while driving, surely we can find ways to memorize a few.

Have a Plan

There are many good prepackaged Scripture memory resources available in print and digital formats. But you might prefer selecting verses yourself on a particular topic where the Lord is working in your life right now. If your faith is weak, memorize verses on faith. If you’re struggling with a habit, find verses that will help you experience victory over it. One man told Dawson Trotman that he was afraid that following his example of Scripture memory would make him prideful. Trotman’s reply: “Then make your first ten verses on humility!” Another option is to memorize a section of Scripture, such as a psalm, rather than isolated verses.

If you are using a digital resource to help you with Scripture memory, it probably provides you with plenty of guidance on how to utilize it. But if not, or to supplement your use of that digital guide, the following tips will be helpful.

Write Out the Verses

Make a list of the verses on-screen or on a sheet of paper, leaving an inch or so of space between each one, or write each verse on a separate index card.

Draw Picture Reminders

Nothing elaborate is needed here, just a few lines or stick figures beside each verse, or some sort of picture or clip art if done on-screen. This makes the verse “visual” and puts the picture-is-worth-a-thousand-words principle to work for you. One simple image can remind you of a couple dozen words. This is especially true if the drawing illustrates some action described in the verse. For instance, with Psalm 119:11, you might make a crude drawing of a heart with a Bible inside to remind you of treasuring God’s Word in the heart. For Ephesians 6:17, a sketch of a sword is an obvious reminder. You’ll find this method particularly helpful when memorizing a section of consecutive verses. I realize that you are probably no more of an artist than I am, but no one else has to see the pictures and they can certainly make Scripture memory easier.

Memorize the Verses Word-Perfectly

There’s a great temptation, especially when first learning a verse, to lower this standard. Don’t settle for just getting close, or getting the “main idea.” Memorize it word for word. Learn the reference, too. Without an objective standard of measurement, the goal is unclear and you may tend to continue lowering the standard until you quit altogether. Moreover, if you don’t have the verse memorized exactly, you lose confidence in using it in conversation and witnessing. So even though memorizing “every jot and tittle” is harder in the beginning, it’s easier and more productive in the long run. Incidentally, verses you know word-perfectly are easier to review than those you don’t know so accurately.

Find a Method of Accountability

Because of our tendency toward sloth, most of us need more accountability on Scripture memory than on other Disciplines. And the busier we are, the more we tend to excuse ourselves from this commitment. Some, as Dawson Trotman did, develop personalized means of accountability to this Discipline that keep them faithful. Most Christians, however, are more consistent when they meet or talk regularly with someone else—not always another Christian—with whom they review their verses.

Review and Meditate Every Day

No principle of Scripture memory is more important than the principle of review. Without adequate review you will eventually lose most of what you memorize. But once you really learn a verse, you can mentally review it in a fraction of the time it would take to speak it. And when you know a verse this well, you don’t have to review but once a week, once a month, or even once every six months to keep a sharp edge on it. It’s not unusual, however, to reach a point where you spend 80 percent of your Scripture memory time in review. Don’t begrudge devoting so much time to polishing your swords. Rejoice instead at having so many!

Integrating Scripture memory review into one or more of your life routines leverages the regularity of your habits to strengthen your grip on Scripture. Thus you might want to incorporate a few minutes of review into your daily devotional time. Or you might find that you can review your verses while you are brushing your teeth, working out, or making your daily commute. A great time to review your better-known verses is while going to sleep. Since you don’t need a written copy of the verses before you, you can repeat them and meditate on them while dozing off or even when you have trouble sleeping. And if you can’t stay awake, that’s okay, since you’re supposed to be sleeping anyway. If you can’t go to sleep, you’re putting the most profitable and peaceful information possible into your mind, as well as making good use of the time.

As we finish this section on the Discipline of Scripture memory, remember that memorizing verses is not an end in itself. The goal is not to see how many verses we can memorize; the goal is godliness. The goal is to memorize the Word of God so that it can transform our minds and our lives.

Jerry Bridges said in this regard,

I am very much aware that Scripture memorization has largely fallen by the wayside in our day. . . . But let me say as graciously but firmly as I can: We cannot effectively pursue holiness without the Word of God stored up in our minds where it can be used by the Holy Spirit to transform us. . . . I know it requires work and is sometimes discouraging when we can't recall accurately a verse we have worked hard to memorize. The truth is, however, all forms of discipline require work and are often discouraging. But the person who perseveres in any discipline, despite the hard work and discouraging times, reaps the reward the discipline is intended to produce.[1]

MEDITATING ON GOD'S WORD—BENEFITS AND METHODS

One sad feature of our contemporary culture is that meditation has become identified more with non-Christian systems of thought than with biblical Christianity. Even among believers, the practice of meditation is often more closely associated with yoga, transcendental meditation, relaxation therapy, or some New Age practice than with Christian spirituality. Because meditation is so prominent in many spiritually counterfeit groups and movements, some Christians are uncomfortable with the whole subject and suspicious of those who engage in it. But we must remember that meditation is both commanded by God and modeled by the godly in Scripture. Just because a cult adopts the cross as a symbol doesn't mean the church should cease to use it. In the same way, we shouldn't discard or be afraid of scriptural meditation simply because the world engages in something it calls meditation.

The kind of meditation encouraged in the Bible differs from other kinds of meditation in several ways. While some advocate a kind of meditation in which you do your best to empty your mind, Christian meditation involves filling your mind with God and His truth. For some, meditation is an attempt to achieve complete mental passivity, but biblical meditation requires constructive mental activity. Worldly meditation employs visualization techniques intended to "create your own reality." And while Christian history has always had a place for the sanctified use of our God-given imagination in meditation, imagination is our servant to help us meditate on things that are true (see Philippians 4:8). Furthermore, instead of "creating our own reality" through visualization, we link meditation with prayer to God and responsible, Spirit-filled human action to effect changes.

In addition to these distinctives, let's define *meditation* as deep thinking on the truths and spiritual realities revealed in Scripture, or upon life from a scriptural perspective, for the purposes of understanding, application, and prayer. Meditation goes beyond hearing, reading, studying, and even memorizing as a means of taking in God's Word. A simple analogy would be a cup of tea. In this analogy your mind is the cup of hot water and the tea bag represents your intake of Scripture. Hearing God's Word is like one dip of the tea bag into the cup. Some of the tea's flavor is absorbed by the water, but not as much as would occur with a more thorough soaking of the bag. Reading, studying, and memorizing God's Word are like additional plunges of the tea bag into the cup. The more frequently the tea enters the water, the more permeating its effect. Meditation, however, is like immersing the bag completely and letting it steep until all the rich tea flavor has been extracted and the hot water is thoroughly tintured reddish brown. Meditation on Scripture is letting the Bible brew in the brain. Thus we might say that as the tea colors the water, meditation likewise "colors" our thinking. When we meditate on Scripture it colors our thinking about God, about God's ways and His world, and about ourselves. Similarly, as the tea bag flavors the water, so through meditation we consistently "taste" or experience the reality taught in the text. The information on the page becomes experience in our hearts and minds and lives. Reading the Bible tells the believer, for example, of God's love. Meditation is more likely to convince him or her of it personally and, in biblically appropriate ways, to cause a person to feel loved by God.

Joshua 1:8 and the Promise of Success

A specific scriptural connection between success and the practice of meditation on God's Word is found in Joshua 1:8. As the Lord was commissioning Joshua to succeed Moses as the leader of His people, He

told him, “This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.”

We must remember that the prosperity and success the Lord spoke of here is prosperity and success in His eyes and not necessarily in the world’s. From a New Testament perspective we know that the main application of this promise would be eternal riches and Christ-centered success—the prosperity of the soul and spiritual success (though some measure of success in our human endeavors would ordinarily occur as well when we live according to God’s wisdom). Having made that qualification, however, let’s not lose sight of the relationship between meditation on God’s Word and true success.

True success is promised to those who meditate on God’s Word, who think deeply on Scripture, not just at one time each day, but at moments throughout the day and night. They meditate so much that Scripture saturates their conversation. The fruit of their meditation is action. They do what they find written in God’s Word, and as a result God prospers their way and grants success to them. Why? For striving “to do according to all that is written in” God’s Word is just one of the biblical ways of describing what the New Testament would characterize as the pursuit of Christlikeness, and God loves to bless conformity to His Son. From eternity past, God predestined that all those who are in Christ will be made like Christ (see Romans 8:29). For all eternity future, all those in Christ will be glorified (see Romans 8:30), that is, “we shall be like him” (1 John 3:2)—sinless, perfect people reflecting the glory of God forever. So during our earthly pilgrimage, the more we obey God’s Word—the more we become like Jesus—the more we are fulfilling God’s eternal plan to make us like His Son. That’s why God loves to bless obedience. And so as meditation leads to obedience, obedience results in God’s blessing. We are not told how much of that blessing is material or spiritual, or how much of that blessing is in this world or the next, but we know that God does bless obedience.

How does the Discipline of meditation change us and place us in the path of God’s blessing? David said in Psalm 39:3, “As I mused, the fire burned.” The Hebrew word translated “mused” here is closely related to the one rendered “meditate” in Joshua 1:8. Analogous to David’s musing that caused the fire of his anger to burn higher, whenever we hear, read, study, or memorize the fire of God’s Word (see Jeremiah 23:29), the addition of meditation becomes like a bellows upon the fire of what we’ve encountered, causing it to burn more intensely in our experience at that moment. And just as when a fire blazes with more intensity it radiates both more light and more heat, so when we apply the bellows of meditation to the fire of God’s Word, we see more light (insight and understanding) and feel more heat (passion for obedient action). And as a result of this growth in Christlike obedience, “then,” says the Lord, “you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.”

Besides a bellows on a fire, meditation can also be compared to lingering by a fire. Imagine that you’ve been outside on an icy day and then come inside where there’s a hot, crackling fire in the fireplace. As you walk toward it, you are very cold. You stretch out your hands to the fire and rub them together briskly during the two seconds it takes to walk past the glow and the warmth. When you reach the other side of the room, you realize, *I’m still cold*. Is there something wrong with you? Are you just a second-class “warmer-upper”? No, the problem isn’t you; it’s your method. You didn’t stay by the fire. If you want to get warm, you have to linger by the fire until it warms your skin, then your muscles, then your bones until you are fully warm.

The failure to linger is the reason why many fail to remember or find their hearts warmed by the fire of God’s Word. It takes their eyes about two seconds to go past the fire of verse one in the chapter they are reading for the day. Then it takes their eyes two seconds or so to read over verse two. And then another two seconds as their eyes go past verse three, and so on until they’ve finished reading. It doesn’t matter how many of those two-second episodes you have; you will rarely remember or be moved by something you look at for two seconds. Thus the problem is probably not your memory or the coldness of your heart, but your method. So why don’t you remember what you read in the Bible? Could it be that you simply do not let your mind linger over something you’ve read? And why does the intake of God’s Word often leave us so cold and seem to produce so little success in our spiritual lives? Puritan

pastor Thomas Watson has the answer: “The reason we come away so cold from reading the word is because we do not warm ourselves at the fire of meditation.”^[2]

Psalm 1:1-3—the Promises

God’s promises in Psalm 1:1-3 regarding meditation are every bit as generous as those in Joshua 1:8:

Blessed is the man
 who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
 nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
 and on his law he meditates day and night.

He is like a tree
 planted by streams of water
that yields its fruit in its season,
 and its leaf does not wither.

In all that he does, he prospers.

We think about what we delight in. A man and woman who have found romantic delight think about each other at all hours. When we delight in God’s Word (because it is the revelation of God) we think about it; that is, we meditate on it, at times all throughout the day and night. According to Psalm 1, the result of such meditation is stability, fruitfulness, perseverance, and prosperity. One writer said it crisply: “They usually thrive best who meditate most.”^[3]

The tree of your spiritual life thrives best with meditation because it helps you absorb the water of God’s Word (see Ephesians 5:26). Merely hearing or reading the Bible, for example, can be like a short rainfall on hard ground. Regardless of the amount or intensity of the rain, most runs off and little sinks in. Conversely, meditation opens the soil of the soul and lets the water of God’s Word percolate deeply. The result is an extraordinary fruitfulness and spiritual prosperity.

Consider that again. Many who read this book are folk who hear much of the Bible at church and perhaps again in a midweek Bible study. You may often listen to recorded Bible teaching and Christian music as well. You may read the Scriptures almost every day, and possibly other Christian books like this one. As a result you encounter a torrential amount of God’s truth (not to mention the river of all the other information that rushes through your eyes and ears) each week. But without absorbing some of the water of the Word of God you encounter, you will be little better for the contact. Hearing and reading the Bible is the exposure to Scripture—that’s needful, but it’s only the starting place. After the exposure to Scripture we need to absorb it. Meditation is the absorption of Scripture. And it’s the absorption of Scripture that leads to the experience with God and the transformation of life we long for when we come to the Bible. Yes, we want to hear and read the Bible—often and much—but without the addition of meditation, warned the great man of prayer and faith George Müller, “the simple reading of the Word of God” can become information that “only passes through our minds, just as water runs through a pipe.”^[4]

The author of Psalm 119 was confident that he was wiser than all his enemies (see verse 98). Moreover, he said, “I have more understanding than all my teachers” (verse 99). Is it because he heard or read or studied or memorized God’s Word more than every one of his enemies and his teachers? Probably not. The psalmist was wiser, not necessarily because of more input, but because of more insight. But how did he acquire more wisdom and insight than anyone else? His explanation, expressed in a prayer, was,

Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies,
 for it is ever with me.
I have more understanding than all my teachers,

for your testimonies are my meditation. (PSALM 119:98-99)

I believe meditation is even more important for spiritual fruitfulness and prosperity in our day than it was in ancient Israel. Even if the total input of God's Word were the same for us as for those in the psalmist's day, combined with our intake of Scripture we also experience a flash flood of information that the writer of Psalm 119 could never have imagined. Join this with some of our additional modern responsibilities and the result is a mental distraction and dissipation that overwhelms our capacity to absorb Scripture. Due to today's deluge of data, more new information becomes available to us every few minutes than Jonathan Edwards would have encountered in his entire eighteenth-century lifetime. Granted, he had many time-consuming responsibilities (such as care for his horse) no longer required of most people now. On the other hand, he never once had to answer a telephone in his entire life! Despite his inconveniences, his mind, like the psalmist's, was not as distracted as ours by instant, ubiquitous information and entertainment. Because of these things, it's more difficult for us today to concentrate our thoughts, especially on God and Scripture, than it ever has been.

So what do we do? We can't return to the days of Edwards, unless we move to the jungles of Papua New Guinea. And even then we have already lived too long in the information age to escape its influence. We can, however, restore an order to our thinking and recapture some of the ability to concentrate—especially on spiritual truth—through biblical meditation. But it will require discipline.

In fact, this is exactly the way men like Edwards disciplined themselves. In her winsome biography of Edwards' wife, Sarah, Elisabeth Dodds said this about Jonathan's resolve regarding meditation:

When he was younger, Edwards had pondered how to make use of the time he had to spend on journeys. After the move to Northampton he worked out a plan for pinning a small piece of paper to a given spot on his coat, assigning the paper a number and charging his mind to associate a subject with that piece of paper. After a ride as long as the three-day return from Boston he would be bristling with papers. Back in his study, he would take off the papers methodically, and write down the train of thought each slip recalled to him.^[5]

We don't have to walk around bristling like a paper porcupine, but we can be transformed by the renewing of our minds (see Romans 12:2) through disciplined meditation upon Scripture. We may not be as fruitfully productive or as spiritually successful as a Jonathan Edwards, but we can be wiser than our enemies, have more insight than our teachers, experience all the promises of Joshua 1:8 and Psalm 1, and be more godly if we meditate biblically.

James 1:25—New Testament Promises

The expansive promises God gives to those who meditate on His Word continue from the Old Testament into the New. For instance, there's this assurance: "But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does" (James 1:25, NASB). Observe first that the promise is not just for someone who looks at "the perfect law" of God as a casual reader, but rather for the "one who looks intently" at it. That's meditation.

Notice that the opposite of a meditator is called "a forgetful hearer." There's not a lot of difference between "having become a forgetful hearer" of God's Word and being a forgetful reader of it, which is what many Bible readers must admit they have become. So, according to this verse, why do we forget what we read in the Bible? Is it just a poor memory? No, it's a failure to meditate.

Next, James 1:25 teaches that meditatively looking at Scripture turns you into "an effectual doer" of Scripture. This, let's remember, is the goal. Obedience to God, that is, Christlikeness, is the end; meditation is just one of the means. In other words, our primary purpose is not to become more proficient or disciplined with meditation; our purpose is godliness.

And then, the one who is an "effectual doer," who is becoming more like Jesus—who was perfectly obedient to "the perfect law" of God—"will be blessed in what he does." Sound familiar? It sounds a lot like the promise in Psalm 1:3 to those who meditate on God's Word: "In all that he does, he prospers." We have seen that as meditation leads to obedience, so obedience results in God's blessing. Do you

want God's blessing on your life? Of course you do. According to the texts we've examined, the blessing of God is associated with our obedience to God. Our obedience doesn't earn God's blessing, for His blessings are always by grace. In fact, sometimes God blesses us even in and in spite of our disobedience. But we know that we cannot *expect* God's blessing apart from obedience. So the question is, what makes us more obedient tomorrow than today? Is it just reading the Bible? Well, as we've seen, people can read the Bible every day and basically remain unchanged by it. It's usually not the mere reading of the Bible that causes us to become "an effectual doer" of it, but meditation.

How then do we meditate Christianly?

Select an Appropriate Passage

The easiest way to decide what to meditate on is to choose the verse, phrase, or word that impresses you most from the passage of Scripture you've read. So, after your reading, return to that which attracted your attention and meditate on that. Obviously, this is a subjective approach, but any approach is going to be somewhat subjective. Besides, meditation is essentially a subjective activity, a fact that underscores the importance of basing it on Scripture, the perfectly objective resource.^[6]

Verses that conspicuously relate to your concerns and personal needs are clearly targets for meditation. Although we don't want to approach the Bible simply as a digest of wise advice, a collection of promises, or an "answer book," it is God's will that we give our attention to those things He has written that directly pertain to our circumstances. If you have been struggling with your thought life and you read Philippians, then you probably need to meditate on 4:8: "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." Is the salvation of a friend or family member on your mind? Should you encounter John 4, you could profit from meditating on Jesus' manner of communication there and drawing parallels to your own situation. Sensing distance from God or a dryness in your spiritual condition? Looking for clues to the character of God and focusing on them is a good choice.

One of the most consistently profitable ways to select a passage for meditation is to discern the main message of the section of your encounter with the Scripture and meditate on its meaning and application. For instance, recently I read Luke 11. There are ten paragraphs to that chapter in the version I was using. I chose one section, verses 5-13. The main theme of that paragraph is persistence in prayer. I reflected on that idea, especially as it is set forth in verses 9-10, which talk about asking, seeking, and knocking.^[7]

Or you can narrow the focus to determine the key verse or verses of the passage you've read. Choosing one of these as your subject of meditation enables you to spotlight the main themes—the big ideas—of Scripture. For no matter how familiar a key verse may be, we never fully plumb the depths of the great truths of the Bible. We can never reflect too much, for example, on subjects such as the person and work of Jesus, any aspect of the gospel, or the attributes of God.

The general rule, then, in your personal, daily intake of Scripture is to both read and meditate. Read at length—such as a chapter or more—then go back over what you've read and select something specific from that as the focus of your meditation. Read big; meditate small.

Select a Method of Meditation

Meditation is not folding your arms, leaning back in your chair, and staring at the ceiling. That's daydreaming, not meditation. Daydreaming isn't always a waste of time; it can be a much-needed, well-deserved respite for the mind as important as relaxation often is for the body. Our gracious Father is not always goading us to "produce," and, as I've written elsewhere, it is possible to daydream, to "Do Nothing—and Do It to the Glory of God."^[8]

As opposed to daydreaming wherein you let your mind wander, with meditation you focus your thoughts. You give your attention to the verse, phrase, word, or teaching of Scripture you have chosen. Instead of mental aimlessness, in meditation your mind is on a track—it's going somewhere; it has direction. The direction your mind takes is determined by the method of meditation you choose.

Here are seventeen methods of meditating on Scripture. I use all of them some of the time and none of them all the time. Why do I present so many? [9] Because you'll likely resonate with some of these methods more than others, while the inclinations of someone else might be just the opposite of yours. And like me, you'll probably want some variety.

Meditation Method #1: Emphasize Different Words in the Text

This method takes the verse or phrase of Scripture and turns it like a diamond to examine every facet.

A meditation on Jesus' words at the beginning of John 11:25 would look like this:

"I am the resurrection and the life."

"I *am* the resurrection and the life."

"I am *the* resurrection and the life."

"I am the *resurrection* and the life."

"I am the resurrection *and* the life."

"I am the resurrection and *the* life."

"I am the resurrection and the *life*."

Of course, the point is not simply to repeat vainly each word of the verse until they've all been emphasized. The purpose is to think deeply upon the light (truth) that flashes into your mind each time the diamond of Scripture is turned. It's simple, but effective. I've found it especially helpful when I have trouble concentrating on a passage.

Meditation Method #2: Rewrite the Text in Your Own Words

From his earliest homeschool days, Jonathan Edwards' father taught him to do his thinking with pen in hand, a habit he retained throughout his life. Meditating with pen in hand or fingers on the keyboard can help you to focus your attention on the matter at hand, while stimulating your flow of thinking. With this method, imagine that you are sending the verse you've chosen in a message to someone. How would you convey the content of the verse faithfully, yet without using the words of that verse?

Paraphrasing the verse you are considering is also a good way to make sure you understand the meaning. I have a friend who says that paraphrasing verses after the fashion of the Amplified Bible is the most productive method of opening a text for him. The very act of thinking of synonyms and other ways of restating the meaning of a part of God's Word is in itself a way of meditation.

Meditation Method #3: Formulate a Principle from the Text—What Does It Teach?

While this method can work when you are meditating on a section as short as one verse or as long as a chapter, it works especially well when your focus is on more than just a sentence or two. Think of it as a type of summary of the main message of the passage. This method might be compared to developing a thesis statement for the section of Scripture you've read. Thus a principle derived from Matthew 6:9-13 might be stated as, "Jesus teaches His followers how to pray," and a principle formulated from a long passage like Luke 8:19-56 might be, "Jesus has authority over creation, over demons, over illness, and over death."

The more memorably you can state the principle, the better. That's what Dr. R. G. Lee did in one of the best-known American sermons of the twentieth century. He condensed the Old Testament story of Naboth, Ahab, and Jezebel into the unforgettable line, "Pay-Day—Someday!" Once you've developed the principle, take the second step and think of a way to reformulate it into a phrase or line that will be easy to remember later when you ask yourself, "Now what was that verse I was meditating on this morning?"

Meditation Method #4: Think of an Illustration of the Text—What Picture Explains It?

An illustration is a word picture that explains, clarifies, or confirms the object of your meditation. It can be a personal anecdote, an event in the news or in history, a quotation, an analogy, a song—anything

that throws light upon the text. An illustration is the completion of a sentence that begins with, “That’s like . . .”

Jesus often used illustrations in His teaching. In Luke 13:18-21,

He said therefore, “What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? It is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.” And again he said, “To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened.”

Evidently at some time before this episode, in His humanity He had meditated upon the nature of the kingdom of God and arrived at these two analogies, or else He did the reverse and once while observing a tree with nests and once while seeing leaven put into flour He asked Himself what biblical truth each might illustrate. The apostle Paul used illustrations in 1 Thessalonians 5:2-3, as did James in James 1:6.

The first thing to do when you want to picture a passage is to consider whether there is a story in the Bible that illustrates the point of the verse upon which you are meditating, or, if you are meditating on a story, whether there is a single verse somewhere in Scripture that summarizes the point of that story. If the verse you are considering is not in the Gospels, ponder whether it illustrates something Jesus said or did.

Another way to use this method is to reverse it and ask what this particular text might illustrate. Is it, for example, an illustration of another passage of Scripture, or of something in the words or deeds of Jesus?

Meditation Method #5: Look for Applications of the Text

The outcome of meditation should be application. Like chewing without swallowing, so meditation is incomplete without some type of application. This is so important that the entire next section of this chapter is devoted to applying God’s Word. So ask yourself, “How am I to respond to this text? What would God have me to do as a result of my encounter with this part of His Word? The Bible tells us to ‘be doers of the word’ (James 1:22); how then should I do this portion of it? Is there something to start, to stop, to confess, to pray about, to believe, to say to someone?”

If you’ll say to yourself, “I will not close my Bible until I know at least one thing the Lord wants me to do with this verse,” you’ll meditate.

Meditation Method #6: Ask How the Text Points to the Law or the Gospel

One way of thinking of the Bible is that it presents us with God’s Law and God’s gospel. The Law (basically the Old Testament) consists of what our holy and just God requires of people for them to have the righteousness necessary to live with Him in heaven. The gospel (basically the New Testament) is the good news of how our loving and merciful God has provided through Jesus the righteousness He requires in His Law. With this meditation method, you look for how the text you are considering points to some aspect of the Law, the gospel, or both.

With a verse like Psalm 23:1, for example—“The LORD is my shepherd”—we might say it points to the gospel in that Jesus said of Himself, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). But why do we need a shepherd, and why did the Good Shepherd have to lay down His life for the sheep? Because—and here Psalm 23:1 can indirectly point also to the Law—we’re all like sheep that have turned from God’s Law. As Isaiah 53:6 puts it, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

It may not often be as easy to trace lines to other texts or to make connections to both the Law and the gospel as it is from Psalm 23. But with a little practice you’ll find yourself becoming much more perceptive to these major themes of the Scripture even as you are considering a very small part of it.

Meditation Method #7: Ask How the Text Points to Something About Jesus

This is similar to the previous method, but it focuses entirely on the person and work of Jesus Christ. After His resurrection, as Jesus was walking on the road to Emmaus with two believers, we're told that "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). Essentially this approach to meditation attempts to do the same thing; that is, it examines the text to see how it might point to something about who Jesus is or what He did.

So you might look for how Jesus fulfilled or epitomized the text (as we saw in Psalm 23:1) or, conversely, how He is the perfectly pure opposite of it (if it speaks of sin). Look to see if what you are considering is like some aspect of what Jesus accomplished by His life or death, or someday will do upon His return. As Jesus taught us, let's train ourselves to think of the text before us Christocentrically.

Meditation Method #8: Ask What Question Is Answered or What Problem Is Solved by the Text

In this approach, you regard the text before you as the answer to a question or the solution to a problem. With that assumption, you ask, "What is the question?" or "What is the problem?" If you are meditating on "Jesus wept" (John 11:35), what question does that answer? How about, "Was Jesus fully human?" Well, "Jesus wept." That doesn't answer everything about the question, but it does tell you something important about His humanity. If you are meditating on John 3:16 and you consider that verse the solution to a problem, then what is the problem? One way the problem could be stated is, "What is God's plan for providing eternal life?"

Meditation Method #9: Pray Through the Text

This method especially can help you express the spirit of the psalmist in Psalm 119:18: "Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law." The Holy Spirit is the Great Guide into God's truth (see John 14:26). Moreover, Christian meditation is more than just riveted human concentration or creative mental energy. Praying your way through a verse of Scripture submits the mind to the Holy Spirit's illumination of the text and intensifies your spiritual perception. The Bible was written under the Holy Spirit's inspiration; pray for His illumination in your meditation.

I recently meditated on Psalm 119:50: "This is my comfort in my affliction, that Your word has revived me" (NASB). I prayed through the text along these lines:

Lord, You know the affliction I'm going through right now. Your Word promises to comfort me in my affliction. Your Word can revive me in my affliction. I really believe that is true. Your Word has revived me in affliction during the past, and I confess my faith to You that it will revive me in this experience. I pray that You will revive me now through the comfort of Your Word.

As I prayed through this text, the Holy Spirit began to bring to my mind truths from Scripture about the sovereignty of God over His church, His providence over the circumstances in my life, His power, His constant presence and love, and so on. In this extended time of meditation and prayer, my soul was revived and I felt comforted by the Comforter.

Biblical meditation must always involve two parties—the Christian and the Holy Spirit. Praying over a text^[10] is the Christian's invitation for the Holy Spirit to hold His divine light over the words of Scripture to show what you cannot see without Him.

Meditation Method #10: Memorize the Text

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, "memorization stimulates meditation." Simply put, when you are memorizing a verse, you think about it. The mental repetition of the text required by memorization simultaneously fosters reflection on it. And after you memorize a verse of Scripture, you can meditate on it during your commute, while on a walk, as you are preparing a meal, when you are falling asleep, or any other time you choose.

The most consistent and diligent memorizer of Scripture that I have personally known is Dr. Andrew Davis, who wrote, "There is no more useful discipline to this careful process of verse-by-verse

meditation than memorization. Memorization is not the same as meditation, but it is almost impossible for someone to memorize a passage of Scripture without somewhat deepening his/her understanding of those verses. Plus, once the passage is memorized, a lifetime of reflection is now available.” [11]

Meditation Method #11: Create an Artistic Expression of the Text

This approach to the text consists of giving tangible expression to your meditations with a sketch or some other material manifestation of your thoughts. You could compose a song or poem based on the text. As Psalm 96:1 urges us, “Oh sing to the LORD a new song.” It doesn’t have to be laborious or lengthy, or even more than one note and thus chant-like. Most often it might be entirely spontaneous. Jonathan Edwards wrote that this was often his practice: “walking alone in the woods, and solitary places, for meditation, soliloquy, and prayer, and converse with God; . . . it was always my manner, at such times, to sing forth my contemplations.” [12] You can do that. On the spur of the moment, improvise a tune and sing the text and/or your thoughts about it as “a new song” to the Lord as you reflect on His Word.

Meditation Method #12: Ask the Philippians 4:8 Questions of the Text

Recently I was meditating on Philippians 4:8: “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” It occurred to me that the directions given here about meditating on “these things” could provide guidance for meditating on any verse of Scripture, as well as for meditating on “life.” As a result (and after consulting several translations of Philippians 4:8), I developed a series of questions based upon “these things.”

- What is *true* about this, or what truth does it exemplify?
- What is *honorable* about this?
- What is *just* or right about this?
- What is *pure* about this, or how does it exemplify purity?
- What is *lovely* about this?
- What is *commendable* about this?
- What is *excellent* about this (that is, excels others of this kind)?
- What is *praiseworthy* about this?

So whether meditating on a verse or story in the Bible, or on something in your life—circumstances, an event, an experience, an encounter with someone, a part of creation—in fact, when thinking about *anything*, the Philippians 4:8 questions can be a helpful guide.

Meditation Method #13: Ask the Joseph Hall Questions of the Text

Joseph Hall (1574–1656) was a devoted Anglican bishop in Norwich, England. His 1606 book, *The Art of Divine Meditation*, was one of the best-selling and most influential books of its day. In this Puritan devotional classic he discussed and illustrated the use of ten questions helpful in meditating on Scripture. I find Hall’s questions extremely thought-provoking whenever I am preparing to preach or write or make any sort of presentation, but especially so during my devotional meditation on Scripture. I have modified and expanded them slightly to make them clearer to contemporary readers.

1. What is it (*define and/or describe* what it is) you are meditating upon?
2. What are its *divisions or parts*?
3. What *causes* it?
4. What does it *cause*; that is, what are its *fruits and effects*?
5. What is its *place, location, or use*?
6. What are its *qualities and attachments*?
7. What is *contrary, contradictory, or different* to it?
8. What *compares* to it?

9. What are its *titles or names*?
10. What are the *testimonies or examples of Scripture* about it?

The first question is the most difficult, but it is also the most important, for the answer becomes the “it” referred to in the following questions. So if the verse you were meditating upon were, say, Romans 8:28, your answer to the first question might be something like, “God’s control of all things for the good of His people.” Then “its divisions or parts” (from question two) would include “God’s control,” “all things,” “the good,” and “His people,” for these are the “divisions or parts” of “it” as defined in answer to question one.

You might find it useful to keep a copy of these questions in your Bible and digitally in locations where they’ll always be available to you.

Are ten questions too many for a single time of meditation? Then take one or two per day, perhaps using this method to meditate on a single verse for an entire week. Whether many or few, it’s often much easier in meditation to answer specific questions about the text than to think about it without any guidance at all. For this reason, besides those provided above you might develop other lists of questions to use in meditation. When you are sleepy or tired or distracted, looking for the answers to particular questions will help you minimize the mind-wandering that happens when there is no particular method to help you focus on the text.

Meditation Method #14: Set and Discover a Minimum Number of Insights from the Text

With this method you determine at the outset that you will not stop meditating on your text until you discover at least a certain number of insights from it. The first time I did this I was meditating on Hebrews 12:29: “For our God is a consuming fire.” I resolved to continue poring over the verse until I found a minimum of ten insights. In this case, I resolved to think of ten comparisons between God and fire. The first ones were rather easy: “God is light,” the Bible says in 1 John 1:5, and fire gives off light. Next, God is the ultimate Judge, and in the Bible fire is sometimes the means of God’s judgment. But after about four quick comparisons between God and fire, I had a more difficult time. But that’s when I began to go beyond what was rather simple or obvious to that which required more thought. Only then did I sense that I was growing past what was already familiar. If I had not set the bar at ten, I would have stopped at about four on that occasion, because that’s when the mental challenge came. But I often need that kind of mental challenge to go deeper in the Word of God.

I’ve had at least four friends confirm a legendary assignment each experienced in a seminary class on Bible study methods taught at Dallas Theological Seminary by professor Howard Hendricks. He would tell his students to come back to the next class with at least twenty-five observations on Acts 1:8. Having done so, they would be required in the next class to return with twenty-five more observations on that verse. Finally, they were given the assignment to make as many observations as they could beyond the original fifty. Most were thinking they had almost exhausted Acts 1:8 by that point, until Hendricks exhorted the class with, “Oh, by the way, the all-time record is over six hundred.”

Not every verse in the Bible is as fertile as Acts 1:8. Nevertheless, this method is founded upon the belief that an infinite mind has inspired every text in Scripture, and for that reason there’s always more to see there than you’ve yet seen, no matter how well you think you know a given verse. Perhaps it’s an observation, an insight, or an application—but there’s almost certainly something you’ve not previously noticed or articulated in that text.

Meditation Method #15: Find a Link or Common Thread Between All the Paragraphs or Chapters You Read

If you read one chapter and it has, say, three paragraphs, then search for a connection between all three. In Luke 15, for example, there is a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. All are found, and there is rejoicing. In Mark 5 we read of Jesus demonstrating His divinity by exercising authority over the spiritual realm, over illness, and over death.

If you read from more than one book of the Bible, look for a common thread in all that you read. Can you, for instance, see Jesus in the various chapters of your reading? Or how does each relate to the gospel? Or how would each speak to the “current crisis” in your life? You may eventually conclude from one or more of the chapters you’ve read that you can’t see any application whatsoever to your current crisis. But even when that’s so, there’s profit in mentally scouring the Scriptures, examining and reflecting on them in a way that’s far more thoughtful than mere reading.

Meditation Method #16: Ask How the Text Speaks to Your Current Issue or Question

Suppose the current issue in your life is financial. After you have completed your Bible reading, review what you’ve read and search for any texts that address or might apply to finances. Then consider what the text says, perhaps praying through the text or using one of the previous methods to meditate further. If the immediate concern in your life relates to your family, look for those verses that would have something to say about relationships. If you are wrestling with a persistent question, go back over all you’ve read in the past few minutes and scan it for something the Holy Spirit might illumine in relation to the answer. When you ask the Author of Scripture, “Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law” (Psalm 119:18), you may be surprised by the texts He uses to give you insight, understanding, or application regarding your issue or question.

Meditation Method #17: Use Meditation Mapping

Meditation mapping applies the principles of mind mapping to record one’s meditation on a text of Scripture. If you are unfamiliar with mind mapping or similar methods, you might want to briefly explore the topic on the Internet. It’s a quick study, especially if you find examples of basic mind maps. [13] Essentially a mind map is a diagram that outlines information in a more visually appealing and memorable way than words on lines. The idea you want to explore is placed in the center of a page. Then as ideas come, they are connected by lines to the central image, radiating out from it. Subcategories are similarly connected by thinner branches to the main ideas, and so forth. The use of simple images, symbols, and color is highly recommended.

Suppose you were to use this method to meditate on Romans 8:28. You’d begin by putting the words of that verse in the middle of the page, perhaps drawing a circle, box, or “cloud” around it. The first major branch radiating from it might be about “And we know,” and as you gave thought to how “we know,” as well as to the connection this verse has with the immediate context, you would connect your insights with lines or thinner branches to that first branch. The next large branch might be about “those who love God.” Minor branches on “who are they?” and “loving God” would grow out of this first-level branch. Next, you might have a major branch about “all things,” another on “work together,” and more. Each major branch would bear as much fruit as your meditations would produce.

Personally, this is one of my favorites. It’s not a different way to think, just a different way to write down what you think. But as fresh insights often follow fresh approaches, I’ve found this method of meditation on Scripture helps me to stay focused on the biblical text while stimulating my mental processes about what I’m seeing.

Don’t Rush—Take Time!

What value is there to reading one, three, or more chapters of Scripture only to find that after you’ve finished, you can’t recall a thing you’ve read? It’s better to read a small amount of Scripture and meditate on it than to read an extensive section without meditation.

Scotsman Maurice Roberts wrote,

Our age has been sadly deficient in what may be termed spiritual greatness. At the root of this is the modern disease of shallowness. We are all too impatient to meditate on the faith we profess. . . . It is not the busy skimming over religious books or the careless hastening through religious duties which makes for a strong Christian faith. Rather, it is unhurried meditation on gospel truths and the exposing of our minds to these truths that yields the fruit of sanctified character.

[14]

Read less (if necessary) in order to meditate more. Although many Christians need to find the time to increase their Bible reading, there may be some who are spending all the time they can reading the Bible. If you could not possibly add more time to your devotional schedule for meditating on your Scripture reading, read less in order to have some unhurried time for meditation. Even though you may find moments throughout the day when you meditate on God's Word (see Psalm 119:97), the best meditation generally occurs when it's part of your main daily encounter with the Bible.

May our experience in scriptural meditation be as joyful and fruitful as that of Jonathan Edwards, who penned these lines in his journal soon after his conversion: "I seemed often to see so much light exhibited by every sentence, and such a refreshing food communicated, that I could not get along in reading; often dwelling long on one sentence to see the wonders contained in it, and yet almost every sentence seemed to be full of wonders."^[15]

APPLYING GOD'S WORD—BENEFITS AND METHODS

God made all the essentials of the Bible—that is, those things that are essential for knowing Him—abundantly clear. Still, parts of the Bible are hard to understand. Even the apostle Peter said of the letters of Paul, "There are some things in them that are hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:16). Despite our occasional struggles to understand parts of Scripture, however, understanding the Bible isn't our chief problem. Much more often our difficulty lies in knowing how to apply the clearly understood parts of God's Word to everyday living. What does it say about raising my children? How should Scripture influence my decisions and relationships at work? What is the biblical perspective on the upcoming choice I must make? How can I know God better? These are the kinds of questions Bible readers ask frequently, thereby proving the urgency of learning the Discipline of applying God's Word.

The Value of Applying God's Word

The Bible promises the blessing of God on those who apply the Word of God to their lives. The classic New Covenant statement on the value of integrating the spiritual with the concrete is James 1:22-25:

Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

Pithy and powerful is Jesus' similar statement, "If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them" (John 13:17).

These verses tell us there can be a dangerous delusion in hearing God's Word. Without minimizing either the sufficiency of Scripture or the power of the Holy Spirit to work through even the most casual brush with the Bible, we can frequently be deluded about the Scripture's impact on our lives. According to James 1:22-25, we can experience God's truth so powerfully that what the Lord wants us to do becomes as plain to us as our face in the morning mirror. But if we do not apply the truth as we meet it, regardless of how wonderful the experience of discovering the truth has been, we deceive ourselves if we think we will be blessed for giving attention to the Bible on those occasions. The one who "will be blessed in his doing" is the one who *does* what Scripture says.

For someone to "be blessed in his doing" is the equivalent of the promises of blessing, success, and prosperity given in Joshua 1:8 and Psalm 1:1-3 to those who meditate on God's Word. That's because meditation should ultimately lead to application, to Christlike obedience. When God instructed Joshua to meditate on His Word day and night, He told him the purpose for meditating was "so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it." The promise "then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success" would be fulfilled, not as the result of meditation only, but as God's blessing upon meditation-forged application.

Expect to Discover an Application

Because God wills for you to be a doer of His Word, you may be confident that He wants you to find an application whenever you come to the Scriptures. For the same reason you may believe that the Holy Spirit is willing to help you discern how to flesh out your insights. Therefore, open the Book expectantly. Anticipate the discovery of a practical response to the truth of God. It makes a big difference to come to the Bible with the faith that you will find an application for it as opposed to believing that you won't.

The Puritan minister and writer Thomas Watson, whose influence was so great he was called by Charles Spurgeon “the nursing mother of gigantic evangelical divines,”^[16] encouraged anticipation about application when he said,

Take every word as spoken to yourselves. When the word thunders against sin, think thus: “God means my sins”; when it presseth any duty, “God intends me in this.” Many put off Scripture from themselves, as if it only concerned those who lived in the time when it was written; but if you intend to profit by the word, bring it home to yourselves: a medicine will do no good, unless it be applied.^[17]

Because of God's inspiration of Scripture, believe that what you are reading was meant for you—at least in some Christ-related way—as well as for the first recipients of the message. Without that attitude you'll rarely perceive the application of a passage of Scripture to your personal situation.

Understand the Text

A misunderstanding about the meaning of a verse leads to misguided applications of it. For instance, some have applied the injunction of Colossians 2:21—“Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch”—to prohibit just about everything imaginable. And while there may be good reasons to abstain from some of the things this verse has been used against, the text is misapplied when used that way because its meaning is misunderstood. When taken in context, it's clear that these words were actually the slogans of an ascetic group the apostle Paul was denouncing as an enemy of the gospel. So if you were reading this verse and thought it could apply to your need to lose weight, you might be pleased to know that's an invalid application from an incorrect interpretation. (However, a different diet might be the personal application the Holy Spirit would lead you to from 1 Corinthians 9:27.)

Watson was right when he said, “Take every word as spoken to yourselves.” But we cannot do that until we understand how it was intended for those who heard it first. If you take every word of God's call to Abram in Genesis 12:1-7 as spoken to yourself, you'll soon be moving to Israel. But if you understand that particular call as unique to Abram, you can still discover the timeless truths within it and apply every word to yourself. Have you followed the call of God to come to Christ? Are you willing to obey the will of God wherever He might call you—to a new job, a new location, the mission field, and so on?

We must understand how a passage applied when it was first given before we can understand how it applies now. When Jesus said, “Today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43), its immediate application was for the thief on the cross beside Him. Because these words are part of Scripture, however, and because “all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable” (2 Timothy 3:16), the Lord intends for them to have application to all believers. Obviously, the contemporary application is not that each Christian will die today and be with Jesus in paradise. But one way we can apply this text is in terms of preparing for death. We realize that it is possible for death to come today and then examine ourselves about our readiness for it. We also can apply the text regarding the presence of Christ. As Christians, Christ is always present within us, thus He is with us today even though we are not yet in paradise. How does a fresh awareness of Christ's presence affect your prayers or your outlook on the rest of the day?

Jesus' promise to the thief is an example of how not every promise is meant to be applied today in exactly the same way as it was originally. Yet many other promises are general, universal, and perpetual in their application. One obvious example is John 3:16. Another is Romans 10:9. How can we know which passages should be applied somewhat differently than when first given? Here is where a growing

knowledge of Scripture through hearing, reading, and, in particular, studying the Bible pays dividends. For the better we understand the Bible, the better equipped we will be to apply it.

Having said all that, I maintain that most of Scripture is plain and straightforward in its basic meaning. Our problem continues to be more of a lack of action than comprehension. The words of Scripture must be understood to be applied, but until we apply them, we don't really understand them.

Meditate to Discern Application

We've already noted that meditation isn't an end in itself. Nevertheless, deep thinking on the truths and spiritual realities of Scripture is the often-neglected key to putting them into practice. It is by means of meditation that the facts of biblical information transform into practical application.

If we read, hear, or study God's Word without meditating on it, we shouldn't be surprised that applying Scripture to concrete situations is so difficult. Perhaps we could even train a parrot to learn every verse of Scripture that we ourselves have memorized, but if we don't apply those verses to life they won't be of much more lasting value to us than to the parrot. How does the Word memorized become the Word applied? It happens through meditation.

Most information, even biblical information, passes through our minds like water through a sieve. There's usually so much information coming in each day that we retain very little. But when we meditate, the truth remains and percolates. We can smell its aroma more fully and taste it better. As it brews in our brain, the insights come. The heart is warmed by meditation, and cold truth is melted into passionate action.

Psalms 119:15 puts it this way: "I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways." It was through meditation on God's Word that the psalmist discerned how to regard God's ways for living, that is, how to be a doer of them. It's no different for us. The way to determine how any Scripture applies to the real situations of life is to meditate on that Scripture.

Ask Application-Oriented Questions of the Text

As we noticed earlier, asking questions of the text is one of the best ways to meditate. The more questions you ask and answer about a verse of Scripture, the more you will understand it and the more clearly you will see how to apply it.

Here are some examples of application-oriented questions that can help you become a doer of God's Word:

- Does this text reveal something I should believe about God?
- Does this text reveal something I should praise or thank or trust God for?
- Does this text reveal something I should pray about for myself or others?
- Does this text reveal something I should have a new attitude about?
- Does this text reveal something I should make a decision about?
- Does this text reveal something I should do for the sake of Christ, others, or myself?

There are times when a verse of Scripture will have such evident application for your life that it will virtually jump off the page, take you by the shoulders, and urge you to do what it says. More often than not, however, you must interview the verse, patiently asking questions of it until a down-to-earth response becomes clear.

Respond Specifically

An encounter with God through His Word should result in at least one specific response. In other words, after you have concluded your time of Bible intake, you should be able to name at least one definite response you have made or will make to what you have encountered. That response may be an explicit act of faith, worship, praise, thanksgiving, or prayer. It may take the form of asking someone's forgiveness or speaking a word of encouragement. The response may involve forsaking a sin or showing an act of love. Regardless of the nature of that response, consciously commit yourself to at least one action to take following the intake of God's Word.

How important is this? How often have you closed your Bible and suddenly realized you can't remember a thing you've read? How many Bible studies have you participated in and how many sermons have you heard where you left without any imprint of Scripture on your life at all? I've known people who were in as many as six Bible studies per week, and yet they grew only in knowledge and not in Christlikeness because they were not applying what they were learning. Despite all their Bible intake, their prayer life wasn't strong, they weren't influencing lost people with the gospel, and their family life was strained. If we will begin to discipline ourselves to determine at least one specific response to the text before walking away from it, we will much more rapidly grow in grace. Without this kind of application, we aren't doers of God's Word.

MORE APPLICATION

Will you begin a plan of memorizing God's Word? If you've been a Christian for very long, you probably have already memorized much more Scripture than you realize. One of the verses you may know is Philippians 4:13: "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." Do you believe this verse is true? Do you believe that the "all" mentioned there includes Scripture memory? Since you *can* do it, will you do it? When will you begin?

Will you cultivate the Discipline of meditating on God's Word? Occasional Godward thoughts are not meditation. "A man may think on God every day," said William Bridge, "and meditate on God no day."^[18] God calls us through the Scriptures to develop the practice of dwelling on Him in our thoughts.

By now I'm sure you realize that cultivating the Discipline of meditation involves a commitment of time. Bridge, one of the older but best-ever evangelical writers on meditation, anticipated this problem of making time for meditation:

Oh, saith one, I would think on God, and I would meditate on God with all my heart, but meditation work is a work of time, it will cost time, and I have no time; my hands are so full of business, and so full of employment, I have no time for this work. Meditation is not a transient thought, but it is a work of time, and will ask time, and I have no time. Mark therefore what David saith in Psalm [119], "Lord incline my heart unto thy testimonies," how so? "Turn away mine eyes from beholding vanity." The way to have one's heart inclined to the testimonies of God, is to turn away one's eyes from these outward vanities. Would you therefore meditate on God and the things of God, then take heed that your hearts, and your hands, be not too full of the world and the employments thereof. . . .

Friends, there is an art, and a divine skill of meditation, which none can teach but God alone. Would you have it, go then to God, and beg of God these things.^[19]

Here's the question we naturally tend to ask at this point: "Will the Discipline of meditation be worth this commitment of my time?" I cannot answer better than Bridge:

It is a help to knowledge, thereby your knowledge is raised. Thereby your memory is strengthened. Thereby your hearts are warmed. Thereby you will be freed from sinful thoughts. Thereby your hearts will be tuned to every duty. Thereby you will grow in grace. Thereby you will fill up all the chinks and crevices of your lives, and know how to spend your spare time, and improve that for God. Thereby you will draw good out of evil. And thereby you will converse with God, have communion with God, and enjoy God. And I pray, is not here profit enough to sweeten the voyage of your thoughts in meditation.^[20]

When you consider what the Scriptures say about meditation, and when you weigh the testimonies of some of the godliest men and women of Christian history, the importance and value of Christian meditation for progress in Christian growth is undeniable.

Ponder one more quotation on the subject. It presents a challenge about meditation from Richard Baxter, the most practical of all Puritan writers. I join him in making this challenge to you regarding the cultivation of the Discipline of meditation:

If, by this means, thou dost not find an increase of all thy graces, and dost not grow beyond the stature of common Christians, and art not made more serviceable in thy place, and more precious in the eyes of all discerning persons; if thy soul enjoy not more communion with God, and thy life be not fuller of comfort, and hast it not readier by thee at a dying hour: then cast away these directions, and exclaim against me for ever as a deceiver.[21]

Will you prove yourself an “applier” of the Word? You have read many verses from the Word of God in this chapter. What will you do in response to these passages of Scripture?

Most of us would consider ourselves to be doers of the Word and not merely hearers. But “prove it,” as one widely respected translation of the Bible (NASB) renders the beginning of James 1:22—“Prove yourselves doers of the word.” How will you prove that you are a doer of the Word of God as it’s been presented to you here?

The Discipline of Bible intake—especially the Discipline of applying God’s Word—will often be difficult, and for many reasons, not the least of which is spiritual opposition. J. I. Packer makes that sobering point:

If I were the devil, one of my first aims would be to stop folk from digging into the Bible. Knowing that it is the Word of God, teaching men to know and love and serve the God of the Word, I should do all I could to surround it with the spiritual equivalent of pits, thorn hedges, and man traps, to frighten people off. . . . At all costs I should want to keep them from using their minds in a disciplined way to get the measure of its message.[22]

Despite the difficulty and spiritual opposition, are you willing, at all costs, to begin using your mind “in a disciplined way” to feed on the Word of God “for the purpose of godliness”?