

## Walking with God in the Word

If you think about it, we were taught some really strange things as children. Parents get away with this because it's in the form of rhymes and songs. How about this song that many believe had its origins in the Black Death that decimated London in the 1600s. "Ring around the Rosie, pocket full of posies. Ashes, ashes, we all fall down." Of course, others say, "No, no, that's all wrong. Ring around the Rosie has its origins in ancient pagan worship rituals." I'm not sure that's any better.

How about this one where we put our kids to bed with a bedtime prayer about dying in their sleep? "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." Very good. Let's spend all night staring at the ceiling.

Then there's, "Rub a dub, dub. Three men in a tub." What? Wait a minute! That's just creepy.

We better call Family Services for this next one. "Rock-a-bye baby, in the treetop." Who puts their baby in the top of a tree? "When the wind blows, the cradle will rock." Sitting their seat on top of the dryer I understand, but I this is pushing things way too far. "When the bough breaks, the cradle will fall, and down will come baby, cradle and all." Why do we sing this to our children? No wonder they grow up messed up. We sing songs to them about infanticide.

But there is one song many of us learned as children that is right on the money. "The B-I-B-L-E. Yes, that's the book for me. I stand alone on the Word of God, the B-I-B-L-E." It's true. The Bible is an amazing book. It is the word of God, and we can stand on it, whether we have to stand alone, or with other. We can stand on the Bible.

Here's the thing about the Bible. You never outgrow it. It isn't just for children's songs. Paul wrote to the young minister Timothy, "*But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Tim. 3:14-15).*"

Timothy had grown with the Word from the time he was a baby and God's word was taught to him by his mother and grandmother we learn from 2 Timothy 1:5. And he had grown with the word until he was an adult and now he's a leader in the church, but still God's word is able to make him wise.

Timothy never outgrew the Scriptures. Paul goes on to write in verses 16-17, "*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*"

Here's the thing. We know from polls done by Barna, Pew, Gallup, that we know the Bible is important. We believe the Bible is important. But most of us don't make it a regular part of our lives. Half of us, as Christians in the church, don't read the Bible at all. Only 20% read the Bible on a regular basis, and according to that study was 4 times a week.

We have just started a new series called Walking with God, and in this series we are looking at spiritual habits for ordinary people. The traditional name for these habits are spiritual disciplines. These are

habits that when we practice them we are exercising our spiritual muscles so that we can become the people God wants us to be. These are the workouts for your soul.

We are going to look at a number of disciplines or spiritual habits over the next several weeks. They are all important. They are all valuable. But there are two of them that are more important than all of these others.

Let me switch metaphors. These two habits are like the two rails of a set of train tracks that will guide the locomotive of your faith to holiness and heaven. God provides the fuel. He provides the fire, but these two tracks are what point you in the right direction. These twin rails are the tracks of communication with God. He communicates with you, and you communicate with Him. If you do these two things you will experience 70% of what the spiritual disciplines can do for you. In fact, most of the other disciplines are branches or stations along the way.

### **What Bible Intake Includes**

These two rails are Bible intake and prayer. We're going to look at Bible intake this morning and prayer next week. I'm using Bible intake as an umbrella term to describe a whole series of interrelated habits that have to do bringing Scripture into our lives.

- **Hearing** – The simplest means of taking God's word into our lives is by hearing God's word. We do this by listening to sermons, lessons, Bible podcasts, and audio Bibles. Jesus said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it (Luke 11:28)." Paul writes in Romans 10:17, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." Most of the earliest Christians were not able to read the word. The New Testament hadn't been fully written and collected yet. They could hear the letters read aloud in church. They could listen to the word of the apostles and prophets. Even if it was written down books were too expensive for most people to afford and many of them could not read. Don't underestimate the power of hearing God's word. But it doesn't stop there. Don't think that hearing one sermon a week is a good diet of Biblical truth. If you ate one meal a week, you would die.
- **Reading** – Next comes reading God's word. It's one thing to hear it, but another to read it for yourself. In Acts 17:11 the Bereans heard the apostle Paul preach the word, but Luke commends them, "Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true."
- **Studying**. Studying God's word is to dive deep. Jerry Bridges says, "Reading gives us breadth. Study gives us depth." In the O.T. we read about Ezra who led the Israelites back to Jerusalem from Exile and inspired a time of revival. How did he do this? Ezra 7:10 says, "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." In the N.T. Paul calls on the young minister, Timothy, to rightly divide the word of truth. Study is to go beyond a passing familiarity to a thorough understanding. Study is to compare one Scripture with other passages side by side. It is to use a Bible dictionary to better understand the words used. It is to use a Bible concordance to more completely understand what the Bible has to say on a subject. It is to make use of a good study Bible or good commentary.

- **Meditation** – In many traditions meditation means to empty your mind. In Christianity meditation is to fill your mind with God’s word. Psalm 1:1-2 says,

Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night.

Meditation is when we take the time to stew on what we just read. We think about it. We reflect on our lives in light of it. We pray about it. Maybe we write down our observations and questions. I like to say we marinate in God’s word. I

Donald Whitney uses a tea bag as an illustration. You mind is like a steaming hot cup of water and the tea bag is God’s word. Hearing God’s word is like a single dip of the tea bag into the hot water. A little bit of the tea flavoring seeps out, but not much. You would get much more with repeated soakings of the bag. Reading and studying are like additional plunges of the tea bag into the cup of your mind. The more frequently the tea enters the water, the more permeating its effect. Meditation, however, is like immersing the bag completely and letting it brew until every bit of flavor is extracted and completely saturates the water. The cup of hot water is now a deep reddish brown. When we meditate on God’s word it likewise colors our thinking about ourselves, about life, about God, about others, about faith, about the world, about everything. And it flavors everything we say and do.

- **Memorizing** – The final and most thorough way we bring God’s word into our lives is by memorization. It’s much easier to hear, study and meditate when its permanently etched in your heart. The Psalmist writes in Psalm 119:11, “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.” It is possible to hear, read, and study it enough that you simply know it by repeated use, but there are also some well-designed systematic approaches that empower you to learn Scripture much more quickly.

### **Some Practical Advice**

I could easily do several sermons on this, and maybe we should do that at some point. I know several of you have regular Bible reading plans you follow. Some of you couples do it together. So to you, I say, keep it up. To the rest of us, if you’re struggling with this, or don’t know where to start, let me give some practical advice to help.

#### **1. Make a time and a place that fits your life.**

There is not a one size fits all Bible study plan. Some of us are morning Bible, so staying up 30 minutes late to read your Bible isn’t going to be productive. Some of us night owls, so getting up 30 minutes early will just end in frustration. You need to find a time and place that fits with you. Maybe that’s in a breakroom at work, maybe it’s while you wait in the pick-up line at school. You can turn off the radio and put down your smartphone, and use that time for reading God’s word.

But here’s the bottom line. You need to make a time and a place. You need to carve out the space in your life. If you are waiting until you have some extra time. It will never happen. If you are waiting until

its convenient. It will never be. It is a discipline. It will take some work and effort. You will never experience the blessing of being in the word and the word being in you, if you don't make a time and place.

## **2. Have a Plan**

Secondly, have a plan. Having a plan makes it easier to stick with the discipline. That plan doesn't always have to be starting in Genesis and ending in Revelation. Many people have started out with that plan, and get bogged down in Leviticus. You can mix it up. Read some in the O.T. and some in the N.T. You can get a chronological Bible or Bible reading plan which puts all the scripture in chronological order. Read and a study a gospel, then go to an O.T. book of history, then to one of Paul's letters. I would suggest going through whole books of the Bible so that you can understand them in context. The You Version app on your phones has many Bible reading plans you can follow.

If you're just starting out at this let me suggest some good places to start. The gospel Luke or John are good places to get to know Jesus. The little letter of James is very practical and understandable. There are two books of poetry that should be a regular part of any Bible plan. The Psalms are great for encouraging you and inspiring your soul. The Proverbs are filled with nuggets of timeless wisdom. And both of these books can be digested in small bite-sized pieces and perfect for those just wading into reading the Bible.

You can read the whole Bible in a year with little more than three chapters a day. It takes just 70 hours and 40 minutes to read the Bible aloud at a comfortable rate. You can do that in less than 12 minutes a day. If you give yourself 30 minutes to give time for prayer and meditation, that's easily doable.

## **3. Read with prayer**

Third, read with prayer. You can pray before you start reading. You can pray when your done reading. You can even pray in the middle if there's something you find confusing, difficult, or your mind is simply beginning to wander. I don't want to steal from the prayer sermon here, but remember prayer and scripture are two rails on the same set of tracks. When you pray, ask for God's help. Ask Him to teach you. Ask for His Spirit to guide you, to help you understand, to show you things, and to help you learn. According to Paul in Ephesians, God's Word is the sword of the Spirit, so ask for His help.

## **4. Author's Intended Meaning**

The next thing to keep in mind is that our initial goal in any Bible study is to discover the author intended meaning. Call it the AIM. Author's Intended Meaning. What was the original intent of the passage? What was Paul intending to say when he wrote this. What was Moses' meaning when he wrote that?

Too often, we treat the Bible like some amorphous piece of modern art. A family stands in an art museum looking at framed canvas of color splotches on the wall. The wife says, "I think it's a commentary on the meaninglessness of modern life." The husband says, "I think it's a nude woman

holding a basket of fruit. Their 8 year boy says, “I think it looks like a splashes of different color. Look, they couldn’t even stay within the lines. I can do better than that.”

We get together in small groups and Bible studies and read a passage of Scripture and then take turns saying, “What this means to me is...” As if a Bible verse means one thing to you, and another thing to you, and another to you. You’re answering the wrong question. It doesn’t matter what it means to you.

What matters is what it means. The Bible means what God meant it to mean. Any passage means what its human author was inspired for it to mean. The right question is what did David mean here? What did Isaiah mean? What did Luke mean? What did John mean? Only when we understand what the AIM, the author’s intended meaning is, can we begin to wrestle with this question, “How does this apply to me?”

## **5. Remember the context**

Next, we always need to keep the context in mind. When I was in seminary, on day one of Bible Interpretation class we learned the first three rules of Bible interpretation were context, context, context. One of the worst things we do to the Bible is we break it up into a bunch of disjointed pieces. We treat it like it’s nothing more than desk-top calendar full of quotes- a quote for this day and a quote for that day. A quote for this occasion and a quote that occasion.

But beyond a tee-shirt slogan or a coffee mug motto, we learn really God’s word in context. Every verse is a part of a greater story. Ideas are connected. Arguments and principles develop over the span of many pages and multiple chapters. Scripture can become dangerous, destructive, and divisive when we ignore the context. There are two key contexts to keep in mind when reading your Bible.

### **A. Historical**

The first is the historical context. The Bible is not a “once-upon-a-time” fairytale. These are real people in real places and events that really happened in history. We need to understand that historical context to understand and apply the Bible. This is where we ask the who, what, when, where, and why questions.

Who’s talking and who are they talking to? What’s going on here? Where are they at? What’s the occasion? Why is this happening? Understanding the historical context is why as Christians we know that we can enjoy shrimp scampi and comfy poly-cotton blend tee shirt, because we know that the Old Testament laws against such things were written to a certain people at a certain time for a certain reason, and as Christians under the new covenant, those things no longer apply to us.

### **B. Literary**

The other significant context is the literary context, or the textual context. The Bible is not a single book. It’s a collection of 66 separate documents. Some of them are letters, some of them are books of history. Some are collections of poetry. One was a song book. Each letter, each song, each poem, each book has its own context that affects the meaning.

It can be dangerous to start treating the Bible like a magic 8 ball and taking random verses and applying them to your life out of context. One guy who was a brand new Christian was seeking God's guidance in his life, and so he opened his Bible at random and read the first passage he saw hoping to find God's will for his life. Here's what he read. Hosea 1:2, "Go marry a prostitute and have children with her."

Maybe that's an extreme example, but let me give you a common one that we see all the time, but it's still out of context, and that is Jeremiah 29:11, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Plans to never give you up, never gonna let you down, never gonna run around and desert you.'" It's a great "feel good" verse. Many people have it as their life verse. It's printed on greeting cards, plaques, and Facebook memes. Many claim this as a promise from God. There's only one problem. God never made this promise to you. This isn't a promise made to all believers for all time. This verse was a promise to the ancient tribe of Judah while they were in captivity in Babylon because they had rebelled against God. This was a part of a promise that they would eventually be freed, which happened 150 years later.

## 6. Live What You Learn

My final bit of practical advice is live what we learn. The goal of Bible reading, Bible study, meditation or memorization isn't merely to grow in knowledge. You can have lots of Bible knowledge and yet live far from God. The goal is to put the truth of Scripture into practice. The goal is life-change, transformation.

We must respond to what we read. We must engage the word with obedience and submission. Let me share with a good set of application questions you can ask of any Bible passage you study. The more of these questions you can ask and answer, the better you will understand that passage and how it applies to your life. These come from New Testament professor Matthew Harmon's book *Asking the Right Questions*.

- What does God want me to understand/think? –transformed mind
- What does God want me to believe? –beyond knowledge, data
- What does God want me to desire? – affections/motivation
- What does God want me to do? – When God's word changes what we think, believe, and desire, it changes what we do.

Here is another set of questions that guided me for years. Don't remember original source, but goes back to college. Guided my study for years. I had a color coded system of highlighting relating to these questions.

1. Is there a command to obey?
2. Is there an example to follow/obey?
3. Is there a truth to believe?
4. Is there a promise to claim?
5. Is there a sin to avoid?
6. Is there a principle to follow?

Before we get to the invitation, I have asked Amber Theobald to share some of her thoughts on Scripture memorization.

If you want to know God, you must know his word.