

Session 6 - Reading the Bible Devotionally

“Christians feed on Scripture. Holy Scripture nurtures the holy community as food nurtures the human body. Christians don’t simply learn or study or use Scripture; we assimilate it, take it into our lives in such a way that it gets metabolized into acts of love, cups of cold water, missions into all the world, healing and evangelism and justice in Jesus’ name, hands raised in adoration of the Father, feet washed in company with the Son.”

– Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book*

We have defined already the practice of **exegesis** (understanding the setting and historical/cultural purpose of a passage) and the process of **hermeneutics** (carrying that meaning into today’s 21st century context). While these tools are valid and often essential to an informed understanding of God’s Word, we would be remiss if we did not spend time discussing the importance of a third approach to reading Scripture that is best known as **devotional reading**. In his book *Life with God: Reading the Bible for Spiritual Transformation*, Richard J. Foster warns that we must not allow ourselves to get stuck in the two most common reasons why Christians read the Bible: (1) for information and knowledge alone, and (2) to find a supernatural formula that will solve our problems of the day. The Bible is God’s book, Foster reminds us; and to explore a book intended primarily to reveal God’s loving and steadfast heart to us, we must read prayerfully, quietly, and with a heart open to the possibilities of how the Lord might choose to speak to us on any given day. Foster calls this approach “The Immanuel Principle.” “Immanuel” is a name that means “God with us,” and devotional reading must be approached with an understanding that the Bible is essentially a text about human life with God.

1. *What does the phrase “devotional reading” mean to you? How might we tie together the words “devotion,” “read,” and “God” into a practice that ultimately will draw us into a more intimate relationship with the Lord?*

Another way to reduce the complexity of such terms as exegetical, hermeneutical, and devotional is to consider **informational** versus **formational** reading. Most of us have been trained to conquer a text (informational reading): We analyze the meaning, context, and format in an effort to cull any information relevant to our needs. In essence, we take control of the text by picking apart its inner workings until, ultimately, we are in control and have arrived at a deeper understanding of the information at hand. Consider, for example, if you sit down to read a magazine article titled “The End of Europe” that bemoans the unraveling of the global economy in recent years. Assuming the topic interests you, you might wonder the motivation of the author and/or publication source, you might criticize the facts and opinions that are and are not included, you might critique how the information is presented, and you might reread details in an effort to remember them. We were all taught to read critically in our grade school/ high school years, and we subconsciously still employ such techniques, whether we are reading a pamphlet on how to set up an iPod or opening an epistle in the New Testament.

2. *What is an example of a kind of “informational reading” you currently do? Consider the actual text: How, specifically, do you seek to conquer it?*

When we read formationally, on the other hand, we open our hearts and our ears and allow God to set the agenda; rather than striving to understand by conquering the text (informational Scripture reading), we instead allow the text to conquer us – to form us spiritually (formational Scripture reading).

3. *What specific mindset shifts and/or steps would it take for you to alter your approach to reading from informational (exegetic/hermeneutic) to formational (devotional)? What will it take to set aside that subconscious need to conquer a text and instead allow God to be in charge of your time with His Word?*

The opening pages of *The Spiritual Formation Bible* (NIV) offer helpful suggestions for formational Scripture reading:

- *Make listening for God's voice a top priority.* Focus your attention on what God is saying to you as you read. Listen for God to speak to you in and through, around and within, over and behind the words. Keep asking yourself, "What is God seeking to say to me in all of this?" Allow the text to become an instrument of God's control in your life. Respond to what you read with your heart and spirit. Open and close your devotional reading time with prayer, seeking to unfetter your heart before the Lord and hear what words He may have for you in response.
- *Let your response take place down in the deeper levels of your being.* Ask yourself questions such as: How do I feel about what is being said? How am I reacting? How am I responding down deep within myself? What is going on inside of me? Then begin to ask yourself "why" questions: Why do I feel this way? Why am I responding in this manner? Why do I have these feelings? Let this exercise be an opportunity to get in touch with the deeper layers of your being. What do your reactions tell you about your habits, your attitudes, your perspectives, your responses and your reactions to life? Are you beginning to see something about yourself? Thomas á Kempis said, "A humble knowledge of ourselves is a surer way to God than is the search for depth of learning." That humble knowledge of yourself can come when you read Scripture if you balance your cognitive response pattern with this affective response from deep within your being.
- *Prepare to read by quieting yourself.* You can't run in, sit down, pick up the text and read Scripture formatively. You have to "center down," to use the old Quaker phrase – become still, relinquish your agenda and acknowledge the presence of God. You may have to relax first in order to do this. When you do, you may find that no word addresses you out of that text on that day, but the constant discipline of preparing yourself and entering into formational reading will itself be spiritually forming to your soul.

4. *Which of the above bulleted items sounds the most challenging for you personally? Why?*

Formational or devotional Scripture reading demands a mindset that runs counter to the conquer-the-text approach we have all been taught. Some of the unique characteristics of devotional reading include the following:

- *Depth*. Informational reading seeks to cover as much material as possible as quickly as possible, while formational reading involves smaller portions of Scripture. The point is not to just get through the text, but to become personally involved with it. Formational reading is concerned with depth, so we may find ourselves “holding on” to just one sentence or paragraph or page for a while. We allow the passage to open out to us its deeper dynamics and multiple layers of meaning. We let the text intrude into our life and address us.
- *Openness*. In formational reading, we let the text master us. We come to the text with an openness to hear, to receive, and to respond. This may feel risky because it lays us open to unforeseen conclusions.
- *Humility*. Formational reading requires a humble and willing approach, which requires a new inner posture in which we are willing to relinquish our insights and purposes. We stand ourselves before Scripture and await its address.
- *Mystery*. Informational reading can be characterized by a problem-solving mentality. When we do respond, we often read our needs and desires into the Scripture, asking, Does this passage solve my problems, answer my questions, meet my needs. Formational reading invites us to become open to the whole mystery of God. We allow God to address us however He may wish. Eventually, we may discover that problem-solving dynamics emerge from the encounter, but we relinquish the right to solve our problems with Scripture.

5. *Which of the above bulleted items sounds the most challenging for you personally? Why?*

If this sounds daunting to you, please remember that any new habit takes time. Even five minutes per day dedicated to praying and reading Scripture devotionally can have a profound effect on how you approach the events of that day. Consider, too, the virtuous circle of Scripture reading: Over time, the more you read the Bible, the more you will understand other parts of the

Bible, and so on, in a virtuous circle. The more you read about the life of Jesus in the Gospels, the more the Old Testament messianic prophecies will make sense to you and become exciting foreshadows of what God was about to do. The more saturated you are in Scripture, the richer it becomes.

Devotional time can be of your own devising, whether you decide to read devotionally through the Psalms or the Gospels or some of Paul's epistles. Another option is to find a resource that suggests daily devotionals for you. If you simply search "devotional" online, you will find a number of outlines for daily readings. Christian publishers like Zondervan and Integrity offer a variety of devotionals geared toward specific populations: busy dads, working moms, grandparents, teens, children, etc. Some offer both Old Testament and New Testament selections, some incorporate discussion of the texts, some present a thought or focus for the day, and so on.

6. *Have you ever read a daily devotional? If so, which one(s)? If not, what kind of devotional sounds most appealing to you?*

In *Daily Light*, for example, we get a year's worth of twice-daily devotionals first compiled by Jonathan Bagster in London, England, in 1794. Republished by Anne Graham Lotz in recent years, this popular devotional incorporates five or more Scripture selections under a single theme in each morning and evening entry. The selections are short enough to demand only minutes of reading time, although remember that the goal of formational reading is not quantity but intentional, Spirit-led quality. In *Jesus Calling*, another popular daily devotional, Sarah Young has selected one or more Scriptures for each day, and she presents them in personalized language intended to suggest Christ's voice to us. In a September entry, for example, Young presents John 15:13 as follows: "I am your best friend, as well as your King. Walk hand in hand with me through your life. Together we will face whatever each day brings: pleasures, hardships, adventures, disappointments."

7. *What kind of daily devotional approach do you think would work best at this stage of your life? Why?*

If reading Scripture on your own rather than relying on a devotional book sounds more appealing to you, keep in mind that there are many tried and true techniques for reading Scripture formationally. Some of these approaches include the following:

- *The Psalms*. Nowhere else in the Bible can we find a self-sufficient prayer book that addresses God directly, climbing at times to heights of elated joyfulness and sliding at other points into pits of despair and vengefulness. The book of Psalms is a collection of sung prayers that teach us to be honest and transparent before the Lord.
- *The Promises*. Another approach is to find a passage of Scripture that speaks a promise and insert your name, allowing yourself to receive personally the promises of God and learn to respond from the heart. Insert your name in the blanks of this Isaiah 55 passage, for example: “Come, _____ who is thirsty, come to the waters; and _____ who has no money, come, but and eat! _____, why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, _____, and eat what is good ... hear me, that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, _____.”
- *Lectio Divina*. Reading, reflecting, responding, and resting is the basic rhythm of an often-used approach to Scripture called “lectio divina” (Latin for “divine reading”). After selecting a brief section of Scripture, (1) read the passage slowly, (2) sit in quiet prayerfulness, listening for what the Lord might have for you, (3) respond to God in prayer, (4) repeat steps 1-3 with the same passage three times, if possible, and (5) rest in the mercy and peace of God’s words to you.
- *The Ignatian Method*. This approach invites us to enter the narrative of a particular Bible passage, picturing the situation and identifying with the characters who populate the drama. As you read a specific passage, consider where you might be physically in the scene, what you would be thinking and feeling, what you would see and hear and taste and smell, and how this scene might relate to your experience with God and your current joys and struggles.

8. *You've hopefully learned not just about new methods of reading Scripture but even about new ways of cultivating an intimate relationship with God. What stands out to you from this session that you might like to try?*

9. *Close by having one person read Philippians 3:7-14 slowly, phrase by phrase, savoring each thought. Then pray for one another.*

10. *For next week's study, it would be helpful if someone could bring a concordance and/or a topical index of the Bible.*