



FOUNDATIONS

WEEK THREE: PRIVATE DEVOTIONS

INTRODUCTION

I once read a story about an expedition into the interior of the Congo. The explorers and cartographers hired local villagers to carry their equipment into the jungle. The villagers, though slight of build and stature, were known for their ability to carry enormous loads over great distances in short periods of time.

The carriers proved true to their reputation. For the first three days, they hoisted the heavy parcels to their heads and carried the expedition deep into the interior. On the fourth day, however, the porters refused to move. After several vain attempts to raise the villagers to their feet, the officer in charge of the expedition turned to his translator in exasperation, “Why won’t they move?” The translator shrugged his shoulders and turned to one of the porters. “Why won’t you move?” The porter’s answer was as simple as it was profound. “We have traveled too far too fast. Today we will wait for our souls to catch up to us.”¹

We live in a day where we seldom allow “our souls to catch up to us.”

Listen to one author’s description of what he calls destructive busyness.

I had accumulated a few months of busyness (I mean really busy!) in my work. Now, there is a busyness that reflects a plan of activity, a pattern of priorities, and a sense of purposefulness. It is a good and satisfying busyness through which one grows and increases competence. But there is also a busyness (a destructive busyness, actually) that reflects a chaotic way of life—a way of doing in which one is simply responding to the next thing in the day. It makes no difference whether it has significance; it’s just the next thing, and one does it because it’s there to do... I was swept along in that second kind of busyness, much like someone being swept along in the rapids of a raging river. Out of control. Fearful of capsizing. Feeling quite unprotected. For several months I had been... doing the work of an ambitious, anxious-to-prove-himself organizational leader.²

¹ Recreated from a book I read nearly 30 years ago. I believe I first encountered the story in Gordon MacDonald’s “Rekindling Your Spiritual Passion.” No longer in print.

² MacDonald, Gordon. *Ordering Your Private World*, Revised and Updated. Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group and Imprint of Thomas Nelson, 2017.

The same kind of busyness often characterizes the 24/7 routine of the ambitious; anxious to prove themselves super mom or super dad as well.

We have an endless array of really good things we can give ourselves to. We are not languishing for a lack of good things, we are languishing because of an overabundance of good things that keeps us from the very best thing.

THE DANGER OF DISTRACTION

Even though the Bible was written in a far simpler time and place, it warns against the dangers of “destructive busyness.” One of Jesus’ most poignant parables answers the burning question, “Why do some people flourish in the faith and others do not?”

Mark sets the scene for us:

Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water’s edge. ² He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said... (Mark 4:1-2)

Mark not only tells us that Jesus loved to tell stories, he seems to be saying that this particular story captures the heart of all his other stories. “While he taught many things in parables, here is the heart of what he taught.”

The story has to do with our responsiveness to the word of God. We are already on the edge of our seats...

³ “Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴ As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times.” ⁹ Then Jesus said, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear (Mark 4:3-9).”

It is a great story, and it peaks our curiosity, but it begs for an explanation. That is exactly what the disciples were thinking as well.

¹⁰ When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables (Mark 4:10).

Jesus’s initial explanation is pretty straight forward.

¹⁴ The farmer sows the word (Mark 4:14).

The seed in Jesus’ story is the Word of God. From the outset, we learn something important about the Word. The Word of God, like a seed, has the power to bring forth life and vitality. But we are about to learn something else. Even though the word of God is powerful and life giving, it does not

always have the desired effect. Jesus goes on to list three occasions when the word will not bear fruit.

First, Jesus tells us, the word will not bear fruit when our hearts are hard.

¹⁵ Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them (Mark 4:15).

Several years ago, Pastor Greg Laurie gave me a really nice New King James Bible. On the inside cover he wrote, "Sin will keep you from the word, and the word will keep you from sin."

If our hearts are hard, it is because we love our sin more than we love God. I've been there. You've been there. Nothing is more deadly. If you do not have an appetite for God's word, you might humbly ask the question, "Father, what am I doing to grieve or quench your Holy Spirit?"

Second, Jesus tells us, the word will not bear fruit if we have no root.

¹⁶ Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. ¹⁷ But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away (Mark 4:16-17).

Jesus is describing what we used to refer to in student ministry as the summer camp high. We attend a great event. We get caught up in the moment. Our enthusiasm runs ahead of our commitment. We don't do the necessary and often hard work of cultivating our heart through the word and prayer. Our enthusiasm begins to wain. We live for the next great event. Eventually we find that there are not enough spiritual pep rallies to sustain us. We become disillusioned and walk away.

Exciting spiritual experiences are great, but a sustained walk with Christ is so much better.

Finally, and to our point, Jesus tells us, the word will not bear fruit when we are busy and distracted.

¹⁸ Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; ¹⁹ but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful (Mark 4:18).

I am afraid this is where most of us live. We are so caught up in the frantic pace of our daily lives and the mystical allure of the elusive suburban dream, that we have neither the time nor the appetite for the things of God.

Jesus highlights three things that occupy far more head space than they should.

- Our worries—the irrational fears and anxieties that weigh heavy on our hearts and keep us from being fully present.
- The deceitfulness of wealth—the unrealistic notion that if we have enough stuff, or at least the right stuff, our stuff will make us happy.

- And the desire for other things—this is the one where you get to fill in the blank. What do you really want in life? Recognition? Comfort? Entertainment? Relationships? Every one of these can compete for space with the word of God.

Here is a simple truth. If any of these things or all of these things are keeping you from spending meaningful time alone with God, you are far more busy and far more preoccupied than he intends you to be.

I am not only in a dangerous place when I don't make time for God, I am in a dangerous place when I make time for God but my mind is a million miles away.

We all need to learn how to slow down and find our rest in him.

THE CURE FOR A RESTLESS SOUL

So what is the cure for a restless soul?

Psalm 19

I love David's answer in Psalm 19. "The Law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul (v. 7a)."

Usually when we think about the perfection of God's word, we think about how every word in Scripture is exactly as God intended it to be. David, however, is not thinking so much about how the words fall perfectly into place, as he is about the power of those words when they find their place in our lives.

The law of the Lord is perfect, he tells us, for reviving the soul (or breathing new life into our being). God has given us his word to fuel and impassion our relationship with him. There is nothing else in all the world that has the power to renew and refresh us like the word of God.

In fact David continues,

The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple. ⁸ The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes (7b-8).

In the grand climax to the Psalm, David declares,

¹⁰ They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb. ¹¹ By them your servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

David is in effect saying, they are more valuable to me than anything I own or could ever hope to own. They are more enjoyable to me than the finest of desserts. It is hard to imagine that David is only talking about the Torah: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The books we struggle with. He would have been beside himself if someone placed a copy of Isaiah in his hand, or John or Romans.

We have so much more to delight in than David ever dreamed of having.

David is not alone. Job could say, “I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my daily bread (Job 23:12).” Jesus expressed the same sentiment when the enemy enticed him to turn stones into bread. “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4).’”

In other words, the word of God is to our spiritual life, what food is to our physical life. Both in terms of sheer enjoyment and vital nourishment.

Psalm 1

Let’s take a look at another Psalm. Psalm 1 is not the first Psalm in the book of Psalms because it was written before all the other Psalms. Psalm 1 stands at the beginning of Psalms as an introduction and the explanation of the entire Psalter. In a book about intimacy with God, David is telling us, “This is where intimacy begins...” Psalm 1 is built on the simple premise, “We thrive when we delight in and meditate on God’s word.”

David tells us,

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, ² but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night. ³ That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither— whatever they do prospers (Psalm 1:1-3).

- The godly are known for what they avoid. They do “not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers.”
- For what they do, “They delight in the law of the Lord and meditate on it day and night.”
- And for how they weather the dry seasons, “They are like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither.”

In case you are tempted to think that flourishing spiritually has very little to do with flourishing in every other arena of life, David is quick to add, “Whatever they do prospers.” When we flourish spiritually we will flourish as husbands and wives, parents and teachers, team leaders and team members, and friends and neighbors. God’s definition of flourishing is much bigger than ours.

A Fascinating Survey

Several years ago, Willow Creek Community Church in Barrington, Illinois engaged one of the nation’s leading marketing firms to conduct a series of extensive surveys on the health of their congregation. At the time Willow Creek was the largest evangelical church in the nation with well over 20,000 people attending their three weekend services. Amazingly they had nearly as many people gathered in small groups throughout the week. Nobody does a better job of leading people to Christ, connecting them in groups and mobilizing them for ministry than Willow.

In order to expand their research base they opened the survey to over a thousand churches who were part of the Willow Creek Association.

The burning question for Willow Creek's leadership was, "How can we more effectively lead our people to spiritual maturity?" They divided their congregation into four segments: "Those Who Were Exploring Christ;" "Those Who Were Growing in Christ;" "Those Who Were Close to Christ;" and "Those Who Were Christ Centered." They wanted to know what activities or spiritual practices were most catalytic for every segment of their congregation.

Their assumption was that church activities like weekend worship, small groups, advanced classes, dynamic outreach experiences and serving the poor would automatically lead to spiritual maturity. And while all of these contributed to spiritual maturity, there was one practice that was far more foundational than all the others combined. Here's how their executive pastor, Gregg Hawkins, summarizes their findings.

Nothing has a greater impact on spiritual growth than reflection on Scripture. If churches could do only one thing to help people at all levels of spiritual maturity grow in their relationship with Christ, their choice is clear. They would inspire, encourage, and equip their people to read the Bible—specifically, to reflect on Scripture for meaning in their lives. The numbers say most churches are missing the mark—because only one out of five congregants reflects on Scripture every day.³

And that's only part of the story. Because when we statistically compare the responses of those who take the survey, of all the personal spiritual practices, we find that Reflection on Scripture is much more influential than any other practice by a significant margin. In fact, for the most advanced segments—Close to Christ and Christ-Centered—it's twice as catalytic as any other factor on the list.⁴

David did not have the benefit of a major marketing firm to back him up, but his instincts were right. We flourish when we are actively delighting in and meditating on God's word.

THE ART OF READING SCRIPTURE

So let me do what Greg Hawkins just encouraged me to do. Let me attempt to "inspire, encourage, and equip you to read the Bible."

There are so many ways we can be meaningfully engaged with Scripture. We can hear it taught. We can memorize it. We can study it. We can read books to help us understand it better. But more than anything else, we should simply read it.

When we study the Bible, we break it down into smaller parts, when we read the Bible we step back and get the big picture. The Bible is one seamless story, the more familiar we become with the story the more meaningful our study will become.

Let me share a few best practices that will help you make the most of your time in the word.

³ Hawkins, Greg L., *Move: What 1,000 Churches Reveal About Spiritual Growth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 2011. Chapter 1: The Truth About the Church

⁴ Ibid. Chapter 6: The Catalysts of Spiritual Growth

1. Be Relentless With Your Schedule

You need to give your time in the word a prime spot in your day. That means, you may have to give up a few good things, in order to pursue the best thing. Make an appointment and keep it. One of my friends used to say, “no Bible, no breakfast.” Frankly I have never been that committed, but I do skip breakfast more often than I do my time in the word. It might be more effective for you to say, “No Bible, No Netflix.”

2. Set Reasonable Goals

Don't be overly ambitious. Start with a manageable goal. Maybe something like, “I want to read the Bible for five minutes a day five times a week.” If you use the New Testament reading in the Christ Church reading plan, You can read through the entire New Testament in a year in less than five minutes a day; five times a week. Sure it sounds more spiritual to say I want to read for an hour everyday, but you won't do that. And neither will I. Find something you will do and stick with it.

3. Find a Good Translation

Most of my friends read from the English Standard Version of the Bible and they feel like they are far more spiritual than I am, because I read from the New International Version of the Bible.

All of our English Bible Translations are very good. None of them are perfect. You always lose something when translating from one language to another. Some Bible translations are more formal and others are more functional. Formal translations try to be transparent to the form and structure of the original languages, while functional translations attempt to render the original in the best English possible. Our most formal translation would be the “New American Standard Bible” and our most functional translation would be “The New Living Translation.” I would be comfortable recommending either one.

For me the NIV strikes the perfect balance between formal and functional. The ESV is more formal, but even so, there are certain passages where the NIV is more literal. By the way, there is no such thing as a literal translation. It would sound like gibberish to us.

The Goal of the NIV is to render the original Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek into the English idiom the Biblical writers would have used if they were writing in English today. I love the goal, but it is impossible to attain. I do love the translation though. It is dynamic and fluid and picks up theological nuances that the more formal translations miss.

Choose the ESV if you like. You can't go wrong. Just remember you are not more spiritual because you've picked the right translation. You are more spiritual because you are reading the Bible and God is changing you through the experience.

4. Adopt A Systematic Approach

You may not want to read the Bible from cover to cover to start with, but eventually you will want to work your way through the entire book. Just a warning the Bible is a strange book. It will offend our sensibilities, but that is alright. It is good to wrestle with Scripture, every part of Scripture, in order to get a fuller picture of who God is and his way with his people.

I started my kids on the three track reading plan from the NIV Student Bible. Track One: Was an Introduction to the Bible which included three weeks of readings on the life of Jesus, three weeks of readings on the life of Paul, and two weeks of readings from the Old Testament. Track Two took you through the key chapters in every book of the Bible. Track Three took you through the entire Bible in three years, switching back and forth between Old and New Testament books.

The Christ Church Plan will take you through the entire Bible in a year, two years or three years. We give you two readings from the Old Testament and one reading from the New Testament each weekday, and a reading from Psalms on the weekend for a change of pace. You have a built in catch up day each week to help you stay on track. We recommend you read through the New Testament a couple of times to get your feet wet, and then tackle an Old Testament Reading.

Eventually you may want to read through the Bible in a year.

5. Create a Meaningful Ritual

I used to hate routine. Now I love routine. If you do the same thing at the same time in the same way it has a far better chance of sticking than if you simply work it into your day when you get around to it.

I start my day by walking into the kitchen and making myself a cup of bullet proof coffee. Then I walk into my study, open the Scripture and spend unhurried time with God.

I love the routine. I love what it is doing for me. I hate it when I miss.

6. Read for Intimacy Rather than Information

Reading Scripture is not about learning more about the Bible, it has more to do with growing in your love for Christ. If you are reading relationally, you realize you're in a conversation where you are hearing God's voice through his word, and responding to what he is teaching you in prayer.

Maybe you're not sure about the whole God thing, and simply exploring the faith. Even so, I would still read relationally. I would begin each reading with a prayer, "God I am not really sure you are there. But if you are there, and if this is your word to me and all of humanity, speak to me through your word. If your speaking, I'm listening."

7. Keep a Journal

There is no passage in Scripture that says, "Thou shalt journal!" Sometimes it is just helpful. My goal is to read broadly (I will read four or five chapters each day) and to meditate narrowly (I usually pick a verse or two to meditate on). That means I read with a highlighter in hand, and I mark every verse that stands out to me.

The fact that I am looking for key verses already has me reading far more intentionally than I would if I were just reading through Scripture and checking the boxes. After I have finished reading, I go back and review all of my highlights (so I am reviewing what I just read). I choose the verse that best captures everything I've read and I write it down in my journal. Simply

writing out the verse makes it stick. After I have written the verse in my journal, I make a few quick notes on what I am seeing in the verse. After I have recorded my insights I write down a short prayer in response to what God is teaching me through the verse. So that means I have been over that particular verse four or five times before I close my Bible.

When I am in a really good rhythm, I pick one of the verses from my journal each week and commit it to memory.

By the way, when I finish writing out a short prayer in response to what God is teaching me through the passage I am meditating on, I close my journal and continue in a season of extended prayer.

The whole routine takes about 30 to 40 minutes. I am by no means a super spiritual guy. Those 30 to 40 minutes are the most precious moments of my day.

8. Read in Community

Once you've chosen a plan and established your routine. Ask some friends to join you. Cindie, April and I all read through the Christ Church plan at different levels of intensity. I read all three readings each day. The girls read one of the Old Testament readings and the New Testament reading. We usually read some theology together through the week as well.

On Saturday we stay in our pajamas, gather at our house, cook a really nice breakfast, sit down and read the Psalms together, share what God is teaching us through his word, and talk theology. We call it "Theology Saturday."

You're welcome to join us as long as you have modest pajamas.

9. Take Our Class "Living the Word"

We have a Bible Survey class that is part of our Theology Cohort called "Living the Word." You might want to consider taking the class in order to learn how to read Scripture more effectively. We discuss some of the overarching themes in the Bible, how the Bible is telling a seamless story, how the Old Testament leads us into a far greater appreciation of what Christ has accomplished for us on the cross, and how every part of Scripture points to Christ.

The class is a bit heady at times, but well worth the investment.

CONCLUSION

We flourish when we delight in and meditate on God's word. Whatever else you do this week, find the time, find a way, find a place and spend some quality time with God in the word and prayer.

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AROUND THE TABLE

1. According to the REVEAL survey, no single factor contributes more to your spiritual vitality and joy in the faith than reflection on Scripture, yet fewer than one in five followers of Christ regularly spend time in the word. What are some of the things that keep us from being more meaningfully engaged with God through his word?
2. Read Jesus' explanation of "The Parable of the Sower" in Mark 4:14-19.
 - a. According to Jesus what are some of the things that keep the word from bearing fruit in our lives?
 - b. Which one of these pitfalls is most deadly to you?
 - c. What are some practical steps we can take to avoid some of these pitfalls?
3. Read Psalm 19:7-11. According to David, what are some things God's word will do for us?
4. Read Psalm 1:1-3. David tells us that we will flourish and prosper in everything we do when we delight in and meditate on the Law of the Lord.
 - a. How does he describe flourishing?
 - b. What do you think it means to delight in the Law of the Lord?
 - c. How does meditating on God's word enable us to prosper in all that we do?
 - d. What do you think it means to meditate on God's word?
5. In Sunday's message we highlighted some best practices for reading and meditating on God's word.
 - a. Which of these have been most meaningful to you in your time alone with God?
 - b. Which, if any, of these do you think might be helpful in the future?
6. What are some practical steps you can take in the coming week to be more meaningfully engaged with God through the word and prayer?