

The Word, Part 1 - Spiritual Practices

Introduction - Why it Matters

We are in the middle of a three week series on the Spiritual Disciplines of Prayer, Word, and Fasting with a heart attack in-between.

In a way, I'd like to pick up where I left off last week.

Matthew 28:20 -- "Behold, I am with you always to the end of the age."

What I shared with you last week was essentially a testimony of how God used this one piece of a Bible verse to carry me through a very difficult time when my Boogeyman came knocking.

In that frightening moment, it wasn't the words of friends, mentors, parents, my wife, good preachers, or anyone else that carried me. It was the words of God stored away in my heart and mind. Because when your Boogeyman comes calling, other people's words aren't enough to sustain you. Only the very words of God will do!

The thing is, had I NOT read that verse before this happened then those words would not have been there to call upon.

That makes this topic serious business, because I know that many of us here (maybe most of us) are seriously Biblically illiterate and it's killing your faith and it makes you impotent when you face the trouble in your life. You always feel untethered in your life, and it's because you are.

Maturity = Bible

It's been said, and I agree, "I've never met a strong Christian that doesn't consistently meditate on the Word of God, and I've never met a weak Christian who does."

You will not grow in your faith to a place of stable maturity and trust in God without personally meditating on the Word of God regularly. Don't fool yourself. It won't happen. It is a non-negotiable part of following Jesus.

About the Bible

The Bible is the most popular Book ever sold, yet most people know very little about it and often start off on the wrong foot in their Bible study. After one frustrating attempt, they put it away and never try it again.

What the Bible is NOT:

- It is not God's Handbook for Life. It doesn't work that way. It's not a magic 8 Ball that you shake and ask a question.

- It is also not a Roadmap for Life telling you what to do at every turn. Try asking it whether or not you should take that new job and see what it says.
- It's not a magical talisman that you carry with you to ward off evil spirits, guarantee God's blessing, or make your home prosper.
- It is not a symbol of Christianity that you can simply display in your home, office, car, or whatever to "be a witness" thereby absolving you of any need to actually read it or actually live like a Christian
- It is not a history book, though it does contain history.
- It is not a Science book, though it does contain science.
- It is not always clear, but it is always true.

What the Bible IS:

- It is God's very words through the agency of human authors
- It's central figure is Jesus. The OT points ahead to Him, the New Testament introduces us to Him and then records the effects of His coming. Just like the Christian life, it's all about Jesus.
- It is our highest authority for all matters of life and truth
- It is our only reliable measurement of reality
- It is just as true now as it ever was, and it is just as relevant now as it ever was.
- It is living and active - when you read it, it breathes Life into your spirit whether you feel it or not
- In so far as your translation is accurate to the original writing, it is infallible
- With the Holy Spirit's help, it is understandable and profitable to all - whether young or old in the Lord
- A collection of books that only be accessed through the reading words. So, you're going to have to read.

Some Important Facts:

- The Bible is not one book. It is a collection of 66 books. Think of it as a library, not as a book. (calling it "The Good Book" has misled people for a long time)
- Because it is a collection, reading it back to front doesn't work well at all.
- 66 total books divided across Old and New Testaments (testament used to mean "covenant" or "document of proof") When we refer to the OT and NT, we mean covenant.
- 39 books on the OT. 27 in the NT.
- It is divided up into 6 genres of ancient literature: Law, History, Wisdom & Poetry, Prophecy, Gospels, Letters (Epistles)
- The Bible was written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit by over 40 different authors from all walks of life: shepherds, farmers, tent-makers, physicians, fishermen, priests, philosophers and kings. Despite these differences in occupation and the span of years it took to write it, the Bible is an extremely cohesive and unified book.
- It was written over a period of about 1,500 years, from around 1450 B.C. (the time of Moses) to about 100 A.D. (following the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ).
- The Bible was written in three languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Koine Greek. What you have is a DIRECT translation from the manuscripts (original language copies) originally written in those languages. Your translation is NOT a translation of a translation of a translation.
- The entire New Testament as we know it today, was canonized before the year 375 A.D. The Old Testament had previously been canonized long before the advent of Christ.
- How the canon was formed, which books were in or out, is a big topic. Basically, there were a set of measurements and rules that a book had to meet including that the greater Body of Christ at the time had to collectively receive it as God's word to them before it could be included.

- It's important, however, to acknowledge that no human being has the authority to grant authority to scripture. All we can do is recognize it as the word of God, not *make* it the word of God.

Is My Bible Reliable to the Original Writings?

This is the most common question or accusation against the Bible and it is easy to answer.

First, the Bible is not a translation of a translation of a translation and so on. It is a translation of original copies.

Meaning, modern Bibles are translated from original languages.

These manuscripts were painstakingly copied by hand from original language manuscripts.

The New Testament

We can verify the accuracy of the copies by comparing them with other copies. The closer in time the copy is to the original writing, the more it is trusted. So the date of the copy is important, as well as how many copies there are to compare. The more copies, and the earlier the date, the more scholars trust the accuracy of a text to its original writing.

AUTHOR	EARLIEST COPY	# OF COPIES
Homer	???	643
Plato	1,300 years	7
Aristotle	1,400 years	5
Caesar	950 years	10
Tacitus	1,000 years	20
NEW TESTAMENT	100 YEARS	About 14,000

Statistically, the New Testament is 99.5% textually pure. That means that there is only 1/2 of 1% of all the copies that do not agree with each other perfectly. But, if you take that 1/2 of 1% and examine it, you find that the majority of the 'problems' are nothing more than spelling errors and very minor word alterations. For example, instead of saying Jesus, a variation might be 'Jesus Christ.'

The Old Testament

Scribes known as Masoretes had very strict rules about making copies to keep the text from being changed even down to the letter.

When an obvious error was found (even penmanship mistakes and typos) the corrected was written in the margin, not on the original text.

When a word was considered textually, grammatically, or exegetically questionable, dots were placed above that word instead of changing the text. (Like in Genesis when Esau ran out to hug Jacob, they thought this out of character for Esau and dotted it, but did not change it.)

Minute statistics were kept as a safeguard against errors:

- in the Hebrew Bible at Leviticus 8:8, the margin has a reference that this verse is the middle verse of the Torah.
- According to the note at Lev. 10:16 the word *darash* is the middle word in the Torah,
- and at 11:42 there is a notation that the *waw* in a Hebrew word there is the middle letter.
- At the end of each book are statistics like: the total number of verses in Deuteronomy is 955, the total in the entire Torah is 5,845; the total number of words is 97,856, and the total number of letters is 400,945. (someone counted to make sure the copy and the original matched up!)

Until the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1947, we didn't have any copies of the OT before AD 895, simply because the Jews so revered these writings that when they got worn out they would bury them to keep them out of the wrong hands.

The Dead Sea Scrolls are Hebrew texts of the OT (except Esther) that date back to 1st and 2nd century B.C.! And the Masorete's copies have proven to be extremely accurate and trustworthy.

There are also some other early OT texts that date back to the 3rd century BC that provide us with some comparisons.

What About Translations?

How We Get From the Original to Your Bible

Inspiration (divine author) – God breathes His word through human authors using their personalities, gifts, and experiences as tools to communicate His Word.

The Original Text – written thousands of years ago

Copies of the original text – we want to get back as close as we can to the original text to ensure the most accurate picture of the original, inspired, text.

Critical Text – put together all the text fragments which will give you the best picture of the original.

Translator or translation team brings that critical text into the modern culture and language. The safest translations will be done by a team, not an individual made up of various experts in different Biblical genres, books, or other Biblical specialties.

Translation Continuum

FORMAL (word for word/literal) <-----> **FUNCTIONAL** (thought for thought)

NIV is in the middle, ESV is about halfway from there to the left. The Message is on the far right.

What the Bible Says about Itself

Circular reasoning is unavoidable when you are talking about ultimate things. If Scripture is our highest authority, to what authority should Scripture appeal to in order to be verified? If there was such an authority, wouldn't THAT authority have the same problem?

- **2 Peter 3:15-16**
- **2 Timothy 3:16-17**
- Proverbs 30:6
- **Isaiah 55:11**
- **Psalms 19:7**
- Psalms 119:105
- John 17:17
- James 1:22
- **Hebrews 4:12**
- Acts 17:10-11
- **I Corinthians 14:37**
- Ephesians 3:4-5

Conclusion

Read your Bible this week. Set a goal that you can achieve. If that's reading it one time, do it. If that's listening to it in the car. Do it.

Set a goal right now. Make it specific. WHEN? WHERE?

Spend this week praying and asking God to help you desire HIM in a way that causes you to desire to read HIS WORD.

The Word, Part 2

Introduction

I want to start this morning in what may seem at first to be a strange place, but just follow me for a minute.

Heather recently went to a conference where the speaker talked some about the education process in ancient Hebrew culture. The process Jesus would have gone through to become a Rabbi in Galilee. I found it really fascinating and so did some of my own reading on the subject.

Here's some of what I learned:

Boys and girls began school at age 4 or 5 in what amounted to their version of elementary school. The school was operated by a Rabbi (teacher).

Study was primarily focussed on the Torah (referring to the first 5 books of the OT). Most students had the entire thing memorized by the time they graduated at about age 10.

Then most students would return home. The boys would become apprentices in their father's trade.

The best of these students would be selected to continue their education, while also learning a trade.

These secondary school students would be taught directly by the Rabbi the prophets, letters, and oral scriptures. Basically the rest of our OT.

Here there would learn to make their own interpretations and applications of scripture from the Rabbi. This was done along side other adults and was a learning system based on asking questions of the text and of others.

This was still centered around memorization, reinforced by reciting scripture aloud. Most students ended their time in secondary school having the entire OT memorized.

They finished secondary school around 15 or 15.

Most of these students left school to practice the family trade.

The best of the very best (only a handful) would then be invited to pursue being a disciple. The candidate would approach the Rabbi and ask/beg to be his disciple. The Rabbi would grill the student on his knowledge of scripture and then invite him to follow him (or not).

Being invited to follow a Rabbi was an extremely high honor. It was like being invited to be a PhD student under the greatest mind in your chosen field.

Some Rabbis had been granted special "authority" to interpret scripture for themselves, outside of the standard accepted interpretations. These Rabbis had what they called their "yoke" which was their own added rules and burdens that they had come up with in reading scripture. Each of these special Rabbis prided themselves on how hard (and therefore holy) their yoke was.

A disciple's job was to literally follow the Rabbi around, no matter how far he travelled, and learn his interpretations of scripture. Not only that, but they were to copy and mimic all of his ways of talking, mannerisms, ideas, etc.

When a Rabbi was considering whether or not to take on a new disciple, he was evaluating based on whether or not he thought this young disciple could imitate him and take on his yoke and spread it to others. His goal was to spread his yoke.

There was a saying, "May you be covered in the dust of your Rabbi" which meant that you had followed your Rabbi so closely that the dust of his feet from walking in front of you in the street was all over you.

Jesus was a Rabbi and would have gone through this process. And this is the context from which He is speaking when He says "Go and make disciples of all nations."

This explains why the disciples so quickly dropped what they were doing to follow Jesus. He was a RABBI! And He was approaching THEM, and asking THEM to follow HIM. They had not been chosen. Most of them had probably not even gone to secondary school. They were no the best of the best. They were fishermen, and this Rabbi (with authority) was choosing them.

READ Luke 10:38-42

The Rabbi was offering His teaching to these two women and Martha was busy.

Being a disciple cannot in any way be separated from a sincere, fervent, intentional life in the Word. You cannot be a disciple without reading the Bible. That option has not been given to you. At no point does Jesus conceive of following Him, without the Bible.

We spend so much time DOING, that we often never learn how to be like Mary and sit at the Rabbi's feet and listen to His teaching.

This Doesn't Have to be a Heavy Burden

READ Matthew 11:28-30

28 Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

The Goal of Bible Study

The goal of reading scripture is to become a disciple of Christ. To mimic His ways, teachings, mannerisms, and life. To take on His yoke and spread it to others.

So we are not primarily reading the Bible, looking for information about God so that we can be better educated. No, we are reading the Bible looking for God Himself. We are reading and listening for Jesus' whisper in the pages.

The thing to understand, though, is that the communion with God moments are quite often preceded by hard work in the text reading, thinking, praying, and waiting.

The Goal Is NOT:

- to rack up points so you can level up
- to prove yourself to God or others or yourself
- to make God bless you
- to make you full of knowledge but no understanding (like the Pharisees)
- to help you win arguments on Facebook
- to tickle your intellect

Getting Started

Confront Your View of Yourself

I am convinced that the primary reason that the vast majority of people do not engage in any consistent Bible study is that they have been convinced that Bible study is for other smarter, more holy, more scholarly people.

“I’m not a reader” or “I’m no theologian” or “I’m not a preacher” are words that should never, ever, come across your lips. They are labels and curses that you need to reject.

What you are saying is that God’s Word is not accessible to you. THAT IS A LIE, DON’T BELIEVE IT!

I believe that every single Christian in this room can have a vibrant, exciting, and fruitful life in the Word of God. This is not just because I believe in you! It’s because I believe in the power of the Holy Spirit to train, disciple, and lead you into it.

One Book at a Time

Generally speaking, you will do better taking on a book at a time instead of cherry picking verses out of their context. Staying in one book at a time will help you with your interpretation of the text because the context is very helpful as well as knowing the genre of the book.

A Historical book will be read differently than a Prophetic book or Poetry.

Also, staying in a book at a time will force you to work through difficult texts as well as difficult topics.

Don’t agonize over what book you choose too much. It’s all from God. However, once you choose, commit to it and don’t bail on it for any reason. It’s one of the number one mistakes I encounter.

For first timers, I recommend either the Gospel of Mark, Galatians or Philippians as good starting points.

Set a Goal You KNOW you Will Accomplish

If your Bible reading is at a 0 right now, you probably are not going to start reading every day for an hour and sustain that for long, if at all. You need to set a goal that is realistic with your current motivation level.

Cut yourself a break! Try once a week. **The same day and time and place every week.** Make it as important as a Doctor's appointment or picking your kids up from school. Put it on your calendar. **LITERALLY, plan the exact time, the exact place, and the exact day. Maybe even go somewhere other than your home to do it. Make it an event that you plan around. Now guard that time like you would an appointment with your accountant or your doctor. Say no to EVERYONE and EVERYTHING that comes up that will compete with it.**

Do this consistently for a month. Then add a day, but do not change the original time at all so that you are still protecting that time that you have already carved out.

How to Study the Bible

OK. You've carved out some time. You have your Bible and a few minutes to meet with God. What now?

Have a Plan, Stick to the Plan

Before you open your Bible, decide what you are going to read. It sounds silly, but if you don't do this you will waste surprising amounts of time skipping around being indecisive. It's amazing how hard it is to make a decision when you sit down to read the Bible.

When you start reading, do NOT bail on the book you've chosen. If you do, I promise you will not settle on a plan for weeks. You will come to the first challenging scripture and quit.

Pray First

Specifically, ask the Holy Spirit to help you focus and understand what you are about to read.

If you don't know what to pray, try something like this (or exactly this, if you like):

Holy Spirit, I'm about to read your Word and I know that it's not going to do me any good if you don't help me focus on what I'm doing as well as help me understand it. Please help me to not get distracted, or sleepy, or confused. Help me to see Jesus in what I'm reading and keep me from twisting what I read into something un-true. Help me to submit to what it says about who I am and who God is. Amen.

Read the Entire Context

Just reading chapters is problematic because the chapter and verse breaks were added later. They are not part of the inspired scripture. They are handy for finding things, but often the chapters do not fall in natural places.

Read until there is a subject change or a natural break in the story. In other words, let the text finish the thought it is expressing. You will understand a lot more when you read that way instead of just stopping at a paragraph break or a chapter break.

Stop, Think, Pray, ReRead It

When you don't understand something. **STOP**. When something is profound. **STOP**. When you are going too fast to see anything. **STOP**.

STOP. Look up from the page. Close your eyes. Think about what you just read. Let the words run through your mind. **THINK** about what they mean. **PRAY** and ask God to help you see what He wants you to see.

Now **REREAD** it again. Go back. Chew on it multiple times like a good piece of jerky. **TAKE YOUR TIME**.

Remember the first love letter you got? You read every word and wondered what it meant! You hung on every word.

Meaning Vs Application

This is absolutely crucial. Missing this simple distinction is what gets most people into major Biblical error. It is the quickest way to spot a false teacher.

Meaning

In the same way that Truth is a fixed point that never changes with the time, circumstance, or context; the meaning of the words on the page are a fixed point. There is a right and a wrong.

The words that God put in the Bible mean something specific. That meaning never changes. It doesn't mean one thing to you, and another thing to someone else. Meaning is fixed, unchanging, and unyielding.

This MUST be true because Truth is encapsulated in words. Words and the Truths they express cannot be separated!

We may not be sure of the meaning of a text, we may disagree on the meaning, we may have no idea what it means, but to be sure there is a meaning and we can be wrong or right about what it is.

You cannot do an end run around the actual words of the text in order to squeeze out your own meaning. A plain reading of the text is usually the right one. Simplicity is a good sign that you are on the right track.

Application

How the MEANING of a text APPLIES to your life, your context, and your circumstances is a moving target. It's always changing and is very much a relative thing. It will often be different for different people. You may come back to the same text over and over and get something different out of it each time.

But what the words on the page MEAN never changes (though each visit to the text may reveal more of what it means to you, or you may change your understanding of its meaning altogether because you have learned something new since the last visit).

EXAMPLE: The current debate over homosexuality and marriage by gay Christians is predicated on redefining the MEANING of the scriptures that mention marriage and sex and gender. They say, “Well, those verses don’t really MEAN what they say. They REALLY MEAN, something else.” It’s a battle over whether or not the meaning of a text is fixed, or whether or not it can change.

PS - saying that the meaning is fixed, and that we can be right or wrong about it, is not arrogant. Being overly confident in your assessment of the meaning of difficult texts is arrogant. Know the difference!

Meaning First, Then Application

When studying the Bible, **you start with getting at the meaning of the text as best you can.** STOP, THINK, PRAY, RE-READ IT until you have a good grasp of what it means. *You’ll know you’ve gotten there when you can comfortably restate the text in your own words.*

After you grasp the meaning, PRAY and ask the Holy Spirit again to help you see how He wants to apply that to your particular life. It may mean that you need to change in some area. It may simply be some glorious truth about God that should be responded to with worship and thankfulness expressed to God somehow.

If you jump to application too quickly, you will shortcut the communing with God moment because your application will not have a deep foundation.

Press Into the Difficult Texts

Your biggest breakthroughs in your maturity with God will be over scriptures that you found difficult to understand at first. There is something about really wrestling over a text that produces something deep in your relationship with God and the way you value scripture.

Skipping over, or avoiding, hard to understand scriptures will stunt your growth!

What to do with a difficult text

1. Read it several times in its context. Read it out loud too. Often times the way you are reading it is the problem.
2. Read any cross references notated in the vicinity.
3. Look up any words you aren’t sure of in the dictionary.
4. Read the same verse in several other Bible versions, also with some context. Most of the time, a verse is hard to understand because of some decision that the translators had to make. Seeing how different translators did it can be very helpful.
5. Search concordance with a key word from the verse and read all the scriptures listed.
6. Ask a friend, your small group and/or pastor and/or elder
7. Look in a commentary, and/or in The Message version of the Bible to see how they interpret it.
8. *Check the notes in your study Bible (I recommend this LAST because those notes are often unhelpful or too simplistic)*
9. *Search gotquestions.org or desiringgod.org for the Bible verse or topic and see what you find.*
10. *You can Google it, but it’s a wild and wooly Bible world out there. If you have no idea what the text means, then you are usually better off staying in your Bible.*

Ask Questions

We are not taught to ask questions but to receive information. This is bad for Bible study!

Ask questions of the text. Why is it confusing? Why does it seem outrageous? What is the context? Is there another verse, story, idea, etc that might explain this? How does this idea fit in with the rest of what the scripture teaches? What would the original audience have thought about this?

This is a skill most of us have to learn because of how we were taught. Asking questions seems dangerous, even disrespectful.

How I Can Help

I'd like to propose an idea to help anyone that is struggling to read and/or understand the Bible.

Once a week for 9 months we can setup a 30 minute group video chat meeting using Google Hangout or Skype. I would assign the group a section of scripture to read for the week and we would discuss it briefly. You would have to be willing to do the reading well ahead of time in order for this to be beneficial.

I would NOT be teaching you the Bible, but just facilitating the group and helping guide you through your personal Bible study. That's it.

I will send out an email inviting anyone that is interested to respond and we will come up with a convenient time for everyone.

Conclusion

Heat, Fuel, Air Heat - the burning embers of affection for God in your heart, Fuel - true thoughts about God (The Word), Wind - the Holy Spirit.

The net result is that you will be covered in the dust of your Rabbi. There is no other way.