

BIBLE READING AND JOURNALING

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In a recent edition of the American Journal of Medicine, doctors published a highly revealing conclusion: “The health of 21st century America will no longer be determined by what people can get the doctors to do for them. The health of America today will be determined by what the doctors can get people to do for themselves.”

The above statement, although framed medically, isn't any different spiritually; our spiritual growth is determined by the choices we make daily. This comes in the form of daily habits, the formation of our life and character through spiritual disciplines. It seems a balancing act: By engaging in habitual disciplines, we take the glossy luster away from discipleship, leaving the rough-cut essence of following Jesus as He leads us towards humility, righteousness and new life; by staying focused on a loving relationship with Christ Himself, we leave behind a life of rules and formulas to follow the One Who called Himself The Way.

I have found that establishing daily times for devotional reading, praying, studying and journaling has not for me led to a legalist or lifeless faith; in fact, it has guarded against it by treasuring and safeguarding these moments of growth and reflection.

A word of caution, though: If we are not careful, we will replace a life lived Coram Deo (in the presence of God) with “times with God”, as if God is not always present, available, involved, etc. It's the difference between a life of devotion and just “having devotions” (e.g. - “Well, I have read my Bible, and my daily time with God is done!”) God will not be compartmentalized to a five minute session. Simply enough, daily reading, praying and journaling is a time to align ourselves with Him. We see how Jesus responded in facing situations like ours, and we learn to reframe our way of thinking.

FIND A TIME

We live in possibly the most fragmented time in history, with the ability to multi-task and over commit ourselves to death. With so much going on, we can fall prey to tempting yet inaccurate thoughts:

- “I can't commit to reading daily.”
- “My life is too hectic to make consistent time.”
- “I'm lucky to get any time for God.”

The truth is that we choose our time, and a quick review of where you have been and what you have done this past week will show you what is important to you.

My encouragement is to habitually find a time that you can get alone to read, pray, study, and journal with the Scriptures. Morning people: Find Jesus at the crack of dawn! Night owls: Stay up late! Midday people: Have a holy lunch! Whatever; just look at your schedule and make a decision.

One last thought: Guard that appointment with Jesus! Block it out on your calendar.

FIND A PLACE

I don't think there is a perfect place; some of this again will match how God wired you. Some people will find an unaccustomed place to be best, free of daily distraction; others will cherish the breakfast nook they sit at daily. Some might find a quiet corner of the room, while others will find a bench on a nature trail. The key is to find a place free from distractions, where silence, focus, and open honesty with God can happen.

FIND A PLAN

By the word “plan”, I am encouraging just that; to go beyond cracking open your Bible to wherever your finger lands and choosing instead to read it thoughtfully, book by book, chapter by chapter.

Some reading plans focus on just a few chapters a day, others focus on an amount that will help you read the Bible through in a year. A plan should help you to get in a rhythm of daily looking to God’s word; seeking understanding, meeting Him in the pages, finding new life. Plans will also help you gain an understanding of God that is fuller and richer, going past our personalities, default verses, and favorite portions of Scripture.

FIND A METHOD

Now you have a time. You’ve got a spot. You know what portions of Scripture you’re reading. So now what? Again, this is about what is helpful in cultivating a life of action and obedience to the words and ways of Jesus. It isn’t about following a system to produce head knowledge; it’s finding a method to assist in thinking through what you’re reading, responding to God, and living it out.

I will list two similar, yet very helpful methods for study. Adapt these, change them, rearrange them, develop something new.

Read. Think. Pray. Live.

Taken from ancient Christians who used a similar pattern of reading called *Lectio Divina* (“Holy Reading”). Originally dates back to the 12th century, and is likened to “feasting on the word”.

- **Read** (*Lectio*: Taking a bite) This consists of reading the Scripture passage slowly and attentively. Many people write down or underline words and portions that stick out to them during this time.
- **Think** (*Meditatio*: Chewing on it) Now the reader has opportunity to think through or meditate on specific portions of the text. The Holy Spirit leads us to greater understanding as we humbly and openly meditate over what we have read.
- **Pray** (*Oratio*: Savoring the bite, responding) A time to respond to the text. This is a time of heart response, not a mere brain game. We respond in conversation, sharing our heart’s response; often it will be varied: joy, fear, shame, relief, challenge. Like David in many of the Psalms, we learn to open our heart to God in honest dialogue.
- **Live** (*Contemplatio*: Digesting, bringing into our lives) This final act is a time of contemplation of God, bringing the spiritual food into us, to be a part of our life, and breath. We see the connection of what we are reading in how we live it out humbly before God.

S.O.A.P. (Scripture, Observation Application, Prayer)

A very helpful method of study developed by Pastor Wayne Cordeiro (New Hope Church, Oahu).

- **Scripture**: A time to read the passage you have selected, allowing God to speak through the words. When you are done, find a verse that particularly spoke to you, and write it in your journal.
- **Observation**: What do you see happening in the portion of Scripture; what do you see God saying to you? A time for God to teach you as you meditate on the meaning. Write down what you are sensing in your own words.
- **Application**: Personalize what you are reading. Consider and write down how you can apply to your life right now. Are you sensing an encouragement, a challenge, a warning?
- **Prayer**: It can be as simple as asking God to help you use what you are reading, or greater insight on what He could be showing you. Use this time to again be honest and sincere, opening your heart to God.

JOURNALING

Journaling can be a powerful way to grow spiritually, for many reasons. One would be the amount of time spent thinking through and recording your thoughts on daily spiritual insights. Another would be the maturing of your faith as you learn to put into words what you are thinking about. It is also helpful to look back and see what God has encouraged you about or challenged you on; consider it the trail marks of a new life!

Some thoughts on journaling:

- **Match Your Style.** Maybe you'll fill up a page in a notebook. You might get ultra organized with a systematic journal. Perhaps you'll open a Word document. Some will find an online tool (www.youversion.com is a great one). No matter what you use, find something that works, and stick with it!
- **Honesty Counts.** Don't try to create a "Super Holy Life" on paper for posterity. Be honest. This is life; saving face in a journal does nothing for you. Use journaling to think through what you are facing now.

BUMPS IN THE ROAD (QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS)

- **"I've never done anything very consistently. This seems like a lot."** And it is a lot! We're talking about growing spiritually; what else deserves a consistent amount of time and energy? If this seems overwhelming, take it slow and keep it simple. Key to your success in spiritual formation is to show up! God is present, so learn to daily be with Him. As you grow, the amount of scripture, the time you invest, and then understanding will all grow, too.
- **"What if I miss a day? Or two? Or three?"** Breathe! Don't let missing a few days of Bible reading take you completely off the track! This happens with diets and exercise all the time. A guy misses a few days at the gym, and suddenly he throws away his entire exercise plan in frustration! My best advice: Just start reading whatever is on the plan for the day. If you have those moments to catch up, great - but try to get back on schedule with where you are today (especially if you are reading with other believers). Don't let a few backlogged days of reading stop you!
- **"What if I don't understand a lot of what I'm reading?"** There will be times when you don't understand what you are reading, or how it applies to life right now. Don't let this discourage you! Instead of letting that hold you back, focus on what you are understanding. I would rather grow from the 10% I understood than be held back by the 90% I didn't get.
- **"I feel alone in this."** If you are involved in a church, find out if there are study groups to join. Include a friend or two - meet for coffee, and share what you are learning. You'll be surprised how your words could encourage others, and how they can sharpen you. You will also find accountability for the things you need to grow in.

about the author

Sean Boyd loves the way Jesus graciously gives new life. He is married to Kristy, and they have four children. Sean pastors the Fountain Church in Tumwater, Washington (www.fountainchurch.com), and in his spare times enjoys reading, coffee, tech stuff, cultural absurdities, movies, and the music of Van Morrison. You can read his blog at www.beezerboyd.com.