

On spending time in the Word

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My assignment is to talk about spending time in the Word. So, here goes: *Spend more time reading your Bible. Just do it.* The command doesn't work very well, does it?

Most of us dread being told to do what we know perfectly well we *should* do, but for which we simply cannot find the heart, the will, and, yes, that dirty word, the discipline—but mainly, I think, the heart, and perhaps the hope that something good really might come of something that for too long seems not to have lived up to all that has been promised for it. Our lives are too much for us already. One more allegedly necessary thing, no matter what, just isn't going to happen. We are muddling along as well as we can. Besides, we already have to read the Bible for our school work, or our sermons, or our articles and papers; surely that should do.

But, of course, it won't. You know that *using* the Bible is not enough, that *using* it for our tasks does not equal being nourished by it any more than a cook gets a proper diet by preparing nutritious meals for others.

To take the meal analogy further, consider breakfast. It's not usually the most exciting meal of the day, right? Indeed, lots of folks regularly skip it, and if many of them are in much worse shape than they look on the surface, missing breakfast is not the only reason for that.

Now, breakfast or the Bible, as you choose, is good for you: It becomes a part of you and

remains there for you to draw on when you need it. But do you have to get all excited and emotional about it? No. Most of the time—true confession—I don't and am just being dutiful (though actually I am pretty consistent about both eating breakfast and reading Scripture; how else could I talk with you about such matters with even the vaguest sense of integrity?). These things, done regularly, become part of you and shape you in ways of which you are barely conscious. And most of the time, that's it.

Most of the time. But not always. There is, after all, a difference between breakfast and the Bible: Breakfast is a lot safer. Breakfast, except in nightmares and really bad restaurants, can pretty much be counted upon not to rise up and bite you, and it doesn't have much promise for touching you gently or inviting you on an adventure, either. In that respect, the Bible is different.

The metaphor my text uses for it does not describe something tame like a meal, but rather a sword: "Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account" (Heb. 4:12).

True, in the first instance the text refers primarily to the Word of God as spoken in the living voices of the prophets. But we do not distort the text by applying it to Scripture as a whole, though, because a living word does not perish along with its hearers but continues to speak with authority. It does so through God's own Spirit as the Spirit works in our hearts to illumine and confirm that word. That is something God alone can do. All those theories of inspiration and all those proofs of why the Bible must be true may reassure us when we already believe, but they have been strikingly ineffective with most unbelievers. It's not our theories but God's Word itself that, applied by the Spirit, captures the skeptic—yes, even if the skeptic is you, or me.

Take, for instance, Emile Cailliet, a prominent once-atheistic French philosopher who eventually came to teach at Princeton. Dissatisfied with his entirely naturalistic early education, as a young man he sought some source of meaning to counter what looked like the complete absurdity of existence. Having found no book that met his needs, he spent long hours copying particular passages that spoke to him out of the great literature he read, thinking that he could thus make

for himself what he called a book that would understand him. He later wrote,

"The day came when I put the finishing touch to 'the book that would understand me,' speak to my condition, and help me through life's happenings. A beautiful, sunny day it was. I went out, sat under a tree, and opened my precious anthology. As I went on reading, however, a growing disappointment came over me. Instead of speaking to my condition, the various passages reminded me of their context, of the circumstances of my labor over their selection. Then I *knew* that the whole undertaking would not work, simply because it was of my own making. It carried no strength of persuasion. In a dejected mood, I put the little book back in my pocket."¹

He found that what we make, what we produce, simply does not meet our deepest needs; in the end it is no bigger than we are. That insight could have been a moment yielding lasting despair. But by a strange miracle of God's providence, Cailliet's Christian wife had just, almost without knowing what she was doing and almost at that exact moment, obtained a French Bible from an aging pastor. She brought it to him apologetically, for he had forbidden all discussion of religion in their home. But he grabbed it eagerly, having never even seen a Bible before. He read and read and read throughout the night, full of awe and wonder, finding at last the Book that would understand him—that understood him because, as he said, "its pages were animated by the Presence of the Living God. . . . To this God I prayed that night, and the God who answered was *the same God* of whom it was spoken in the Book."² He heard a word that was indeed living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword. It penetrated his soul and he was changed, permanently.

Something rather similar happened to me when I was an unconverted, grade-obsessed university student, reading a portion of the Bible with a bad attitude and only because of an assignment in a Western Civilization class and reading repeatedly for the sake of getting a good mark. About my third time through the passage, the inescapable conviction dawned that

there was something different about that book. The miracle stuck. Today there hangs on the wall of my home a calligraphy version of Augustine's famous words, "Thou didst strike my heart with thy word, and I loved thee."

And something at least analogous happened to Martin Luther, with the difference in Luther's case being that he had studied the Scriptures diligently for years, but found in them only the condemning and judging God that he most feared—found only what he feared until, that is, that night in the tower when light dawned and he came to understand righteousness through faith

can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand."

We can, for instance, avoid concerns about judgment only by avoiding the Bible altogether, but that is like avoiding anxiety about ill-health by refusing to see the doctor. The Bible's sword, like a surgeon's knife, will hurt, at least when the numbness wears off; but despite all it cuts away, despite all it requires that seems like terrible loss, it places us finally in the midst of a story larger than our own little story, a story in which our life has its only enduring meaning.

That's the reason we read Scripture and insist that it be Scripture, not

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in a brand new way. The point is that in each case something about the living Word of God broke down the barriers in these diverse and resistant people, just as Prince Emmanuel in Bunyan's allegory *The Holy War* came battering down Eargate and announcing to the trembling citizens of the City of Mansoul, "Pardon, pardon." The sheer unexpectedness of it all was overwhelming. And that the news could be *good* news—well, it was inconceivable before it happened.

Of course, the Word that discerns the thoughts and intents of the heart, in conjunction with the One to whom we shall have to render an account, as the end of my text reminds us, does not *always* come in a way conducive to our comfort. We may avoid Scripture, not out of philosophical skepticism, not from bad habits or stress or boredom, or worries about its pre-scientific worldview or historical obscurity or patriarchalism, but because of how it fingers all too accurately where we fall short. Maybe what troubles us is not the difficulties, but what is all too clear. As Mark Twain is said to have put it, "It ain't those parts of the Bible that I

something else, no matter how superficially edifying, that we proclaim from our pulpits. And we must read *Scripture*, not just read *about* it. I was cheered when a colleague objected in a recent faculty meeting to providing a remedial "basic Bible knowledge for beginners" course precisely on the grounds that it would be giving poorly prepared incoming students a substitute for reading the Bible itself. Between reading *about* the Bible and reading *the Bible*, lies all the difference between talking *about* someone and talking *with* that person. And we read and listen because, even in ways we do not understand, biblical truth takes root in us and grows; and because sometimes, by God's Spirit, it grabs us in ways we could not have predicted or even dreamed.

Techniques and colleagues may help keep us faithful, whether set readings from a lectionary or commitments to a group study. A program in my own Presbyterian denomination tries to combat the huge problem of burnout and dropout in beginning pastors by placing selected students in a covenant

group with some faculty advisors. The whole group commits to certain disciplines of Scripture-reading, prayer, and discussion. The students start out by finding even very modest disciplines to be difficult to adhere to. Even so, early results suggest that these practices have a profound effect on new pastors' ability to persevere and flourish.

Generations ago, a prominent Christian suggested that one spend just 15 minutes a day reading the Bible slowly, taking in the words as a way of reaching beyond the words to Him who gave them, seeking to put heart and will in contact with God that they might be strengthened and fortified. He recommended taking to heart whatever seemed at that moment fitting for one's own soul and passing gently over the rest—not criticizing, not trying to apply what did not seem to fit, certainly not actively rejecting or resisting it (for what rubbed one wrong today might be exactly what one would most need at another point) but just passing over it and taking in the nourishment that one needed, receiving the light that one could at that stage in one's life use. He thought one should not spend more than 15 minutes at a time doing this, lest the reading slip over into ordinary reading. After 40 years, he called this one of the greatest sources of sustenance and calm for his life.³

So read. With a group? Individually? Both? The how of the practice is not the key thing, but simply that one finds a practice fitting for oneself and one's own circumstances and that one observes it with regularity. And remember how God can surprise us.

God surprises us. In our consciousness of our inadequacy and sin, in our faithlessness, in our fear of being laid bare before any judge, most of all God, I suspect we keep dreading that the surprises are going to be bad ones, and our dread drives us away. But we are wrong. In the end, despite God's sometimes stern chastening, the surprises for those who love God will be good ones; and even now, we may be surprised by blessings where we did not expect them, if we can just remain faithful in our practice.

I'd like to take just one extended example. I am always moved when I see how Israel has delighted in God's Word—even and most especially in God's Law—and how Jewish people have expressed that delight. What a contrast with modern Americans, sporting bumper stickers such as one I saw awhile back reading, "No gods, no bosses." How wonderful that God should tell us what pleases Him rather than play hide-and-seek with us. Yes, we misuse the Law; yes, we are incapable of keeping it in our own strength; yes, it is, in fact, death to us apart from Jesus Christ. Yet it is still full of blessings when we trust in the Lord's mercy, for it shows us something of God's character and of His will for righteousness for His people. What a marvel that God has chosen to reveal Himself to us in Scripture, which is indeed a light for our path, and leads to pleasure as well as difficulty in obedience.

Often, I think, the Jewish people, in their love of God's Law, have grasped that truth better than we Christians have. "Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it," says the Lord in Psalm 81 (and He isn't referring to a trip to the dentist, as we with our jaded imaginations and truncated hopes may cynically rush to assume).

"Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it." The setting of Psalm 81 is a celebration, the great Feast of Tabernacles, instituted by God Himself for Israel. The Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, comes somewhere between mid-September and mid-October. That day was a solemn festival of trumpet blowing on which the *shofar*, the ram's horn mentioned in verse 3 of the psalm, instead of a metal trumpet, was blown. Fifteen days later, at the full moon, the Feast of Tabernacles began, also hinted at in verse 3: "Blow the trumpet at the new moon, at the full moon, on our feast day." The festival was the most joyous of all the feasts ("Sing aloud to God our strength; shout for joy to the God of Jacob!") and was the occasion for the special recitation of—guess what?—the Law that took place every seventh year. Even now, in fact, on the 23rd day after Rosh Hashanah comes Simchat Torah, the day of the celebration of the Law—and we see allusions to the Law

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in verses 9 and 10: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt" (the introduction to the Ten Commandments); "There shall be no strange god among you; you shall not bow down to a foreign god" (as the first and second commandments insist).

God commanded the feast to be kept. A terrible importance attaches to the ability to celebrate and carry out the rituals involved in celebration of these things central to one's identity, for in celebration lies a testimony to confidence in God's faithfulness and provision. I love Chaim Potok's book *In the Beginning*, about an orthodox Jewish family, before, during, and just after the Depression and the Second World War. On a Rosh Hashanah when the effects of the Depression were being deeply felt by the members of a little synagogue, the protagonist-narrator's father went to the podium for the traditional sounding of the *shofar* and, as the narrator recounted it,

"He faltered over the *teruah* blast during the repetition of the Silent Devotion. He stood at the podium in the white knee-length cotton garment that he wore over his dark suit and in his tall white skullcap and tried to complete the series of staccato blasts from the ram's horn, and for the third time the attempt ended in a hoarse spitting wheeze before he was halfway done. His face was dark red; the veins and muscles bulged in his neck. The congregants were very still. He had never had any difficulty sounding the *shofar* before. He waited a moment, cleared the spittle from the *shofar* by blowing into it, then tried once again and was able to complete the blast. The congregants stirred with relief and the service continued. My father came back to his seat next to me and out of the corner of my eye I could see his flushed face and the faint trembling of his hands."⁴

When you experience your world falling apart, it matters more than ever that the horn be sounded, that you carry on the celebration. For in the celebration, and in the recounting of the Law, comes the reminder of our reason for both confidence and faithfulness. The Law, lest we forget, begins not with demand but with gift: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of

the land of Egypt." No other god, no strange god, did or could have done that for us. So why should we turn to any other in a time of crisis?

But that was then and this is now, you say? Strikingly, the psalmist depicts the Lord as addressing the Israelites of his (the psalmist's) day as one with those of an earlier day—and thus, implicitly, addressing us: "I relieved your shoulder of the burden; your hands were freed from the basket. In distress you called, and I delivered you; I answered you in the secret place of thunder; I tested you at the waters of Meribah." In a profound sense, all of God's people, near and far in time and in space, are one. The Lord's dealings with His people do not fundamentally change because He does not change; and the human response, in both its faithful and its sinful aspects, does not fundamentally change because human beings of every era and race share a humanity common in its essentials.

Thus, the reminder of the deliverance from Egypt should be understood as a pledge that God not only did come to His people's rescue then but will answer the prayers of His people today. From faithfully attending to Scripture we learn the character and power of the Lord on whom we rely.

It can hardly be emphasized enough that the acts of God revealed in Scripture are acts in history, even as our own sins and failings are acts in history: The Jew points to the Exodus as the evidence of the Lord's ability to deliver; the Christian points, above all, to the resurrection of Christ. These are not myths, or interpretations of our hunger for meaning and help, or pious wishes. They are solemn, historical facts. And the Lord asks that our celebration of the past, our faithfulness in the present, and our trusting expectancy of the future also take place as historical facts. We need both daily attentiveness to the roots of our faith and great moments of remembrance.

With respect to those great moments, at a later point in the Potok story, after a later Rosh Hashanah, the community was celebrating Simchat Torah, the rejoicing in the Law. The narrator recounts:

"The little synagogue was crowded and tumultuous with joy. I remember

the white-bearded Torah reader dancing with one of the heavy scrolls as if he had miraculously shed his years. My father and uncle danced for what seemed to me to be an interminable length of time, circling about one another with their Torah scrolls, advancing upon one another, backing off, singing. Saul and Alex and I danced too. I relinquished my Torah to someone in the crowd, then stood around watching the dancing. It grew warm inside the small room and I went through the crowd and out the rear door to the back porch. . . .

"The noise inside the synagogue poured out into the night, an undulating, swelling and receding and thinning and growing sound. The joy of dancing with the Torah, holding it close to you, the words of God to Moses at Sinai. I wondered if Gentiles ever danced with their Bible. 'Hey, Tony [he said aloud to an almost-forgotten Gentile friend]. Do you ever dance with your Bible?'

" . . . I had not thought of him in years. Where was he now? Fighting in the war probably. Or studying for the priesthood and deferred from the draft as I was. Hey, Tony. Do you ever read your Bible? Do you ever hold it to you and know how much you love it?"⁵

Tony, Maria, Jorge, Isolde, Kwon, Wei-Ling. Do you read your Bible? Do you ever hold it to you and know how much you love it? Try it. Just maybe, it will make alive again the hope that if indeed we open our mouths, the God of all good gifts will fill them. The promises are real, even as the God who, in His Word, discerns the thoughts and intents of our hearts is real. The promises do not cancel out the pain of this life, but they give it a new context in God's faithfulness, God's guidance, and God's final victory, and that can make all the difference. ■

1 *Journey into Light* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1968), p. 16.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 18

3 Baron Friedrich Von Hügel in John Baillie, *A Diary of Readings* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1955), #1.

4 *In the Beginning* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Crest, 1975), 214,15.

5 *Ibid.*, 382,83