

The Living Word of God

A question I get often is, “Pastor, what should I do to have a better devotional life?” Now instinctively, every Christian knows that a better devotional life begins with reading the Bible. On this we can all agree. But where we can’t agree concerns the application. For while we can all agree that we should spend more time in God’s Word, we are conflicted over just what exactly that means. Do you start from the beginning and read from Genesis to Revelation? Do you start with the Gospels and read Matthew, Mark, Luke and John? Should you spend your time familiarizing yourself with one book or should you try to obtain a surface knowledge of all 66 books? And while we are at it, do I read the Bible as literature or history or science? Should I try to master Middle-Eastern customs and values, geography and dynasties, key dates, and figures, or is it better just to read it personally with an eye toward subjective insight and growth? Believe it or not, these questions are so tedious and daunting that many quit before they start. So, perhaps a simple tutorial in reading the Bible might prove helpful to you.

When it comes to reading the Bible, we need to remember that it occupies a genre all by itself. There’s nothing else like it. When I read a novel, for example, I rely on my own personal experience and insight to find meaning in the text. The plot is meant to draw me in, and then solicit an emotional response from me; but, and here’s the important part, I am free to take whatever meaning I choose from the text. Themes like love and hate, success and failure, courage and cowardice are filtered through my own personal lens and are incorporated into my own personal experience. Not so with the Bible. The Bible is not meant to be a collection of stories to which you supply your own meaning. The apostle Peter tells us that the Bible is not meant for private interpretation. So, if the Bible is not open to my own private interpretation, then how can I ever know that I am interpreting it correctly? What’s to keep me from drifting off into errors and

misunderstandings? To safeguard ourselves against such abuse, it's important to see how the Bible speaks about itself. The Scriptures tell us in no uncertain terms that, "these things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, and by believing in Him you have life in His Name." The Bible is organized in such a way as to express God's definitive Word about Himself; how in the fullness of time He revealed His heart to us in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Seeing how this is God's self-revelation as the Word of God who took on flesh and dwelt among us, it is easy to understand why His Word is not open to private interpretation. How could it be otherwise?! If the eternal God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow, then His eternal Word must remain unchanged now and forevermore. And while this Word of God reveals much about who we are, and what we are, it reveals above all how God Himself wants to be known by us.

And just how does He want to be known? Through His Son, the very Word made flesh. This is why we say "All of Scripture is pure Christ" (Luther). This is the only interpretative principle you will ever need to know. Christ is the skeleton key, which unlocks the treasury of biblical interpretation. From the first page to the last, we hear how God in Christ Jesus is reconciling the world to Himself. Christ is the crimson thread that holds it all together. So, my advice to you, is don't read God's Word meditate on it for it is precisely when you read the Bible that problems arise. Reading implies that the main goal is to get my head around some piece of knowledge and once I have achieved this then I have mastered the subject. Meditation is not reading the Word, but rather the Word reading me. Reading implies doing, meditating implies being. Reading is about actively engaging the text. Meditation is passively receiving from it. Therefore, the Bible is not so much a text to be read, but a gate to enter through, a portal into the mind of Christ. This is counterintuitive thinking I know, but the very Christ who turned the world upside down now inverts our everyday experiences. Each time we open the Bible we encounter

God not with our simple reason or understanding, but by faith alone. And where God is there also are His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. Where God is there also is His Word at work amongst us. For we are told God's Word never comes back void, but always accomplishes the purpose for which He sends it. This means that even when we feel like we get nothing out of the Bible such is never the case. God's Word is performative. It has this inherent power to kill and make alive. As is usually the case, God works in the shadows in ways often unseen, unknown, unfelt. So long as we are connected to His Word, though, God is there transforming our hearts, recreating us in His image, drowning the old in the death of Christ, raising the new in the life of Christ. In the end, meditating on God's Word is not a pious good work on our part, but rather an act of Divine worship. We approach God's Word as we approach His altar—not upright, but on bended knee, not to demand but to receive, not to do anything, but to wait on the Lord. At the foot of the altar, at the foot of the cross, the same Christ who once asked His disciples if they too would leave because His teachings were too hard, now questions us. How should we respond? St. Peter answers for the whole Christian church on earth, "Lord to whom shall we go, You have the words of eternal life." Amen.

In Christ,

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