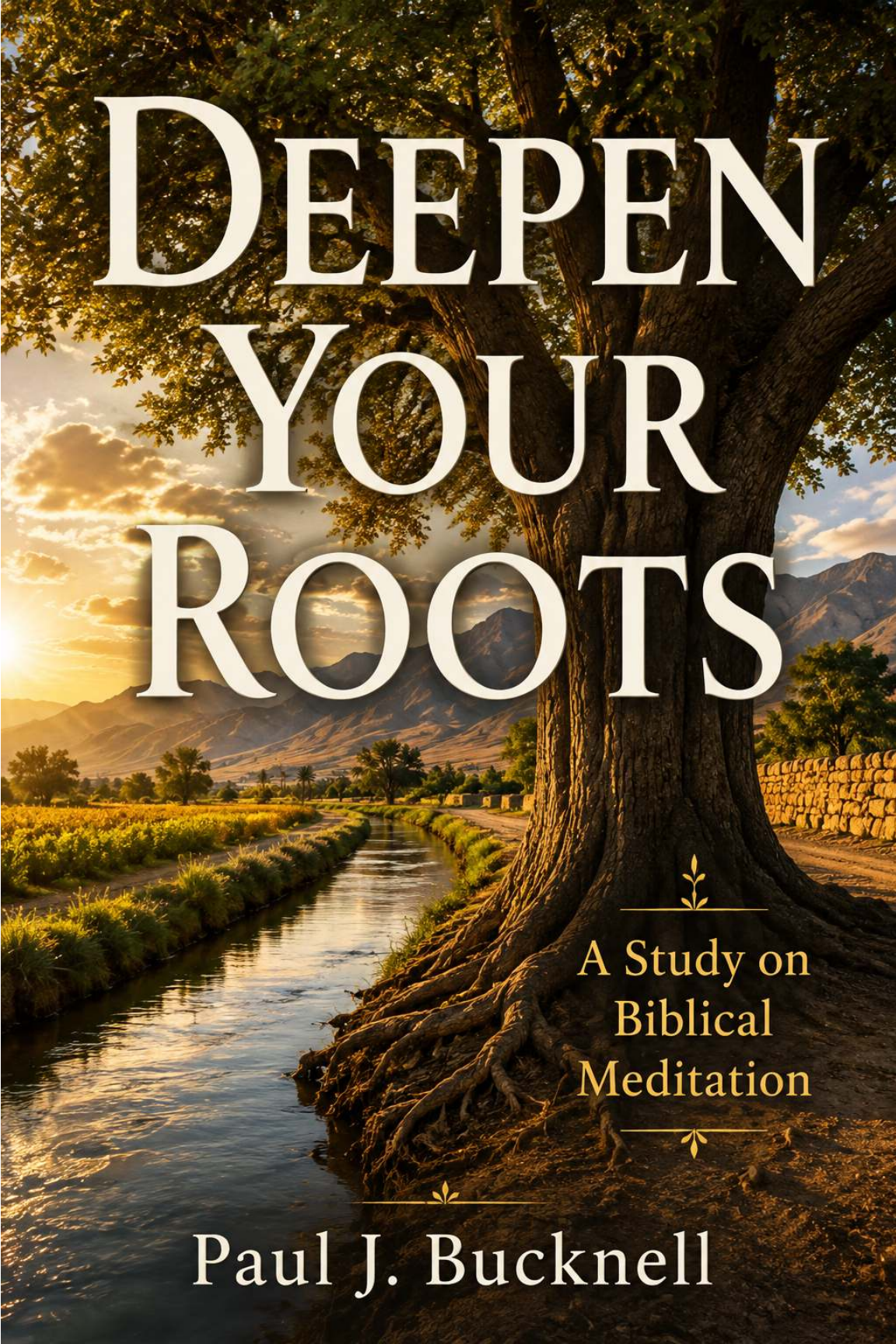




DEEPEN YOUR ROOTS

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A Study on
Biblical
Meditation
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Paul J. Bucknell

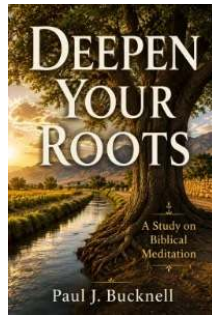
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Deepen Your Roots

A Study on Biblical Meditation



Paul J. Bucknell

Deepen Your Roots: A Study on Biblical Meditation

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Digital ISBN: 978-1-61993-125-1

Published by Paul J. Bucknell, USA

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Introduction to Deepen Your Roots

— *A Study on Biblical Meditation* —

This topic of biblical meditation excites me. As I began reflecting on why I feel this way, I thought of the many ways God has used His word, the Bible, to weave itself into my life. The more I think about it, the more convinced I am that my life has been deeply transformed by biblical meditation. I haven't learned everything from a single lesson, but rather from many hundreds of impactful events that have etched their lessons on my mind. These reflections have humbled me, making me realize how God has reached out to me through biblical meditation, inspiring and guiding me throughout my life. The truth remains, however, that God is revealing His truth to each person so they might seek after Him and allow His Word to awaken us powerfully.

God has set before each of us a unique path to learn about Him and His sufficiency. Nor can I relive these events with you. They come through us as we regularly meet with God and His Word. God speaks through the Scriptures, which He revives and directs in our lives. The Holy Spirit takes the Word of Life into our lives and makes us grow. But be careful—nothing is straightforward here. There is no guarantee that reading the Bible for 10 minutes a day will give us all we need to grow. No, our study is built on maintaining a deep relationship with the Lord. Though time spent in His Word is critical, our pursuit of truth and how we wrestle with it greatly affect the blessings that fol-

low from that study. Like any relationship, our reading can thrive or merely be tolerated, but the promise remains true: seek Him, and we will find Him. In those more desperate times, we will knock and find answers (Mat 7:7-8).

Biblical meditation times are essential, but it is our relationship with Him that we are nurturing. It doesn't depend on a classroom but on the 'class time' spent with our Master. Just as it is unacceptable to plan to meet someone but only read a book about that person, so it is with the Lord. If we don't speak and listen with Him, our Maker, we fail to meet Him. Biblical meditation is about integrating thoughts from God, amplified by His Word, into our relationships and purpose in life.

Our meditation times must extend far beyond the mere use of analytical tools. They are important, and we will discuss this type of study along with others, but much more is going on beneath the surface. As you prepare for this journey of discovering Him in His Word, your appetite can only grow, along with your desire to meditate on His Word and to thrive in His presence. Yes, there will be challenges, but they will only test your true motives and help you recognize what we genuinely seek in the relationship. This is, of course, what He desires. The truth is that we know remarkably little about God and ourselves. Understanding what we want in life differs from knowing ourselves. Our identities lie deeper and are found only in our meetings with God.

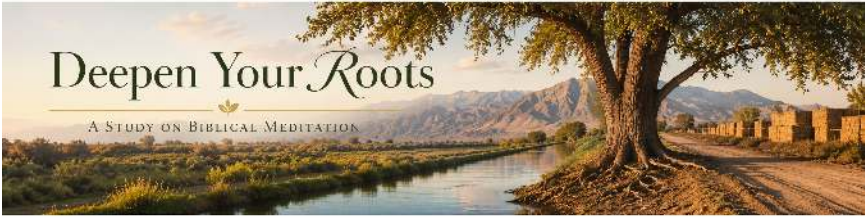
Did I mention how totally excited I am about this study? I hope so. My deepening relationship with the Lord truly inspires me. He desires this for each of His children!

So, if you don't mind, I'll take you along on my personal spiritual journey and share with you various things the Lord has

taught me and is teaching me. You must recognize that, as we explore what the Bible says about meditation, our success depends not on what we have learned but on what we are learning and applying to our lives.

We find that an increasing number of believers are confused about Christianity. Some, disappointed with the Protestant church, leave, while others are changing denominations or becoming Catholic or Orthodox. We are not suggesting there should be no critique of the institutions we belong to or associate with, but don't overlook the layer beneath that most people miss. Our faith does not rest in human institutions but in our relationship with the Head, Jesus Christ. Even if we find some relevance in religious organizations, our faith is only as strong as our relationship with God. Although changing our circumstances might heighten our sensitivity to God, they will ultimately prove inadequate if we don't meet God, our Father.

Biblical meditation brings a person into direct, transformative moments with God. Paul uses the term circumcised hearts to describe how God has made our hearts sensitive to the things of God. But being born again means we have life and must grow by meeting with our Life Giver. Far from being too busy for us, He commands us to meet with Him (Psalm 1:1-3) and to coach others to meet with Him through Jesus Christ (Mat 28:18-20).



#1 Thoughts on Biblical Meditation: Hebrews 5:11-14

Significant points of spiritual growth often emerge when you, as a genuine believer, meditate on God's Word. Biblical meditation occurs when God observes your diligence in studying His Word and your seriousness about learning from Him. In faith, you seek His life lessons.

Our Encounter With God's Word

When you immerse yourself in His Word, you will encounter Him and witness His power. These will become memorable moments, but like meeting a wild animal, we can never quite predict what to expect or where it will lead. Real growth is not simply what we can easily observe day by day, but only what we see when we look back. Don't get discouraged as if nothing is happening. The mysterious process of spiritual development is akin to a child's imperceptible physical growth. Just as we don't see our child grow at every meal, we can't measure the spiritual growth we find through our persistent exploration of His Word. I, with many others, call these pursuits of God in His Word "Biblical meditation." They have nothing to do with Bud-

dhist or other forms of meditation, in which practitioners empty their minds of thoughts. We deliberately input God's words into our thoughts and seek what He has to communicate to us through His Spirit.

Biblical Meditation Touches One's Life

Biblical meditation, although it can't be measured or precisely calibrated, still makes sense. Listening to God speak through His Word allows you to be increasingly influenced by His insights and love. Whoever you like and listen to will have the most influence on your life. Conversely, the opposite is also true: ignoring God's Word, whether by not meditating on it or by not paying attention to what you're learning, brings its negative consequences. Either way, biblical meditation makes perfect sense, just as the Scripture warns us.



So join us in deepening your roots; complete the exercises. Like a beginner hiker, try all the new gear and explore the paths that lead to life. You will never regret it. "Thou wilt make known to me the path of life; In Thy presence is fulness of joy; In Thy right hand there are pleasures forever" (Psalm 16:11). May it be for you—a never-ending journey filled with delight, trust, and joy in the Lord.

If at any point you feel that Christianity becomes a list of do's and don'ts, or that you are overwhelmed and weighed down, or that you have no chance to face your battles, simply turn to biblical meditation. My goal is to teach you how to handle both the dry seasons and the exciting moments. Yes, you might see biblical meditation as just another duty, but when understood correctly, it is quite the opposite. Think of the difference between eating a plastic apple and eating a nice, juicy, and sweet apple; there is no comparison! It is through biblical meditation that you will find strength, direction, peace, joy, love, and delight in the Lord. So, stay encouraged, and take good notes. If you don't move toward effective biblical meditation, you will eventually run dry.

Time for Watering

Let me give you an example: My daughter brought home this beleaguered, dying ivy plant from the florist. Nobody wanted it. It had some life, but it mostly stayed the same, with about 10 to 20 leaves. However, after she moved the plant into a larger bowl with added soil, it began growing wildly! Now, it's a massive, lush ivy plant on our kitchen table. Once it was repotted and new soil was added, the plant started to grow like crazy.

Every time our family gathers at the table, someone comments on how one or more limbs reach out toward us as we sit around it. The other night, my wife was actually giving lessons on how to tuck the plant's "arms" in so they stay tucked in better and don't crawl over anyone's plate. (We have a big family!) Do you get the picture? Christians cannot grow strong and big on infant roots. What you learned when you were young was great, but it is not enough to take you where God wants you today. You need new and deeper roots.

Sometimes the Lord will replot you by taking away a girlfriend, moving, losing a job, etc. We all face such life experiences. However, if we understand them correctly in light of our Sovereign God directing our lives, we will discover that the very same events become opportunities for growth. Seek the Lord during such times and take His Word into your heart; He will use our deeper needs as places to seek His watering. If we choose to doubt His care for us, we simply won't grow. He hopes we will seek Him in a new way through His Word so we can strengthen our relationship with Him. The Lord doesn't want us to stay in kid-mode forever.

Have you ever considered how your spiritual root system has grown or perhaps weakened over the years? Your spiritual life reflects how you nurture your roots, which reach deep into God's Word and take His words into your soul.

These chapters are designed to help you regularly have more meaningful times with the Lord, no matter where you are in life. This is how Jesus lived and how He wants to live in you. The evil one is truly afraid of all His people staying connected to Jesus. It was hard enough to have one Jesus, but what if there were a hundred Jesuses—that is, a hundred Jesus-filled believers?

I must differentiate meditation from religion and scholarship before moving on. While knowledge of God's Word is helpful and important, it is not the same as what we aim for in biblical meditation. So, if you think this is just another lecture you'll listen to and forget, then forget it. If biblical meditation doesn't change you, then it isn't truly biblical meditation. Biblical meditation is more like getting on one of those amusement rides. By

fastening the straps, you are preparing yourself for an experience.

Hebrews 5:11-14

In this chapter, I will show you how Bible meditation fits into the Christian life by thoughtfully examining Hebrews 5:11-14. This will also serve as our first exercise.

Assignment 1: Please pause and take the handout on Hebrews 5:11-14. In the middle of class, assign Hebrews 5:11-14. Enjoy! Continue reading once you're done, as we want to discuss it together.

Concerning him we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. 12 For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. 13 For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. 14 But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil. (Hebrews 5:11-14 NASB)

I hope you have finished the exercise. There is an old proverb that says you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink. You need to immerse yourself in God's Word. Oh, I can tell you about its richness, but it's different when you study and realize how the Lord is growing you. I've led a Biblical teaching team for many years. I often hear new teachers say they gain far more from preparing for the lesson than from just learning in class. This is true. Do you know why? Because teachers explore God's Word more deeply.

Don't worry if you're not a teacher or preacher. As you reflect on the Hebrews 5 passage, see how the Lord expects you and every Christian to grow. Our old mindsets must be broken; otherwise, like old wineskins, they cannot expand with what God is teaching you (Luke 5:37).

Hebrews 5:11-14 is a powerful passage that not only offers insight into the Christian growth process but also traces spiritual life and links one's spiritual journey to growth in the Word of God. This is the key: growth depends on the proper intake of the Word of God. Just as a person needs to hear the Gospel to know God, a believer's growth requires further engagement with the Word of God.

Although the word 'meditation' isn't used in this passage, the idea is conveyed through the analogy of eating. The author describes two groups of people consuming food: first, those in need of milk, and then those eating solid food. Milk is for babies who have no teeth and need others to prepare it. Adults eat solid food. You can't just swallow food without chewing; you must chew it. Meditation is similar to eating. We enjoy chewing, tasting, grinding, and swallowing. The tastes, textures, and time spent processing all add to the delight. Similarly, we consume the Word of God as our spiritual food; it becomes food for growth! New believers need more mature people to break down the Word and feed it to them. Teachers provide substantial portions of meat, properly sized so the more mature can break it down and find strength. Both need God's Word, but new believers need more extended help breaking it into simple truths so they can understand and benefit from it. Adults, however, need more substantial nutrition than milk to function effectively. They have larger bodies and more active minds than

infants, who sleep much of the day. Isn't this a beautiful image of discipleship?

If time spent meditating on His Word doesn't change you, something is missing.

The author of Hebrews, when comparing physical food to the Word of God, emphasizes this point in verse 11, which speaks of hearing the Word of God. Verse 12 mentions the "oracles of God," and verse 13 refers to "the Word of righteousness." Just as food strengthens our bodies, God's Word strengthens our spiritual lives. For example, in the Parable of the Sower, Jesus likewise likens the sown seed to the Word of God, which grows. The truth of this food analogy runs much deeper, as we will see below.

Just as with physical development, more is expected of those who are mature in faith, so believers need greater discernment. Christian growth is primarily defined by our training. This explains why we can't grow without obedience; otherwise, we remain untrained. We will look at passages like Joshua 1 later, which instructs Joshua not to turn to the left or right.

Through extensive nutritional studies, we understand more about how food benefits our bodies as it is broken down and surprisingly distributed at the micro level throughout the body. The Word of God does not operate magically within us either. It may seem that way from our superficial observations, but that is simply a reflection of our ignorance, much like how we once viewed the sciences before they advanced and showed us how food benefits our bodies. The author of Hebrews states that the

Word of God encourages caution and awareness that we might otherwise lack in living out our spiritual lives.

Looking Closely at Hebrews 5:11-14

Looking closely at verses 11-14, he identifies three levels of Christian growth that parallel those described by John in 1 John 2:12-14. First, there are the babies who rely on basic teachings. They possess new life (he doesn't mention new birth, but other scriptures, such as 1 Peter 1:23, do), along with the Spirit of God's work. They can grow in their initial understanding of the Word of God through the "milk" of the Word.

He also clearly describes mature believers who consume the meat of the Word. Their faith (Heb 11) is notably stronger because God's Word is integrated into their spiritual lives. Although he does not explain the process, the analogy of eating meat and other tough foods suggests that one is involved. I will later show how meditation plays a key role in this process.

The third group, actually the second, consists of young believers who are not yet mature in their spiritual development. They are described but not named. Infants grow and mature, but before they reach maturity, they shift from drinking milk to eating meat. They are on their way to developing "their senses trained to discern good and evil" (14). This discernment does not develop instantly.

An expert pianist reaches expertise only after extensive practice. Such practice makes the playing second nature. The middle group, the growing Christian, is still training their senses to distinguish between good and evil. The mature are portrayed as such because they have this training and can use God's Word to determine what is appropriate and what is not. The imma-

ture cannot. They make foolish mistakes, including what many of us consider normal behaviors: getting angry, worrying, looking lustfully, etc. The young in faith are often and rightly described as those who experience ups and downs in their spiritual lives. Of course, if someone is discipling the immature, they can learn from the more experienced one's insights.

I will not discuss the [three stages](#) further, as I have done elsewhere, but it is important to understand that the Word of God helps Christians grow in maturity and righteousness. This training increasingly enables one to discern right from wrong. New and young Christians, much like babies and teens, do not yet possess full discernment in life decisions. They may have passion, excitement, and some knowledge, but they are not yet fully trained for leadership. Therefore, God's Word helps develop discernment between good and evil. On the surface, we can see how this happens. For example, we learn that wishing harm on someone is as wrong as [committing murder](#), and so when we notice such attitudes in ourselves, we humble ourselves and confess our murderous spirit.

Many aspects of the spiritual growth process, such as the nutrition gained from physical foods, will remain unseen behind the scenes. Some can be observed, while others cannot. Yet, we are confident that God's Word helps us grow. There is an element of faith mixed with experience here. A person eats an apple without knowing it will benefit them, but it does. They are only aware of how much they enjoy a good apple. Similarly, a believer will, over time, learn how God's Word helps them—somehow—and plan to regularly meditate on His Word.

Perhaps I should add one more point as a rebuke. In verse 11, we see him rebuking the believers. They are at one stage, but

they should be further along. They ought to be teachers, yet they are dull of hearing. They seem to hear the Word but do not let it penetrate and strengthen them. This happens in several ways, which we hope to address later, but the main point is that hearing God's Word does not automatically mean we grow through it. We want to think it does, and it might seem obvious, but it's not always true. Other factors are involved, usually related to our unbelief and disobedience.

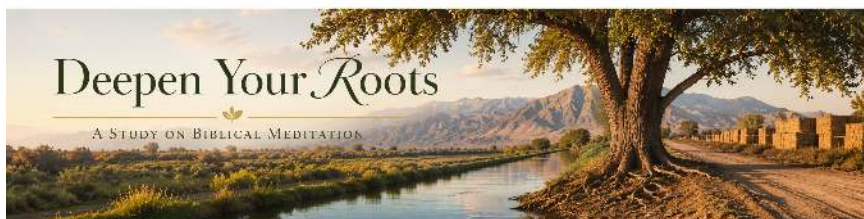
Summary

In summary, the Word of God brings us new life and supports us at every stage of our spiritual growth, whether we are new, young, or mature believers. Meditation is the practice of taking in God's Word. We learn to enjoy spending time with God in His Word. His words, the truth, increasingly strengthen our discernment, hope, and faith, and help us make good decisions.

I understand there are questions: "But why don't I grow when I read God's Word?" These are valid inquiries! They often stem from the expectation that reading God's Word will benefit us. We agree. That is our main point: God's Word is of great benefit to our lives. As we move along, we will discuss the factors behind proper biblical meditation.

Discussion Questions

1. Why are milk and meat mentioned in Hebrews 5?
2. How does the Word of God help us grow spiritually?
3. Provide an example of when you experienced the "meat" of the Word. How did it benefit you?
4. Where in Hebrews 5:11–14 do you see Christian growth described?



#2 Deepen Your Roots:

Psalm 1

Something happened to me one day. I had been a Christian for many years, even serving in a pastoral ministry, but I continued to search for a deeper experience with the Lord. A teacher, Bill Gothard, taught on success and shared certain truths from the Scriptures. Towards the end of the day, it finally clicked. The verses found in Psalm 1 opened my mind to what seems like a whole new approach to the Scriptures—a good and healthy one.

My Study on Psalm 1

Let me take you back to the study on Psalm 1 to reflect on what it truly says. There are two Old Testament passages that strongly instruct us to meditate on God's Word. We have books like Psalms and Proverbs that connect the Word of God to our individual lives. We ought to conclude that God wants each of His children, those who believe in Him, to be holy and live uprightly.

Deciding between Psalm 1 and Joshua 1 is challenging, as both reach similar conclusions. Joshua, in some ways, feels more impactful because of the greater emphasis placed on it. Psalm 1, however, is skillfully crafted and presents its key message in a

way that all believers can access. While not everyone may be a general like Joshua, we are all God's people—His worshippers. Psalm 1, positioned at the start of the Psalms, serves as a model for how we should live so we can bless and serve Him with our whole hearts. Let's dismiss any idea that godly and blessed living is only for clergy! It is for everyone. This understanding naturally guides us to live uprightly in His sight. Psalm 1 addresses some important issues for us in this regard. From the very start, the Psalmist speaks of blessing. This is even more evident in the original Hebrew, where the first word is "blessed."

Study Psalm 1 Yourself

List all the hints you find in the following verses for living a good spiritual life, then answer the following questions.

¹ How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, Nor stand in the path of sinners, Nor sit in the seat of scoffers! ² But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night. ³ And he will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, Which yields its fruit in its season, And its leaf does not wither; And in whatever he does, he prospers. (Psalm 1:1-3)

- Does the Psalmist desire that each reader be blessed? How do you know?
- What does it mean to be blessed? How can a person ensure they receive God's blessing in their life?
- What imagery does the Psalmist use to deepen our longing for God's blessing?
- Which part of the description resonates with you most?

Let's review some of the main observations here.

God, so to speak, lures us with the word 'blessed,' knowing our natural desire to live a full and meaningful life before the Lord. Do you see this powerful truth? God wants to bless all of us. His blessing manifests in every good, rich, helpful, and kind aspect of life.

Think of Paul in Ephesians,

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him (Eph 1:3-4).

The Lord knows it's easy to overlook the spiritual side of things and, from our perspective, end up with less than blessed. The Psalmist emphasizes two ways of living: one blessed and the other cursed. He describes the fruit of the godly as abundant, while the ungodly produce a worthless, something like an inedible husk. Imagine the person enjoying a wonderful meal with his family compared to someone alone, eating just a few grains of dried rice.

Digging Deeply

The psalmist begins Psalm 1 in a surprising way, pointing out three ways a blessed man will not live—speaking a certain way, thinking a certain way, or being influenced by others. Transparency about our failures leads us to repentance, which in turn opens the door to life for us. Before we can believe that God's goodness is the most desirable, we must reject the ways of the world.

I assume the readers here all know the Lord and, deep down, love Him and His Word. I remember that once I came to know

the Lord, I loved His Word. It was not just curiosity but a genuine desire to know Him. After salvation, the hunger for His Word took hold of my desires. Upon salvation, the Word of God becomes a joyful and wonderful experience. Before that, enjoying reading the Bible was out of the question. I would rather do anything else than read. Repentance comes before belief. Recognizing the world's bankruptcy comes before experiencing the joy of the Lord's fellowship. However important this is, we need to focus on the crucial aspect that leads us to that point of success.

The Test of Our Heart

Success is linked to a heart that delights in God's Word. A key principle is that when we love God's Word, we naturally want to read and meditate on it regularly. When something is enjoyable, we want to spend more time with our Lord. Therefore, blessings come to those who delight in and meditate on His Word. I believe most of us have experienced times in our spiritual lives when we found joy in God's Word and received blessings in return. These blessings are associated with confidence, trust, help, joy, peace, and assurance. They don't take us out of difficult circumstances but enrich our inner lives.

The image of a vibrant tree planted by the water, bearing fruit in its season, symbolizes success. It doesn't matter what one does; what matters is a steady supply of water to nurture growth and produce fruit. The Psalmist's confidence is expressed in "Whatever he does, he prospers" (1:3).

Everything sounds great, but our Christian lives can be marked by conflicting images, aren't they? We want to be fully honest and avoid giving an inaccurate picture of the Christian life. At the same time, we want to remain faithful to the Scriptures.

What does it mean when a believer shows no desire for God's Word? How can someone rediscover delight in God's Word? Also, what does it mean to meditate on God's Word? Is it the same as reading or memorizing it?

The Blessings of Biblical Meditation

When everything is functioning well, this picture remains clear, but sometimes gaps appear. The system isn't working properly. Some try harder and harder, but nothing helps. We can address these concerns as we move forward. I hope that when we read a passage like Psalm 1, you can honestly assess whether you hunger for God's Word. You will be able to see the fruit you have or lack. Or you might see yourself at this moment as a tree beside a dry stream bed. Don't be afraid to be honest about your true situation or to seek understanding of where the scriptures might lead us.

One of meditation's benefits is that we connect and deepen our understanding of one truth by understanding another. Did you notice that Hebrews 5:11-14 is closely related to the truths presented in Psalm 1? Yes, it is presented differently, but the ability to distinguish between good and evil is connected to one's meditation on God's Word. No wonder that when Jesus, facing one of the hardest times of His life during His temptation, unhesitatingly stated that "Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Mat 4:4). We also have to battle temptations and, like Jesus, need to use God's Word. We live in a state of spiritual warfare (Eph 6:10ff.).

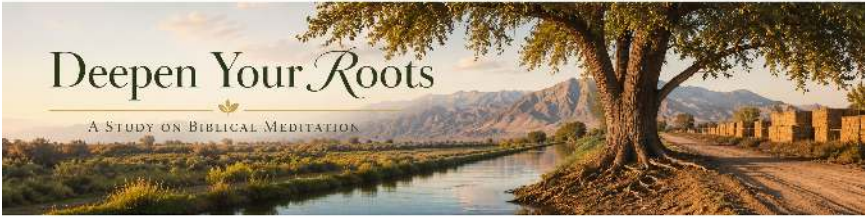
My Reflections

God used this insight into the reality of God's blessings to greatly influence my life. It was decades ago now, and though I forget some details, I remember the change it brought. I sometimes had zeal for God's Word, but I also wondered whether I was getting everything I could out of life. The Lord, as seen in Psalm 1 and Joshua 1, revealed to me that God will powerfully guide our lives if we meditate on His Word. I began to realize that God didn't focus on many things but emphasized the importance of entering His Word and obeying Him. I knew I didn't have to be the best or try to be. It didn't depend on education, wealth, or even one's church and friends, but on my pursuit of Him through His Word.

This understanding shifted my focus toward meeting God through His Word, which we will examine more deeply in the next chapter. If I had to sum up the lesson, it was that God granted me greater faith in His Word's power in my life. Some questions remained unresolved, but I kept moving forward in faith, trusting that God wanted what was best for me and that this could only happen through regular meditation on His Word.

Discussion Questions

1. What does Psalm 1 have in common with Joshua 1?
2. Which thought or word from Psalm 1:1–3 encouraged you the most?
3. Describe your familiarity—or unfamiliarity—with meditating on God's Word.
4. What questions do you still have about biblical meditation?



#3 Meeting with God:

Exodus 33:7-11

How many here know someone who is spiritually struggling? Most of us, if we take time to look, will find numerous fellow Christians who are confused, doubtful, and perhaps even despairing. How do Christians enter such periods? Is it necessary? Exodus 33 surprisingly gives us clear answers.

Our souls often desperately seek a revival of our faith through God's Word, but how? It certainly does not arise from a ploy of convincing oneself that all is well or that the heart's situation doesn't matter. Hebrews 11:1 reminds us that through our faith we can see and respond to spiritual truths. Without this faith, we cannot rightly discern or respond to God, His will, and His glory as seen in His word or otherwise. Without faith, our spiritual vision is dim, and therefore our spiritual lives are greatly restricted and rarely moved by stimuli arising from the spiritual world. If our spiritual vision wanes, we will, out of necessity, pay heed to the world's forces. The world, in those cases, dominates our sight and mind. When we grow spiritually weak, we grow worldly strong. Our soul, though once vibrant and strong, might later cower behind a shadow of doubt.

So what would you say to a brother who asks, “How can I get back to God?” or “Why do I always seem to be losing the battle?” Or perhaps you yourself are wondering, “How can I grow stronger? What keeps me from being a strong Christian?” I, like many of you, have gone through many trying times. Instead of being strong, I was often weak and even failed. The truth is that we do not need to slip and fall. A toddler will falter at times, but it is not expected of the established Christian. What do you then say to the Christian seeking renewal?

Recommendations Anyone?

Most of us would come up with a quick list of recommendations.

- Get up earlier and meet God.
- Spend more time in the Word.
- Need to deepen roots by studying theology.
- Just wait. Growth comes with age and experience.
- Use ‘my’ Bible. My version is better.
- You need this spiritual experience.

These things sometimes work. More often than not, however, they only become temporary fixes. We all know that getting up early to meet God can help. But what happens when I fall asleep after I get up, or when my time with God grows ‘stale’ even after spending longer times in the Word? Each offered solution can fall short because it focuses on habit rather than on the things that directly affect our faith. Of course, if we have the wrong lifestyle, making improvements can greatly help one’s spiritual life. Some Christians are ashamed of not being more intentional with spiritual disciplines, but even with the best

habits, we can end up with dull prayer times. By mandating longer readings, we end up despising the time even more. We know this is wrong, too, and yet these battles are all too common.

Spiritual Nourishment

We need to recognize some basic things about spiritual life. 1 Peter 1:3 tells us, “The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” At one point in our lives, we did not have spiritual life. But after this special “caused to be born again” event, we found we had a new spiritual life. Just as in our physical lives, at one point we were nonexistent, and then at another moment we were born and alive.

The Spirit of God comes and does a special work that brings about new life. Once this new life is born, it has a life of its own, with a purpose, appetite, and set of needs that seek fulfillment. Physically, we breathe and feel hungry. Spiritually, we pray and love to read God’s Word. I remember absolutely loving to read my big King James Bible after coming to know the Lord as a young teen. All of the Lord’s children can look back on this new thirst for God’s Word.

This spiritual life has an innate tendency to grow. We might cut back some plants, like bushes or grass, but it isn’t long before what we cut away grows back. Life is like that. Life innately seeks to grow. It will consume what it needs to carry out its purpose. Spiritually, we need to consider both those needs and the purpose of our spiritual lives. There is so much to learn.

The Needs of Life

If we do not understand our spiritual lives, we will not recognize when we are not receiving the spiritual nutrients we need. Is it right to expect a five-year-old to grow? Of course! But what if we added that he was not eating properly? Would that change our expectation? Sure. We sometimes see starved children who look much younger than their age. Our spiritual growth is meant to be without limits; this is a good and healthy expectation. However, we need those spiritual nutrients. Otherwise, we will be much like that starved child. To grow, we need to be fed by God's Word. Many of us have not thought about it.

As mentioned above, we can examine our spiritual habits. We look to see whether we or others are doing Christian things, such as going to church, praying, or reading God's Word. But we should not think that the mere opportunity to be spiritually fed is the same as being spiritually fed. This is the problem with legalism. It misplaces the focus on outward observations rather than on what is happening inwardly.

What good is it to put a nice, full plate of food in front of you if you are never able to eat it? You were there. The good food was sitting there. The problem is that the food never entered your system and therefore was never properly utilized. The same thing happens spiritually. We read God's Word. We pray. We go to church and give money, but these are not the same as spiritual growth. They make the condition ready for growth, but without entering into those spiritual disciplines with faith, we do not gain from them. Legalism is the expectation and demand to carry out various activities without regard for their real purpose or the means by which those activities are carried out.

The revival of our faith does not come from merely looking like we are enjoying a spiritual feast, but from actually enjoying one. This is true for pastors and Bible teachers as well as other congregational members. Spiritual strength comes from spiritual food, while spiritual weakness comes from a lack of spiritual food. The issue is not the trials we face, but whether we are being spiritually nourished.

I need to pause here for a moment. Some Christians might think that their pastor does not spiritually feed them. If this is true, it is a shame. Many preach stories rather than God's Word, but we are fools to think a thirty-minute message once a week is going to be our main diet for the week. Nature tells us to eat several times each day. We can get by with one portion, but I see that most people eat more than this. For many centuries, Satan tried to keep God's Word away from us. But now that many of us have God's Word, He keeps us distracted from reading. Too many things are going on. Each and every Christian needs to learn how to feed himself from God's Word. By feeding ourselves well, we enable our spiritual lives to keep growing. The pastor's message is used in a special way to equip us, but we need more of God's Word to grow strong.

We are now going to look at Exodus 33:7-11 and identify four aspects necessary for exciting and effective times of spiritual fellowship with God.

1) Discover the Power of Exciting Devotions (Exodus 33:7-11)

Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, a good distance from the camp, and he called it the tent of meeting. And it came about, that everyone who

sought the LORD would go out to the tent of meeting which was outside the camp. And it came about, whenever Moses went out to the tent, that all the people would arise and stand, each at the entrance of his tent, and gaze after Moses until he entered the tent. And it came about, whenever Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent; and the LORD would speak with Moses. When all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would arise and worship, each at the entrance of his tent. Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend. When Moses returned to the camp, his servant Joshua, the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent. (Exodus 33:7-11, NASB)

Moses regularly shared a special time with God (Ex 33:7-8)

Moses experienced many things. We remember him at the burning bush and on Mount Sinai. He was the man who led millions across the Red Sea. But here we find that Moses “used to” regularly take a tent, set it up, and meet God. The camp would move according to the pillar of fire's leading, but Moses would always set up his tent and meet God.

Intimacy demands regular meetings.

We might think Moses didn't need these regular times with the Lord because he was a spiritual man. But when we reflect on these experiences, we see that even those with special spiritual encounters with the Lord can still go up and down in their passion for God. At a foundational level, we all need to cultivate a special time with the Lord, just as Moses did. We are not made to live on special annual feasts that we might have on some hol-

iday. That is ludicrous. Feasts are never meant to replace those regular times with God.

People look for special spiritual experiences to renew themselves because they are not having significant times with God each day. Special experiences are fine if God gives them to you, but they are not to be sought as our mainstay. They are not the spiritual pill of life. God will give us what we need when we need it. Instead, we ought to turn our minds and hearts back by cultivating regular, significant meetings with the Lord.

We might ask, “Why did Moses regularly go out to meet the Lord?” It is evident that what he experienced on the mountain-top was not enough. We will look at this later. Many of us can say we had a special experience with God, but we are fools if we think those high, spiritual experiences will satisfy the deep need to regularly commune with God. The need is there, but it must be met through regular meetings with God. This is the problem with those running to this and that revival. Perhaps they are spiritually touched, but it is not enough. It is never enough. It is not meant to be enough. God has a much better way for His sheep!

Here is one key to finding spiritual renewal: Realize that one’s spiritual life is nurtured and strengthened as we meet God. If meeting God is the way we are to grow, then we need to meet Him regularly. We can think of it as a developing friendship. Each time we see a certain friend, our hearts are excited. The same is true with regularly meeting the Lord. We don’t say to ourselves, “Oh, I had such a good time with my friend last time. I don’t need to see him again.” The opposite is true. The joy of meeting together becomes a good and natural motivation to

meet. It is from this special meeting with God through His Word that spiritual growth occurs.

We, like Moses, need to order our physical lives so we have regular times with God. It doesn't matter how important or unimportant we are in the eyes of the world. We can skip social media and even go to bed earlier so we can get up earlier and be more alert to Him. It becomes our daily habit, not built on guilt but on the expectation of meeting our Mighty God. That habit merely gives us the occasion to meet. More will be said later about what will happen in that meeting, but without being deliberate about meeting God, we essentially admit that God is not important in our lives. That would be a tragic mistake. Can a plant thrive apart from its roots (John 15:4)?

Moses considered it utterly important. Jesus considered it essential. The same should be true for us. We have never learned so much that we cannot learn much more. We have never been on such a spiritual high that we do not need to humbly meet with God again. We are never at a point in our lives where God's Word is not crucial to guiding, protecting, and comforting us.

We must make every effort to meet with God, but we will face many obstacles that keep us from doing so. Sometimes we just don't feel like it. We don't believe God will meet with us and be there alone. We are distracted by catching flights, cooking, kids, cleaning, and making plans. Our minds are already anxiously plotting the day's events and conversations. We need to be frank. Any life that does not seek God daily is already crumbling. Don't fool yourself. You might be a pastor or deacon, but a life without regular meetings with God is a dead life. This is where many Christians are today. The Christian life is a pre-

tense. We go to church, but we lack the joy of a Spirit-filled Christian. Are you regularly meeting with God alone? When? How often? Where? This is an important spiritual discipline, but if you show up without meeting God, we should recognize that nothing of importance has occurred. Let's look at what should happen during these times.

2) Moses had a special meeting place (Ex 33:8)

It is interesting that Moses established a special tent for meeting God and placed it outside the camp. This was called the 'Tent of Meeting.' This was not for everyone, but they would go as near as they could to see God's pillar of cloud over it. Maybe they could hear what God was saying to Moses. Imagine having times like that with God! Some groups of Christians still live this way, believing that when they have a spiritual need or problem, they need to meet with a counselor. There is no doubt that this can be helpful at times, but God has called all of us His spiritual priests. "You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5). Under the New Testament, God has given a much greater way than under the Old Covenant. We will look into that further later, but it is clear that Moses is an example of how the Lord wants to relate to all His people. Everyone should meet with the Lord. That is our New Testament calling as His disciples and children.

We see that the tent was placed outside the camp. This can have two meanings. It may mean that Moses sought a place where it was quiet. As long as he stayed in the camp, everyone there would be coming by. He would be distracted from the dai-

ly affairs of life, even being asked to make good decisions for them (i.e., judging). If I don't get up early, people call, things happen, and I need to go places and handle things. Moses sought a place away, as much as possible, from the noise of earthly life. I have to get up when it is still dark and quiet to do this.

The second reason to keep the tent outside the camp is to disassociate oneself from the sin of the world. God repeatedly tells us that His anger is directed at those who sin. In Genesis 6:3, God says, "My Spirit will not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh," for this reason. It was here that the godly seed began to marry those who were not godly. Almost instantly, the godly seed was polluted, and God came to judge the world by the flood. Numerous other verses say the same thing, though from different perspectives.

"You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (James 4:4).

For the LORD had said to Moses, "Say to the sons of Israel, 'You are an obstinate people; should I go up in your midst for one moment, I would destroy you. Now therefore, put off your ornaments from you, that I may know what I will do with you'" (Exodus 33:5).

Intimacy means separation.

Just having a special place to meet God does not guarantee that God will always be there. There are countless temples and shrines around the world. God is not in those idol-infested places. Nor is He with those who reject Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The Jews and Muslims reject key truths about knowing

God. God does not visit their worship centers either, and the same is true of the Christian church. God will not necessarily show up. There are conditions. When we have unconfessed sin, God will not commune with us. God has spoken clearly to His people, as in the seven churches of Revelation (Revelation 2, 3), but we have ignored Him. Is there sin the Lord is speaking to you about? Is there something the Lord has pointed out that you need to change, but you have been reluctant to make those changes? That is something you need to repent of. Otherwise, you take your sin to your supposed meeting with God. He will refuse to meet with you because of the way you dishonor Him in your whole approach.

3) Moses had a special meeting with God (9-11)

The third key to a significant meeting with God is that He is actually there. Notice what the Scriptures say: “Whenever Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend” (Exodus 33:9). As I mentioned before, people have often tried to get God’s attention but have failed. People use all sorts of things to get God’s attention: ringing bells, serving food, chanting, etc. What is different about Moses?

Although this may seem like a special moment between God and Moses, I will show later that it is meant to be typical of our relationship with God as New Testament Christians. When Moses entered the tent, God came. Many people try, but it just doesn’t happen. Man’s greatest temples are like empty riverbeds filled with the world’s dust. Man was made for God, yet God is not present in their lives. Today, we have people screaming with excitement when they find a rock that looks like Jesus’ mother, shedding a tear (I’m sure we have no idea

what she looked like). What happened in Moses' case is entirely different. It is the difference between spiritual life and death.

When Moses found time to go to the tent outside the camp, God came. It is as simple as that. "And it came about, whenever Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent; and the LORD would speak with Moses" (Ex 33:9). God was willing to meet with Moses. The New Testament portrays God similarly. God is ever-present and ready to meet man's needs through Jesus. We are not talking about doing this or that so God can come (Rev 3:20). I like to think of it this way. When I enter a room or place to meet the Lord, He is there. I can simply pray in Jesus' Name, and the Almighty Creator is present. It is absolutely awesome. Here is an insignificant person talking to the Maker of the heavens!

This shows that God is more than willing to spend time with us if we simply meet with Him. God is never too busy to meet us. We might be too busy for God, but He is never too busy for us. We might wait twenty minutes on the phone to speak to someone for technical help, but the Lord comes when we purpose to meet Him. Of course, it is good to have a regular place to meet, but it is more important to meet Him than to have a regular place. Moses set up a tent wherever he was.

His presence means everything!

Let me ask a question: "Why do you think he put up the tent and went in there?" The answer is obvious, isn't it? He expected to meet God. Would he keep doing it if God did not meet him there? He probably would for a while, but then he would stop. The goal of our devotional time is to meet God, not just to say prayers or to read the Bible. When we are intent on meeting

God, God comes. When our goal is simply to say our prayers, God probably will not come. When we are merely happy to have read some of God's Word, God doesn't have to be there. But for those who know that prayers and reading God's Word are means to address and hear from God, they are not content if God is not there. They insist on God being there. God has to be there, or why should they read the Bible? The problem with Christians in this age—too often, me included—is that they are content to read and study God's Word without God.

Prayer, then, can be merely saying our prayers without faith. We say prayers because they are supposed to help. But we honestly don't need God for that. False religions have many people who merely say prayers. We think there is magic in the words. This is religiosity. God will stay away from those kinds of prayers. If, however, we insist that God hear our words, we find the real spirit of prayer. Prayer is, after all, communion with God. If we talk and do not hear from Him, then we had better change things until God hears and responds to our prayers. In Matthew 6, Jesus taught the disciples how to pray. We come to God, our Father, in Jesus' Name.

The same is true of Bible reading. We do not just read God's Word. When I hear my wife's voice on the phone, the words are special. Her voice and presence shape the words I hear. The same is true when I read God's Word. If He is not there, the words are void of life. We need God to speak to us through His Word.

Now, some of us have never learned to meet God this way. We never even thought God would want to meet with us or have anything special to say to us as individuals. Our expectations for what would happen during our devotion times are rather

dead and dry. We don't expect much, so we don't get much out of it. This is why many Christians can't keep up the habit of reading God's Word. It just doesn't mean that much to them, and they eventually give up on it. We should be discontent with reading God's Word if God doesn't speak to us. We want Him to be there, for He is our life. What He says to us is critical to our lives. God wants us to come regularly before Him so He can commune with us. It has been this way from the beginning.

What do we understand about God meeting Adam before the fall? Do you believe He walked in the garden with Adam and Eve? This is what we find God regularly doing before the fall. "And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day..." (Genesis 3:8). Why would the Creator condescend to spend time with Adam? The Creator is separate from His creation and immeasurably greater than it, yet we find that He desires to build a special relationship with us.

Summary

What do you expect to happen when you open your Bible to read? What should happen? Are you truly aware of God's presence when you pray? Are you sure God is there? If you have not paid attention to these matters, you have been improperly trained and need to retrain yourself. Keep your devotional times short if necessary; God is there! Insist on it.

4) Moses heard a special Word from God (Ex 33:9)

The fourth aspect of an effective and meaningful time with God is hearing a special message from God. One brother, who had been a Christian for 7 years, told me that God had never spoken to him. He was desperate. Whenever we were in a Bible study

together, he had little to say. I now understood why. He is like an orphan who has never heard his parents' voice. I wonder how many other Christians face this same problem.

Verse 9 says, "Yahweh would speak with Moses." So simple, and yet so powerful. We might think this is especially significant. But as we look through the Scriptures, we see that God often speaks with people. It is a common occurrence. God spoke to Adam and Eve after they sinned, and the text indicates that God had often spoken to them before that time. Then we have many instances when God spoke to Moses or the prophets. Many of these words are written down as the "Word of God." God has spoken because He has words of life and hope to offer us.

Isaiah 59:2 teaches that God will not speak to those in sin. It might be a demon they hear, but it is not God. If it were God, He would be judged (cf. 1 Cor 11:30-31). God cannot tolerate the presence of sin, for it is open rebellion against His honor and ways. God speaks, but people often do not listen: "I called, but no one answered; I spoke, but they did not listen. And they did evil in My sight, and chose that in which I did not delight" (Isaiah 66:4).

Behind this phrase, 'God speaks with us,' is the understanding that God has special things to say to His people. We have already discussed the need to make a special, regular place to meet with God, but we should also expect to hear from Him. Because of this, I have reshaped my understanding of myself and my expectations of what God might say. I get ready to hear from Him.

First, I now recognize that God wants to speak to me every day. Along with this knowledge comes an awareness of my desper-

ate need for Him to speak to me. I admit I do not know what I need to hear from Him, but that doesn't matter—He does! I might need comfort or exhortation, a rebuke or a warning. He guides, helps, teaches, and motivates me to do His will. I cannot do His will without Him speaking to me through His Word. Deep in my heart, I recognize that my heart is empty each day without His Word abiding in my life. I am spiritually dry each day and need to be spiritually fed. I could depend on yesterday's conversation, but, like leftovers, it only lasts so long. More important is the knowledge that if I don't receive what He would otherwise give me, I would neglect to minister to others as I ought and even fall into temptation. Without the Spirit of God moving in my life each day, I am like a kite without a wind.

Second, my expectations for what will happen during my times with God have been greatly improved. I now live in the hope that God will speak to me about what I need. I am a newcomer to this way of life, but Jesus lived this way. I need to follow the Spirit's leading. What makes this so rewarding is that this new expectation aligns with the new life within me. My new life thrives on the Word of God. It wants to grow and flourish. When I see my spiritual life grow strong, I get very excited about being His child. This is remarkable. God involves Himself in each of our lives. Because He cares, He wants to train and enable us to live out our best each day.

Jesus said, "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you" (John 15:7). The Lord instructs us to let His Word abide within us. He wants to shape us by His Words. The Bible plays a key role in all of this. It contains the Words of God, written to greatly impact us. More will be said in another session about what this all means, but for now, let me define 'God speaking to us' as

the Spirit bringing certain words to our minds as we deliberate on God's Word. Of course, He can speak apart from the Scriptures, but a careful look at Jesus' life shows that the Father largely used His written Word to speak.

Many inadequate and outright wrong ideas about God keep His people from listening to Him. Some people are intimidated by those in authority, including God. They are shy about meeting God. They think those in high places have no time for the unimportant people. Other followers of Christ wrongly believe that God will meet with them only on very special occasions. Others fear that God will yell at them when He speaks (because that is what their own physical fathers did). The majority never think of meeting God when they read His Word and pray. They read the Bible out of habit. God is not important to their lives unless they are going through a crisis.

Our Heavenly Father is deeply interested in who we are and concerned with helping us do His will. He knows we cannot do it alone, so He has given His Spirit to help us. This is what Jesus told us in John 16:13, "But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come." When we understand God's close involvement in our lives, we can anticipate hearing good and important words that concern our lives and ministries. This anticipation is faith. We believe God wants to speak to us. We believe He will meet with us, and we trust Him to speak to us through His Word.

When was the last time God spoke to you? Have you learned to hear Him? What did He say this morning? How much do you prize what He says? Do you let novels and computer screens

distract you from what He said earlier in the day? What do you expect to gain from meeting with God tomorrow? Let's make sure that not one day is wasted in our pursuit of Him and His will!

An Old and New Word

These basic ideas we have been sharing are so startling to some Christians that they do not know what to think. It seems to them that they have missed out on Christian living. They have, to some extent. But they might also receive a word from the evil one suggesting that this presentation of Moses might not accurately reflect what God wants to do in believers' lives. So let's support our conclusions.

We can easily reject those false words because God's Word has much to say on this matter. This is what we find in 2 Corinthians, chapters 3-5. This passage is too large to examine in full, so we will focus only on the major contrasts relevant to our lesson from Moses' life. Our real question is whether we should expect God to meet us regularly, as He did with Moses. You will find much more, however, including astonishing facts about our relationship with God.

The Apostle Paul makes a clear and deliberate contrast between Moses and the Christians. He acknowledges Moses' special experiences. They really took place. But they are of little value when compared to what we see Christ has given to us. Let's look at a few of these contrasts.

Moses and the Christian (2 Cor 3:3)

You are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts. (2 Cor 3:3)

First, we see the contrast between what God did with Moses and what God did with the believer. This is indicated by the 'tablets of stone'. Moses' name isn't used here (as it is in 3:7, 13, 15), but the 'tablets of stone' make it clear that Moses is being referred to.

Moses received tablets of stone, while the Christian has God's Word written on their heart. The difference is great. In the Old Testament (OT), the Law shaped the community through outward laws. But the believer in Christ is shaped because God's truth is in their heart. The Spirit of God gives light to God's Word in our lives. The Word was written not with a stylus but with the Spirit of God. This is just the beginning of a list of contrasts. Again, we do not look down on Moses' experience. It was awesome, but it is nothing compared to what He wants to give His believers today.

Let's take a look at one more important section.

Moses, who used to put a veil over his face that the sons of Israel might not look intently at the end of what was fading away. But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ. But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart; but whenever a man turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit (2 Cor 3:13-18).

Moses' brightness came from meeting God, but to emphasize its temporariness, the glory faded. He wore a veil so others could not see its diminishing. It is so special to see the contrast

between Moses' diminishing glory and our own lives. We, as believers in Christ, do not need a veil because Christ's glory grows greater and greater. As we spend more time with Him, a literal transformation takes place. It is gradual yet sure. It is wrong to conclude that Moses' experience was greater than what we are offered in Christ. The opposite is true. Our experiences with God radically transform us into Christ's glorious image!

A Heart For God

What would we say to a brother or sister seeking to recapture their first love for God? Or, if it were us, what would we do? We have mentioned several points, but I would like to summarize what we have said so far.

The regular meeting place is important, but something lies at the foundation of a true and effective quiet time with the Lord each day. The first is faith, and the second is desperation. We have spoken briefly about these, but allow me to elaborate for clarity's sake.

(1) Faith: I believe God will speak to me

We are often so focused on habits such as Bible reading that we are not rightly attuned to God's presence. As I said before, it is possible to read the Bible without faith. But in case we miss the point, we want to elaborate on what it means to have faith in one's Bible reading. We will have a few examples in a moment, but let me first highlight its meaning. I will use the example of Bible reading, but this is true of all spiritual disciplines and practices.

Faith is the approach we use to practice these spiritual disciplines. It is the belief that God will speak, can speak, and wants

to speak to me. When I open the Word of God, I also open my heart to the Lord to teach me. As I open the Bible, I consciously speak to the Lord, welcoming Him to teach me. The Spirit of the Lord then begins to teach. This process is further explained in the section on Biblical meditation, but faith is the key element here.

We need to consciously reject merely reading or studying the Bible on our own. Instead, we must understand that God draws near as we read His Word and wants to speak to us. What happens if I find myself just reading the Word without a conscious awareness of His presence? I repent. I confess the pride in my life that leads me to think I could read His Word without Him in a good or proficient way. I also confess my hardness of heart. Such action means I am content to live my day without meeting the glorious God. Afterward, I need to pray, usually out loud, something like this,

“Oh Lord, how dare I read your precious Word without depending upon you, my Teacher. I am so prideful. I am so hardened to your glorious truth, but I don’t want the religion which you disdain. I want you. I don’t want to master the Bible but to have the Spirit master me through the training of your Word. Lord, I want to meet You. I must meet You. But it’s not just me; the world needs You. Oh, Lord, please speak to me. Lord, open my heart up to Your great and mysterious Word. Speak, and let my pride be properly humbled. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.”

After this, I go back and start reading properly; that is, I ask and expect Him to speak to me through that passage.

(2) Desperate: I need God to speak to me

Faith speaks to my awareness and confidence that God is present, ready to bless. But I find that the element of desperation or urgency is also critical. It touches on the belief that I can do no good apart from God (John 15:5: “For apart from Me you can do nothing.”)

If this world is truly a spiritual battle, we are great fools to rely on earthly weapons, such as money and influence, to fight for and promote God’s kingdom. It is like building a house out of a deck of cards. Just blow on it, and it falls flat. Part of this conviction about our desperate need comes from recognizing how sinful we are. We are blessed that the authority of the flesh is cut off once we become a Christian, but Satan has a host of tricks to get us to act in the flesh. This is what temptation is—the portal to serving self. The only way to live against the flesh is to live or walk in the Spirit (cf. Gal 5:25). We need the Word of God to live within us each day so that we are conscious of His truths and so can, therefore, discern the wiles of the devil.

Third, we need God to speak to us, to comfort, encourage, and guide us into His works. Again, we cannot do this on our own. Humanism is the popular religion of the West right now, which holds that people can cope on their own (i.e., without God). We must face our foe and our pride and step away from this wicked philosophy. We need God’s grace to accomplish God’s work.

There are many times when I start reading God’s Word and suddenly realize I don’t feel I need It. At this point, I pray and cry out to God,

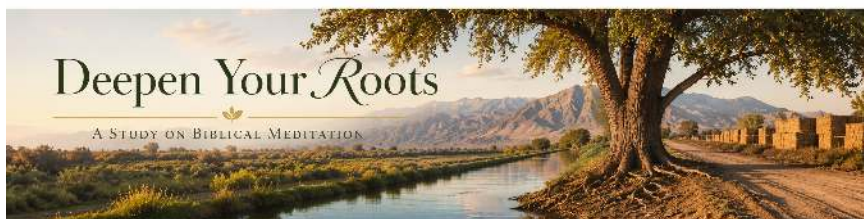
“Lord, forgive me for my pride. I don’t think I need You. I think I can get by this day without You and Your grace. That is an outright lie. Set me free, O Lord. Set me free, O Lord. Please forgive me through the blood of the cross. I need Your wisdom, Lord. I need Your protection, Lord. I need You, Lord. Come and help me. Speak to me. If You don’t speak, I shouldn’t be here. But I am here, and I need You to speak to me. In Christ’s Name, I pray. Amen.”

Summary

Having faith that God will speak words that produce grace to meet our needs is critical. We need God’s grace. Faith is the belief that He can lead and help us by His Word. We, of course, do not know what we need each day, but we can fully trust the Lord for those needs. We know where to find that truth. We go directly to Him in His Word in a regular and expectant manner. He will begin to teach and transform us into Christ’s image.

Discussion Questions

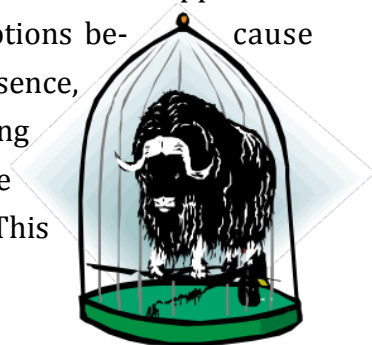
1. Reflect on how meaningful your devotional life is. What makes your devotional time meaningful?
2. What makes a devotional time poor or unproductive?
3. Do you have meaningful conversations with your Heavenly Father? How has your approach to devotions shaped your relationship with Him?
4. Can we consistently have good devotional times? If so, how can we make them meaningful and special?
5. Share with your group one or two significant things you have learned from a Bible passage.



#4 Deepening Our Reflections—OXPET: Joshua 1:6–9

Our study on Joshua 1 helps us understand biblical meditation and learn to apply its techniques in your daily quiet times and Bible studies.

Earlier, we looked at how every reading of God's Word should be alive and meaningful. The more meaningful our times with Him, the more excited we will be to meet Him. The opposite is true as well. If we are just having devotions because we should and do not sense God's presence, we should react. "Hey! Why am I doing this?" We need to be dissatisfied with the form of religion and to desire its heart. This is the life Jesus lived and spoke of.



Engaging With the Lord

The depth of our times with the Lord largely depends on making every encounter with the Lord in His Word special by meditating on His Word and applying what He teaches to our lives. I have found special insight into making each reading of God's Word meaningful. God revealed it to a key Biblical figure sever-

al millennia ago. That figure was Joshua. Joshua had an impossible task. He needed to fill Moses' shoes. Now, it isn't that Joshua was not well trained or prepared for the job. He was. No matter how much time he had spent working at Moses' side, he, like us, had a lot more to learn. It is fascinating to see what God tells him. God lays it all on the line. He tells Joshua how he can succeed or fail. Many of us have never taken these instructions to heart. We never thought what God said to Moses would be equally important to the success of our own lives and ministries. Let's take a close look at the passage.

Joshua 1:6-9 and Its Lessons

Be strong and courageous, for you shall give this people possession of the land which I swore to their fathers to give them. Only be strong and very courageous; be careful to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, so that you may have success wherever you go. This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go (Joshua 1:6-9).

What is the key thing Joshua is to focus on? He was to be strong. That is important. But what was he supposed to be strong doing? How was he to know what God wanted? How would he know if what he wanted was different from what God wanted? God clearly tells him.

This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be

careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success (Jos 1:8).

God's Word needed to be close to Joshua's mind. He needed to be affected by the truth God had revealed in His Word. At that time, they had only the first five books of the Bible, called "the Book of the Law" or simply the "Law." They were written by Moses under the inspiration of the Lord and are the same as what we now know as Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Biblical Meditation

The Lord does not stop there, however. He carefully delineates how God's Word is to remain close to Joshua's heart and mind. He is to meditate on the Word. The Hebrew word 'to meditate' can mean devise, muse, or even imagine. He is to take God's Word and mull it over in his mind, much like a cow chews the cud. A cow seems to do this all day long. It chews the grass, then it sends it to its stomach. Then it comes up again and chews on it more. This continual effort at meditating is emphasized in the words "day and night."

Joshua was not a king, but he was a leader of these people in every other sense. He was the general. He was the guardian of God's new society. He was the means by which God would speak to, guide, and help the people. What was he supposed to do all day? Meditate. He would do other things, but the central advice was clear. This advice is especially interesting because it goes against what we would normally advise others or do in our own lives. God knows the difference between the great and the ordinary. He wanted to bless Joshua and the people beyond their imagination. This happens as we allow the Word of God to

come so close to our minds that our minds and hearts are shaped by His. Remember, just reading or memorizing God's Word, though good and essential, is insufficient. It is only when we enter into meditation on God's Word that it comes alive. When we follow God's advice, He blesses us in all that we do.

Digging a Well

Spiritual life is like digging a well. If one digs fifteen feet but doesn't reach water, does he stop? No. It is hard to dig at such depths.



But if he needs to dig another fifteen feet to reach water, he digs it. What sense is there in having a well when there is no good, clean water? Our need for water motivates us to dig deeper. Our belief that we will eventually find the needed water helps us persist in such digging. So it is with meditation. We have an inner need for wisdom, guidance, comfort, warning, and encouragement. God ministers to us what we need (much more than we could expect) through His Word. Once we catch on and are blessed, it is easy to fall into the spiritual discipline of meditating.

Biblical meditation is very different from Eastern meditation. In the East, they try to block their minds of logical thought using a mantra (a word). They 'empty' their minds. Biblical medi-

tation fills one's mind with God's Word and aligns one's thoughts with the Lord. It's like a quiet conversation about a particular passage of God's Word between God and man. Questions are important in this process. "What does this mean? What does this have to do with my life, Lord? What are you trying to tell me through this, Lord?" We need not pretend we know our lesson!

Some people cannot meditate like this, even if they try very hard. This is because they lack the Spirit of God. It is like trying to receive a radio station without a radio receiver.

For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man, which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God (1 Cor 2:10, 11).

One needs the Spirit of God to understand the things of the Spirit. If one does not have God's Spirit, they cannot properly discern God's Word. We should remember, though, that sin in the lives of Christians brings about a similar deadening effect. A dead person cannot communicate and is isolated from the land of the living. Sin is just like that, even in the lives of Christians. "But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He does not hear" (Isaiah 59:2).

The Study of God's Word

Having put the command to meditate before us, we need to understand how to integrate meditation effectively into personal Bible study. Meditation should show up wherever we spend time in His Word. We are often more focused on the process of study than on the message the Spirit is trying to convey to us.

We need to get more in tune with the Spirit. Learning how the Spirit teaches us is not only something we need to learn and apply in our quiet times but also in any Bible study or Bible preparation time. After analyzing our studies in God's Word, I have come to see that there are three aspects to good Bible study. I have used eating an orange or a pineapple to illustrate this.

Desire: Seeking heart: How much do I desire it? Will I eat it?

Approach: Bible study methods: How are we going to eat the orange? Peel, slice?

Technique: Analytical skills: How shall we actually prepare it? Use hands, knife, carve?

The Desire

I discussed the aspect of desire in the first session. The desire for God to speak to us through the reading of His Word is normal, good, and necessary. If, in our reading of God's Word, we do not truly meet the Lord, we should become dissatisfied. We want to meet God. He wants to commune with us. If it doesn't happen, we should seriously seek God until things are righted.

THE STUDY OF GOD'S WORD		
 APPROACH	 TECHNIQUE	 DESIRE
 Bible study methods	 Analytical skills	 Seeking heart
How are we going to eat the orange? Peel, slice? 	How shall we actually prepare it? Use hands, knife, carve? 	How much do I desire to eat the orange? Maybe I just want to look at it. 

Some of us might be oblivious to what is normal and right. If we have grown up in unhealthy families, our concepts of God and relationships are usually distorted. For instance, if we have

grown up in a family where the father did not speak with the children except to scold them, what hidden thoughts might this person have toward His heavenly Father? How will this affect His expectations about what God might say to him?

In fact, God, though high and lifted up, enjoys spending time talking to His people. The sin is that we run through life without regularly conversing with our Heavenly Father. We need to recognize our need for Him and expect that He greatly desires to help us daily with all these issues. Notice that even Jesus Himself received His teaching from the Father: “Jesus therefore answered them, and said, “My teaching is not Mine, but His who sent Me” (John 7:16). If Jesus went to the Father to know what to say and teach, certainly we should do the same in every aspect of our lives. This is why Joshua experienced so many victories.

How much do we want God’s Word? How much do we really need Him to speak to us? Can we get by without ‘meditating’? Once He reveals things to me, will I actually obey? This will show how much we truly desire His Word. It is easy to say we will obey, but quite another to carry it out.

Our good desires are closely associated with three key words: faith, hope, and love.

Faith is the expectation that God will speak to you during your time together.

Hope is the joyful reliance on God because of His faithful care for you.

Love is the wholehearted devotion to treasuring what the Lord says to you.

Behind any true and genuine spiritual discipline lies the fundamental expression of our dependence on God. In our genuine search for Him, our fervent belief that He alone has the answers and truly cares for us compels us to trust Him no matter where He leads us. Let us now spend more time discussing the approach and the technique.

The Approach

We will not spend much time on the approach to reading and studying God's Word. There are many other resources for this. In our illustration, Bible study methods are how we open the fruit to eat it. We have to decide whether to peel or slice the orange. Bible study methods are different ways to open up God's Word. Some are better than others, and each has its own advantage. The 'Devotional Study' is what we have been discussing so far. For these studies to be effective, they also need to include an element of the devotional study. God's Word is given that we might be shaped. We must respect this.

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim 3:16, 17)

When God's Word is rightly appropriated by the man of God, he is ready for any good work. God's Word empowers us! If we feel unable or very confused, we are not engaging rightly with God's Word. He will give us the faith needed to face each situation. If you are a teacher of God's Word, you need to be familiar with these studies of God's Word. If you are not, you should use them to deepen your reflections on God's Word in your life. It is helpful to think of these studies as methods for meditating on

God’s Word. Again, the main point is to capture a truth that God wants us to apply and pass on.

For a fuller overview of common Bible study approaches, see Appendix H “Bible Study Methods.”



Before going on, I need to address the use of devotional books. Some have asked me whether I recommend using them. I don’t recommend them. They are not wrong, but they lead us away from where we want to go. We do not want to hear man speak but God. Let the child play with a toy gun, but the soldier in the army must learn to use a real gun, even though it is dangerous. If God uses the devotional to touch us with His Word, it is good, but we must work toward that.

The Word of God is the most likely place to meet God. We can meet God elsewhere, such as while driving or playing golf. Of course, we can also learn from others’ experiences, but do not make devotional material your primary means of meeting God. David said,

They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; Sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them Thy servant is warned; In keeping them there is great reward. (Psalms 19:10, 11).

We must insist and train ourselves to rightly handle God's Word.

Techniques in Studying God's Word

Bible studies are approaches to God's Word, but each relies on a combination of skills. If the kind of Bible study is the approach one takes to eating a fruit, then these techniques or analytical skills are the means one uses to prepare to eat. Does one use a knife to slice or hands to peel?

Analytical skills can range from simple to complex. Reading, itself, is a complex skill that integrates many processes. We take this skill for granted, but many have not yet mastered it. The more these skills are developed, the less they interfere with the process of studying God's Word. But like riding a bicycle, they need to be practiced repeatedly so that they become part of the way we do things. Here are some important and helpful analytical skills:

- Praying through scriptures (Talking to the Lord about what He is saying to you).
- Observation (Carefully making contrasts and comparisons that result in conclusions).
- Inductive study (Already mentioned; ability to draw conclusions from a passage about what the passage was originally meant to say and teach).
- Persistence (Plain discipline to get through difficult or long passages).
- Asking questions (Who? Why? Where? When? What happened?).
- Application (Answer: "What are you saying to me, Lord?")
- Meditation (The persistent perusal of a verse, its meaning and application to one's life).

- Grammatical (Ability to make observations on the word structure of a verse).
- Word Study (Includes a range of skills from using a dictionary, thesaurus, concordance, Hebrew and Greek dictionary - or one of many computer programs facilitating these studies; AI can do a fantastic fast research job.)

We now want to elaborate a bit on what we discovered in Joshua 1:8, namely the importance of meditation. We want to show how a person can actually meditate. This exercise is nothing short of exciting. We will look at what I call “OXPET” to help us explore some principles of meditation.

OXPET

Those strong at analysis are often weak at application. Meditation blends the two. We want to explore ways to overcome some of the hindrances that keep us from getting close to the scriptures without benefiting from them. We want the scriptures to come alive!

Let me first give you a general example of meditation. I was reading a passage from John 4 during my meditation time. I was going to read further and, in fact, did scan ahead a bit, but the Lord was already speaking to me from verses 1-3. So I accepted that my study would be limited to those verses.

¹ Therefore when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John ² (although Jesus Himself was not baptizing, but His disciples were), ³ He left Judea and went away again into Galilee“ (John 4:1-3).

Jesus had to go through Samaria just after this passage. There He met the Samaritan woman, and many came to know the Lord. These three verses can be easily overlooked in light of the exciting events that followed. But the Spirit began to prompt my heart, saying there was a message for me here. I decided to set aside the later verses (a conscious decision to trust the Spirit's leading even when studying God's Word). Meditation requires discipline to focus on a small passage like this.

But I typically ask, "What does the Lord want to say through these verses?" I believe He can use any passage to teach me, so I humbled myself and began to talk to Him about these verses in a quiet prayer. "Lord, what are you trying to teach me here?" I then offered a brief analysis of what was happening in the verses. This might differ for different times and people, but this is what the Lord was helping me see that day.

Analysis: Once Jesus heard that the Pharisees had heard about Him baptizing more people than John the Baptist, He decided to leave the area.

Principle: Sometimes, when a person is experiencing great success, God might call them away from there to another place and even another ministry.

Principle: The Pharisees grew jealous. They noticed these things. Jesus allowed their jealousy to shape His plans. He could have stayed there and had His disciples baptize more people. That would have been natural, but He was sensitive to the Lord's timing.

Application: God might one day take me from a good and successful ministry. If He does, I must follow the Spirit's leading. Bruce Wilkerson did so when he went to Africa. Jesus did the

same. I must be willing to let God's Spirit lead rather than let success rule.

I sincerely considered whether there was any particular ministry the Lord wanted me to avoid at that time, but it did not seem so. I tell Him that I will pursue the Father's will rather than build on success. I must not live by success but by a higher principle to accomplish God's work. Success does not prove direction.

This short meditation touched my soul, a sensitive part of me. I recognize that He might be preparing me to avoid pursuing success. His lessons are not always applied immediately, but they all prepare me for His work. Perhaps He does this in advance to keep me from temptations I might otherwise not discern. Meditation is the means to true success because it enables us to live out God's will through the Spirit. Now let us look more closely at how we can meditate on a passage using the OXPET method.

The OXPET is derived from two words: OX and PET. It highlights five ways we can meditate, one for each letter. We are not saying you need to use this method to meditate. Instead, we are trying to get a feel for meditation. It is like learning to ride a bike. Someone runs behind you, helping you keep the bike upright. As you pedal, you go faster and faster. Then you realize the person who was holding you is far behind you and no longer holding on!



We are introducing ideas to get you started. The rest is up to you to practice until it becomes part of your daily devotional time. These methods will hopefully become part of your skill set. Feel free to forget the ox being treated as a pet (in a cage).

The neat thing about meditating is that it helps you in all your ministries using God's Word, whether as a Sunday School teacher, teacher, evangelist, or preacher. Commentaries are very helpful when trying to make sure that you are not far off in your interpretation of a passage. What is the problem that many of us face? We are too analytical. We need to learn how to take what we observe and apply it meaningfully to our lives. Someone has said it well. The head and the heart are only a foot apart, but they act as if they were miles apart.

So what is the OXPET? Let me introduce you to the OXPET chart. Each letter represents a significant way to approach the scriptures. It is a tool that helps us combine analysis with application. I developed this while thinking about how I meditate on the scriptures. I took a passage I was joyfully meditating on and identified these processes. Are there more? Probably. As I said, this is only to get you started.

I want to introduce each item to you first. Then, we will work through an example together. After that, you will have opportunities to practice. We will keep Matthew 6:33 in mind and

use it to provide illustrations. “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you” (Matthew 6:33).

O*pposite*

Think of the opposite sense of a word, command, illustration, etc., that one is meditating on. These contrasts easily stir the mind. Light <> dark; thirsty <> full; happy <> sad; late <> early. In the verse Matthew 6:33, we see the word ‘first.’ By taking the opposite ‘last’ and inserting it into the verse, “Seek last ...,” we see how the word ‘first’ highlights the priority of what Jesus wants. We cannot allow the seeking of His kingdom to drift into second, third, and definitely not last place in our lives. This one word, then, brings out Jesus’ emphasis more clearly. He could have left it out.

E*xpend*

Expand and mildly exaggerate the sense of the word or verse. The more practical and personal, the better.

In this case, we might select ‘seek’ from Matthew 6:33 and expand it. Seek means to go out and look for. It calls me to recognize that something is important enough to search for. But how important is it to me? If it is only a bit important to me, like a US\$1 bill, I will look but give up the search after a short while. But if it is a hundred-dollar bill, I will even get friends to help me find it. Jesus is calling me to make the expansion of His kingdom a top priority. I am to go all out and make it a priority in my life. In practice, I might look at my life and see what is

most important to me. How do I know? How do I spend my money and time? This ‘Expand’ is perhaps the most widely used meditation principle. On its own, it can greatly amplify the meaning so that the truths of God’s Word grab our attention. When this technique is working properly, one is humbled and awed by what one has found in God’s Word.

OXPET			
Opposite	O	Think of the opposite meaning of the word, command, or illustration. Contrasts often stir the mind and sharpen understanding.	
Expand	X	Expand and mildly exaggerate the sense of the word or verse. The more practical and personal, the better.	
Personal	P	Personalize the main meaning by placing yourself in the context and situation being described. Substitute your own name for the one being used when helpful.	
Emphasis	E	Emphasize the meaning by noticing repeated words, ideas, or phrases and personalizing them.	
Translation	T	Translate difficult words, phrases, or verses into your own clear, easy-to-understand words.	

Personal

Personalize the key meaning by placing yourself in the described context and situation. Replace ‘your name’ or ‘I’ with the pronoun used.

The verse says, “(You) seek.” The ‘you’ is often omitted in commands (KJV: “Seek ye”), but it is still there. In this case, we can reason that Jesus was speaking to His disciples, but we need to ask whether He is also speaking to me. In other words, are His words relevant to my life? Is Jesus telling me to seek first His kingdom? Sure He is. Then I respond, “I will seek first your kingdom.” We could also apply the last ‘you’ to our lives. The

promise is for me. If I seek first ..., then He will give me whatever I need in my life. This, of course, shows us that the Christian life is a life of faith. Only by carrying out what He wants through faith will we see His special promises come true. Step out in faith, and we, as well as all of His disciples, will be cared for. What a marvelous promise!

E*mphasis*

Emphasis observes repeated words and phrases, personalizing them. This method makes more sense in longer passages where we can actually see repetition being used.

For example, go back to Joshua 1:6-9 and see which word or phrase is repeated. “Be strong and courageous” is repeated three times! The Lord strongly emphasized this point. Why did He emphasize it so? It is probably because Joshua was tempted to be weak and give in. I can then reflect on my life. I might think about both the last time I was strong and courageous and the last time I was weak and gave in. I would follow through with prayer, asking God to make me strong and courageous.

Emphasis doesn’t always come from repetition, but it often does. Rhyme, word order, contrast, special initials (e.g., Psalm 119), words that sound alike (hard to detect because we do not know the original languages), and special sentence structure (Hebrew symmetric poetry 1-3-5-3-1).

T*ranslation*

Translate identifies and explains elusive words, phrases, or verses into your own easy-to-understand words. I could say

“define,” but the word “translate” is a bit broader. In fact, we always need to remember that we are looking at translations. We should consider what the original word means in this context. For your information, the context determines usage (the definition) more often than not.

We are often unaware of how we use words and phrases without truly understanding what they mean. It is so easy for all of us to do this. But if we are attentive, we will discover many words or phrases we think we know the meaning of but cannot put into words. We need to be able to state what they mean. For example, in Matthew 6:33, what does the ‘kingdom of God’ mean? What is it that we are to seek? Another word we might use a lot but not understand is ‘righteousness.’ Once we force ourselves to define these phrases, we think and pray on a whole new level. For example, we might pray,

“Lord, I hear you speaking. You want me to pursue the kingdom of God, but I honestly do not even know what it is. I have been a Christian for six years, and I still do not know how to describe it. I must not have been seeking your kingdom very hard! Please forgive me. Help me now to better understand what you mean. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.”

As you see, with just a few specific questions and observations, we have only begun to explore Matthew 6:33. I am again humbled by the power of Jesus’ teaching. I am like a very poor student who understands so little. I want to learn much more from Him. Let’s look at another short verse.



A Sample Meditation — Psalm 119:169

Let my cry come before Thee, O LORD; Give me understanding according to Thy word. (Psalm 119:169)

Let's do this together. Write down this verse and place one letter from OXPET under five words or phrases. See how far you can go. I will do the same. After you do it, come back and see what I have done. We are not comparing to see who is better, but learning from each other. (Sorry, I can't learn from you what God is teaching you!)

Cry (O)

The psalmist is facing great difficulty. He desperately needs help and cries out to God. If he were silent, it would be as if he had no problems. I think about the gambling casinos proposed in my area. Am I crying out, or just ignoring what is being done? A desperate voice would show that I really care. If my voice is mild, it doesn't really disturb me. Some things should prompt me to be noisy before God. What important things should I be praying about (the context of this verse is a prayer to God)?

Come before (E)

I want my prayers to ascend to the Lord. If my prayers only go halfway, am I content? What about halfway? 90% of the way? Am I content? No. I want my prayers to go right before the Lord and nothing else. If my prayers don't reach God, they are no good, no matter how close they get. I want my words and concerns to reach God. I want God to take notice and do something about the situation I bring before Him. I might also reflect on

how shallow my prayers are at times. I pray as if it doesn't matter whether God hears my prayer. It is as if I am content just to pray. What a sham!

My (P)

The Psalmist is praying. He is making his prayer known to God. But it is not enough for him to do that. Or, for that matter, it is not good enough that many around me are making their prayers known to God. The key for my personal life, family, and ministry is whether my prayers are being lifted up and coming before God so that He will do something about them. Are my prayers going up to God? Do I care? Do I pray? Am I content that others attend prayer meetings but not me? May it never be. I only have one life, and I need the Living God to hear my prayers and bring about His kingdom here on earth, even as it is in heaven.

Thee, O Lord (O)

People pray to many different gods. I often hear people say that it doesn't matter who you pray to or what religion you belong to; it will all work out the same. But the psalmist prayed to Jehovah, the living God who revealed Himself to Moses. If my prayers go to different gods, it doesn't matter because they are not real. But they must come before You, the Living God. I am accountable to You. You alone can hear my prayers. May I faithfully trust You to hear my prayers and to work!

Word (T)

I need understanding "according to Your Word." 'Word' here refers to the words that have come from the Living God. They are 'Thy Word.' The Scriptures are Your Word. I need to gain insight from Your Word. I must guard against taking my own advice. There is no other reliable source than what the Lord

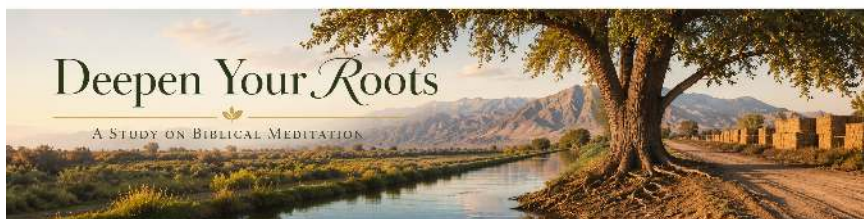
has said. “You have spoken. Let the truth in Your Word touch my heart. Do I take Your Word seriously? When I read Your Word each day, am I really desperate for you to teach me, as the Psalmist was? I don’t understand unless you teach me. Help me, Lord!”

Summary

From this brief use of the OXPET meditation method, we see our skills growing. We can extract rich nuggets from a few words. It is important to be in a prayerful spirit when meditating. You can see that even when writing, I go in and out of prayer. At the end, it is good to say your prayer aloud or write it down. Let the prayer reflect what you have learned from the verse. Make an appointment with the Lord and meditate on Psalm 119:174. It is special because it is another word of the Lord. But the point is that you need to train yourself to meditate. Keep doing it until you do it regularly, even on the passage the preacher is preaching from. The Lord has much more to teach you.

Discussion Questions

1. How does meditation differ from routine Bible reading?
2. What does OXPET represent?
3. Find a Bible verse and identify two words in it and their opposites. How does this help you understand the verse more deeply?
4. What does it mean to let God’s Word dwell richly in your heart?
5. How does trust help complete the meditation process?



#5 Abiding in Christ:

John 15:1-8

God has ways of shaking up our lives. I don't know if there has ever been a more meaningful time of challenging growth in my life than when He taught me the basics of Abiding in Christ, which is, in fact, the same as Bible meditation. The reason for this is clear. Jesus clearly explains how God's Word is connected to our relationship with Him and how that relationship impacts our success.

Let me first discuss these verses to explore their profound meaning. We are not stating anything different from what was previously stated. I am using the verse to reaffirm God's Word once again.

John 15:1-8

¹ "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. ² "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it, that it may bear more fruit. ³ "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. ⁴ "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you, unless you abide in Me.

⁵ “I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing. ⁶ “If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. ⁷ “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you. ⁸ “By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.

Caught Off Guard

This wasn't a planned series! The Lord caught me off guard. He interrupted my daily routine to draw me closer to Him.

First, the Lord secured my commitment. He reminded me of my desire to grow as a Christian. He was not impressed with my past missionary or pastoral work. The Lord was determined to shape my heart further. He spoke to me through Psalm 1 and Joshua 1 about the importance of daily meditation.

This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success (Jos 1:8).

God created meditation as a way for His people to grow and succeed. Excuses about not having enough time were untrue. I had a very busy schedule and was already waking up early to meet Him each morning. He wanted more time. I understood what He was asking for.

After much struggle, I finally gave up my afternoon radio talk show to listen to Him through His Word. The meditation time

didn't have to be long each day (I didn't have much time), but it was meant to be a regular commitment. I made no vows, but like other good habits, I intended to meet with Him at a certain time whenever I could. I could never have imagined what actually happened.

Learning to Meditate

As I reflect on it, I am still amazed. Even now, years later, I am deeply moved just by recalling what He did. Above all, I wanted to hear from the Lord during this brief meditation time. I did. He came so close that I was completely transformed. The time rarely exceeded thirty minutes, but what He taught me consistently had a profound impact on my life. The truths were so clear, piercing, and heartbreaking that I almost needed to prepare myself before meeting with Him. I wondered what He would say. Where would He lead me? My life might never be the same after that time with Him in His Word. My life was never quite the same.

I focused my study on Jesus and the Gospels. The Gospels were very familiar to me, so I approached them from a different perspective. After all, I have preached and taught most of the Gospel passages. This time, however, I planned to study passages where I could observe how Jesus trained His disciples. Instead of the typical study on how Jesus responded to different situations, I examined what the disciples themselves saw and heard. Jesus, after all, was training his disciples.

Appreciating the Fruit

The Gospels became a real adventure land full of special paths to learning. I would sit at Jesus' feet and, through the eyes and ears of the disciples, learn what and how Jesus was training

them. I wanted to be trained. That was my desire. Could I learn from these situations? Oh, yes. I learned far more than I expected, if I'm honest. I felt overwhelmed by the truths affecting my life. I was almost afraid that what I would learn the next day would be too much for me to handle.

I no longer doubt whether God wants to speak to me or other Christians. He desires to speak loudly and clearly. The real question is whether we truly want Him to speak to us. How eager are we for Him to communicate with us?

Each meditation session was unique, yet the approach for this series stayed consistent. Ultimately, every meeting with God had a deep impact on my life. Sometimes, the key insights would stand out right away. These lessons were easy to understand. At other times, however, the Lord would challenge me. I eventually realized that no matter how long it took, I needed to keep reading the same passage until He spoke to me. The Lord was strengthening my faith so I would fully understand that He was both able and eager to communicate with me through any part of His Word. No matter how unlikely the passage might seem, God could and would speak to me. But I had to be persistent. I was not to turn the page. I was not to drift off to another passage. I had to meditate on the Word He guided me to reflect on, even if it felt somewhat random.

Meditation's Difficult Parts

Once God captured my attention with the passage's truth, I inevitably felt the need to repent. Each passage served as a revelation, opening my spiritual eyes to my dire condition. I had been a Christian for many years, but the teachings were so powerful that I often ended up with tears streaming down my face. I wonder what my children thought as they walked past

me, seeing my deep emotion during a Bible reading. However, it was truly much more than just reading the Bible. I had encountered God, or rather, God had reached me in the profound, unspoken needs of my heart.

The encounters felt so real that it was as if the Spirit actually transported me to the place where the disciples were watching Jesus or asking Him questions. He enabled me to understand what Jesus was conveying. He spoke to me so regularly and powerfully during those times that I became an even firmer believer in the importance of a Christian growing every day of their life. Like the Apostle Paul, we have not yet reached that point of perfection. We have far more room to grow than we ever imagined.

Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead (Philippians 3:13).

Each session focused on a new passage. I read and reflected on each one until He spoke to me through His Word. Sometimes this took longer than usual, but I stayed there until at least one truth was revealed to my soul. Many times I was tempted to give up and settle for a general reading of His Word. Grateful to the Lord, I persisted in reviewing the passage until He spoke. More often than not, I just needed to read it reflectively once or twice more before His truth would start to powerfully shake my life. Each session ended with an application to my life. Usually, this wasn't too difficult because He was there to teach me. When I repented of my hardened heart, there was always some genuine, practical truth to apply to my life.

Our Hope, His Hope

My hope is that you will learn to hear God speak to you through His Word. This is what God wants of us—placing our hearts in His presence. These will be among the most extraordinary moments of your life.

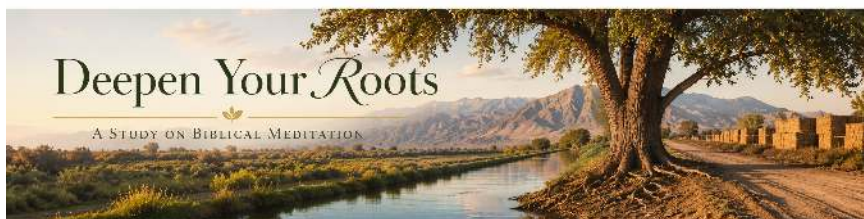
“Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love.” (John 15:9)

The Lord still waits to speak with you and me. He has already told us to meditate on His Word. Put aside televisions, computers, and movies. Sit down and ask Him to communicate with you through His Word. He is faithful. Just remember the key: whatever He tells you to do, you must do it. This bold yet essential heart approach makes each Bible meditation a journey with an uncertain destination.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the keys to abiding in Jesus?
2. What is your chief difficulty in abiding in Jesus?
3. In what area of life do you think He wants us to depend on Him?
4. Discuss an area of your life where it is hard for you to depend on the Lord.

You can read and enjoy these very meditations in Paul’s book, [*Abiding In Christ: Walking with Jesus*](#).



#6 Dying to Self

The spiritual discipline of dying to self prepares our hearts for fruitful biblical meditation. One good habit the Lord has instilled in me, which I hope becomes yours, is meeting with the Lord daily. I get up early and spend my quiet time with Him, but I have not always, or even regularly, found profit in these times.

Facing Our Problems

At one point, God led me deeper. I was reading through Joshua, and I love the Book of Joshua for all the action and lessons it contains. The Spirit sparked my interest further by posing a series of questions to me.

- “What makes this reading so helpful to you?”
- “How come other Christians have such a hard time gaining insights from these readings?”
- “Didn’t you use to have a tough time? What makes these readings so helpful now?”

The Lord used these questions to remind me of my struggle to profitably read longer passages, so I focused on shorter ones, maybe just a few verses. Later, I moved away from studying smaller passages because my devotional time had become so rewarding that it felt like another work project. So I intention-

ally began reading through several chapters each day. Still, I wanted to gain something from studying these longer passages.

What's the point of reading God's Word if He doesn't speak to me? The Lord had been speaking to me through His Word, guiding me in ways I hadn't noticed before. He prompted me, asking, "Why are these readings so helpful now?" I realized I had developed a mental routine to ensure my readings were useful.

How about you? How do you spend your time in the Word? Is it fruitful? Always? What makes it fruitful? What do you do when you feel dry and empty? How can you have a more fruitful time in the Lord's Word, even better—always? I suppose you have other related questions. But I know that, because I have had these questions, other Christians do too. It is one of those discoveries Christians make as they grow.

I have introduced numerous essential elements for a fruitful and engaging time in God's Word. Can you identify them? Part of it is habit—I read God's Word even when I don't feel like it, even when I am extremely busy or troubled. God's Word is a light, and regardless of my day or feelings, I meet with Him. It is habit, rather than crisis, that typically brings me to His Word. However, habit alone cannot solve our problem of having meaningful times with Him, because it does not adequately prepare our hearts.

Exposure of Our Need

Our hearts are best prepared on days when we are filled with hope that God will speak to us through His Word. The Parable of the Sower clearly illustrates our struggle to prepare our hearts. Our hearts are likened to soil. Sometimes they are hard-

ened and resistant to God's Word; other times, the good seed is planted in thorny places where people become caught up in worldly worries (Mat 13:22). But there are moments when our hearts are like good soil, ready to accept the seed, allowing God's Word to grow and produce fruit—some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred. Notice that when the soil is prepared for God's Word, it consistently bears fruit. Jesus' teaching underscores the necessity of prepared hearts for consistently fruitful times in His Word.

This truth has defeated the dragon of doubt many times! "Will it make a difference?" "Why should I get up early?" You need to realize that the evil one is not only trying to tempt you to ignore God's Word (think Psalm 1:1) but also to steal your hope that God's Word will make a difference in your life. Do you see how spiritual warfare is an ongoing, daily, though subtle, battle? I'll now return to this chapter's theme: "Dying to self."

Brokenness: Preparing My Heart

When I carefully examined my study of God's Word and monitored my mind and heart each day, I realized I needed to "die to self" daily. I did not discover anything new, for "Dying to self" is a spiritual discipline, though it may go by different names. Others have spoken about it before, but now the Lord has connected it to profitable biblical meditation, deeply impressing upon me the importance of preparing the heart for an effective and fruitful time in His Word. Yes, we will experience distractions and disappointments, but we use these moments to further discover the richness of Christ.

God seeks to reach and transform the places we have kept from Him. It's essential that we focus not only on the means but also on the goal: "Christ lives in me."

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me (Gal 2:20).

Let me give you an example. I am getting older and don't know how much longer I can serve publicly. I no longer have the stamina I once had. Now I must move forward in faith. In any case, I've learned the secret of dying to self, which helps me be honest about my weaknesses and frailties. I don't need to be alarmed, frightened, or defensive; instead, I can rejoice in the Lord's care for me and those I care about. Why do I speak so confidently? Because this brokenness, this admission of our needs, prepares our hearts and minds for Christ to live in me.

Empowerment: The Three-Step Process

"Dying to self" is a scriptural admonition found in Jesus' words and life, further explained by the Apostle Paul. Jesus submitted Himself fully to His Father's will, despite the suffering He would face at the cross. Remember when Jesus pleaded, "Father, if Thou art willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Thine be done" (Luke 22:42). Jesus didn't want to endure the cross, but in the end He chose to trust God's will. "Dying to self" means placing our will at the end of the line, like the caboose. We may have our preferences and concerns, but we can always trust our Father in heaven to know what is best. Accepting the loss of children in my wife's womb was not easy, but it became part of my trust in my Father's greater plan. Our trust in Him will be tested in times of conflict between what I

want and what God has for me. The choice of God's will over my own accurately captures the idea of "dying to self."

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Mat 5:3).

Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me" (Mat 16:24).

However, we need deep trust and confidence in God's will to practice this discipline consistently. You might say, for example, "I don't know how God will care for this matter, but I will trust Him. He is good." We are not suggesting that God doesn't care about our concerns; rather, He addresses our wants and desires—in His time and way.

'Dying to self' is not an end in itself but a means to our destination: Christ living in and through us. This teaching addresses the struggle with our desires and enables us to fulfill God's purposes. So how does one actually 'die to oneself'? The battle of our wills is the primary test before us. We must recognize this battle with our desires. By recognizing the contest, we can, like Jesus, submit our will to the Lord. This becomes our test of obedience.

Of course, if there is any unconfessed sin in our lives, it will instantly complicate matters. In that case, we begin with darkness in our souls, which clouds our understanding. During such times, we might avoid Scripture because we doubt whether God cares or can help us. Even if we do read, perhaps out of habit or to avoid guilt, the time may not be very profitable because our hearts are resisting Him. Our goal is to live in a good relationship with the Lord, repenting of our sins and specifically confessing them, finding full forgiveness in Christ. So

whether there is no particular sin standing in the way, or even if there is, we can still approach the Lord.

At the same time, we must master the art of changing our will. I think this is a struggle many of us have not yet overcome. Our modern world simply tells us to follow our desires. Our desires do not rightly inform us about what is always best! We can choose what we want, including prioritizing God's will over our own. Observe these three steps. Use your own terms to describe them as you please.

1) Self-denial — surrender my will.

Identify your conflict and choose God's will.

Do you detect resistance to reading God's Word? You might still read because of a good habit, but you don't want to. You would rather be doing something else. By recognizing your heart's resistance, you see the conflict in your life. You choose to deny yourself; that is, to admit the conflict and submit to God's will. Self-denial leads to self-restraint. Self-restraint aims to make healthy decisions about what to think and do, while self-denial focuses solely on our hearts and motives. In the context of biblical meditation, it means saying to the Lord, "I don't feel like meeting with You, but I know You are calling me to spend time with You. So here I am. I don't know what I need to hear and learn, but I know I need something from You."

2) Brokenness — acknowledge my need.

Relate one's life circumstances to the observed brokenness.

While the first point leads us to seek what observations the Lord has for us from our Bible reading time, it is essential to connect those reflections to our lives. Instead of thinking about missing out on something in the world—a cell phone call,

checking the stock market, or checking email—I choose to hear from my Heavenly Father. Choosing to seek God brings a host of good promises to mind and frees me to anticipate my time with Him. I get a glimpse, like a rising sun, that is increasingly shaping my thoughts and deepening my faith.

3) Empowerment — receive God’s grace and strength.

Seek God’s abundant grace for our needs.

When we humble ourselves, we not only recognize our needs but also acknowledge the rightful place our Savior seeks in our lives. This is the Spirit of God influencing us, sending streams of living water within us. This third point flows naturally; God’s grace abundantly prepares us for the day. This includes meeting our needs, directing our paths, and reminding us how to love someone. These are not necessarily ‘big’ things, but they are all important.

Dying to self is a process with a clear goal. Where does the rainwater go? Into the holes, the lowest places. We similarly prepare our hearts by digging holes through the confession of sin, acknowledging the hardness of heart, and embracing general vulnerability. In this way, we prepare ourselves to eagerly receive God’s abundant grace as we meditate on His Word.

Results of Meditation

God uses His Word to change, humble, rebuke, and encourage us ([2 Tim 3:16-17](#)). The humbling of our hearts opens our hearts and minds to God’s grace and prepares us to embrace God’s Word. In turn, we seek and find the wisdom, financial guidance, strength, passion, and love we need. No part of our lives is beyond Him because He cares for us. Because of our

various responsibilities, what we gain sometimes aligns with different stages of life—as a dad, brother, friend, neighbor, colleague, etc.

- Take note of what you consider most important to you.
- Order them by priority.
- Acknowledge and repent of any illegitimate desires, behaviors, and thoughts. Do this with each false value you have discovered (e.g., lust, greed, fear, “I need...”).
- Take a step back and recognize that God is ultimately the One who cares for and watches over your family. Rather than trying to control everything yourself, faithfully carry out your God-given responsibilities under His guidance.
- Prepare yourself not only to give up what you love but also to value what God values. Pause and see whether God brings to mind any person or situation.
- Boldly affirm how Jesus Christ lives in you and leads you. (He does this with your submission to His will.)
- Reestablish your ground. Review the things you consider important in your lives, but now prefer how the Lord is leading, even if you don’t know how it will work out. As we entrust these matters to Him, we become better prepared to follow His guidance and rest in His care.
- Your primary responsibility is to be close to the Lord each day. Rather than saying, “I can’t” or “I won’t,” respond like Mary: “Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38).

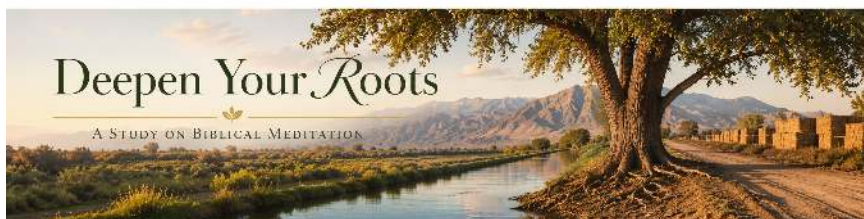
Discussion Questions

1. What does “dying to self” mean in your daily life?
2. Which Scriptures best illustrate this principle?
3. Why is self-denial so difficult in today’s society?

4. What is the hardest area of your life to trust God in?
5. How can recognizing one's weakness lead to greater joy and dependence on God?

Go Deeper

This chapter introduces the spiritual discipline of dying to self, specifically as it relates to biblical meditation. For a fuller treatment—including self-denial, brokenness, empowerment, and practical meditations from Joshua—see [*Dying to Self: The Spiritual Discipline That Leads to Renewal*](#).



#7 Our Lives and Ministries: Ephesians 2:10

Biblical Meditation and God's Good Works

In this chapter, we are focusing on God's purposes for biblical meditation and how He uses these times in His Word in our own lives and ministries. As with all Christian disciplines, we can forget God's purposes for what He is doing in the Christian individual or in us corporately. This is easy to understand, since our minds are so narrow and we focus on our own interactions.

So, we must ask, "What is God's purpose for biblical meditation?" There are numerous reasons for this special intimacy God has with His people through His Word. The Spirit works behind the scenes throughout this process, yet plays a crucial role. Let me list a few.

- Biblical meditation is a general means by which God intimately communicates with His people, generally assuring our souls and teaching our minds certain truths that are particularly applicable and helpful to us.
- Biblical meditation stirs our souls regarding our special spiritual needs, whether it is conviction and the cleansing

of sins from our lives, strengthening our faith for a special spiritual errand, or love in that difficult situation.

- Biblical meditation sets before us specific steps to reveal God's love and truth to others, whether in evangelism, sharing a testimony, or in life work.

God, then, individually communicates with us, spiritually nourishes our souls, and leads us in carrying out His work among others. If we are not in His Word, we miss out on a whole lot. We cannot carry out His work for His glory. We can complain about those around us, but we exclude ourselves from the very means God brings more love and truth into the world.

These purposes beautifully interweave the building up of the body of Christ, one by one. He intends that we all cherish His Word and delight in it. As we do, God shares more of His helpful truth to make us the men and women of God He has called and designed us to be. Biblical meditation is the path we take to reach what Paul writes in Ephesians 2:10, where he speaks of our appointed good works. But much transformative, holy, and envisioning work must take place within us if we are ever to live out His appointed purposes for His glory. God is ever eager to work in our lives.

Again, remember the Holy Spirit's role in the background. It is far more crucial that we focus on these day-to-day experiences with God than on past emotional, special touches from God. Both have their place, but this daily encounter in His Word works more deeply and thoroughly. Jesus said, "Whoever drinks the water that I shall give him shall never thirst, but the water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life" (John 4:14). Jesus spoke of a well of living water springing up within us. Later, in John 7:37-39, He

explicitly identifies this living water with the Holy Spirit, showing how the Spirit works within our lives, giving life and enabling us to grow.

What does it mean in practice, and what happens if we start to get burned out? Those are some of the questions we're working through in this session. Now, let's first turn to Ephesians 2:10 and see the goal God has for each of his believers. This is God's design for our lives. We are created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand. We should walk in them; God has a design for our lives.

**“For we are His workmanship,
created in Christ Jesus for good
works, which God prepared be-
forehand, that we should walk in
them” (Eph 2:10).**

We are His Workmanship, His Vessels

We are His handiwork, and like a vessel shaped by a potter, there is purpose behind His design. God, the Potter, created us for His purposes (Jer 18:1-6). We can consider God's purposes for my life, but we should approach this question with a filter in mind. Why did He make me?

Since He has equally designed and formed us (Ps 139:1-9), He can accomplish His purposes through us. We don't yet know exactly what those purposes are, but note that He has already designed us with them in mind. “God prepared them beforehand.” God's design for our lives and situations encompasses all that we are and will be. All His amazing grace in Christ Jesus is

given to accomplish His specific purposes. As time progresses, He grows us, directs us, burdens us, and places us so that we will accomplish those good works.

- **God has designed me (workmanship)**
- **God has designed what to do (the works)**



**Trust in His
workmanship**

**Trust in God's
special grace**

With this marvelous viewpoint, we can better understand God's purposes for our lives. Now you say, well, aren't we moving away from biblical meditation? No, not at all. The more we understand the power of His Word in our lives, the more we look at how He might equip us and work through us for His purposes. Though we are His workmanship and have special grace, we constantly look to how He helps us accomplish these good works. This largely comes from biblical meditation, which plays a crucial role in our lives. As we discussed earlier, biblical meditation is where we find success (Chapter 4).

The Purpose: "For Good Works"

So let's think here. What does Paul say in Ephesians 2:10 is the reason for making each of us His workmanship in Christ Jesus? The verse is clear: "For good works."

If you look at your life as a whole, from the particular point where we presently are, what do we see? If we look back, we will see a chart of all the good works we have, by His grace, accomplished. Wow, He has done so much through me. Some of us, who don't think of our lives in terms of seeing and caring for

others, carrying out God's will, perhaps need to be reminded of the Holy Spirit and how He uses us to help others. We were made to serve, even as Christ came to serve us (Mark 10:45). When a wife submits to a husband, or a father calms himself before addressing his disobedient son, they are equally carrying out God's good works. We don't have time to describe these good works, but it is a wonderful assignment for each of us.

Or bring it into the present. What good is God trying to accomplish in my life today? This is where we often face our life challenges. But we can be assured, aware of the ongoing spiritual battle (Eph 6:10-16), that He will enable us to speak, touch, help, pray for, or run an errand for someone. We should make it our goal to accomplish all the good works He wants us to do each day.

Our Spiritual Garden

Biblical meditation is the means by which we accomplish His assigned good works and bear fruit in our lives.



Whenever I look at my garden, I go out to look for fruit. We have a lot of cucumbers. Many of them are young, but they're coming along, and we've picked a couple. I'm looking for fruit. Every time I go out to the plants bearing fruit, I'm looking for fruit. Our raspberries are starting to turn nice and bright red.

It's nice to have good, strong plants, but sometimes I find myself a bit upset. Why aren't the string beans bearing fruit? We're looking for fruit in our lives, fruit born of the gracious work of God. If we're pastors, we're looking for growth among our congregants. As parents, we want our children to grow up experiencing God's wonderful grace and to bear fruit. This is the expected full cycle.

That's where growth finally reaches its productive stage, which we can enjoy. And those grapes look so luscious. The way we do this is described in John 15:4. Biblical meditation is how we make Christ's words part of our lives. But the way to bear lasting fruit is to abide in Christ, letting his words abide in us. This is almost imperceptible, but keeping a journal makes it easier to track God's work in us. We are assured of fruit, though it might look and bear differently from what we imagined! The problem is that at some point we can be broken off.

Burned Out - Not bearing fruit

Though we might be attached to the vine, if the branch is bent or misshapen, the flowing life of the plant will not enter the branch, and it will wilt. Any fruit on it will wither. This is what we call a stage of burnout—being a Christian and yet having lost its zeal and power.

Maybe you are experiencing it now! We start, of course, with excitement about knowing and serving the Lord and watching how he's working in our lives. But then family pressures, marriage pressures, and work and ministry pile up. We feel increasingly barren; it becomes harder to accomplish God's purposes. And now ministry's hard, and marriage is just getting by.

You see what's happening. All of a sudden, we feel like we don't have enough to do everything God has given us. Sometimes we even grow a bit bitter. I remember when I had eight children—many of them small at the time—along with a busy ministry and serving as a pastor. At times, this burden would come upon me. This was precisely the time I needed faith in God's work in me. The key is that we really can't take on ministry, marriage, or family work without constantly meeting with God.

Each busy part plays an important role in our lives. We can't drop any of them, or it will look like a juggler who has to stop because he dropped the baton. Our time in God's Word becomes our lifeblood. We are tempted to sleep in and skip time with God, but that begins to zap our energy and focus. Things get worse. I have found that only by regularly meeting with God in His Word do I keep everything else in balance.

Biblical meditation during our quiet time forces us to regularly meet with God, hoping He will help us. I remember, not a few times, how I couldn't see how the day would work out. But He is able to help us accomplish that day's good works, including being patient with others even when we have so much to do. These days prove the benefit of meeting with God, but even more so, they show how He somehow works it all out, for this is where He gets the glory. At night we give thanks for His faithfulness. We're not just doing this as another habit, but learning to rely heavily on Him. Yes, we can't do it without Him. As we spiritually grow, we say to ourselves, "I don't want to do it without God!" Doing it with Him is always so much better, watching how the impossible is done. Being amazed at how He could give me extra gracious words for that nasty person. We see God accomplishing His good works!

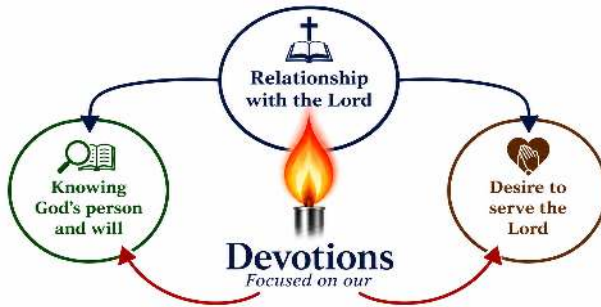
We believe God can help us, and He does. We go into our quiet time every morning, looking for God, not just for direction but to live! “I can’t live today without you. I don’t want to live today without you. Meet with me in your word.” And that’s what He delights in doing, because these works were never meant for us to do on our own but with Him. How does He do it with us? He greatly uses our meditation times.

He helps and encourages us through our times with Him. We get to know Him, and of course, we bring our requests to Him. He tells us to do this! But He also puts other people’s needs on our hearts; that’s intercession. He gives us the insight, help, and determination we need. I remember living in a three-story house and sometimes having to go up to the roof. When I was young, it wasn’t much of a problem, but as I got older, I noticed my legs making the ladder shake! I waited for the right time. When I talked to Him, He brought it to my mind and bolstered my confidence. I know that’s the day He wants me to venture up the ladder. We believe in God, and He helps us. We already learned how to meditate on the Bible, maybe using OXPET.

There are many ways to do that. You can go through the whole Bible, as I’m doing now, and focus on a particular verse that God brings to your mind. But no matter how you engage with God’s Word, John 15, Psalm 1, and Joshua 1 all speak to how this special time enriches our minds with the Word of God; our Lord helps us through the day, not just to get by, but, like marriage, to bear fruit that remains. Biblical meditation has to do with our work, our ministry, and our whole lives. Everything comes together through the time we spend with Him every day.

The Interaction in Biblical Meditation

Let me describe how this works a little more. When we meet with God in His Word and in prayer, it enriches our relationship with Him. We get to know Him, and He reveals more of Himself. When that's happening properly, He helps us know Him better, understand His will, and prioritize knowing Him and His work. At the same time, He helps us carry out the works He wants to do through our lives and in our life situations (or directs us elsewhere).



From the diagram, we see there are three parts. Through our devotions, where we pray and seek God, He enables us to do and accomplish those things. In other words, Biblical meditation is a time to focus on Him, His Word, and what He wants. From that relationship, we see two arrows emerge from the bottom, where He helps us understand Him and stirs our desire to serve Him and others. Every day he gives us grace, day by day, not for tomorrow but for today.

Summary

As we summarize our thoughts on biblical meditation, we're considering how our Lord feeds and teaches us through our times in His Word. He speaks, though we don't physically hear (or, at least, I haven't). He actively works through these times;

they are not just add-ons to our busy life schedules but a way to reset us on Him, enabling us to walk in the Spirit.

Biblical meditation, often part of our devotional time, is not merely something to do or observe. We must integrate the thoughts He brings into our minds into our lives. This is where we see how He will help us in our marriage and our work, interweaving our personal lives with His and accomplishing His good works. Ephesians 2:10 firmly states, “You are his workmanship.” He’s already planned all the works He wants to do through you. That’s the fruit. How does He do it? By meeting with Him every day, we find that He helps us step by step.

Discussion Questions and Prayer

1. What does Ephesians 2:10 teach about God’s design for both our lives and our good works?
2. What does spiritual burnout look like, and what usually contributes to it?
3. How does abiding in Christ protect us from serving in our own strength?
4. How does biblical meditation prepare us for the good works God places before us each day?
5. Why is bearing fruit a better goal than simply staying busy?
6. Why is Christ’s living water an effective illustration of the Christian life?
7. What is one area of your life or ministry where you need God’s grace and direction today?



Appendix A — Exercise 1: Thoughts on Biblical Meditation

Hebrews 5:11–14

Directions: Read Hebrews 5:11–14 carefully several times. Identify and record all aspects of Christian growth that are explicitly or implicitly taught in these verses. Refer to the particular verse where each observation is found.

11 Concerning him we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. 12 For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. 13 For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. 14 But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.

Your Observations



Appendix B — Exercise 2: Spiritual Life

Psalm 1:1–3

1 How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! 2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night. 3 And he will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers.

Directions: List all the hints you find in Psalm 1:1–3 for having a good spiritual life.

Your Observations



Appendix C — Exercise 3: Meeting with God

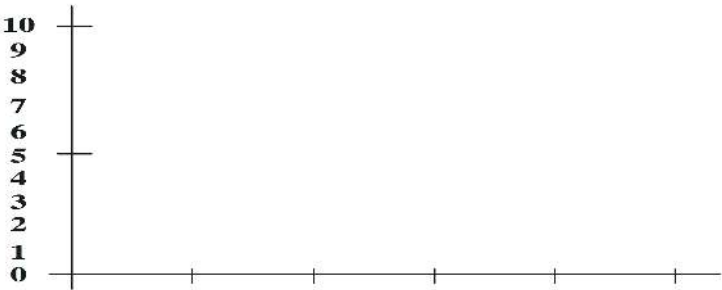
Exodus 33:7–11

Directions: After carefully reading Exodus 33:7–11 and considering its context, answer the following questions to the best of your ability.

1. What makes a meeting with God so important? Draw on thoughts from Exodus 33:7–11.

2. Graph the quality of your personal devotions since you became a Christian. What observations do you have? (10 is excellent; 0 is null. Put the year you came to know the Lord at the bottom left and the current year at the bottom right.)

Graph the quality of your quiet times below.



Reflecting on Your Meetings with God

3. What was your relationship like with your earthly father? Did you have meaningful conversations? How has that shaped or influenced your relationship with your Heavenly Father?

4. What would you want from daily meetings with God? List at least three things.

A Quiet Time

Have a quiet time meditating on God's Word.

- Hope: Tell Him what you want from this time together.
- Read: Quickly pick a passage, then read carefully.
- Listen: Think about what He wants to teach you. What did He "say" to you? Stay with the passage until something stands out.
- Apply: How should His Word affect your life?
- Respond: Will you comply by making the required changes? How and when?

Notes



Appendix D — Exercise 4: OXPET

Practicing Biblical Meditation

Directions: Review OXPET’s five approaches to biblical meditation. In your own words, describe what each letter and term means.

Letter	Approach	Your Description
O	Opposite	
X	eXpand	
P	Personal	
E	Emphasis	
T	Translation	

Apply OXPET — Psalm 119:174

I long for Thy salvation, O LORD, and Thy law is my delight.

Psalm 119:174

Directions: Apply each OXPET approach to enhance the meaning and application of Psalm 119:174. You do not have to force every approach; use each one thoughtfully and record what you discover.

O — Opposite

X — eXpand

P — Personal

E — Emphasis

T — Translation

Review Your Practice

1. Name one way the OXPET method helped you understand or apply the passage.

2. What frustrations did you encounter, if any?



Appendix E — Exercise 5: Abiding in Christ

John 15:5–7

5 “I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing. 6 If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. 7 If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you.”

John 15:5–7

Directions: Review the five OXPET points and use them to identify at least one significant teaching from John 15:5–7. Stay with the passage until the Lord gives you something important. Memorize the passage as helpful.

1. What are the five points of OXPET?

2. At this moment, what is the most important lesson you take from this passage?

3. Explain specifically how and when you will apply this lesson in your life.



Appendix F — Exercise 6: Dying to Self

Galatians 2:20

“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me.”

Galatians 2:20 (NASB)

Directions: Reflect honestly on your devotional times—not on what you wish were true, but on what is true.

1. How often do you meet the Lord?

2. Are those times fruitful? Explain.

3. What do you do when you feel dry and empty inside?



Appendix G — Exercise 7: Our Lives and Ministries

Ephesians 2:10

“For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

Ephesians 2:10 (NASB)

Directions: Reflect honestly on your spiritual life and the good works God has prepared for you.

1. Think of a time you were burned out. Was it from your spiritual life in general or from serving?

2. What were some signs of that burnout?

3. What do you think God has truly designed you to do? Write down any hints you recognize about His purposes for your life.

Appendix H — Bible Study Methods

As we briefly introduce various Bible study methods, I want to first emphasize why Bible study is so important. If you have taught the Scriptures before, you have likely been enriched more than the students. I have heard numerous teachers, both experienced and new, say this. But why is this true? It is because we, as teachers, engage with the Scriptures more than the students. The truth of God's Word enters our minds more deeply. Jesus says that it is the truth that sets us free. "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). Bible study methods are ways we bring the truth of God's Word into our lives.

Below, we provide a brief overview of each study type. The forms of Bible study require a bit of time to introduce and understand. Fortunately, a simple book like Vos' "Effective Bible Study" can do this. Let's look at some of the more common Bible study methods. Some of these methods overlap with other studies or involve combining several of them.

An analytical study focuses on a detailed analysis of a biblical passage. For example, if we studied 1 Corinthians to see what it said about tongues (i.e., foreign languages), we would need to conduct an analytical study of 1 Corinthians 12-14. We would need to examine the exact words used and the contexts in which they appear. These studies are valuable, but we often need to do them separately from our devotional times because they require extensive research.

Bible Book study: These are my favorites. I have studied many books of the Bible. My real growth and calling in the ministry came from a Christian camp that taught me how to study Bible

books. It relies heavily on the inductive method (described later). Basically, one reads the book many times, divides it into chapters, and gives each chapter a title. Then each chapter needs to be divided into paragraphs with their given titles. We then, like detectives, study each passage to see what God wants to say through it. The chart of Joshua found below is one example of a Bible book study that grew out of many inductive Bible studies.

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 BEING READIED FOR GOD'S WORK Success is determined by one's ability to become and remain sensitive to the Lord's authority and methods.	 THE RECORD OF GREAT VICTORIES Victory only arises when one fully understands temptation and wholly depends upon the Lord's means for deliverance.																																																																																																																				
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At the end, one tidies it all up by aligning the titles with the book's overall thrust. Most commentaries do not bring a book to life with meaning. These studies sure do! We want to ask, "Why did God give us this book?" He has many messages in that one Bible book, but what is His chief message? What need is He addressing? Why does that Bible book mention this and not say

that? In the end, after each study, we ask, “What is He saying to us?”

Biographical study: In this study, we examine one person throughout the Scriptures. We, of course, do not just study the person but also learn why he succeeded and why he failed. We must ponder why God mentions him, what He says about him (or her), and how this person and his life choices apply to our own lives. For example, if you look at the very end of Genesis 11 and continue into chapter 22, you will see many things mentioned about Abraham. Notice how many of his failures are mentioned. God has His purposes in recording these incidents along with his life. We should know why God does this.

Devotional study: A devotional study is usually a short, deliberate time spent in God’s Word. We regularly apply what we read in the Bible to our lives. This focus on application must accompany other studies to make them profitable, as Paul says to Timothy. We will spend time in God’s Word with a clear purpose: that God would warn, exhort, comfort, or help us.

Inductive Bible study: This careful text study determines the passage’s original purpose and meaning. We look for clues within the passage. Take a shorter passage, number it 1-4, and answer each question in succession.

#1 Observe: What does it say?

#2 Understand: Look up words, similar passages, etc.

#3 Interpret: What does it mean?

#4 Apply: What does it mean to me?

The Bible book study is built on this steady approach and helps us see what the author intended to say. This, in turn, allows that message to impact our lives. If it was important to them, it

is important to us. God's Word was written not only for those in ancient times but also for us.

For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope (Romans 15:4).

For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Hebrews 4:12).

A synthetic Bible study gathers general observations about a book by examining its overall structure. An inductive study draws clues from the passage itself, whereas a synthetic study looks at the whole from an outside perspective. They will focus on questions like, "Why is the book positioned here? Why is it structured the way it is?" Again, we must remember that such analysis is meant to help shape our lives.

A theological study focuses on a specific theological issue, such as marriage and Jesus' return. Again, this is less suitable for devotions because it can easily become too analytical. Set aside special time outside your devotional time if you want to pursue such a pleasurable study as this. Some might call this a topical study, but any study that addresses how we should think or live is theological. We are called to respond to God's truths. Our minds and practices must be changed to reflect God's Word.

A word study is more of a technique than a study. But having said that, it can also be a study in and of itself. This involves a careful analysis of a word or set of words in the original language and of its usage throughout the Bible. We might study the words 'faith' and 'belief' in the New Testament and com-

pare them with a similar study in the Old Testament.¹ Sometimes these studies are straightforward, but at other times they are quite difficult. It helps to know the original languages, Hebrew and Greek, or at least to know how to use computer programs to speed up our search for detailed information. For example, there are many different Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament) words used for 'sin'. Each has its own special connotation and meaning.²

Summary

These are some approaches to God's Word. We can, as many have, simply study it without meditating on it. This is like slicing the orange but never eating it. That would be an outright shame. Unfortunately, this is happening all around us, and seminaries are training people to read God's Word incorrectly. They do not know how to actually 'eat' the truths in God's Word.

We do not go to a Chinese buffet just to look at good food. The color looks fine. Not too oily. Hot. Smells great. We cut it open and see that it is crispy on the outside and moist inside. It is perfect. We want to bite into it! We expect God's Word to enter our lives in a similar way. By opening ourselves to the Word of God, we give Him the opportunity to speak to us. The devotional aspect calls us to always see what God is trying to say to us.

¹ Look at the OT and NT word study on the word 'grace' wwwFOUNDATIONSfor-freedom.net/Topics/Grace/Grace014.html

² Girdlestone's Synonyms of the Old Testament is a fascinating study of these synonyms.

About the Author

Paul J. Bucknell

Paul J. Bucknell served as an overseas church planter in Taiwan during the 1980s and as a pastor in the United States during the 1990s. In 2000, God led him to establish Biblical Foundations for Freedom. Since then, Paul has continued writing, conducting Christian leadership training seminars internationally, developing biblical training resources, and serving in the local church.

Paul's teaching covers a wide range of subjects, including the Christian life, discipleship, godly living, spiritual growth, leadership training, marriage, parenting, overcoming anxiety, and Old and New Testament studies. These themes are woven throughout his more than twenty-five books and extensive media-rich training resources, all designed to help believers grow in God's Word and live out His truth.

Paul and his wife, Linda, have been married for more than forty years. With eight children and eight grandchildren, they continue to see God's grace and faithfulness unfold through their family and ministry.