

+ S.D.G.+

This is Finding Hidden Treasure. Episode number 73. Today's episode is on the reasons why Bible intake is so necessary to our Spiritual Formation.

This episode is the second in a series devoted to the topic of spiritual formation.

In the last episode, I used the word picture of growing our relationship with God in Christ as spiritual hunger, a hunger which only Christ can satisfy.

There are references in God's Word to that Word being food. In the Gospel of Matthew 4 Verse 4, the Lord Jesus repels a temptation by Satan for Jesus to turn stones to bread to satisfy Him after fasting for 40 days. Christ quotes from Deuteronomy chapter 8, verse 3 when he says: **"It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"**

In account of Jesus speaking with a woman of Samaria, found in the Gospel of John, chapter four, verses 32 thru 34, the Lord Jesus tells His disciples, who went to fetch lunch for Him, something that puzzled them:

"But he [that is Jesus] said to them, **"I have food to eat that you do not know about."** So the disciples said to one another, "Has anyone brought him something to eat?" Jesus said to them, **"My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work."**

The very words of the Father were food to His Son, Jesus.

God's Words found in the Bible are true food for His people. Just as we eat physical food, ingest it and digest it to make what we eat and drink a part of our body, the Bible is to be ingested and digested as well so that the Word of God may become more and more a part of us spiritually, so that Paul's instruction to the 1st century believers in the town of Colossae would come true for us as well: **"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly."**

What are some guidelines about how we take in this spiritual food so vital to the growth and nourishment of our souls?

It may help to think of how we approach this ingesting of the Bible as Bible Intake. I first came across this term when reading Donald Whitney's book *"Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life."* Dr. Whitney made a great point that while one way of getting Scripture into us is by reading, it is not the only way. There is also what is the earliest way of getting Scripture into us, that is, by hearing it.

You might be surprised to know that for the everyday Christian, there is no command given in the Bible for us to read the Bible. There is a command that Apostle Paul's gave to his disciple Timothy about reading Scripture. In the first letter to Timothy, chapter 4 and verse 13, we read:

"Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture"

Until the time that Gutenberg invented the printing press in the 1450s, the primary way that the overwhelming majority of Christians encountered the Bible was by hearing it read. Bible reading by vast numbers of lay people, that is, those who are not clergy, is relatively new in church history. It has only been around for about the last 25 percent of the history of the church.

Consider what it has taken to get the Bible to you for you to listen to it or read it on your own. Unless you read Old Testament Hebrew and Koine Greek, you needed someone to translate the Bible into a language you understand. You also needed to have someone put the Bible into a readable format that you have access to (such as a printed version or an accessible digital version such as a mobile phone app).

You would also need to be able to read, a skill which we should not take lightly. The development of Sunday Schools started from a desire to teach people to read, during a school taught on Sunday, to enable the people to read the Bible for themselves.

For those of us who are English speakers, there was one more obstacle which needed to be overcome. In the Western church, those who sought to put the Bible into the hands of the common people in their own language faced tremendous opposition from the institutional church. What was perhaps a well-intentioned desire to keep the common people from misunderstanding the Bible in their own language had the effect of trying

to hold back access to the Bible from the common people. There are numerous individuals, such as William Tyndale, who were persecuted and sometimes killed for bypassing church authorities because they translated the Bible into English and supplied printed copies to those eager to read and know God's Word.

While Bible reading is not commanded, it is a hard-fought and hard-won privilege given to us in our time and our place. Many who sacrificed time, effort, comfort and sometimes their very lives, ensured that we would have access to the Bible.

With all this in mind, how do we approach the Bible to help shape us spiritually?

I'd like to suggest three touchpoints to use here and to be used as I discuss other aspects of Christian Spiritual Formation in the other episodes of this series.

The first is PRIORITY. We need to have a sense of the importance of taking in Scripture. It's a good observation about life that unless we are in some type of emergency situation outside of our control, we spend our time and effort on what is important to us. We need to ask ourselves what we are willing to do to make this interaction with God a priority in our lives. In the sixth chapter of the New Testament book of Acts, we find an example of making the Word of God a priority. Let me give some context. In the early church in Jerusalem, there was an improper distinction being made between Jewish converts from outside Israel and those from within when it came to food distribution to widows. In Acts chapter 6, we read:

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

The apostles understood their priorities. Working to ensure a fair distribution of food to needy widows was a noble thing to do. However, for the apostles, they understood that Word and Prayer needed to be, for them, a priority.

Based on the circumstances and season of our lives, we may have a number of priorities to which we must be mindful. Yet, while not neglecting other priorities, taking in the Word of God must have a high priority for us.

There is an article I read several months ago from Bible teacher Nancy Leigh DeMoss. She recounted speaking to a young mother of several very young children. One might expect that with all of the very real demands on that young mother, Bible intake might get much less attention. However, note what was said:

I remember talking some time ago with one of our ministry partners who's got six little kids, including a set of triplets. Her life is just so, so, so full, as you might imagine. I was just asking her, "How do you do it?" Just trying to minister to her. And I was struck when she said to me, "I will do whatever I have to do to start my day with Christ."

What a marvelous example of making the taking in of God's Word, the Bible, a priority in the midst of very heavy demands on your time.

The second touchpoint which flows naturally from this is PLANNING. The best of dreams remain unreal without a plan to take those dreams from our imagination and plant them into real life.

We have examples from church history about those who have planned in order to make their priorities a reality. The example I'll use here is that of the 18th century English preacher and evangelist, John Wesley. During the last twelve years of his life, when he was not on the road for missionary and evangelistic work, Wesley lived in London. That house still stands. My wife and I had the privilege of visiting John Wesley's house during our anniversary trip to London in 2014. For me, the highlight of that visit was being able to stand in the room which Wesley used for reading the Bible and praying. Every morning, at 4:00am, John Wesley met God by encountering Him in the Bible and in prayer. Wesley carefully planned his

schedule to protect that time. Wesley is known to have on one occasion to have turned down an invitation to a late meal with the famous English writer Samuel Johnson because it would interfere with his early rising for prayer the next morning.

May I suggest that in the same way that you would plan for any other activity, such as a doctor's appointment, plan a time and place to take in Scripture.

The last touchpoint I'll discuss in this episode is PURPOSE. Establishing priority and carving out time in planning are important. Understanding why you are doing this is equally important. It is, unfortunately, a part of our fallen human nature that we might approach taking in Scripture in the same way that we might approach physical fitness. It may help our body to run or walk a certain distance every day or do so many repetitions of pushups or some other form of exercise. However, taking this same kind of approach with the Bible is dangerous and spiritually counter-productive. We must never read the Bible simply to tell ourselves or others that we have read our assigned portion for the day and be simply content with that. Bible intake should never degenerate into a "check-it-off-your-list" practice.

The purpose of taking in Scripture has three dimensions. The first is that we encounter God in Scripture. In the Bible, we interact with God and hear His voice. In the Gospel of Matthew Chapter 22, in verses 31 and 32, we find the response of the Lord Jesus to a group of Sadducees who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. Note what the Lord said to them and, by way of warning, says to us as well.

And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living."

Note that Jesus did not say: "Have you not read what was said to Moses by God?" That would have been a true statement. But that is not what He said. He said: "Have you not read what was said to you by God?"

What God says to Moses out of the burning bush is said also to us.

The second dimension about why we need to take in Scripture is to find Christ throughout its pages, from Genesis to Revelation.

On the day of His rising from the dead, the Lord Jesus encountered two of His disciples on their way to the village of Emmaus. Being kept from recognizing who He was, these two disciples get the ultimate Bible study from Christ. In the Gospel of Luke chapter 24, verse 27, we are told:

“And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.”

The Bible is about Jesus, from Genesis to Revelation. Christ makes this point in a negative sense in an account from the fifth chapter of the Gospel of John. The Lord Jesus, in speaking to individuals who had read what we today call the Old Testament says to them, and, once again, warns us as well:

And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen, and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe the one whom he has sent. You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.

Somehow, the individuals to whom Jesus was speaking read the existing written Scripture of that time and missed the very One of whom it was speaking.

As you approach taking in the Bible, please do not do this to simply get principles for living a good life, or out of religious curiosity. Do it to meet with the One about whom it is written. Yes, you will find godly counsel about how to live a good life. But, never, ever, ever come to the Bible to learn about Christ ahead of meeting the living and eternal Christ of whom the Scriptures speak.

A third dimension of taking in Scripture is to assist us in the fulfilling the destiny of every single individual who has or ever will put their trust in Christ. That is to, be conformed and transformed into the image of Christ.

The Lord Jesus is the Incarnation of the very glory of God (see Hebrews 1:3); The Apostle Paul tells us what happens when we behold that glory of Christ as we see it in Scripture. In 2 Corinthians 3:18, we read:

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.

When you behold that glory, you will be changed more and more into the image of Christ.

In our next episode, I will be exploring some practices that may be helpful in approaching the Bible as well as some resources which may assist you in drawing close to Christ.