

+ S.D.G.+

This is Finding Hidden Treasure. Episode number 74. Today's episode is on the practices and resources for using the Bible in your spiritual formation.

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

In the last episode, I presented several points to consider about the value of the Bible in Christian spiritual formation.

Let's explore how to approach using the Bible in our spiritual growth.

The first practice to discuss is simply reading the Bible. Be mindful that most Christians in church history have not had access to a copy of the Scriptures in a language they could read. You do. You have a great privilege in possessing and being able to read the Bible.

In reading the Bible, it is helpful to understand that you are not reading one book but really sixty-six books compiled into a single collection which we call the Bible. You will be reading through a variety of types of literature as you go from Genesis to Revelation. There are narratives, and sets of rules. There is poetry and literature written to grow your wisdom. There are genealogies. In the Gospels, there is an interesting mix of biography, teaching and narrative. In the rest of the New Testament, there is narrative, history, teaching and in the book of Revelation, a style called apocalyptic, which uses highly symbolic language to assure Christians of the final victory of God in Christ and the promise of spending eternity in the presence of God.

Read Scripture remembering to look for the type of literature you're reading. In everyday life, if you still happen to read a newspaper, you know to recognize that reading front page stories is different from reading editorials, or the sports section or the comics. The same holds true for the Bible.

A second way to take in Scripture is by hearing it. There are several different ways to listen to the Bible. One could be as simple as reading it out loud to yourself. Many of my fellow believers have mentioned to me

that reading God's Word out loud helps to focus their attention on what they are not only reading but hearing as well. In the ancient world, when someone would read, they would always read aloud, even if reading by themselves.

In our time, there are a variety of technologies for listening to the Bible. One means that has been used for decades is that of shortwave radio. While shortwave listening is not as popular in the United States, it is still a primary means of being informed about the outside world for much of the rest of the world. Bible reading programs and Bible study programs, such as Through The Bible, are heard around the world using shortwave transmission.

Using the technology of the time for Bible listening is nothing new. Many decades ago, audio recordings of the Bible were available on vinyl discs and then cassette tapes.

There are a number of more recently-invented ways to listen to Scripture. There is an abundance of means of listening, such as the Bible on Compact Disc or on mp3 downloads. There are SmartPhone apps which give you the ability to not only read but have a text-to-speech rendering of what you're reading so that it can be heard as well as read. Many models of Kindles have a text-to-speech capability that allows you to also hear the Bible (and other books as well).

In Episode 72, I mentioned that there are individual and corporate aspects to spiritual formation. This is also true for taking in the Bible. So far, I've mentioned reasons and resources geared toward the individual. There is also the corporate aspect.

Studying the Bible at your church or with a community of fellow believers is a great way to study, learn and absorb Scripture. It gives you the opportunity to learn from the insights of others as well as offering the occasions for you to offer your insights on the Bible to others.

What is undoubtedly the oldest means of taking in Scripture is to hear it read publicly in the context of a church service. Hearing the Bible read and

preached upon in a sermon has been the most common way for Christians to encounter God in the Scriptures through the centuries.

I think it is helpful for you to remember that what you read or hear in the Bible is not simply information being imparted to you. It is that, but there is a spiritual dimension to be considered which is much greater. We are told in Hebrews 4:12 that the Word of God is living and active. Reflect with me about this for a moment. In the first chapter of the book of Genesis, we are told that God spoke the Universe into existence. He didn't go to a cosmic version of a lumber yard or building-supply store to get the materials to build the Universe. Rather, He SPOKE it into existence. The power of God's words in doing this is unimaginably great. In reading or listening to the Bible, you are encountering words from and of God, which have the power to transform us more and more into the image of Christ.

It has been noted that in the early 21st century, at least in the Western world, Bible access is no longer a problem. Bible Engagement is. At a time when Scripture is so readily available yet no more than 20% of Christians will ever read the entirety of Scripture at least once in their lifetime. By the way, that 80% value is the most optimistic one that I could find in my research. Typically, the values are in the 5 – 9% range.

Once more, it needs to be said that to enter into this phase of spiritual formation requires discipline, a plan and a purpose. It may help to know that, reading at a normal speaking speed, you can complete a cover-to-cover reading of the Scriptures by devoting 12 minutes per day to the practice.

There are numerous, well-crafted plans for reading through the Bible in one year such as the One Year Bible and the Discipleship Journal Bible Reading Plan.

There are a number of excellent Bible translations available in English such as the New American Standard or English Standard Version.

The electronic options for the Bible are, wonderfully to say, too numerous to mention on this episode. Perhaps two of the best known online Bible sites are Bible Gateway and You Version. Both offers mobile apps and have

an enormous number of versions ready to read. You Version has over 1,110 versions in almost 800 languages. Bible Gateway offers over 100 versions in 50 languages.

Crossway Publishers offers the entire English Standard Version as a free app for Apple or Android devices. With an internet connection, you can have the app read aloud the passage on your screen. This could be great for churches with an English as a Second Language program in which guests could be encouraged to read and hear passages from the Bible.

There is also an app from a church nearby to where I live. It is from Woodside Bible Church in Troy Michigan here in the United States. Many of the app's featured point to areas specific to Woodside Church. However, that app features connecting to an online English Standard Version as well as downloadable audio which can be played back on your device, even if you are not connected to WiFi or cellular data.

I recommend taking in the Bible in both individual and corporate ways. Listening to sermons at your home church is a good means to hear the Word of God both read and explained. It may help you to remember and absorb what you have heard in a sermon if you take notes. I am offering a free downloadable Notes card if you want to print these off, perhaps on card stock, and use them for taking notes during a sermon.

There are also online and other media by which to study the Bible and hear it explained. I mentioned Through The Bible earlier. It goes through a study of the Bible which takes five years to complete. There is also Sermon Audio, the largest collection of Christian sermons in audio form on the Internet.

In the United Kingdom, there is a video series called Book By Book in which a several teachers will provide background and insight into the books of the Bible. I've had the chance to preview some of these and I can highly recommend the studies which I viewed.

There is the E100 Bible Challenge from Scripture Union. The E100, or rather, Essential 100, are 100 passages of Scripture, 50 from the Old Testament and 50 from the New Testament, which provide a wonderful

overview of the basic themes of the Bible. I will be providing a link to a pdf from Scripture Union UK which contains the list of the 100 readings.

Lastly, I recommend memorizing passages of the Bible. While we do have unprecedented access to the Bible, there is no guarantee that you will have a copy of the Bible, either in a printed-paper text or in electronic format, at all times. The battery on your SmartPhone might run out of energy or perhaps you left your paper copy of the Bible at home while you could really use it where you're at now (while away from home). Memorizing the Bible allows you, to use a phrase from Scripture itself, hide God's Word in your heart and mind. In a real way, it's the Bible which you always carry with you.

One useful tool for Bible memorization is known as Fighter Verses. It is a program for memorizing a passage of Scripture each week over the period of a year. Visit fighterverses.com for a table of verses to memorize. as other resources including apps for an iPhone and iPad.

In the next episode, I will speak briefly on biblical meditation and then focus on the role which prayer plays in our spiritual formation.