

Good Practices for the Soul: Study II Tim. 3:14-17; Ps. 119:1-3;

Deut. 6:4-7 2/28/21

A recent research project involving 1000 churches in the US found that, “Nothing has a greater impact on spiritual growth than reflection on Scripture. If churches do only one thing to help people at all levels of spiritual maturity grow in their relationship with Christ, their choice is clear. They would inspire, encourage and equip their people to...reflect on Scripture for meaning in their lives.” That has certainly been my own experience.

This morning we continue our Lenten series of sermons about “Good Practices for the Soul” with a look at study. Specifically, study of the Bible, a book which Christians believe is God’s Word to us. When we read scripture, God speaks to us, and that makes the Bible is a very powerful book.

A number of years ago a group of North Korean Christians needed a new North Korean translation of the Bible. Since no one in their fellowship had the necessary skills, they hired a linguist to do the work. The linguist, having grown up in North Korea, had never read the Bible before. So, in order to familiarize himself with it, he read through an older South Korean version they gave him. He read it several times. And through his reading, the Word of God spoke to him and he became a Christian, eventually

attended a small seminary and entered into ministry. All because he read the Bible! This book is powerful, changing people's lives in unexpected ways in unexpected places!

So, let's take a look at what reading scripture does for us and how to get started. We start with a short passage from II Tim. In this letter, the Apostle Paul is writing to a young pastor. He writes, ¹⁴*But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it,* ¹⁵*and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.* ¹⁶*All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,* ¹⁷*so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.* (II Tim. 3:14-17)

Here, Paul affirms that scripture is inspired by God. The Greek word for "inspired" here literally means "God-breathed." God's Spirit breathed into and through the human authors so that his word continues to speak to us thousands of years later! That's remarkable! Paul then gives us four specific uses for the Scripture in verses 16 and 17.

The first two have to do with what we believe. He says scripture is useful for teaching, for forming our basic beliefs about God, ourselves, and our world. On the flip side, it is also useful for reproof, for examining other

philosophies and ways of life. I think of the many “isms” of our day, that compete with a Christian understanding of life. Materialism says that this tangible world is all there is, and that any meaning we can find is found in wealth and having lots of stuff. Hedonism says that life’s meaning is found in pleasure. Workaholism says that meaning is found in achievement, so work must take precedence over everything else. Racism says that only certain people have value, and sees others as inferior, undeserving of our respect or concern. Nationalism says that our ultimate identity is found in the nation in which we find ourselves, and that we have no responsibility to the people of other nations. You get the point. Scripture both teaches us what is true and serves as a reproof or critique of other worldly points of view.

Paul also says that Scripture is useful for showing us how to live- for “training in righteousness,” he says, and negatively, “for correction.” Ultimately, scripture should change the way we live. Look at these words from Ps. 119. Now Psalm 119 is an interesting Psalm. It’s the longest chapter in the Bible- 176 verses- and the whole thing is an ode of praise to God’s Word. It contains 22 stanzas of 8 verses each and it’s actually an elaborate acrostic poem based on the Hebrew alphabet. The first 8 verses all begin with the Hebrew letter Aleph, the second eight with Bet, and so on. Here are the first three verses.

¹*Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD.*

²*Happy are those who keep his decrees, who seek him with their whole heart,*

³*who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways. (Ps. 119:1-3)*

The Psalmist uses phrases like “whose way is blameless,” “walk in the law,” “keep his decrees,” and “do no wrong” to make the point that God’s Word is meant to be lived, not just read and learned. Paul sums this up by saying that Scripture is given “¹⁷so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.” (II Tim. 3:17)

The practice of studying the Bible is given to us to help us become the people God intends us to be. And that gives meaning, fulfillment, and direction to our lives! But, how do we do that? Some of you have tried reading the Bible, but found it very difficult to understand. What do we do about that?

A number of years ago I was at the Mayan ruins at Tulum, Mexico with a young adult from our mission group. On the way into the ruins, a man approached us, offering his services as a guide. We politely declined because we had a book with a few pages that explained the site. Unfortunately, we couldn’t make heads or tails out of most of what we were seeing, often not being sure whether what was described in the book was

what we were actually looking at. We left the ruins feeling frustrated. On our way out, the guide approached us once again. “You should have engaged my services,” he said. “All you saw was a big pile of rocks!” And he was right!

Reading the Bible on our own can be like that. After all, it contains 66 different books, written 2000-3500 years ago in strange cultures by 40 different authors! Most of us aren't knowledgeable about the situations in which these books were written, so they can be very confusing to us. We need a guide. In our remaining time, I'll try and guide you a little bit, and I'll point you to other helpful guides.

The first challenge you face is deciding which of the 120 English translations of the Bible to use! Some are almost word for word translations of the original languages, while others are paraphrases- more thought for thought. For serious study of the Bible, I would recommend the *New Revised Standard Version*, which we use here in worship. Buz Myers was part of the translation team for this version! The *New International Version* is also a good translation. For a paraphrase, the *Living Bible* is an old standard, and *The Message*, by Presbyterian pastor, Eugene Peterson, is a fresh, lively paraphrase. I do not recommend the *King James Version*, because it's language is very dated, and modern translations have access to better ancient manuscripts.

After you choose a translation, you'll find that it will come in a variety of formats. I would recommend getting some kind of study Bible with notes explaining the historical and theological setting of each book of the Bible, with additional notes throughout the pages. I use *the New Oxford Annotated Bible*, but many others are available. If you want to get into more serious study, there are many commentaries written about each book of the Bible. You can use some of the ones found in our church library to see which ones are most helpful for you. So, study Bibles and commentaries are two good guides, as are some on-line guides and apps.

But where do you start? Unlike most books, it's best not to start at the beginning! I'd start by reading one of the gospels- perhaps Mark or Luke. These are pretty accessible for youth or adults. My wife is doing a study of the gospel of Matthew on the youversion app called "Lent for Everyone." Because of the way the app is set up, she's doing it along with a friend in Virginia. She's loving it! Lent is a great time to read these stories about Jesus!

The Psalms and the book of Proverbs are also good places to start, or one of Paul's letters, like Philipians would also be good. I think it's best to work through an entire book, rather than jumping around from place to place, because you can begin to understand the main themes and context of the book as you spend time in it. Read short sections and then meditate

or think more deeply about that section throughout the day. Then figure out if there is a way to apply what you've read to your life.

You might also consider doing a group Bible study- in-person or on-line. We have small groups going on right now, and the Disciple Series does a great job of going through major portions of the Bible. In a group you can benefit from the knowledge of the leader and other group members. They can help guide you!

Finally, consider these words from Deut. 6. ⁴*Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.* ⁵*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.* ⁶*Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.* ⁷*Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.*" (Deut. 6:4-7) This passage invites God's people to immerse themselves in God's Word, including passing it along to our children! Don't forget that part if you are a parent, grandparent, aunt or uncle, or anyone who has a trusting relationship with children. Pass God's Word along to them, too!

How will you get started this week in studying God's Word?