

The Discipleship Project-Summer 2017 Series 2: Developing Spiritual Disciplines

A series by Seth Simmons

Series Big Idea: Because we have been called into covenant, we have the privilege of deepening our relationship with Jesus Christ through spiritual disciplines.

Lesson 2.3: The Privilege of Learning the Word

Lesson Big Idea: Because we have been called into covenant, we should exercise our privilege of reading and memorizing Scripture.

FOUNDATION

Scripture Focus: Psalm 119:11 (PPT)

“You will not believe what I have found,” the high priest Hilkiah told his secretary, “I have found the Book of the Law in the Temple.” They quickly rushed to share the news with King Josiah, and as the Book of the Law was read aloud to him, he tore his robes. Shockwaves of disbelief rumbled throughout the king’s court. “We didn’t know,” some of the scribes lamented, “so what will happen to us now for not obeying the Law of the Covenant?” King Josiah issued orders to seek out the prophetess Huldah. The people needed to hear from God.

Then the Lord spoke through the prophetess, “I am going to bring disaster on this place and its people, according to everything written in the Book the king of Judah has read. But because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before the Lord when you heard what I have spoken against this place and its people, I will gather you to your ancestors, and you will be buried in peace. Your eyes will not see all the disaster I am going to bring on this place.”

After hearing this word, King Josiah gathered the people of Judah to the Temple and read the entire Book of the Covenant in their presence. He pledged to obey the commands, laws, and decrees with all of his heart and soul. And all the people of Judah pledged themselves to the covenant with him.

This biblical narrative rekindles a deep appreciation for the written Word of God. The Scripture we read today is known as the Old and New “Testament,” which is another word for covenant. But do we hold the same reverence for Scripture as the people did during the time of King Josiah? “It’s one thing to be unfamiliar with Scripture when you don’t own a Bible,” as Donald S. Whitney points out, “it’s another thing when you have a bookshelf full” (*Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*). Never before have we had more access to the Word of God than we do in the Information Age. Therefore, let us rediscover the privilege of reading and memorizing Scripture, the Word of God, the Book of the Covenant.

FRAME

Covenant relationship underscores God’s desire to be close to us. **He drew close to us when the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us.** (See John 1:14.) (PPT) By His Spirit He is also not far from any one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being. (See Acts 17:27–28). But have you ever considered this? God has drawn close to us through His written Word.

Paul used vivid imagery when describing the Scripture to Timothy: “All Scripture is God-breathed” (II Timothy 3:16, NIV). His Word is His breath. How much closer could we get? This imagery reminds us of the Creation account in Genesis when God “formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (Genesis 2:7, NKJV). To create humanity, God was personal. He came close and breathed life into us. **Today He comes close and breathes life into us through His written Word.** (PPT) (PDG)

- **What imagery comes to mind when you hear, “God-breathed”?**
- **In what ways does God breathe life into us through the Scripture?**

Through Scripture God has used the most historically reliable medium to communicate His love and covenant with humanity (David Bernard, *God’s Infallible Word*). The sign of a healthy relationship, however, is when we are made better by that relationship. How much more should this be the case in covenant relationship with our heavenly Father and His Word? We should expect the Scripture to challenge our assumptions about life.

As a matter of fact, Timothy Keller takes it a step further, “If you don’t trust the Bible enough to let it challenge and correct your thinking, how could you ever have a personal relationship with God?” (*The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*). If we are simply parroting back to God what we desire in life, then we are not being transformed by the renewing of our mind. (See Romans 12:2.) Furthermore, when we eliminate anything from the Bible that offends our sensibilities or crosses our will, then we essentially have a God of our own making, not a God with whom we can have a relationship and genuine interaction (Keller, *The Reason for God*).

On the other hand, **when we embrace the Word as the Book of Life, we not only find clarity of direction in this life but also for the life to come.** The Bible gives us an eternal perspective on our temporal existence, “about God, human nature, sin, salvation, judgment, and eternity . . . humanity’s deepest spiritual questions and aspirations” (*God’s Infallible Word*). Moreover, we discover eternal life. “And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John 17:3, NKJV). (PPT)

- **How could viewing Scripture as direct communication from God change our**

perspective of Scripture and deepen our relationship with God?

- **How has the Word challenged your assumptions about life?**

When the enemy tempted Christ to turn stones into bread, His rebuttal was clear, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4, NKJV). (PPT) **If we are to be sustained along the way, it will be by the Word.** (PPT) (PDG) “No Spiritual Discipline is more important than the intake of God’s Word. Nothing can substitute for it. There simply is no healthy Christian life apart from a diet of the milk and meat of Scripture” (Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*).

We may miss a meal while dieting or while fasting, but few of us would “accidentally” miss a meal, much less a whole week of meals. Yet some attempt to go days and even weeks without reading the Scripture. **The long-term effects of a life without the Word is an anemic Christian with little chance of survival.** On the other hand, when the Word is appreciated and valued as nourishment for the soul, there is an eagerness to seek the Word daily because we realize it is sustaining us and drawing us closer to God.

- **How long could you go without food before you noticed?**
- **Why do you think we do not always have the same urgency when we go days without our spiritual food—reading the Scripture?**

To have the mind of God, we must place a priority on reading the Word. (PPT) (PDG) Jesus often challenged the assumptions of people who thought they knew about God with this question, “Have you not read?” The truth is—whether we realize it or not—we are all theologians. “To be Christian at all is to be a theologian. There are no exceptions” (Howard Stone and James Duke, *How to Think Theologically*). The question is whether we will be a good theologian or a poor one. Reading the Word of God enables us to know and thereby live according to the will of God accurately.

First, read it. These statistics are startling: “*USA Today* reported a poll showing only 11 percent of Americans read the Bible every day. More than half read it less than once a month or never at all. . . . Worst of all, 23 percent—almost one in four professing Christians—say they never read the Word of God” (*Spiritual Disciplines*). There is no excuse for a Christian to not read the Bible, especially today with the wealth of resources available for the intake of the Word. Even a verse a day, which would take less than a minute, is better than not reading it at all. Once the daily reading habit is developed, it becomes easier and easier to spend more time in the Word.

Second, choose a reading plan that works. Pentecostal Publishing House offers a BREAD Bible that guides the reader through the Bible in one year. If that is too daunting of a challenge, try reading through the Bible over the course of two or three years. The General Youth Division partnered with Word Aflame Press to produce *Devote 365: An Engaging Daily Devotional for Students*. The Bible app offered by Life.Church is a free resource that comes with multiple versions, a variety of reading plans, and a free audio

Bible. So whether it is a plan to read through the Bible in a year or two, daily devotionals, a Bible app plan, or listening to an audio Bible on the way to work, find a plan that works and stick to it.

Most of all, **allow God to speak to you through your time in the Word**. Remember, the ultimate goal of reading is not to accomplish the task of reading, but to allow Jesus Christ to speak to you. In fact, it is often better to focus on a shorter passage of Scripture for a day or even a week, so it can sink into your spirit and bring about true life change.

To have the mind of God, we must place a priority on studying the Word. (PPT) (PDG) “Reading gives us breadth, but study gives us depth” (Jerry Bridges, *The Practice of Godliness*). Studying Scripture is delighting in the Word and planting our lives deep into the will of God so that whatever we do will prosper. (See Psalm 1:3.) (PPT) We experience the healthy benefits of a fruitful life when we study the Scripture.

Studying the Word is not just for a select few members of the church. Studying is for all believers. In the Acts narrative, for example, believers in Berea examined the Scripture every day to see if what Paul said was true. (See Acts 17:11.) (PPT) These believers had the practice of studying Scripture and were able to confirm Paul’s message as a result. They left an inspiring example for us as well, so we do “not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (II Timothy 2:15, NKJV). (PPT)

There are ample resources for studying Scripture provided at www.pentecostalpublishing.com. Weekly Sunday school lessons and Bible studies are also an optimal opportunity to go deeper into the Word. Consider taking notes during the lessons and studying them throughout the week. Another resource for advanced guided study provided by the UPCI is ministrycentral.com. The lack of study is “not a lack of intelligence or a lack of passion,” as R. C. Sproul points out, “our problem is that we are lazy” (*Knowing Scripture*). Let that indictment be for someone else besides us. Instead, let us go deeper in our knowledge of God and do the work of studying Scripture.

- **How do you think reading and studying the Word enhances your relationship with God?**
- **What advice would you give to a new believer about the importance of studying God’s Word?**

To have the heart of God, we must place a priority on memorizing the Word. (PPT) (PDG) The heart of God is for His will to be imprinted on our hearts. “But the Holy Spirit also witnesses to us; for after He had said before, ‘This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them’” (Hebrews 10:15–16, NKJV). (PPT) The best means of internalizing our love for the Scripture is through memorization. Memorizing Scripture fixes our minds on the heart of God throughout the day and makes His Word readily available when we are tempted to contradict His will.

Jesus Christ internalized the words of the psalmist, a psalm dedicated to the celebration of God’s statutes, **“Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not**

sin against You” (Psalm 119:11, NKJV). (PPT) When He faced temptation in Matthew’s Gospel, each time He responded with “it is written.” (See Matthew 4.) Indeed, we “memorize Scripture so that it’s available for the Holy Spirit to take and ignite within us when it’s needed” (*Spiritual Disciplines*).

Now let us consider a few **effective means of memorizing Scripture**. Repetition is key, of course. A productive way to begin is to focus on a verse a day or even a verse a week. Start by writing out the verse, and then expand the memorization to include the context of the verse. Songs also provide an effective means of memorization. Find a partner to join the journey with you, so you can keep one another accountable. For the more ambitious, consider leading or joining the Bible quizzing program at your local assembly. Attending one Bible quizzing tournament will be both inspiring and convicting. We are capable of much more memorization than we realize.

To have the heart of God, we must place a priority on living the Word. (PPT) (PDG) The fruit of reading, studying, and memorizing the Scripture is a life that exhibits the love of God, His will, and His kingdom in the world. The apostle Paul referred to the lives of the Corinthians as open letters “known and read by everyone” as confirmation of his ministry among them (II Corinthians 3:2, NIV). Living out the Scripture is the ultimate way to reveal our love for Christ and the depth of our relationship with Him.

As our minds are transformed by the Word, so are our hearts—our fundamental beliefs. Our relationship with Jesus Christ and the Book of Covenant changes us from the inside out, and we begin to reflect the values of the Kingdom in our world as living witnesses of the gospel. **When we live the Word, we are then given the opportunity to impart life and hope to others.**

From beginning to the end and even after the end, it is all about the Word. “Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever, because ‘All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and its flower falls away, but the word of the Lord endures forever’” (I Peter 1:22–25, NKJV). (PPT)

- **How do you think memorizing Scripture enhances our relationship with God?**
- **What hope and strength do you find in knowing that “the word of the Lord endures forever”?**

FINISH

In Korupun, West Papua, Indonesia, the Kimyal people had only small portions of Scripture translated into their native language. Local Pastor Semea shared his frustration through a translator, “In the past, only part of God’s Word was translated into our language. So when other people came to our church and taught us, if we had that portion in our language, we would read it and understand. But when they taught from a scripture

we didn't have translated, our hearts would be heavy. But now we're going to have it from Matthew to Revelation. Our hearts are no longer heavy; they are light!"

In March of 2010, they received the New Testament in their language for the first time. As the plane neared their remote location in the mountains of Indonesia, hundreds of people gathered around in anticipation. There was joy on every face as they began to dance and sing unto God. As the Bibles were carefully unloaded from the plane, the elders conducted a solemn ceremony for this sacred moment. "O God, God," Pastor Semea prayed through tears of joy, "the plan which you have had from the beginning, regarding your Kimyals, which already existed in Your Spirit, the month that you had set, the day that you had set, has come to pass today. O my Father, my Father, You looked at all the different languages and chose which ones will be put into Your Word. You thought that we should see Your Word in our language. Today, the day you had chosen for this to be fulfilled, has come to pass. O God, today, you have placed Your Word into my hands, just like You promised. You have placed it here in our land. And for all this, O God, I give You praise." Then all of the people began to shout and hug one another weeping tears of joy.

(Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bZFPtpZcs0Q>)

What would it take for us to treasure the Word like the Kimyal people? We often only treasure what is rare or scarce. Would it take a national ban on the Bible as some communist countries have experienced? May it not take such a drastic measure to help us realize the privilege we have to read, study, and memorize Scripture. We have more access to the Book of the Covenant than ever before in the digital age. God has come so close to us through his God-breathed Word; now let us draw close to Him.