

STUDY

Study - The intentional process of engaging the mind with the written and spoken Word of God and the world God has created in such a way that the mind takes on an order conforming to the order upon which it concentrates.

Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them (Psalm 111:2).

When God made his covenant with the Israelites, he established the books of the Law, which laid out in detail the way God's people were to live. From that point forward, study became an important part of life with God. Now in addition to the Law, we have the other books of the Old Testament and the revelation in Jesus Christ. Scripture is an expansive gift that shows how God has been with us throughout history.

Accordingly, one of the best ways we can learn more about and grow closer to God is to study the written word. Scripture is the foundation of all of the disciplines. We know Jesus studied the Torah. Luke 2 tells us that Jesus went to the Temple as a young boy and spent time with the teachers there, asking questions. Indeed, he knew the Torah backwards and forwards, quoting from it time and time again. We too are well served by studying and, yes, even memorizing large pieces of Scripture.

For our purposes, study refers to an analytical process of learning as opposed to the more devotional practice of meditation. It is appropriate for the study to come first. Before we get to the devotional stage, in which we meditate upon what a certain passage means to us specifically, we must first seek to understand the passage. But this is not to say that study has no effect on us. Indeed, the opposite is true. What we study, we concentrate on, becomes ingrained in us. Study transforms us from the inside out.

As you study, remember: "The proper outcome of studying the Bible is growth in the supernatural power of love, the love of God and of all people." (Quoted in *The Life with God Bible*, Richard Foster, page 26).

DAY 1 / MARCH 10

ONE TEACHER

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.... They love....to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. (Matthew 23:1-4, 6a,7b-8)

This discourse is given in the Temple, and Jesus offers the divine wisdom. The scribes and Pharisees he criticizes were the professors of their time. They studied Scripture in minute detail and memorized huge chunks of it. Yet all of their study and memorization didn't keep them from doing things contrary to what they were studying. Jesus' disciples are commanded not to accept the title rabbi, father, or teacher, for there is only one final and authoritative teacher — not Moses or Solomon, but the Christ. Thus, Jesus' followers must always remain learners.

Foster states, “We can often use the Bible in ways that stifle spiritual life or even destroy the soul. This happened to any number of people who walked with Jesus.... For many, their very study of Scripture prevented them from recognizing who he was and putting their confidence in him (John 5:39-47). And later, Peter speaks in very grim terms of people who can ‘twist’ Scripture ‘to their own destruction’ (2 Peter 3:16).

If we want to receive from the Bible the life ‘with God’ that is portrayed in the Bible, we must be prepared to have our dearest and most fundamental assumptions about ourselves and our associations called into question. We must read humbly and in a constant attitude of repentance. Only in this way can we gain a thorough and practical grasp of the spiritual riches that God has made available to all humanity.” (Quoted in *The Life with God Bible*, Richard Foster, page 25-26).

KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

We have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, 10 so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God (Colossians 1:9-10).

The truth of faith is not “library” knowledge, a kind of abstract and practical knowledge. Rather, it is knowledge of the God who acts purposely in history to bring people to live lives fully pleasing to God through the person and ministry of Jesus Christ. Christians are expected to grow in this knowledge and conform their lives to it. In this way it is the anchor and source of the kind of living that God empowers within and among us.

Wrong knowledge of God — getting God “wrong,” being “hostile in mind” (1:21) — leads to broken and misshapen lives. So often today an anti-theological bent is allowed to take over our spirituality. It is enough, apparently, to feel or experience something that we take to be the presence of God. Paul is wiser. He understands that theology — knowledge of God — and experience belong together, for without a true knowledge of God our piety will go astray. We will have no basis for interpreting our piety and our spiritual experience. We will be in danger of being taken captive by “plausible arguments” (2:4) that will lead us into error. Thus Paul insists that we are to grow “in the knowledge of God.” In this sense, every Christian is a theologian.

Think about these questions before or after you work on concentrating on, or memorizing, your selected passage: How has wrong knowledge of God negatively impacted your life or the life of someone around you? Which do you tend to rely more heavily upon — experience or theology? What can you do to become more balanced?

SETTING OUR HEARTS TO STUDY

Ezra went up from Babylonia. He was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses that the LORD the God of Israel had given; and the king granted him all that he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was upon him.... On the first day of the first month the journey up from Babylon was begun, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, for the gracious hand of his God was upon him. For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach the statutes and ordinances in Israel (Ezra 7:6, 9-10).

Ezra arrived in Jerusalem determined to accomplish three things. First, he desired to study the law. Rabbinical teachings suggest that among the duties of prayer, good works, and study, the most important of these is study. Study forms the basis of the other two. Second, Ezra committed himself to practice what he had learned. Third, he was called to teach others what he had learned. Ezra's whole-life commitment to Scripture knit Ezra's life closely with God, so that many times Ezra acknowledged that "the gracious hand of his God was upon him."

Ezra study of God's law and his commitments to the law in his own life formed his heart like God's. As we see in Ezra's life, committed study of Scripture can bring about much more than merely head knowledge. It can bring God himself into all the recesses of our being, for "the word of God is living and active" (Hebrews 4:12).

Take inspiration from this quote from Richard Foster as you concentrate on your passage: "The Bible is the loving heart of God made visible and plain. And receiving this message of exquisite love is the great privilege of all who long for life with God. Reading, studying, memorizing, and meditating upon Scripture has always been the foundation of the Christian disciplines.... God is so superintended the writing of Scripture that it serves as a most reliable guide for our spiritual formation." (Quoted in *The Life with God Bible*, Richard Foster, page 28).

DAY 4 / MARCH 13

DISCERNING OUR TEACHERS

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect (Romans 12:2).

As Dallas Willard observes in *The Divine Conspiracy*, we are all somebody's disciples. At different times in our lives we are the students of our parents, our playmates, our teachers, and our peers. These apprenticeships are necessary, so that we can learn about the world and our place in it, how to act and talk and treat one another. Whether we mean to or not, we also apprentice ourselves to books, magazines, TV shows, and movies. When we spend lot of time with particular people, books, or TV shows, their habits, ideas, and behavior patterns start to become ingrained in us.

That is why it matters who and what we surround ourselves with. God wants to renew us from the inside out, transforming our minds, so that we become ever more like God as revealed in Jesus Christ. But if we're spending time with things or people not of God, we will find ourselves changing in ways we may not intend.

In the days ahead, take a block of time to consider the central influences in your life. Jot down a timeline of your life, dividing it into stages (such as childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, marriage, parenthood, etc.) or organizing it by another system of your choice (such as places you have lived or jobs you have had). Think about the teachers and influences that were most important at each time. Focus particularly on the present. Ask yourself who your teachers are and what they are teaching you.

Scripture tells us that we can know who has been inwardly transformed by God by the fruit they produce. Ask God to show you if there are people or influences you should minimize in your life. Then ask God about what new ways you can learn. Is God calling you toward more frequent study of Scripture? Are there particular people or books God is urging you to learn from? Finally, ask yourself who is learning from you and what are you teaching them.

DAY 5 / MARCH 14

OBSERVING ONE ANOTHER

Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness (2 Timothy 3:10).

The Christian faith is contagious. If we are to endure as Christians, it must be through apprenticeship — observing more experienced and well-formed Christians, following their moves, taking up their way of life, inculcating their virtues. Through such observation and imitation, we take up the practices of the faith and come to embody those practices for ourselves. The Church must look for ample opportunities for its members to be observed by and to observe one another as we mature in the faith.

But a caution is also necessary. Since we are all to learn from observing each other, we need to be cautious and humble about what we may be teaching with our words and deeds. Teaching is so much easier than learning. It is also more dangerous. In the act of teaching, especially when we know what we are saying is right, we inevitably sense that we embody what we teach. The admiration and appreciation of others reinforce the feeling. Meanwhile, huge gap gradually widens between what we say and the way we live. It happens a lot in life, but nowhere with more deadly consequences than among those who teach about God and his ways with us.

The truth is that there are no “masters” in the spiritual life. Mature and wise teachers, yes. But fundamentally we are all beginners receiving and giving on our knees before God and with open hands before one another. In this business no one “lords it over” another.

Pay special attention today to whose examples and virtues you are imitating, and also to those who may be observing and imitating you.

REMEMBER JESUS CHRIST

Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David—that is my gospel, for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, so that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory. The saying is sure: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he will also deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself. Remind them of this, and warn them before God that they are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening (2 Timothy 2:8-14).

The Christian faith is distinctly traditionalist. Much of our worship on weekends is consumed with the loving reiteration and joyful celebration of tradition — remembering Jesus Christ. Here you are, studying a two-thousand-year-old letter. That’s the way we Christians continue as Christians. Our remembering of the tradition is a revolutionary act of defiance against the lures of the present age, one of our most significant practices of the faith. Through such remembering, we are freed from the merely contemporary. In our reading and studying of the Word of God, that Word speaks anew, lives among us. The Word of God is not, thank God, chained!

Second Timothy is clear that we have a distinct, demanding body of doctrine that needs to be taught, a message that requires reiteration every weekend if we, as the Church, are to be who we are called to be. Does your worship, your church life, your study have enough biblical content (“Jesus Christ, raised from the dead”) to sustain you? What about those who have taught you?

DAY 7 / MARCH 16

STUDYING GOD'S WAYS

Make me understand the way of your precepts, and I will meditate on your wondrous works. My soul melts away for sorrow; strengthen me according to your word. Put false ways far from me; and graciously teach me your law. I have chosen the way of faithfulness; I set your ordinances before me. I cling to your decrees, O LORD; let me not be put to shame. I run the way of your commandments, for you enlarge my understanding (Psalm 119:27-32).

In these ways and others throughout this song (“open my eyes,” 119:18; “Turned my heart,” 119:36), the psalmist asks God to teach him. This points to a dynamic, continuing relationship between God and the singer, not to a bookishness that serves erudition and keeping rules. It appeals to practical, ongoing guidance and transformation. The study that transforms us moves with patient, focused attention and listens deeply, ready to respond.

For example, in studying Psalms that are hymns we can list all of the reasons why people are called to praise or the variety of ways people are invited to praise. Study that shapes us, however, must be willing to join in praise and to ponder the reasons why.

How can you ask God to teach you? Minister and theologian A.W. Tozer asserts that one way is to learn more about who God is. He states, “What is God like? What kind of God is He? How may we expect Him to act toward us and toward all created things? Such questions are not merely academic. They touch the far-in reaches of the human spirit, and their answers affect life and character and destiny. When ask in reverence and their answers sought in humility, these are questions that cannot but be pleasing to our Father which art in heaven.” (Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, page 13).

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