

Devotional Bible Study

by Pr. William P. Terjesen

There are two basic ways to study the Bible. The first is the devotional method and the second is the investigative method. The devotional method consists of reading a longer portion of Scripture and then going back and meditating on a particular passage that the reader finds striking. The investigative method focuses on a narrower passage and digs into it in order to understand its meaning and application as fully as possible. Everyone can and should study the Bible devotionally. Those who are so inclined may study it investigatively as well. In this article, I'd like to highlight the various aspects of devotional Bible study to help the reader make the best use of the time set aside for study.

The first thing to be said is that Bible study should not be done 'higglety-pigglety'. Those who intend to read the Bible when they have some spare moments, usually don't get very far. You should set aside a regular time during the day and stick to it. Don't let other things get in the way. This time should be a time when you are mentally alert and fresh. If you wait until bed time, more often than not you'll end up sleeping with your Bible rather than studying it.

Once you've set aside the best time, make sure your study environment is conducive to the task at hand. Good lighting is important. A quiet place with few distractions is important. Your posture is important. Slouching about in a noisy place is counter-productive. In addition to your Bible, the type size of which should be easy for you to read, you should have a note pad and a pen or pencil at hand. It also wouldn't hurt to have an unabridged Webster's dictionary¹ about especially for looking up the meaning of archaic words.

¹ An English dictionary is helpful for looking up the meaning of English words in the Bible, particularly words that have changed meaning over the centuries. But because the English Bible is a translation of the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek original, an English dictionary is not meant to serve as an interpretive tool. I have heard too many preachers using Webster's dictionary as though it were a Bible dictionary or a commentary. It should be used to help us understand what the translator intended, not what the original text means.

Next read the Bible sequentially, chapter by chapter, book by book. Don't jump around. Balance your reading of the Old and New Testaments, and read at least one Psalm a day. (If you ask me, I'd be happy to give you a copy of a Bible reading schedule that I've developed, which I find to be very sequential and very flexible.)

Decide how much you will read. Anywhere from one to three chapters at a sitting is good. Pray for understanding and enlightenment. Read the Psalm for the day adding the Gloria Patri at the end. Then read through the entire selection for the day without stopping. (I have a series of cassette tapes of the King James Bible read by Alexander Scourby that I have found useful for reading longer portions of Scripture. It's amazing how many chapters you can cover in fifteen minutes of following along with Scourby.) As you read, when a particular passage strikes your interest, jot down the verse number on your note pad, and keep reading. If you come to a passage that you don't understand, don't stop; keep going. If you're walking on a trail and come to a boulder, you go around the boulder and continue on. You can always come back later and deal with the difficulty.

Once you have finished reading the selected portion, spend a few minutes thinking about the general thrust of the entire selection. Jot down your impressions. Think also about how it relates to the portions you read on previous days. In this way you will slowly and steadily become familiar with the general sweep of the biblical message. This is very important. You've heard of people who can't see the forest for the trees. Many would-be Bible students are like that. They get lost in the details and fail to give due attention to the vast panorama of the divine Word. Note down your thoughts.

Now it's time to go back to the passage or passages that you found particularly interesting or helpful. Read and re-read the passage. Pay attention to the structure of the sentence(s). Ask yourself questions:

What did this passage mean to the writer and his readers?

How is this passage illuminated by the context? By parallel passages and cross references?

What is the Lord saying to me in this passage that strengthens my faith in Christ and

improves my life as his child?

Does this passage lead me to confess a particular sin?

Does this passage lead me to praise and thank the Lord for any particular blessings?

What should I pray for in the light of what this passage is teaching me?

What section of the Small Catechism does this passage seem to parallel?

You don't have to ask every one of these questions for every passage. Nor should you bog yourself down and turn this opportunity for discovery into a laborious chore. Ease into it. Before very long, you will get comfortable with the process and really begin to enjoy it. After you have finished your daily study, sum up what you have learned in a concluding prayer and the Lord's Prayer. That's it.

But what about those difficult passages that you passed by in your study? Note them down too, and ask your Pastor about them. Often difficulties are cleared up as one keeps reading. Context is a wonderful thing. But if the difficulty persists and you have access to commentaries, etc., you may want to consult them. But your Pastor or another experienced layman may have just the help you need. If they don't know on the spot, they'd be happy to check it out and get back to you.

Be methodical and regular. Don't bog down. Be prayerful and persistent. Before you know it you will begin making connections and gaining real insights not only about the general message of the Bible, but also about its specific doctrinal content. As you study the Word of God you will grow strong in faith and in godly living, because the Word is never without the Holy Spirit who calls, gathers, enlightens, sanctifies, and keeps us through it.