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## **“Methodology: Read the Entire Word”**

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Here we are in our yearlong series that began just a few weeks ago called PRAXIS, sort of a fancy Greek word meaning “practices.” Here’s the deal for it: we simply want to believe that if we started and took seriously five experiments, God might do something in the midst of our lives. Last week Valena beautifully presented the understanding that we would be able to pray for the entire world.

Today we are going to be talking about the second experiment. We are going to do this more fully at the beginning of the year, but today we are going to talk about it to get a head start.

Today's topic is to read through the entire word. Jim Gates in his creative, genius mind has come up with this entire series. He has something he wants to call B90X. This is our tool that we are going to be using. Every one of these exercises has a tool. This is called the Bible in 90 days. We will be beginning that in January. We'll be having a lot of help and support that goes with it.

This is what our focus will be today: understanding how it is we are called to be a people of the Word and in the Word. I want to encourage you to take that seriously. Now, in light of that you are going to hear two meaningful passages today. The first comes in Deuteronomy chapter six beginning with verse four.

This is a passage that is extremely famous and well known not only within the Jewish community but within the Christian community. Jesus builds off of this in His teaching and His ministry. It is what is sort of colloquially known as the "shama" or the "shema" simply meaning in Hebrew, "listen, hear"; an emphatic understanding. You're going to hear today in these short verses a claim of God, not a command; and, after we understand who God is, there comes an opportunity to form our identity around God and our identity around His Word.

When Scripture speaks about being able to post these things, to recite them, bind them, to fix them, to write them – we're talking about not only the Ten Commandments that were given just a chapter earlier in Deuteronomy, but we're really talking about the understanding of God's love and presence and His law with us.

*Deuteronomy 6: 4-9*

*“ Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. 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. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”*

In the New Testament our passage is from II Timothy chapter 3 beginning with verse 14. Paul loves Timothy. Timothy is Paul’s spiritual son whom Paul has nurtured and offered ministry opportunities, but he is also one very obviously from whom Paul has learned much himself.

Now we don’t quite know where and how Timothy and Paul met, but we do know that, in Paul’s missionary journeys with Silas, Timothy is often with them. And particularly Paul, in his absence, entrusts with Timothy an important ministry to the Church of the Thessalonians in Thessalonica. He does the same thing in Corinth, and we come to recognize that Timothy is this amazing young man.

What is amazing about him is not that he has any particular gifts but just the love that is shared in the mentoring. But it is not just about Paul and Timothy. In the very beginning of his letters to Timothy, Paul very clearly mentions two people, two women: Lois and Eunice.

Lois and Eunice are Timothy’s mother and grandmother who have nurtured him in the faith. This is amazing testimony of what it is to be a godly family. Keep in mind that Paul is writing this letter some twenty years after Jesus’ death, so it’s not as if Timothy is an old man who had grown up in the faith. It’s more than likely that Lois and Eunice came to Christ together at some point and then began to nurture Timothy and their entire family in the midst of this.

It's in this light that Paul is offering these words to a child, a spiritual child, of his whom he adores but also one for whom and in whom he entrusts incredible ministry.

### *II Timothy 3:14 – 4:5*

*“But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”*

*“In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.”*

In this letter Paul says, “All Scripture,” the way we translate it, “is inspired by God.” That Greek word is *theopneustos* which is “God breathed.” “All Scripture is God breathed.”

Well, I had a great time away. I'm glad to be back. I try to get into the woods for a week every year and had the great privilege of doing it with two very, very dear friends last week. We spent a week out in the Sierra Nevada's back packing in the back country of Yosemite. We were out in the woods for five days and saw five or six people the entire time we were out there. It was a rich, rich gift. I'm also

realizing that, at my age, the level of intensity of some of these things has to be mediated, and so I have to figure that out as I go forward.

It was a little too brutal for me. We started at 7,000 feet, more or less, and got up to 12,000 feet. We found a lot of passes, did a lot of hiking, and we had some days where we would start at a quarter to eight in the morning. One day we actually ended up at five, going all day long.

Back in the day we would hang around at night and sit by the fire and tell stories and talk and do all these poems and prayers and promises—kind of John Denver stuff, but this year, in all honesty, we made a deal with each other that we would stay up till eight o'clock. Truly, I think we only met that goal like one out of the five nights that we were out there.

It happens that these guys, who are contemporaries of mine, and I have this great theological thing in the middle of the night called being prostrate before the Lord. So, we would get up in the middle of the night. One of those nights early on, I got up and I rolled out of the tent and I looked up.

I've seen a lot of beautiful skies, but I don't think I've ever seen a more beautiful sky, beautiful stars that night than ever in my entire life. And here's the deal. I was so tired I did my best not to look at them because I didn't want to be awakened and then not go back to sleep.

And I began to think about that and think about how much of my life is like that. How much of your life is like that? Incredible beauty, incredible things, opportunities, privileges to be able to see and to do and to encounter and yet perhaps to be so busy or tired or worn out to not be able to see that beauty. So I did my best not to wake up. But God had other plans for me, and God spoke to me that night through

Scripture. He said to me, as I was out there trying not to look up, in Psalm 147:41: “He [God] determines the number of the stars and He gives to all of them their names.”

He spoke to me in Scripture, “When I consider the wonders,” the beauties..., and then he did the most unusual thing to me that I will never forget. In the middle of that night, as I was doing my best not to be awakened while looking up those stars, He drew me to Genesis 15. I hadn’t thought about this in a long, long time. I’ve thought about it, but I haven’t thought about it this context.

Abram (later named Abraham) sort of has a series of calls: one in the twelfth chapter where God gives him a promise and tells him to do something, and then one in the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter. In the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter, God realizes that Abram has already taken things into his own hands.

God has told Abram that He would give him descendants, what Abram’s desire has been. But Abram and his wife Sara don’t trust in that, so they go get a slave girl and you know what happens. God comes back to Abram in the middle of the night and the Bible says in Genesis 15:5 that God brought Abram outside and said look toward Heaven and count the stars if you are able. And then God said to him, “So shall your descendants be.”

In the middle of that beautiful, clear night, God reminded me that I’m one of those descendants, a descendant of the promise of God, a descendant of a promise that seems unlikely, improbable. That seems bizarre but that I’m a descendant and so are you. And so for the next days I began to see that trip in a different way. Getting up in the morning was still a struggle, but I began to see that being able to walk each day in the beauty of God’s world to be a day where every step could be for me a prayer, sort of my own “shema.” Here, listen Lord—where I might recite or bind or fix or write the promises of God on my life. Some of those mornings and afternoons were filled

with sheer joy to be able to celebrate the (12:14) great excitement that I knew was coming.

I didn't know then that Zoë had been born to Krista and Jim Gates, but I was so excited about that possibility to be able to celebrate the beauty of our children and the growth that we have in our congregation. I mean it was an amazing thing but there were also steps and mornings,.... Jim Dilley, who was with me, one of my dearest friends, finally realized, "Oh, this is one of those mornings that Wood's just going to be crying a lot." There were mornings that were filled with tears for the unfulfilled, what seemed to be unfulfilled promises that so many of you desire in your life.

For the brokenness in relationships, for the struggles that we have with people who wrestle with demons, but what I came to realize in every step was that the Bible was growing in me. And God kept placing not just people for whom to pray and not just things to lift up but God began to continually place words from this Word on my heart. If I can give you any advice today, the best advice I could give you is that that's what this is. This Bible, this God-breathed text, is your family history.

Now many of you will say to me, and I understand, that you don't understand it. You don't get it all. Just let me simply say this to you today, "It doesn't matter." It's okay that you don't get it. It's okay that you don't understand it because I can speak with confidence today to say that it understands you. This God-breathed text understands you. Everything you've ever experienced, every hope, every dream, every fulfillment, every abandonment, everything you've ever encountered, God knows and God understands and this text understands you and what this is. This history of understanding is what gives us our identity. It's what gives us our family. It is what gives us our hope.

I came to Christ in my mid-twenties, all of you know that if you've been around me. Sheryl made my life miserable enough that I went to church and that's very true. With Sheryl you didn't just go to church, you went to Sunday school. That's part of the package and so I had to do that too. Man two hours, gosh! And we started going to a Sunday school class where I met one of the most godly women that I have ever known in my life, Sandra Nelson.

Sandra had taught at Columbia College for years and years. She's probably thirty years older than I. She taught this incredible Sunday school class in an office at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Columbia, South Carolina and everybody would come and they would bring their Bibles.

I don't know if you've ever been in a Sunday school class like this but everybody would bring a different Bible. Some people have NIV, NRSV, KJV – all these other, different Bibles. We'd all read the Bible. Someone would say, "I'll read the verse," and so they read the verse; and then somebody else would say, "Well this is what my Bible says," and "This is what my Bible says," and "This is what my Bible says," and so I got really smart. I didn't have a Bible so I went to the book store to get a Bible.

They have this thing called the Parallel Bible and it is a big Bible. Now all these versions or translations are printed in these parallel columns. So, if you turn to Mark chapter 7, you have about four different versions right there. So, essentially, I was sitting there with everybody's Bible.

And I would say, "This is what it means to me" when I'd start to step out. Basically, the truth is, I was trying to prove that Jesus didn't really mean what He said. So I would say, "This is what it means to me." After a couple of months of this, Sandra Nelson invited me to go to lunch with her.

So, I went to lunch with this most wonderful, godly, caring woman and, in that context, I said, "I'm just trying to figure out what it means to me. I'm getting excited." She said, "Jim, I know you're excited. I think that's a wonderful thing, but let me just tell you this. What it means to you doesn't really matter. What matters is what it means to God."

Then she said, "You know, we don't come there just to try to play around with what those different words are. I know that's part of it, but every one of us is coming there really hoping God would open up His will to us through that Word. And ultimately we believe that that will is, in a different way for each of us, the same will of God, the same promise of God, the same hope of God."

And Sandra Nelson taught me the most important message about the Bible that I have ever encountered. It's that this Bible, this Word, this God-inspired text – the best way to get at it is when you're in family. It really wasn't meant to be read alone. Like the letters of Paul, most of them are letters to churches. It was meant to be read in community. It was meant to be read in family; a true family.

Now I look at Timothy and I think what a great gift it is that Timothy had Lois and Eunice. I think that's an amazing witness: the leadership, the power of women in the early church, this mother and grandmother that were godly women. I understand all of that. What Paul says to Timothy is even more than that when he says that this text is inspired, this text is God breathed. He says to Timothy, Your family is much bigger than even the faith of your mother and grandmother."

It is so much more. It's the faith of Rachel and Ruth. It's the faith of Abigail and Elizabeth. It's the faith of Sarah and Mary. And the real challenge and the real opportunity for us is to recognize that this is

our family. That our family is so much more than our biological understanding. We are the family of God. It's that this is our family history and that you, just as if you can count all the stars, you are a descendant of the promise of God.

And the goal for our biological families, however you might define that, whether you are a young single that is here and you're trying to sort out what does it mean to be in a family, your own family, and how that might be extended to friends and the people that you welcome in; whether it be those who are here who are grandparents who are blessed with a multitude of grandchildren and all these things.

You see, here's the thing. Your family is a family that is called by God to be a promise of God. You're called to be a family identified by living into the promises of God that are recited within your family, that are bound within your family, that are fixed within your family, that are written within the text and codes of your family — and that this is what we're called to be.

And I'm thoroughly convinced of this. I believe that, on that day when we stand before the King, I do not believe that the King is ever going to ask us, "How much did you focus on your family?" But I believe that He may ask you this, "How much did your family focus on Me?" And how much are we identified by, how much is my family identified by, how much is faith identified by this. So, when we read this Bible as family, we come to realize that it's like looking at the countless stars on a clear mountain night. The Bible starts to make me feel small enough to matter.

That's not just a quick little turn of phrase. I really mean that. This Bible makes me feel small enough to matter. The issues and the concerns and the challenges of my life, as overwhelming as they may be to me, as tiring as they may be, as substantial as they may seem;

and the blessings that I have in my life, as wonderful and overwhelming as they may feel, when I read it in the context of my family and all that my family has experienced and all the promises that have been offered to my family and been fulfilled through Jesus Christ, I come to realize that I am just a small star who's named by God, yes, but in a sky of which there are so many that it is actually impossible to count. And one of the greatest joys in my life is to feel small enough to truly matter. The one thing that I find every time I open this when I feel small enough, I find one word, I find one word in this text over and over and over and over and that one word is "hope."

You see what this text does for us that no other text in the history of the world, no other faith no understanding no other philosophy, nothing else in the history of the world has ever done, is to give us a future. It is only found here, and we've come to realize that future is not a future just for the number of days in our lives and for tomorrow, but it's a future that is promised to us eternally. That's what our family history is about. That's what our family promises, this hope.

We had an incredible weekend with folks from Montreat College. Montreat is doing amazing stuff. It's an amazing place and we're excited about that. Dr. Don King, who's really one of the premier Lewis scholars and a devout believer, came and we had an incredible time. We had great programs with our children and we had adult classes on Friday and Saturday.

I'm a Lewis geek, kind of like a Tolkien geek, and so I went back and was starting to root through and check off the things of Lewis I had read. And just thinking back over it again, I pulled out *Narnia*. If you haven't read *The Chronicles of Narnia* to your children- and you might have a sixty year old child- whatever age, you've got to do it. I promise you that the reason you read *Narnia* to a child is that you

have permission to read it to yourself. It is amazing stuff! I started thinking about it, and I pulled out my tattered copies that I've read to the boys and Sheryl has read to me, and I went to the very back of *The Last Battle*.

The thing that Lewis does that's so powerful is that he creates this powerful image of a resurrected future of God that is a homecoming. At the end, after Narnia ends and the children come home to God's new creation, Lewis writes this in *The Last Battle*: "...it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before."

I've heard a lot of things and had a lot of visions, a lot of dreams, of what heaven is, but I can't imagine one that's any better than that. "Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before." In our class yesterday one of our questions was "How did C.S. Lewis die?" I don't know if you know, but he died on the same day that John F. Kennedy and Aldous Huxley died.

Dr. King answered it this way which was beautifully done. Lewis, for the first time later in life, married a woman who was dying of bone cancer. And Lewis had this belief which I believe as well. I know people who have this gift. He believed that, if he prayed fervently, he could not only share the suffering of his wife but that God could also—if it was God's will—could take some of that suffering from his wife and put it on himself.

And so Lewis would have these experiences where he would be in this encounter, that he would be praying in such a way that God would actually be removing some of that pain from his wife and

placing it on Lewis. As I said, his wife died from bone cancer. One of the struggles Lewis had was a severe debilitating osteoporosis because, when he prayed that God would take that suffering from his wife and strengthen her bones, it actually weakened his.

I think about how is it that he was able to do that? He was able to do that because he knew that this life has a life that comes next, and that next life that comes is "Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever and ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before." That's how C. S. Lewis understood what it was to be part of the fellowship of the suffering of Christ.

He knew just what we're told in Hebrews in the twelfth chapter, that "Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of the faith who, for the sake of the joy that was set before Him endured the cross." You see, Lewis knew that there was a joy that was before him that meant there was a hope, that there was a future.

I was thinking about that in my own biological life. My mom's a great woman. My mom cared for my dad for years when my dad struggled with Alzheimers. She cared for him for years when he didn't know her name, when he couldn't speak. She didn't divorce him. She cared for him. And I want to think that my mom cared for him because she was just such a wonderful woman. My mom's "the bomb."

Even though I didn't grow up in the Church, every night, if I was awake, I would hear my mom read her Bible out loud and every single night she would get down on her knees and pray. I believe that my mom was just a great woman, she's the bomb. But I don't believe anyone can do that without knowing that there is a future hope, that there is a hope and a promise.

In Isaiah chapter 25 we're told what the homecoming is going to be like. "On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine--the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain He will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples; the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever."

"He will swallow up death forever."

"The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. The Lord has spoken. In that day they will say, 'Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the LORD, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.'"

That's the promise that we have; that's what our family history is about; that's who we are as the people of God. God has a future for you—no matter how you feel today. Whether you feel as if you just don't know whether it's going to work out, whether you feel, "I just don't know if God's going to bring that right guy or gal to my life." "I don't know if it's going to turn out with my children; I don't know if I'm going to have them," I don't know....

Whatever in your future is making you afraid, I can promise you God has a promised future for you. And, yes, it might involve part of the "fellowship of his suffering," but that's because it's the way for us to enjoy his joy, and his hope, and his promise because there is a story that has never been written on earth; and that story is one where every chapter is better than the one before. I'm not trying to set you up in some kind of phony way and say, "Live in this and something great will come." I truly believe it with every ounce of my being.

God has a future for you and if you want to know what that future is all you have to do is read this, the Bible. Open it up. People come to

me and they are brand new. They don't understand anything. They say, "I want to read the Bible. Help me understand it." I say, "Do this: read Philippians for a month—nothing else, just Philippians for a month." "I don't know if I'll understand it." "Doesn't matter, it'll understand you. Just open it up. This is your future. This is your family."

And then I start to think about us as a family. I start to think about what that might mean to us. I think about how many times in my own life as a leader here I've just been so tired that I'm afraid to even look up at the great, beautiful things that God has for us; and I need to pray for repentance and forgiveness and all that. But I think about us as a family of faith, and I believe this: I believe that if we truly live into being a family of God, God will bless us with being able to walk, with every step to be able to be in prayer for his world, and to pray a future into that.

Who is it in your life today, maybe it's you maybe it's someone else, that all you want for them right now is for them to believe that there will be a tomorrow that will have a promise for them in their life. Maybe it's you and that's good. That's okay. Maybe it's a child. Maybe it's a parent, maybe it's a friend, maybe it's a schoolmate. Whatever it is, be the family of God and pray it knowing that God is already promised it. And you'll be overwhelmed with an amazing future yourself. I really believe this. Pray with me, please.

Father,

I thank you for your love and your grace. I thank you, Father, for the privilege to look toward heaven and count the stars if I'm able. And to hear you say, "so shall your decedents be." Not limited by my own family that might be biologically understood, Lord, but limited only by your love and your grace. I thank you for the privilege of spiritual sons and daughters. I thank you for the witness of loving parents. I

thank you for those people here who have changed my life by simply loving me. I thank you for the smiles and grace. I thank you, Lord, that we have pictures of children holding mattresses (referring to Joy Orphanage in Kenya). Give us that future, Lord. Speak to us and overwhelm us with it in such a way that your promises would be all that we need in which to trust. Through the gift of Holy Spirit and the forgiveness of you, Lord Jesus, we pray. Amen.