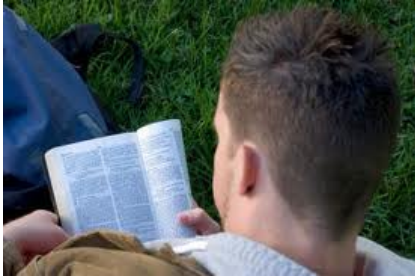


7 Ways to Breathe Life into Your Bible Reading



With Christmas behind us, our thoughts now turn toward the New Year. You are probably like and me and love the idea of new beginnings. January 1 offers us an opportunity to draw a line and start over. We all desire a way to begin again. Typically, we look at all the ways we want to live in a more intentional way. As Christians, hopefully, we take a look at those we know will help us grow in our relationship with Jesus. One of those things is reading the Bible.

Now be honest. Do you do this with dread? We know this is foundational but too often we feel a disconnect between the Bible and our real, going-to-work; driving-the-kids-to-football-practice lives. When this happens we read Scripture out of obligation, guilt, or not at all.

And certainly deciding which devotional to read is always a chore if not a bit stressful. With so many to choose from (there are a lot of good ones out there), we stress over, “What if I choose the wrong one?” So we make a decision, yet too often our resolve to stick with it wanes as the year progresses. Worse, it seems no matter what devotional we choose, Scripture still feels “flat” and disconnected from our daily lives.

Perhaps it doesn't really matter which devotional we choose as much as our approach to Scripture. What makes our reading transformative has as much to do with the intention, attitude, and manner we bring to the words as it does with the nature and content of those words. Perhaps what we need is a way to open ourselves to how God may be speaking to us in and through any particular text.

Here are some ideas to breathe life back into your Bible reading:

It's not about “checking off the boxes.”

Sometimes our “devotion” time feels more like “doing” time...or doing “time!” There is an anxiousness just to “get through it.” The part that is missing so often in our usual reading of the Bible is the pondering; the reflection; the leisurely thinking. Our focus should not be about speed or volume but with depth and receptivity. As we approach God's Word through this more reflective posture, we find there is so much more there than we thought. This is where these words begin to shape us, and Colossians 3:16, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly...” becomes a reality in our lives.

“Be sure to read, not cursorily or hastily, but leisurely, seriously, and with great attention; with proper pauses and intervals, and that you may allow time

for the enlightenings of divine grace.” (John Wesley in *Savoring God’s Word*)

Don’t use Bible to try and “fix” something that is not right

People often read the Bible to find some formula that will solve a pressing need of the moment. “In our desire for a packaged, user-friendly, ‘just tell me what to do’ life of faith, we distort the Bible into an owners’ manual for successful living.” (Foster in *Life with God*, p. 60.) Part of the problem, of course, comes when we no longer need something fixed, we no longer have any reason to encounter Scripture. The Bible is holy ground on which to encounter God not a manipulation tool to get what we want.

Don’t read simply to gather more information. Biblical faithfulness has to be more than just nailing down the meaning of a text. What we are discovering is information alone is not enough to experience transformation. Mindy Caliguire wrote, “It is entirely possible to keep acquiring more and more information about the Bible but be less and less transformed by that knowledge.”

If we approach God’s Word simply to gather more information we may miss what God is saying to us, saying about himself, and His Word will have no meaningful connection to our lives. When we approach the biblical text merely as information that needs to be analyzed, or to prove our presuppositions, we keep Scripture “safe,” at arm’s length and we maintain our false assumption that somehow we are in control of the text. The danger is that it no longer becomes a means by which we listen to God. (Please note: I am not saying there is no place for the in-depth study of scripture. There is. I am addressing our personal devotional engagement with scripture.)

Someone has said, “It’s not about us mastering a text, but allowing the text master us.”

Alive words should be read in an alive manner.

To truly allow the text to come alive and connect with our lives, we must come to the text with openness and attentiveness. To truly “hear” will require we put aside our agenda and need to control the text and be willing to listen with a sense of wonder, vulnerability, and curiosity.

This will also require that we suspend our preconceived judgments and surrender ourselves to the text. Do you remember the “Magic Eye” that was popular in the 80’s? It required us to look differently; to see through to the “picture in the picture”. It required us to bring our whole self to the text with openness, vulnerability, curiosity, and time. It was always exhilarating to “discover” the mysteriously hidden picture that was not obvious to the untrained eye.

Don’t assume you know what it means.

As soon as we say, “Oh, I know what means,” referring to a particular text, we may miss how God may be speaking to us in a fresh new way. It is critical to

approach the Bible as living and active and sharper than a two edged sword (Heb. 4:12,13), not as metaphor but as reality. These words are not merely words on a page, but words that connect to the core of us.

In other words, because it is living and active, there is always more to discover. We are to experience the mystery of the gospel, not just learn about it. When we approach scripture as the living word of God it invites us to pay attention to how we connect with God in ways we never dreamed possible.

Just Showing Up Counts

Too often we feel if there was not an “Ah-ha!” moment in our devotional time, it was wasted time. No true! Again, because God’s Word is alive and active, we can be confident that there is more going on underneath the surface of our lives than what we see or feel. There is a shift taking place undetected in our souls. There is an anchor secretly being forged that will keep us in a time of need. When nothing seems to be happening, always remember...Just being with Jesus is transformative. “I have set the LORD continually before me; because He is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoices; my flesh also will dwell securely” (Ps. 16:8-9, NASB).

You have to live it.

Having a doctrine pass before our minds is not what the Bible means by knowing the truth. In order to read the Scriptures adequately and accurately, it’s necessary at the same time to live them. The reality is...most of know more Scripture than we are living.

If we read what God has written, think about it, pray through it, but don’t allow it to change us, we are missing a big point. It is simply not enough to learn or study or use Scripture; this leisurely approach I’ve been writing about allows us to assimilate it, taking it into our lives in such a way that it gets metabolized into practices of prayer, acts of obedience, and ways of love.

When we do we find that on page after page Scripture surprises us, draws us into its reality, and pulls us into participation with God on his terms as it becomes the means by which we join God in what He is doing all around us. When we do this, God’s kingdom is made tangible to those around us, where we live, work and play.

Our engagement with Scripture has to make a difference in the way we live. “Jesus didn’t say, “Come and study me.” He said, “Come and follow me.” It is through practicing what we study from the Bible in the laboratory of daily life that transformation happens in our own lives and we become a blessing to others. Bible study is not only important, it is absolutely vital and essential, and neither Alan nor I minimize its place in the daily rhythm of following Jesus. But the point here is that it is only the first step in feasting with the Lord on a daily basis, and

just because we've studied something from the Bible doesn't mean the lesson is learned or complete. It has just begun." – Lance Ford

So rather than being information-driven, in devotional reading, it requires unhurried time and an open heart. We will need to practice attentive listening and a willingness to respond to what we hear. The desired attitude is that of the boy Samuel: "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening." (I Samuel 3:10).