

Devotional Reading: Lectio Divina

Colossians 3:16 – “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly...”



There are a variety of ways to approach Scripture. We can study the Bible with reason and logic; comparing other passages and using commentaries, and applying exegetical tools of interpretation. Yet, believing that the head and heart are to be integrated and not divorced, the goal is never about just obtaining more information. While there should always be room for serious study that does not bypass critical scholarship, the goal of any scripture reading is

to internalize and personalize the Scripture so that its truth can affect how we think, our attitudes, and how we live, our actions. We must strike a delicate balance between historical-critical engagement with scripture and opening oneself to the Word's life-transforming potential. If we approach God's Word simple to gather more information we miss what God is saying to us, saying about himself, and His Word will have no meaningful connection to our lives.

This could explain why so many people can read God's Word and remain relatively unchanged by it. It has been reduced to something that is studied, memorized and debated but not heard personally. We must recognize that mere information never brings transformation. When it is reduced to something that is studied, memorized and used as a “spiritual instruction manual so we can make some changes in our spiritual life at points where it is not ‘working properly,’” the danger is that it no longer becomes a means by which we listen to God.

Distinct from other ways of approaching the Bible, the practice of reading Scripture devotionally is the primary mode of reading the Bible for transformation. It is an approach to Scripture with a spirit of attentiveness, seeking to be open and receptive, trusting and listening for how the living Word may be speaking to us in a fresh way.

The part that is missing so often in our usual reading of the Bible is the pondering; the reflection; the leisurely thinking. As we approach God's Word through this contemplative posture, this is where these words begin to shape our lives. As we continue in this posture of openness and response, it naturally leads to a posture of yieldedness to God and we abandon ourselves to God and to whatever God wants to do with us.



“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



Devotional reading is reflective and prayerful. It is concerned not with speed or volume but with depth and receptivity. That is because the purpose of spiritual reading is to open ourselves to how God may be speaking to us in and through any particular passage. We are seeking not merely information but formation. Rather than information-driven, in devotional reading, one of the primary purposes is “to allow the text to have control over us and become a place of encounter with God.” It’s a discipline that allows the Scriptures to “come alive” in our hearts and transforms us from the inside out.

★★★★★★★★★★ Biblical faithfulness becomes more than just mulling down the meaning of a text. Reading the Bible devotionally, requires that we suspend our preconceived judgments and surrender ourselves to the text. It requires us to look differently, to see through to the “picture in the picture.” Much like “Magic Eye” puzzles, it requires we adjust our gaze. It will also take time to “sit” with the text; reading, rereading, pondering and reflecting. When we do, there is so much more than we thought. As we bring our whole self to the text with openness, vulnerability, curiosity, and time, we find it’s not about mastering the text but having the text master us and “read” us.

In our meditations we ponder the chosen text on the strength of the promise that it has something utterly personal to say to us today and for our Christian life, that it is not only God’s Word for the Church, but also God’s Word for us individually. We expose ourselves to the specific word until it addresses us personally.”

Bonhoeffer in *Savoring God’s Word*

★★★★★★★★★★ Hebrews 4:12, 13 – “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give an account.”

“Judging the attitudes of the heart” – it read us! It dissects and analyses us. It speaks to those places in our hearts we’re not even aware of.

The term “laid bare” is a picture of a gladiator with knee on his opponent’s chest, head in tilted back position, ready for the final blow...that’s our approach ...absolute submission...to the text.

This approach to the Bible as living and active and sharper than a two edged sword, not as metaphor but as reality. The words are not merely words on a page, but words that connect to the core of us.

Someone has said, “Alive words must be read in an alive manner.” That’s a good description of devotional reading. It can be summed up this way: “The point is meeting God in the text.” It is a person that we are learning, not a book. We are

connecting with God, not words. We are to experience the mystery of the gospel, not just learn about it.

Practice

While the Bible clearly teaches that the indwelling Spirit will communicate truth and formative experiences that go beyond intellectual knowledge

[John 16:12-16, Romans 8:13, Luke 24:32, Ephesians 1:17-19, 3:16-19], one of the specific methods that developed within the ancient Christian tradition was called *Lectio Divina*, which means “sacred reading.” It includes five components. These are not a rigid sequence but five components that could ebb and flow during a quiet time with God and God’s Word.

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manner.”

Choose a passage that is 6-8 verses long. Any short passage will do. It could be part of your daily reading schedule, or something from a lectionary or devotional book. Here a few examples...Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:17-26; Ephesians 6:10-17; 1 Peter 2:7-12; Isaiah 55:1-5; John 15:12-17

Preparation (Silencio) The art of *lectio divina* begins with cultivating the ability to listen deeply, to hear “with the ear of our hearts.” Learning to hear the voice of God, which often speaks very softly, we must learn to be silent. Take a moment to quiet yourself, take a few deep breaths and become consciously aware of God’s presence with you and intentionally release the chaos and noise in your mind to him.

Read (Lectio) Read a short Scripture passage out loud. Read slowly. Pause frequently—especially if something catches your attention. Don’t analyze or worry about what the word is or why it has stood out to you but seek to listen and be receptive to whatever word or phrase emerges for you. Trust God’s Spirit to bring to your mind what is significant for you at this time.

Reflect (Meditatio) Read the passage out loud again. Reflect and ponder the possible significance in your life of any word or phrase that you feel drawn to. Ponder any instruction or invitation God’s Spirit brought to your mind. Ask yourself, *What in my life needs to hear this word right now?* This is a great time to incorporate a journal. Through *meditatio*, we allow God’s Word to become his word for us, a word that touches us and affects us at our deepest levels.

Respond (Oratio) Read the passage a third time. Now is the moment to enter into a personal dialogue with God. There is no right or wrong way to do this. The important thing is to respond truthfully and authentically. Express in prayer or through your journal whatever has stirred in your heart. Give praise. Give thanks.

Confess sins. Acknowledge your needs and your longings. Intercede for others. Identify where you are resistant or want to push back.

Rest (Contemplatio) In this final reading of the passage – just rest. If you’ve been writing, put the pen down. There is no further need to listen, reflect, imagine, or respond. Release all your thoughts, feelings, and intentions to God. If you have been wrestling and resisting, put that aside for now, and simply rest in God’s Presence. Allow some time for the Word and the Spirit’s truth take root in your heart. Before ending consider how you might continue to ponder and follow the Spirit’s promptings as you go about your life.

Resolve (Incarnatio) Incarnate (live out) the word of God. The Spirit doesn’t only communicate truth or prompt us when we are engaging in Devotional Reading. As you move into your daily activities, be alert to how the Spirit might bring the passage to mind, and resolve that you will live out any truth that you have learned. Helpful questions are, “If I believe the word I’ve received, what should I stop doing?” And, “If I believed, what should I start doing?” Are any unusual enough that they call for discernment before believing and acting upon them?

Questions for Reflection:

1. Do your current Bible studies go deeper than an intellectual understanding of the Word? If not, what prevents them?
2. Are any of the movements listed above missing from your personal or group Bible study? If so, how could they be incorporated?
3. Which of the movements listed above seems most challenging? Why?

For Group Lectio: *Lectio Divina* can be practiced in a group with a few modifications. You can have three different people read the passage. Group members can pray, aloud or silently, for God to help the person on their right respond to the invitation received. Group members may also share their feelings about the process after completing these steps and how they could encourage one another to live out that week what the Spirit impressed on them.

Lectio as a family: *Lectio Divina* is a wonderful way for teens and kids to understand how God’s Word lives and applies directly to their lives. The most important part of the process for younger kids is selecting the right Bible passage for your family to consider. Begin with a New Testament passage that tells a story or has rich sensory images. Ask kids to tell what words or word pictures “jumped out” at them during the reading. Then ask, “Why do you think God wants you to pay attention to that phrase?” Finally, ask kids to tell you what main thing

they want to remember or pray about from the reading. Keep a journal to record the whole family's response to each passage.

Resources on Devotional Reading:

Eat This Book by Eugene H. Peterson

Shaped by the Word by M. Robert Mulholland Jr.

Sacred Readings: A Journal by Kenneth Boa

Savoring God's Word by Jan Johnson