

KNOWING & OBEYING GOD THROUGH HIS WORD

One of our church's pursuits is "spiritual practices." In part, this means that every follower of Jesus is indwelt by God the Spirit, and has direct access to God the Father through God the Son. From the torn curtain in the Jerusalem temple at Jesus' death, to the Protestant Reformation, to Bible translation work around the world and through the ages, we no longer need a priest to pray on our behalf, or to bring the word of God to us. We can learn directly from God; the word of Christ can dwell in us richly!

One way Jesus' disciples can "be like Jesus, become like Jesus, and do what Jesus did" is by spending time dwelling on the words that God the Spirit inspired — by reading the Bible that we can trust and that leads us today. But there are many ways to approach the Bible and the concept of hearing from God and abiding with him through his word can be daunting. So here's a summary of five common ways every follower of Jesus can approach the Bible, as we all carry out our commitment to "one text" each week.

1. FOUR QUESTIONS

Perhaps the simplest starting point for approaching the Bible is asking four questions. They can be asked of literally any text, and by any person. If you can't find an answer in a specific verse, the text before or after almost always help you out. You might start by reading, then restating the text in your own words.

- #1. What does this text say about who God is?
- #2: What does this text say about what God does/did?
- #3. What does this text say about who I am in light of God & his work?
- #4. What does this text say about how I should live in light of who I am?
- Bonus, #5. Who needs to hear these truths, and how can I tell them?

2. INDUCTIVE STUDY

An inductive study of a Biblical text helps us know and understand what the text truly says, and what to do with it. IBS is a three-step process: (1) observation, (2) interpretation, (3) application. You may need some tools (study Bible, reputable website/commentary, etc.) to help, but anyone can walk through IBS.

Observation: "what does the text say?" In this step, you look at what's on the page or screen. You're not interpreting, but merely investigating the "who's, what's, when's, where's, why's, and how's" in the text. (Pay attention to repeated words, lists, transition words, contrasts, and cause and effect)

Interpretation: "what does the text mean?" In this step, you consider the original culture and context for the author's words. What do you know of the author, audience, and purpose of writing? What other passages can help me understand this one? What is the clearest, plainest meaning of the text?

Application: "what does the text mean for me?" We learn the Bible in part so that we can obey God. This final step invites us to consider what the passage means for our everyday lives. How does it impact my daily life, priority, relationships, and decisions? How does it point me to my need for Jesus?

3. LECTIO DIVINA/DEVOTIONAL READING

Much of the world was illiterate during the first 1,500 years of church history. Followers of Jesus would listen to the words of scripture, and rather than study it they would see it as invitation deeper into God's presence, listening for a word or phrase God the Spirit might have for you in a given moment. Lectio divina often occurs in five movements: (1) silencio, (2) loctio, (3) meditatio, (4) oratio, (5) contemplatio.

Silencio: quiet your heart. Pay attention to God's presence, slow down, relax, and release chaos/noise.

Lectio: read the word. Read a passage slowly, out loud, lingering over particular words that resonate. When one does, stop and ask what God might be saying. Don't analyze or judge; just listen and wait.

Meditatio: meditate. Read the passage again, out loud. Savor the words, and listen for an invitation God might be extending. Ponder the words that resonated, and explore the impact of God's invitation.

Oratio: respond and pray. Read a third time, out loud. Enter a dialog with God: There is no right or wrong way to do this: simply be honest and authentic, express feelings, resistance, and willingness.

Contemplatio: contemplate, rest, and enjoy God's presence. Let the word sink deeply into your soul. Surrender to God, and consider a reminder to help you dwell on the impactful words through your day.

4. PRAYER/MEDITATION/JOURNALING THE WORD

Meditation is not merely a discipline of Eastern or New Age philosophies to empty the mind; it's long been a core practice of Judeo-Christian faith, as we seek to fill ourselves with God's presence and will. We can glimpse God in his creation, in history, in humans, and in the Bible, but we must stop and pay attention. While we can explore God in many ways, this sheet specifically suggests ways to meditate on God's word.

Choose a Biblical verse, chapter, or book. Slowly read the passage and write thoughts, questions, and impressions as you read it.

Use your imagination and try to "own" the words — especially those that seem to stand out to you.

Turn the text into personal prayers, and consider writing those prayers down. The Bible is full of prayers, which can provide framework for our own. And when we pray any scripture, we're setting aside our own control and agenda, as God returns us to speak his words back to him.

Marinate on the words: keep processing them, writing them, and praying them. When you become distracted, simply ask God to help you return your focus to the text

If you journal, let your thoughts, feelings, and reactions flow freely. Don't stop to edit, or to question thoughts that pop into your head. Write questions and responses that may be from God.

When you're done prayed, meditated, and journaled, ask God what he wants you to do with the words you processed, and consider a reminder to help you dwell on the impactful words through your day.

5. MEMORIZATION

For most of history, committing things to memory was the basis for education. In a world where anything is accessible with two clicks of our thumbs, the art of memorization — and even the time it requires — is increasingly lost. The Bible calls us to hide God's word in our hearts, and the following practice can be helpful to us as we seek that noble pursuit.

Start with a short passage, then increasingly try longer ones. Consider memorizing a fully chapter or book of the Bible.

Write the passage on a card and keep it somewhere you'll see it regularly. Rehearse it every day.

Don't move on to a new passage until you fully know the current one by heart.

Consider putting the passage to the tune of a familiar song — melody can help with memory.

Develop a group that memorizes scripture together — help each other and fill in gaps.

IN CONCLUSION...

There are many other ways to approach God's word, than the five above. Bible reading plans, study Bibles, and Bible software all provide helpful insights and frameworks for dwelling with God and understanding his word. But these five can be helpful practices — especially if reading the Bible is new to you, if you feel stale or stuck, and/or if God might want you to vary your normal approach to his word. And the goal of all these is to know and obey God, and to see Jesus as the hero of every story which helps us see him as the hero of our own story, and every situation we face.

In all these ways, spiritual sisters and brothers can be helpful in seeing God and his work, finding Jesus as the hero of each verse, and interpreting and applying God's word to your life. They can help you discern His voice from your own, and guard you against misapplying or missing his intent and direction. But as we all "know and obey God through regular time in his word" each week, these are five ways we commend to you, as you dwell on the words that God the Spirit inspired, that you can trust, and that lead you today.