
INTRODUCTION TO THE DEVOTIONAL BIBLE STUDY METHOD

by

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A common question that many people have is "how should I spend my Bible reading time?" Our goal in this section is to suggest a process of reading the Bible that can be accomplished in as little as 15-20 minutes a day. Obviously, this is a minimum standard. The more time you expose yourself to God's Word, the more you will see His transforming work in your life.

"The Devotional Method of Bible Study involves taking a passage of the Bible, large or small, and prayerfully meditating on it until the Holy Spirit shows you a way to apply its truth to your own life in a way that is personal, practical, possible, and measurable. The goal is for you to take seriously the Word of God and 'do what it says' (James 1:22)."¹

The Devotional Method is the most basic method and the foundation upon which all other Bible Study is built. There are four steps to the Devotional Method: *pray, read, reflect, and record*.

- (1) Pray** - Don't open the Bible to read without first praying. Since the Bible is the revelation of God to the minds of men, it is vital that you begin by asking Him to share His thinking with you. After all, He's the Author of the Book. If you want to know what He had in mind when He wrote it, ask Him. In addition, ask God to help you apply the Scripture you are studying and show you specifically what He wants you to do. You already know that God wants you to do two things: obey His Word and share it with others. In your prayer, tell God that you are ready to obey what He will show you and that you are willing to share that application with others. Invite the Holy Spirit to be your teacher and guide.
- (2) Read** - This may sound simple, however, Howard Hendricks notes that "too many readers are nothing but browsers. They turn pages the way they flip through channels on a TV set, looking for something to catch their interest. The Word doesn't lend itself to that sort of approach. It requires conscious, concentrated effort."² Read observantly. Don't be reluctant to backtrack and re-read if your mind has drifted. Unless we discipline ourselves to read in this way, our growth toward spiritual maturity will be stunted. One way we can avoid becoming a Bible "browser" is by having a reading plan and sticking to it. On the Soul Purpose website, listed as resources under this lesson, are a number of Bible reading plans that map out ways to read through the Bible systematically. Please use one of these if you are not currently following any daily plan for reading. You may want to consider asking an accountability partner to check up on you regularly while you are in the process of establishing this discipline.

¹ Rick Warren, *12 Dynamic Bible Study Methods*, Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1981, p. 29.

² Howard Hendricks, *Living By The Book*, Chicago: Moody, 1991, p. 40.

(3) Reflect - Make sure you take some time to think about what you've read. This is the step where you meditate on God's Word. Rick Warren writes, "meditation is essentially thought digestion. You take a thought God gives you, put it in your mind, and think on it over and over again. Meditation may be compared to rumination; that's what a cow does when it chews its cud. It eats some grass and sends it to its first stomach; then it lies down, brings the grass up, chews on it, and swallows it again. This process of digestion is repeated three times. Scriptural meditation is reading a passage in the Bible, then concentrating on it in different ways."³ Here are some practical ways you can meditate on a passage of Scripture: (You do not need to do each of these every time!)

- (a) *Nine questions to ask yourself of the passage under study.* It would be a good idea to memorize these questions so that you have them available every time you want to meditate on a passage. You may not have to use all of them at one time.
- Is there a sin to confess? Do I need to make any restitution?
 - Is there a promise to claim? Is it a universal promise? Have I met the condition(s)?
 - Is there an attitude to change? Am I willing to work on a negative attitude and begin building toward a positive one?
 - Is there a command to obey? Am I willing to do it no matter how I feel?
 - Is there an example to follow? Is it a positive example for me to copy or a negative one to avoid?
 - Is there a prayer to pray? Is there anything I need to pray back to God?
 - Is there an error to avoid? Is there any problem that I should be alert to, or beware of?
 - Is there a truth to believe? What new things can I learn about God the Father, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, or other biblical teachings?
 - Is there something to praise God for? Is there something here I can be thankful for?
- (b) *Emphasize words in the passage under study.* Read through a verse aloud several times, each time emphasizing a different word, and watch how the verse comes alive.
- (c) *Paraphrase the passage under study.* One of the best ways to demonstrate your understanding of a passage is to paraphrase it in your own words.
- (d) *Personalize the passage you are studying.* This can be done by putting your name in place of the pronouns or nouns used in Scripture. For example, John 3:16 would read: "For God so loved *Brian* that he gave his one and only Son, that if *Brian* believes in him *Brian* will not perish but have eternal life."
- (e) *Pray the verse or passage back to God.* Put the passage under study into the first person singular, turn it into a prayer, and pray it back to God.
- (f) *Memorize a verse or passage you are studying.* Memorization will allow you to continue to meditate on the passage throughout the day. Furthermore, it often takes

³ Warren, *12 Dynamic Bible Study Methods*, pp. 33-34.

weeks, months, or even years for God to build a quality into our lives. The memorized verse will help in that process because it will ever be with us - "in the heart."

Which one of these methods should you use in your Bible reading? Obviously you won't use them all each time you read a passage of Scripture. But, just like you have several different screwdrivers, each having a particular usefulness, each of these Bible study tools will be useful for certain passages of Scripture. You must try a tool out though to become familiar with how it works so you can use it when the appropriate job comes up.

(4) Record - You are not done with your Bible reading until you have written some notes. Record what you see in the passage. Keep a record of your insights, questions, and applications. Start where you are, even if what you record seems pretty basic. Everyone starts at that same place. But be sure to write it down. Use a legal pad, journal or a notebook to record what you see. There are many reasons for keeping a spiritual journal, but consider especially the following five reasons:

- (a) It provides a useful method for recording special daily insights from God's Word. Insights which go unrecorded often slip away from your memory and are lost.
- (b) It produces an attitude of expectancy. Keeping a daily spiritual journal develops a mental attitude of expectancy that not only attunes your brain for diligent thought but helps with consistency by producing a spirit of anticipation that today you will hear from God.
- (c) It provides a useful check on regularity. At a glance you can tell just how consistent you are in your quiet time. Many people think they are more consistent in their devotions than they really are; the daily spiritual journal will keep you honest.
- (d) It provides a useful review. One of the blessings in keeping a daily journal is that in a few minutes each week you can review the "best" of your devotional reading for the week and month. This review further helps cement the Word of God in your mind.
- (e) It provides an easy appraisal of spiritual growth. By the time you have kept a spiritual journal for three months, you will be amazed at your growth. Without this kind of record you may not realize that you are growing in grace and knowledge and in wisdom and stature with God.

As we noted above, one item that you should record is an application. Unfortunately, application is often the most neglected stage in the process of Bible reading. Howard Hendricks has noted, "The Bible was not written to satisfy your curiosity; it was written to transform your life."⁴ Thus, the ultimate goal of all Bible reading is to allow the truth of God's Word to do something to you. The process of relating the Word of God to life is called application. Here are four principles to keep in mind as you write down an application:

- (1) Your application should be *personal* - you should write it in the first person singular. When you write out an application, use the personal pronouns "I," "me," "my," and "mine" throughout. However, remember that your application needs to come from principles in the passage, and not just some subjective encounter with the text.

⁴ Hendricks, *Living By The Book*, p. 284.

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- (2) Your application should be *practical* - it should be something you can *do*. Plan a definite course of action which you intend to take. Design a personal project which will encourage you to be a "doer of the Word." Make your applications as specific as possible. Broad generalities can make you feel helpless and produce little action.
 - (3) Your application should be *possible* - it should be something you know you can accomplish; otherwise you will get discouraged.
 - (4) Your application should be *measurable* - you must set up some sort of follow-up to check up on your success in doing it. It has to be measurable so you will know that you have done it. Often this will mean establishing a time limit. It is important that you also tell someone about it - someone who will occasionally check up on your progress in an encouraging way (like your accountability partner/group).

Remember to record applications for future use as well as present needs. If you find an application that does not apply to you at present, write it down anyway, for two reasons. First, the application might be needed in the future when another situation comes into your life. Second, it might help you minister to someone else who is in that situation. Ask yourself, "How can I use this passage to help someone else."

DEVOTIONAL STUDY FORM

Date: _____

Passage: _____

1. Pray

2. Read the Passage

3. Reflect (Remember, you do not have to do all of these each time you do a devotional study.)

- a) Nine questions to ask yourself:
 - Is there a sin to confess?
 - Is there a promise to claim?
 - Is there an attitude to change?
 - Is there a command to obey?
 - Is there an example to follow?
 - Is there a prayer to pray?
 - Is there an error to avoid?
 - Is there a truth to believe?
 - Is there something to praise God for?
- b) Emphasize words in the passage under study.
- c) Paraphrase the passage under study.
- d) Personalize the passage you are studying.
- e) Pray the verse or passage back to God.
- f) Memorize a verse or passage you are studying.

4. Record (insights, questions, and applications)

Make sure your application is *personal, practical, possible, and measurable*.

a) Insights

b) Questions

c) Applications