



An intro to devotional Scripture reading

by John Alexander

The main concern I regularly hear from Christians regarding their personal Scripture reading is that they are not getting anything out of it. I know what they mean. There are many times that I have imagined sitting down with Scripture, digging into a passage, and being struck with some amazing Gospel truth that rattles me to the core, strengthens my intimacy with Christ, and inspires me to be about the work of God's mission. However, many days my time in Scripture is not quite that inspiring or exciting. It makes me want to ask, "Am I doing this wrong?" or "What are those other people doing that makes them so passionate about their faith?" or "Is this really worth it?"

It is right to expect a feeling of inspiration to flow from our daily Bible reading and prayer times, but inspiration is actually a byproduct, not the main objective. When I begin or end my day exercising the discipline of prayer and Bible reading, it is not primarily for *me to get something out of it*, but for *God's glory*. Of course, these two things are linked (God's will is our joy!), but it is important to note the difference, especially when I find that my devotional life is a bit dry—and I do not know a Christian who hasn't had dry times on their spiritual journey.

Whenever I make time in my life to listen to God's word and to worship him through prayer, simply by making the effort I am saying,

"My life is not my own. You are the Lord of my life. I am unable to guide my own steps. I submit myself to you by giving you this time, acknowledging you, and looking to you for strength."

Entering into worship in this posture ensures that our reading and prayer will be acts of *devotion* to God (this is why Christians have often referred to their daily rhythm of spiritual disciplines as "devotions"). Even on days when you don't feel like you are getting anything out of it, you need to know that these devotional times are still deeply significant and meaningful as acts of sacrificial worship. *Getting* from these times is a wonderful byproduct, but it isn't the main point. I hope this offers some perspective to encourage you during the dry times.

All of the above being said, I am happy to say that many at Liberti are experiencing a fruitful and sustainable devotional life that glorifies God and strengthens them for their mission in this city. Let's move on to a few tips that many at Liberti have found helpful.

Tools for the Journey

1. What's the plan?

In my experience, the quickest way to get disillusioned about your personal devotional life is to not have a plan. It's pretty overwhelming to sit down with the Bible without knowing where to jump in — there's a lot of stuff in there! There are a lot of great Bible reading plans to choose from. Some plans offer [a cycle of daily readings](#) that pull from the Old and New Testaments and work through the Bible slowly. Others provide brief and [simple biblically-based meditations](#). Sometimes you may choose to simply focus on one book of the Bible at a time, such as the book that we're currently studying in our weekly worship services. The point is to have a plan and know it. I suggest approaching other Christians whom you respect and asking about their plan as well.

Here just a few options:

- [Cycle of Daily Readings - ESV lectionary](#)
- [Check out the many reading plans at bible.com](#)

One other important thing about the plan — make it sustainable! If you only have twenty minutes each morning for reading and prayer, you probably don't want to read five chapters in a sitting if you still want time to meditate on what you've read and let it drive you into prayer.

2. Asking questions of the text

The work of observing, interpreting, and applying Scripture can be difficult. As a church we are always learning how to better understand and apply Scripture together during Sunday services and at home meeting. But in order to be a truly healthy body of believers, we all need to grow in the discipline of studying Scripture individually as well. There are some great study resources that we can direct you to in the future as you grow in this discipline, but it is best to begin by asking of the text two simple questions: "What does this text teach about God?", and "What does this text teach about us?"

2A. "What does this text teach about God?"

- What does this text tell me about God the Father, God the Son, or God the Holy Spirit? Also, how does this passage describe God's character, his actions, his plans, his promises, etc.?
- What does this text tell me about God's mission? In other words, why was this passage written, and what need does God want it to address for his people, or for lost people that he desires to reach?
- How is Jesus the "fulfillment" of this passage (Mt 5:17, Lk 24:27)? How does this passage point to him, or how is it in some other way "about" him? Since Christ

himself taught that all the Scriptures may be interpreted in relation to himself, we can and should ask of every text, “How does it relate to Jesus?”

2B. “What does this text teach about us?”

Michael Emlet, a counselor and seminary instructor in the Philadelphia area, has helpfully described how God approaches people through the Bible as saints, sufferers, and sinners.¹ Here are some examples of how this informs the question, “*What does this text teach about us?*”

- How does this passage *CONFIRM OUR IDENTITY AS SAINTS*? In other words, how does this passage speak to me as one who is an adopted child of God, saved by grace through faith in the death and resurrection of Christ? What promises does it remind me of? What hope does it assure me of? How does it stir me up to greater obedience in response to the grace I have received?
- How does this passage *COMFORT US AS SUFFERERS*? Since there are always things that we are struggling or suffering through, does this passage give any reminder of his awareness of our suffering, any commiseration with our suffering, or any promise of our suffering being relieved, now or in eternity?
- How does this passage *CONFRONT US AS SINNERS*? Does this text urge us to confess sin, remind us to develop a lifestyle of repentance, assure us of God’s forgiveness, or point us to the freedom that sinners find at the cross and empty tomb?

You can see many ways that these two questions, “*What does this text teach about God?*” and “*What does this text teach about us?*” have significant overlap. In fact, as you grow in reading Scripture you may find that you are listening to the text in these ways without even consciously asking the questions.

The tools above are not the only tools you might need. For example, there are times when you may be totally uncertain about what a passage means. The first and best resource I recommend for a deeper study of the Bible is the ESV Study Bible. It is also very important to develop a familiarity with the general story arc of the Bible (something that the ESV Study Bible can greatly help with). Wherever you are in the Bible, a familiarity with “the big story” will provide greater clarity as to what has happened already in the biblical story, and what has yet to happen in the biblical story. A brief resource list is available below to help with this. But even if you are not able to dig into those materials yet, the suggestions above should offer enough direction to jump in and begin thoughtfully reading Scripture as an act of devotional, sacrificial worship.

¹ Emlet, Michael. *Crosstalk*. Greensboro: New Growth, 2009. p. 74.

3. Meditation

Finally, considering all of the questions we have asked in #2 above and how the text has answered these questions, it is important to meditate on what we have read. In his book on Christian prayer and meditation, Tim Keller writes, “To meditate is to ask yourself questions about the truth, such as: “Am I living in light of this? What difference does this make? Am I taking this seriously? If I believed and held to this, how would that change things? When I forget this, how does that affect me and all my relationships?”²

As you ask these questions of the text — either consciously or subconsciously — let the answers you find drive you into prayer. Each observation you make is guiding you toward praise, confession, thanksgiving, intercession for others, or maybe simply reminding you to remember and claim God’s promises to you.

Further Resources

[The Bible Project](#) is a free video-based service that educates people on how to read Scripture. Their [“How to Read the Bible”](#) video series is helpful, particularly in thinking through how different literary genres in the Bible are interpreted differently. Their [Book Overviews](#) are also extremely engaging!

The ESV Study Bible. Wheaton: Crossway, 2008.

The Drama of Scripture: finding our place in the biblical story. Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004.

CrossTalk. Michael R. Emler. Greensboro: New Growth, 2009.

Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God. Timothy Keller. New York: Dutton, 2014.

Eat this Book. Eugene Peterson. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006.

Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life. Donald Whitney. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991.

² Keller, Timothy. *Prayer*. New York: Dutton, 2014. p. 157.