

Scripture Engagement: What Is It?

Spiritual Growth and the Scriptures

Over the years I've asked many Christians of different ages and spiritual maturity levels what they believe is the best way to grow as a Christian. The most common answer is "pray and read the Bible." I think that's right. A maturing Christian continually grows in faith, hope, and love for God and others (1 Corinthians 13:13, Matthew 22:36-40). Prayer and Scripture reading are foundational to the spiritual growth process of all believers.

In the book *Move: What 1,000 Churches Reveal About Spiritual Growth*, authors Hawkins and Parkinson describe research conducted on 250,000 people at 1,000 churches. The study looked at 50 different factors that impact spiritual growth (defined as loving God and loving others). Their findings? "Nothing has a greater impact on spiritual growth than reflection on Scripture... If churches could do only one thing to help people at all levels of spiritual maturity grow in their relationship with Christ, their choice is clear. They would inspire, encourage, and equip their people to read the Bible—specifically, to reflect on Scripture for meaning in their lives... The Bible is the most powerful catalyst for spiritual growth. The Bible's power to advance spiritual growth is unrivalled by anything else we've discovered." The key process in training ourselves and others to fulfill the Great Commandment is to grow in Scripture engagement.

Why are the Scriptures so vital to spiritual growth? They are living and active (Hebrews 4:12-13), give freedom (James 1:25), make truth known (Psalm 19:7-11), and equip for service (2 Timothy 3:16-17). All this and more is true, but perhaps the most important reason is based on the simple description that the Bible is "God's Word." As Timothy Ward says, "to encounter the words of Scripture is to encounter God in action" (Timothy Ward, *Words of Life*, 2009). Every time we come to the Bible, we can meet and know God. Engaging the Bible is a relational process, the primary means by which God engages the believer.

When it comes down to it, isn't having a deep, meaningful, and engaging relationship with God what you want in life? It's what we were created for.

Reading To Know God - A Relational Process

J. I. Packer, in his book *Knowing God*, writes that having a relationship with God is our primary purpose. “What were we made for? To know God. What aim should we have in life? To know God. What is the eternal life that Jesus gives? To know God. What is the best thing in life? To know God. What in humans gives God most pleasure? Knowledge of himself.” The Bible is the means by which we encounter God, get to know and enjoy him, and fulfill our purpose in life.

Eugene Peterson, in *Eat This Book*, states that Scripture engagement (or “spiritual reading”) is a relational process: “What I mean to insist upon is that spiritual writing—Spirit-sourced writing—requires spiritual reading, a reading that honors words as holy, words as a basic means of forming an intricate web of relationships between God and the human, between all things visible and invisible.” The process of hearing or reading the Bible must be done thoughtfully because you are coming into the presence of a Holy God.

Chris Webb, in *The Fire of the Word*, also writes that engaging the Bible is a relational process. Chris explains that the Bible is a “thin” place where we meet God: the Scriptures are a “place where the boundary between heaven and earth has been worn through…When we open the Bible, it does not say to us, ‘Listen: God is there!’ Instead, the voice of the Spirit whispers through each line, ‘Look: I am here!’” The Bible is the inspired Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16); through it He speaks to us. Through it the Holy Spirit shows us who God actually is. As we come to know Him, we are changed more and more into his likeness.

Dr. Fergus Macdonald (of the Taylor University Center for Scripture Engagement) points out that each Person of the Trinity is involved in the relational process of Scripture engagement. “It is the Holy Spirit who enables the text to speak for itself; when the text speaks it is the voice of God the Father that is heard; and it is Jesus Christ who through the text makes a unique claim upon the readers and hearers.” By reading God’s written Word, we actually find his living Word, Jesus Christ. Come, meet God in the Scriptures!

Do You Know How?

So here is my question, has anyone taught you how to read to the Bible for spiritual growth? When I was first asked that question a few years back, I was stunned because I realized that nobody had really taught me to read the Bible for spiritual growth (and I had to admit I really hadn't taught others to read the Bible either).

Though I was told to read the Bible, I was never really taught how to read the Bible. I was told what to read in the Bible, but I was not given clear instructions about the reading process. I spent a lot of time floundering around with Bible reading when some clear instructions could have made a deep impact on my spiritual life. Thankfully, I was eventually taught how to engage the Bible. Have you learned to engage the Bible to know God, not just know about God?

Scripture Engagement

What is Scripture engagement? Dr. Fergus Macdonald writes, "Scripture engagement is interaction with the biblical text in a way that provides sufficient opportunity for the text to speak for itself by the power of the Holy Spirit, enabling readers and listeners to hear the voice of God and discover for themselves the unique claim Jesus Christ is making upon them." (see "Defining Scripture Engagement" sidebar ↗)

The Bible itself teaches us how we are to approach God's Word. Words the Bible uses include "meditate" (Psalm 1:2, Joshua 1:8), "reflect" (2 Timothy 2:7), "look intently" (James 1:25), "dwell" (Colossians 3:16), "ponder" (Psalm 119:95), "consider" (Jeremiah 2:31), and even "eat" (Jeremiah 15:16, Revelation 10:9-11) (see the "Scripture Engagement Passages" sidebar ↗). The phrase that summarizes this process is "Scripture engagement."

Perhaps some images will help convey what is meant by "Scripture engagement." One of the terms the Bible uses when describing how to approach it is the word "meditate." In Psalm 1 we are told that the blessed "meditates day and night" on the law. Also, in Psalm 63:6 we read, "...when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night..." Eugene Peterson, again in *Eat This Book*, tells us that the Hebrew word used here is *hagah*, the same word used in Isaiah 31:4, which speaks of a hungry lion growling over his prey. One way we

are to approach the Bible is to meditate or “growl” over it. Picture a hungry lion, in all its power, focused, serious, and concentrated on every part of its meal, growling out of pleasure and intensity as it eats. We need to come to the Bible with purpose and intensity, wishing to catch every word God may have for us that will nourish our hungry souls. Do we too often come to the Bible casually, not really hungry, not really expecting to gain anything we might need? God’s Word is the food our souls desperately need. Too often we end up “spiritually anorexic” because we have starved ourselves from God’s Word (Deut. 8:3, Matt. 4:4).

Another “eating” metaphor used for Scripture engagement is ruminating. Picture a cow chewing its cud all day long. It takes a lot of grinding to get the nutrients out of grass, so the cow chews the grass over and over, bringing up old grass (“cud”) from one of four different sections of its stomach, each time reworking a mouthful. The cow needs the nutrients to live, so it patiently, slowly, “ruminates” on what it needs. We too should slowly, repeatedly, “chew” on God’s Word throughout the day, recognizing that being with God gives us life. One quick pass at a verse or section of the Bible once a week is not enough. The passage needs to be gone over-and-over so we can fully savor it and be spiritually fed by it.

The whole idea of “eating” God’s Word has its foundation in a number of passages in the Bible, including Jeremiah 15:16, Ezekiel 3:1-3, and Revelation 10:9-11. It’s important to realize that, when the Apostle John “ate” God’s Word in Revelation 10:9-10, it tasted “sweet” in his mouth but turned “sour” in his stomach. God’s Word, while always true and good, is not always easy to absorb, it calls us to obey and trust. Meeting with God is not a “tame” process, God is training us for his Kingdom, and training involves work and change.

Conclusion

So what is Scripture engagement? It is a way of hearing and reading the Bible with an awareness that it is in the Scriptures that we primarily meet God. It is a marinating, mulling over, reflecting, dwelling on, pondering of the Scriptures, resulting in a “transformative engagement” with God. Besides “Scripture engagement,” phrases that have been used to convey the same idea include “holy attention” (see “Holy Attention” sidebar↗), “spiritual reading,” “participatory reading,” “formative reading,” and “existential reading” (see R. C. Sproul video).

It might be helpful to realize that Scripture engagement is not exactly the same thing as studying the Bible; it is a complement to Bible study (see “Scripture Engagement Compared to Bible Study” sidebar↗). Though both Scripture engagement and studying of the scriptures are needed to grow spiritually, this website will focus primarily on Scripture engagement.

Though all listening and reading of Scripture is better than not coming to the Bible at all, Scripture engagement tries to correct common but inadequate approaches to the Bible (see “Not This Way” sidebar↗). Too many people have come to the Bible with an inadequate approach and then stop reading, thinking that something was wrong with the Bible or with themselves. With a little training and encouragement, the life-changing nature of the Scriptures can be experienced by anyone.

For a preview of the different methods of Scripture engagement listed on this website, go to the “Scripture Engagement Practices Overview” section. Once you find a specific method you want to learn more about, visit the more detailed section of the website where you can find a description, some resources, and practice tips.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/scripture-engagement/main/what-is-scripture-engagement>

© Phil Collins, Ph.D., 2014. This material was created in partnership with the Taylor University Center for Scripture Engagement.