

# SHAPE

Spiritual Formation for Ministry





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*Spiritual Formation  
for Ministry*

Edited by  
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# INTRODUCTION

*Jeff Rankin*

What are you going to do after graduation? What do you want to do with your life? Questions like these echo endlessly at the end of every school year as students prepare to make decisions about the direction of their lives. Maybe you have thought about these same questions and wondered what answers you would give. As important as these questions are, another question holds even greater significance: what does God want you to do with the life he has given you? This question represents what Christians refer to as God's calling. The basis for this question is the recognition that God created you with a unique set of abilities and aptitudes to equip you for the plan and purpose he has designed for your life. If God is truly your Creator, and he is, then he must know what he created you to do and who he created you to be. Yet, discovering this calling presents a difficult challenge for most people.

The following pages will help you begin to think about the question of God's calling and where to seek the answer. A good starting point for thinking about God's calling relates to what some people call spiritual formation. In other words, the pursuit of knowing God and making him known begins with God's Spirit working in the lives of believers to shape them into the image of himself and of his Son Jesus. This idea of shaping is a fundamental part of the Christian life and involves several steps on the journey to Christlikeness. Specifically, the word **SHAPE** itself can offer a memorable pattern for these steps, where each letter represents

another step of the journey to knowing and following God's call. The following chapters in this booklet make clear how God shapes people to understand and respond to his calling for life and ministry: **Study** God's Word, **Hear** God's Voice, **Apply** God's Truth, **Pray** God's Will, **Engage** God's World. In reading these chapters and putting the truths they contain into practice, you will be taking some of the first steps every person must take to find the answers God has given to life's most important questions.

# STUDY GOD'S WORD

*Jeff Rankin*

What thoughts and feelings do you have when you hear the word *study*? If you are like most people, you will have to confess the word *study* brings to mind a variety of negative images and emotions. Study done well requires an intense focus and an unusual level of concentration that strains the mind, stiffens the heart, and saps the strength. In a world where entertainment is not only a ready remedy for the stresses of life but also an addictive replacement for life's disciplines, the prospect of sacrificing its pleasures for the hard work of study is unattractive. Yet, if the subject of one's study has the potential to offer unlimited benefits, the reward is surely worth the work required. God's Word offers a most incredible return on the believer's investment of study; it offers answers to life's most important questions. In this chapter, the first step on the path to spiritual formation and to answering the life-shaping question "What does God want me to do with my life?" begins with the letter S, that is **Study** God's Word.

### **Why the Bible Is God's Word**

God has given people the Bible to help them answer the most important questions about life; it is God's instruction book for living. This statement not only makes a bold claim about the Bible but also identifies the Bible as *the* source of God's Word. Since studying God's Word holds the answers to understanding God's calling, and the Bible is the source of God's Word, those seeking the knowledge of God's calling should study the Bible. Not everyone in the world, however, believes these claims about the Bible are true. Maybe the best place to start in determining whether the Bible is God's Word or not is to consider what the Bible claims about itself.

The history of the Bible is an interesting story. The books that form the Bible were written thousands of years ago and preserved by scribes who copied these texts carefully from the beginning. Those scribes believed they were copying the very words of God so that later generations would have God's instructions to guide their lives. But what led these ancient scribes to believe such grand ideas about the Bible? In the part of the Bible known as the New Testament, a letter from an early Christian leader to his young apprentice gives insight into the importance these writings hold for the world. The Apostle Paul encouraged his young friend Timothy to endure the coming difficulties he would face in the world by studying God's Word. Why should Timothy study the Bible? Paul gave the answer: "All Scripture is God-breathed and useful for teaching, for refuting errors, for correcting faults, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be qualified, for every good work being made complete" (2 Tim 3:16-17). Timothy would be able to handle any situation in life through applying the truths of Scripture, a reference to what people call the Old Testament, since God breathed out these instructions to the

human authors who wrote them down in the Bible. In the same way, studying this divine/human book offers *us* the promise of full preparation for God's plans and purposes.

Why is the Bible God's Word? The first reason is because God himself by his Spirit gave the Bible to people to help them answer life's most difficult questions. The second reason the Bible is God's Word comes from the message of another letter in the New Testament, this time from the Apostle Peter. His second letter to Christians experiencing persecution in the world because of their belief in Jesus Christ emphasizes Jesus' earliest followers were eyewitnesses of his life, death, and resurrection, events already announced beforehand by God's messengers, the prophets of the Old Testament. In this context, Peter exclaimed, "This first of all knowing, that every prophecy of Scripture by one's own interpretation does not come about; for not by the will of a man was prophecy brought into being, but, moved by the Holy Spirit, men spoke from God" (2 Pet 1:20-21). What happened to Jesus, and what was happening to Peter's audience by their identification with him, came about by the will of God, who by his Spirit spoke through men who wrote down what he revealed. God inspired these prophets to record the prophecies he revealed to them in the Bible to make his plan of redemption known. So, why is the Bible God's Word? The second reason is because God by his Spirit gave his Word to people to help them understand his purposes and plans in Jesus' death and resurrection. Those wanting to understand God's will for his people should study the Bible since it is God's Word.

### **What the Bible Offers as God's Word**

Now that the identity of the Bible as God's Word is clear, the next claim to consider in understanding why people should

study God's Word is what the Bible offers those who would take this step to know and pursue the shaping work of spiritual formation. To answer this question, the main storyline of the Bible and its ultimate purpose also must become clear. Three aspects of God's purpose for the Bible help people see what the Bible offers someone seeking the answers to life's most important questions: the Bible represents a revelation of God himself, it offers a reflection of human rebellion, and it tells of a redemption of God's creation.

The pursuit of knowing God has challenged the greatest minds in human learning. Many people have given up on the search, concluding that God cannot be known or that God does not want to be known. Modern scientists even claim that God does not exist since they do not find convincing evidence of him in the natural world. On the one hand, this lack of the knowledge of God is not unusual. The Bible reveals that "God, no one has seen at any time" (John 1:18) and that "God is Spirit" (John 4:24). On the other hand, the Bible claims no one can say God does not exist because he has revealed himself to all people through the creation of the world, whether they acknowledge him or not (Rom 1:19-20). The first words of the Bible testify to the existence of God and his identity as Creator of all that is: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1).

To claim that God cannot be known or does not want to be known makes no sense. God by his Spirit breathed out the words of Scripture to human authors who wrote down those very words of God. Only in refusing to accept the testimony of the Bible can anyone claim God remains unknown to the world. Even more, in reading the first two chapters of the Bible, people can know what God is like since he revealed many of his attributes or character traits there. For example, through the several repeating phrases of

Genesis 1, God revealed himself as a God of majesty, a God of power, a God of order, and a God of wisdom. He is a divine person who speaks, who sees, who acts, and who knows. Most importantly, he is good, and everything he has made is good, including the highest expression of his creativity, the humans he created in his image. In Genesis 2, those humans become the focus of the storyline, receiving from God life and breath and place and purpose and calling and instructions for living in God's world. What more could God have done to make himself known that he has not done?

That the knowledge of God revealed in creation finds rejection in the minds and hearts of people is not surprising once the reader studies the continuing story in Genesis 3. Despite God's goodness in creating and caring for the people made in his image, humans rebelled against their Creator, ignoring his instructions and receiving the just consequences of their sin. Before long, the first two humans were covering themselves in shame, hiding from God in fear, and blaming God and his creation for their problems. The curse of sin begins to unravel the good order of God's creation, bringing struggle and loss of status into the world. Further, God must expel the first humans from his presence and pronounce the sentence of death in the loss of access to the Tree of Life. All these results of rejecting God and his Word have continued in the world until this day, so much so that people have forgotten what God created humans to do and who he created them to be as his image. Now, people wonder how they ought to live, whom they ought to serve, and for what purposes they were designed. The Bible offers this reflection of human rebellion as an explanation for the condition of the fallen world, with its curse on creation, and the lost knowledge of God among the people who populate its boundaries. Only in a rescue mission led by God himself could

God's good creation find deliverance from the futility of enslavement to sin and self.

Thankfully, by God's grace, all is not lost. Here, the Bible tells the story of redemption through the life, death, and resurrection of the Son of God, Jesus the Messiah. God has given both his written Word to instruct humans and his personal Word to redeem them. The New Testament Gospel of John reveals: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and He lived among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:1, 14). God himself, the Creator of all that is, came to earth in the person of his Son to give people an unmistakable picture of who he is and how he is known: "God, no one has seen at any time; the only begotten God, the one being in the bosom of the Father, that one has revealed Him" (John 1:18).

Only a willful rejection of God's Word leads people to refuse the knowledge of God he has revealed in Jesus Christ. Those who accept by faith this knowledge God has revealed, trusting God's story about Jesus and repenting of their sins, are born from above by his Spirit and placed in Christ by his grace, no longer experiencing the full effects of the curse of sin and death. What is more, these believers, led by the Spirit of God in daily life, have received from God the Father the Spirit of adoption and have become children of God and fellow heirs with Christ Jesus of God's promises (Rom 8:14-17). Neither has God forgotten his creation; the world he made, now groaning under the weight of sin's curse and its effects, will be set free, restored to its original glory as the very good creation God saw at the beginning of all time (Rom 8:18-25; Gen 1:31). This restoration will result in "a new heaven and a new earth" and a "new Jerusalem . . . coming



down from the heavens” where God will dwell with his people forever in a renewed garden with access to the tree of life and the river of life never to cease again (Revelation 21-22). Study of God’s Word offers these glorious truths to all who will read and hear, confessing Christ as Lord and believing in his resurrection as proof of the saving power of his sacrificial death.

### **How the Bible Forms the Believer in God’s Word**

Knowing what the Bible has to offer as God’s Word leads to another question in the quest for spiritual formation: how *does* the Bible form the believer in God’s Word? This question relates to the heart of what it means to be shaped by the Spirit of God through the Word of God. To answer this question, two passages from the Bible, one from the Old Testament and one from the New, will provide a model for the study of God’s Word and its life-changing power for spiritual formation in addressing life’s most important questions about calling and purpose.

The Old Testament book of Psalms represents a collection of songs, inspired by God himself, to help people worship him rightly. As with any literary work, the beginning of this collection informs the way its readers will understand the truths contained in its pages. Psalm 1 offers a lens through which the worship of God may best be understood: the choice between enjoying a life of wisdom or enduring one of foolishness. The song begins with a picture of the “Blessed Man” who has chosen the path of wisdom. Four characteristics of this wise believer describe the source of the blessings he enjoys. First, the way he lives challenges the culture that seeks to shape his life. The first verse of the psalm indicates what this man has *not* done; he has not lived according to the advice of wicked people, not lingered on the road with people who make sinning a pathway for life, not settled down with skeptics

who criticize God and his Word. This man does not look to the world and its ways of understanding life for the answers he seeks. Rather, second, he celebrates the wisdom of God's Word and the instructions God has given. The second verse of the song indicates these instructions have become a source of delight for him that counters the false and futile ways of the world. Third, as verse 2 also reveals, in his delight for God's Word, he takes time to contemplate its truths and enjoy its benefits, so much so that he memorizes its phrases and speaks them quietly to himself morning, noon, and night. God's instructions form the basis of his understanding of himself and others, a reflection of the goodness of God's creation and the order which he established in his world from the beginning. Fourth, the third verse paints a beautiful portrait of the blessing found in studying the Bible. As a result of his choice to forsake the world's foolishness and embrace God's wisdom, the man who studies God's Word cultivates growth in the lush garden of God's provision, flourishing as a tree firmly planted, abundantly watered, and wondrously fruitful. He has everything he needs to prosper in his pursuit of knowing God and making him known, nurtured and shaped by God's Word in the image of his Creator. Sadly, the psalm ends with a bleak picture of the wasted life of those who follow the world's patterns: a worthless, weightless, wind-driven existence that ends in destruction. Those who would learn these life lessons and apply them in the pursuit of God's calling, his purposes and plans for life, find themselves blessed as God's Word forms them in righteousness and truth and enables them to live a life filled with meaning and eternal significance.

In the New Testament, Matthew's Gospel records the story of Israel's Messiah and the world's Savior, the man named Jesus. Introduced by a family tree connecting him to Abraham, the father

of God's covenant people, and David, the great king of that covenant nation, Jesus Christ accomplished what Israel never could; he followed the instructions in God's Word perfectly, fulfilling God's plan and purpose for the holy nation he called his firstborn son (Exod 4:21-23). Throughout this gospel story, Jesus models the image of an "Obedient Son," formed by God's Word and led by God's Spirit, who meets the challenges of life with the truths of Scripture. For example, Matthew 4 narrates Jesus' temptation in the wilderness by the devil, an experience not unlike Israel's forty-year journey in the desert. The account makes clear not only Jesus' knowledge of God's Word gained in a lifetime of the study of its wisdom but also three choices that testify to its power to shape human responses to the tests that life in the world brings. First, after refusing to eat during a fast of forty days and nights, Jesus undergoes the devil's temptation to use his power as God's Son to make stones into bread for a meal, a test of his resolve to remain faithful to God's call. Quoting Deuteronomy, Jesus chooses to value Scripture and its spiritual nourishment over the cravings of his physical body. Second, the devil offers him the opportunity to prove his identity as the Son of God by testing God's promise of protection in Psalm 91. Standing on the pinnacle of the temple, Jesus could cast himself down, as the devil suggests, in confidence that God would fulfill his Word in commanding the angels to catch him and lift him to safety. Again, quoting God's Word, Jesus chooses to avoid the spectacle of a miraculous rescue by his faithful resolve to trust God rather than test him. Third, when given the chance to receive the kingdoms of the world and their glory as a reward for bowing in worship before the devil, Jesus chooses to reject Satan and his worldly treasures in obedience to God's written command to worship and serve the Lord God alone, a decision made long before in his commitment to

study God’s Word and its formative truths. In these three choices, Jesus demonstrated the proper role of the Bible in the tests and trials of life, the role of a spiritual weapon for spiritual warfare. Only in the study of God’s Word can truths such as these prepare the believer to face the challenges life in the world brings. Through the examples of the “Blessed Man” and the “Obedient Son,” believers find encouragement to let God’s Word shape them as they pursue the answers to life’s most important questions, including the question that frames this chapter: “What does God want me to do with my life?” Take this encouragement to heart and be rewarded by reading and hearing the Bible as you study God’s Word and find yourself formed for ministry by the unlimited benefits of its truths.

### RECOMMENDED READING

Fee, Gordon D., and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014.

Roberts, Vaughn. *God’s Big Picture: Tracing the Storyline of the Bible*. Grand Rapids: IVP, 2003.

Wilkins, Michael J., and Erik Thoennes. *Biblical and Theological Studies: A Student’s Guide*. Reclaiming the Christian Intellectual Tradition. Edited by David S. Dockery. Wheaton: Crossway, 2018.

Wright, Christopher J. H. Wright. *Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014.

## HEAR GOD'S VOICE

*Larry McDonald*

In *Rediscovering Holiness*, J. I. Packer says that churches have developed a “Peter Pan Culture,” in which spiritual childishness is considered normal.<sup>1</sup> This same culture was found in the Church at Corinth, where Paul warned its congregation, “I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it” (1 Cor 3:2).<sup>2</sup> But this “Peter Pan Syndrome” was not the norm for New Testament Christians and should not be for 21<sup>st</sup> Century believers either. In fact, the Bible calls for us to “grow up into salvation” (2 Pet 2:2) and “go on to maturity” (Heb 6:1).

How do Christians grow in their spiritual walk? Jesus indicates that “my sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27). Similarly, when Paul discusses the spiritually mature believer, he speaks of a discernment that brings the “mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16). Certainly, it seems that spiritual growth is connected with hearing the voice of God and knowing the mind of Christ.

How does a believer “hear the voice of God?” There have been many answers to this question. Some will talk about a “still small voice,” an “impression in the heart,” or a “peace” that indicates God is speaking. Others will emphasize the importance of advice/counsel from other Christians, especially those in leadership. In addition, some will talk about how God speaks through the circumstances of one’s life. Some will even be bold enough to say “God told me” with a few even saying that God speaks to them in an audible voice.

Although each of these answers is worth considering, the claim of this chapter is that the primary and most reliable way a Christian hears the voice of God and thus develops the mind of Christ is by saturating his life with the Word of God, especially incorporating it into the deepest recesses of the mind and heart through biblical meditation.

### **Four Disciplines**

As noted in the previous chapter, the Bible is “breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17). It is through God’s Word that “a young man keeps his way pure” (Ps 119:9), as he stores it up in his heart that he might not sin (Ps 119:11). Scripture guides us as a “lamp to [our] feet and a light to [our] path” (Ps 119:105).

In light of this, let’s consider the four basic disciplines related to the Bible that provide the primary foundation for spiritual maturity. In order to grow spiritually a believer must 1) Read the Word; 2) Meditate on the Word; 3) Pray the Word; and 4) Apply the Word. After briefly overviewing these four disciplines, we will discuss in more detail meditating upon the Word of God.<sup>3</sup>

First, one must regularly read the Bible in order to be knowledgeable of its sections, genres, characters, teachings, and overall message. This reading must be disciplined and intentional. Haphazard reading will not bring about the foundational understanding of the Bible that is needed for spiritual growth. Many Bible reading plans are available to guide a believer in this discipline.<sup>4</sup>

Second, after reading larger sections of the Bible, one must then focus on smaller passages in order to meditate on them. Meditation is “camping-out” on a few verses in order to deeply ponder the meaning of the words and message. Having a time set aside each day for the reading of God’s Word is both vital and foundational. But to truly hear the voice of God and be changed by it, we must go further. Meditation is not set aside simply for one moment during the day. The believer must carry God’s Word throughout all daily activities. More will be said about this practice later in the chapter.

Third, prayer should flow from reading and meditating on the Bible. One’s prayers should relate to the passages studied. In order to “continue steadfastly in prayer” (Col 4:2), prayer must not be separated from Bible study but must be overlapped with it. This joining of prayer with Bible reading and meditation provides a deep well of living water for the follower of Christ.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, it is not enough just to read, meditate on, and pray the Bible. All of these should lead to applying the Bible to one’s personal life. Jesus contrasts the house built on sand with the one built on the rock. Both builders heard the Word, but only one obeyed (Matt 7:24-27). Similarly, James encourages his audience to “be doers of the word, and not hearers only” (Jas 1:22). Some believers dangerously *hear* the Word only but do not allow it to bring about a changed life.

### **Biblical Meditation**

What then is biblical meditation? How is it different from reading the Bible? Donald Whitney identifies a distinction by stating, “*Reading* is the *exposure* to Scripture, but *meditation* is the *absorption* of Scripture. And it’s the absorption of Scripture that leads to the transformation of our lives” (emphasis his).<sup>6</sup>

Following Moses’ death, God gave this charge to Joshua: “This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success” (Josh 1:8). Tim Keller in *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* defines this meditation as “spiritually ‘tasting’ the Scripture—delighting in it, sensing the sweetness of the teaching, feeling the conviction of what it tells us about ourselves, and thanking God and praising God for what it shows us about him.”<sup>7</sup>

How is this biblical meditation different than what is taught in eastern religions? Doug McIntosh contrasts the two with the following distinctions:

#### Eastern Religious Meditation

- Empties the Mind
- Asks Participates to Repeat a Single Word, *mantra*
- Aids in Self-fulfillment
- Visualizes what you Desire
- The Ultimate Resource is within the Person

#### Biblical Meditation

- Fills the Mind with God’s Word
- Asks Participants to Focus on Vital Content—God’s Word.



- Aids in Honoring God
- Prays to God, Who Controls
- The Ultimate Resource and Power is God<sup>8</sup>

Certainly, it is clear that the Bible's teaching on mediation differs greatly from what is taught in eastern religions.

### **Four Main Elements of Biblical Meditation**

First, Christian mediation should focus upon God's Word. The introductory Psalm lays the foundation for this as it states, "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night" (Ps 1:1-2). Psalm 119:9 reiterates the necessity of focusing on God to keep our lives uncontaminated by sin as it declares, "How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word."

Second, mediation should focus on God's Character. The Psalmist declares his confident expectation of God's provision and protection when he indicates, "My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips, when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy" (Ps 63:5-7). The Psalmist finds complete fulfillment and contentment in who God is.

Third, meditation should focus on God's Work. Psalm 77 records a song of lament that portrays the people of God facing challenges. Yet they still declared, "I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your wonders of old. I will ponder all your work, and meditate on your mighty deeds" (Ps 77:11-12).

In good times and in bad, we need to remember and consider what God has done in our lives and throughout history.

Fourth, meditation should focus on God's Creation. While Scripture gives us the specific revelation of who God is, Psalm 19 talks about the general revelation of God in creation as it states, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge . . . Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer" (Ps 19:1-2, 14). As we look at all God has created, we cannot help but see the attributes of the Creator himself.

### **Pictures of Biblical Meditation**

"A picture is worth a thousand words" is an old saying that still rings true, even in today's world. Let's look at five pictures of biblical meditation that help us grasp Scripture's meaning.

The first picture of biblical meditation is "eating" the book. Jeremiah painted this picture when he said, "Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart" (Jer 15:16). This imagery is also used by Ezekiel (Ezek 3:1-3) and John (Rev 10:9). Even Jesus spoke of this idea as he stated, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt 4:4). Biblical meditation is eating and digesting the Bible.<sup>9</sup>

The second picture of biblical meditation is of a tree. The Psalmist indicates that when one meditates on the law of the Lord "He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither" (Ps 1:3). Jeremiah also uses the imagery of a tree planted by water where its roots draw

nourishment from the stream (Jer 17:8). Meditating on the Bible brings about deeply abiding spiritual roots that not only withstand trials but also produce a spiritual flourishing.

The third picture of biblical mediation is of an animal chewing the cud, especially a cow. Chewing the cud is part of the cow's digestive process as it continues to chew its food. This includes swallowing, storing, regurgitating, and chewing again the food as it travels through the four compartments of its stomach. This chewing of the cud was used by John Bunyan and Richard Baxter to portray the chewing and digestion of the Bible.<sup>10</sup>

The fourth picture of biblical meditation is of the brooding hen. A hen broods when she incubates her eggs by sitting on them, often for days if not weeks until the little chicks are born. Following this example, Christians should ponder Scripture until the passage is "hatched" in their heart and life. J. I. Packer and Carolyn Nystrom believe this image illustrates biblical meditation: "Christian brooding or meditation . . . ripens, stabilizes and strengthens our renewed hearts. It is a vital, energizing element in our communion with God . . . it is directional thinking, which is a basic Christian discipline for all of our living."<sup>11</sup>

The fifth picture of biblical meditation is the steeping tea bag. Donald Whitney uses this analogy when he depicts the mind as "hot water" and the tea bag as the intake of God's Word. He says, "Meditation . . . is like immersing the bag completely and letting it steep until all the rich tea flavor has been extracted and the hot water is thoroughly tintured reddish brown. Meditation on Scripture is letting the Bible brew in the brain . . . When we meditate on Scripture it colors our thinking about God, about God's ways and His world, and about ourselves."<sup>12</sup>

### **Practical Methods for Biblical Meditation**

“Methods are many; principles are few. Methods change; principles never do.” This old saying still rings true today. Although the Bible clearly teaches the importance of biblical meditation, it does not offer a road map of meditation methods. Yet, there are excellent sources available with many ideas to help a person, especially in the beginning stages of growth in this area.<sup>13</sup>

Let’s first look at some guiding thoughts and then consider an example of how this approach could work. We have a tendency to read large sections of Scripture, often times remembering few details. Biblical meditation requires one to slow the process down, reading and re-reading passages, focusing on key thoughts, and even memorizing key verses. This allows a person to absorb and digest biblical truth deeply as he examines his life in light of the passage. It further drives the reader to respond to the passage in prayer and practical application.

So how can this process be put into practice? Let’s say we decide to focus for an entire month on the Book of Philippians. The book has four chapters with 109 verses and can be read easily in less than ten minutes. While I encourage reading the entire book at least once a week, the primary focus for each week should be on a different chapter. So, week one would be reading and re-reading chapter 1, focusing on key thoughts and verses as you deeply absorb and digest the passage. For me personally, verse 21 causes me to pause as Paul states, “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” I need to understand this verse in its context, but I also want to evaluate my own life in light of it, as it has far-reaching effects. Memorizing this verse so that I can carry it with me throughout every part of my day helps me to better apply it to my life and even to discuss its impact with fellow believers. This should drive me to prayer and a desire to live for Christ in every area of my life. Week

two begins this process again by re-reading the entire book and then focusing on chapter 2. By the time you have completed an entire month in this book, your mind and heart will be saturated with it. This saturation becomes a transformational part of your daily walk with Christ.

### **The Challenge**

Again, the premise of this chapter is that the primary and most reliable way a Christian hears the voice of God and so develops the mind of Christ is by saturating his life with the Word of God, especially incorporating it into the deepest recesses of the mind and heart through biblical meditation.

The Apostle Paul refused to settle for a shallow, lazy relationship with his God. And he challenges us to “press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:14). At the end of his life, Paul declared, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Tim. 4:7).

John Akhwari of Tanzania was an Olympic runner in the 1968 Summer Games. Despite severely injuring himself early in the Mexico City race, Akhwari completed the marathon, finishing one hour after the winner. When asked why he continued to run, even with his injury and with no chance at winning the race, Akhwari replied, “I don’t think you understand. My country did not send me five thousand miles to start the race. They sent me five thousand miles to finish the race.”<sup>14</sup>

As Christians, God did not save us to just begin the race. Through the power of his Word, his Spirit in our lives, and the fellowship of other believers, God intends for us to “run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Heb 12:1). Endurance means that the runner “keeps on” and withstands hardship and

adversity, refusing to give up or quit. The only way we will be able to complete this spiritual pilgrimage is by saturating our minds and hearts with the very Word of God, meditating upon it day and night.

Charles Spurgeon, in his autobiography, testified of how John Bunyan modeled this practice. Spurgeon stated, Bunyan had read the Bible “till his very soul was saturated with Scripture . . . Why, this man is a living Bible! Prick him anywhere—his blood is Bibline, the very essence of the Bible flows from him. He cannot speak without quoting a text, for his very soul is full of the Word of God. I commend his example to you, beloved.”<sup>15</sup> Let us also through our study and meditation upon God’s Word so saturate our hearts and minds with who God is and what God does. Let us reject spiritual immaturity and instead “press on” and be satisfied with nothing less than following the “upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Phil 3:14).”

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## APPLY GOD'S TRUTH

*Frankie Melton*

“Be ye doers of the word and not hearers only.” - James 1:19

When Augustine, the early church father, was thirty-two years old, he was far from God. He lived a life of sin and despair. One day while walking through a garden in Milan, he thought he heard a group of children singing, “Tolle, lege,” which is Latin for “take up and read.” He took this as a message from God to read the Bible. He immediately found a copy of the Scriptures and began reading. However, he did more than read, he began to *obey* what he read. The result was a changed man and a changed world. Similarly, when we read and apply God’s Word in our lives, we will experience change and become a greater witness for the gospel.

God’s Word contains information, but it is more than information. It is a fruit tree that is always in season. The Bible contains instructions on how to please God and live a life that



brings God glory. Paul admonished the Corinthians, “Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31). The only way we can “do all to the glory of God” is if we know what he requires and what pleases him. The Puritan Thomas Watson said, “A medicine is best when applied.” A bottle of pills will do an ailing patient no good if the pills are not taken. Likewise, the Bible must be applied, it must be digested.

The good news is that God has revealed Himself in the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments so that we can know him and understand what brings him pleasure. In order to please God, we must know and apply his Word to our lives.

### **How Can We Apply God’s Word**

There are several categories for applying God’s Word in our lives. These include Learning, Obeying, Claiming, and Resting.

#### **We Apply God’s Word by Learning Its Instructions**

The Bible is a book of history. It records many historical events. It contains truth about eternity, the origins of human life, God’s design for the family, and his instruction on how to live a good and godly life. One way we apply God’s Word is by learning about the events, people, instructions, and culture of the Bible. By learning the historical events of the Bible, we see what God has done in the past. As we observe what God did in the past, we come to an understanding of who God is and what he is like. The intimate knowledge of God comes through Scripture. Historical events like the Flood, the Tower of Babel, the call of Abram, the parting of the Red Sea, and the Babylonian captivity (among others) put God on full display. We especially learn more about the

character of God in the coming of Jesus into the world to die for sinners. Simply put, we cannot apply what we do not know.

A follower of Jesus who does not read, study, meditate on, hear, and memorize God's Word is going to be at a significant disadvantage when it comes to applying it in life. A recent report indicated that there is over \$70 billion of unclaimed money in state treasuries around the country. Many people are simply unaware that they have unclaimed money. That is stunning. However, what is more stunning is the joy, peace, and blessings of godly living that are unclaimed and unknown by believers unaware of the Word of God.

### We Apply God's Word by Obeying Its Commands

As we are reading, studying, and meditating on Scripture, we must be on the lookout for commands from God that we should obey. God is holy, and he calls his people to be holy. Peter wrote in 1 Pet 1:14-16: "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'" We are called to holiness in our conduct, and the only way to live a life pleasing to God is to apply his Word through obedience.

James, the half-brother of Jesus, was rather blunt and graphic in his assessment of those who know the Word but fail to obey it. He declared, "Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was" (James 1:21-24).

Obedience means turning away from filthiness. With this word, James referred to the sin that defiles the believer's life. He elaborated by pointing to the flood of wickedness that characterizes the lives of some. James urged his audience to obey the Word of God. Likewise, applying God's Word in our lives means turning from sin and seeking to live a life pleasing to our God and Savior.

#### We Apply God's Word by Claiming Its Promises

God's Word contains promises to the believer. When we apply these promises, it brings tremendous comfort to our lives. We apply the promises of the Bible by believing that God will do what he said and trusting in him in such a way that we experience comfort and joy. The promises of the Word are low-hanging fruit for believers to pluck. When I was a kid, we had a well from which we got our water. I can vividly remember looking into that well and thinking that it was bottomless. In a similar way, the Bible is a well that never runs dry. Its treasures are inexhaustible. Its wonders never cease. One example is Heb 4:16. The writer of Hebrews comforted believers when he wrote, "Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need." This verse contains several promises, but one of special note is that God's throne is a throne characterized by grace. When we come to his throne, we will find grace, not wrath.

#### We Apply God's Word by Resting in Its Truths

We can apply God's Word by resting in it. We can rest in the truthfulness of the claims of Scripture. We can rest in the attributes of God. We can rest in God's plan for the future. There are many things in the Bible that bring comfort and rest. We can

rest in the truths of Scripture when we fully embrace them and live in such a way that we clearly believe them.

### **That You May Grow**

The Bible is clear that spiritual growth comes through the application of the Word of God. A steady diet of Scripture is an essential part of the believer's sanctification. The word "sanctification" indicates the believer's progressive growth in godliness over the course of life. The Bible is the fertilizer that makes for a healthy Christian. The Bible is our number one tool of discipleship. The Psalmist declared, "Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path" (119:105). God's Word is a guide for life, and it shows us the way to honoring the Lord. Growing in our faith requires more than a mere knowledge of the Word.

In Acts 20, Paul met with the elders of the Ephesian church on the island of Miletus. After approximately three years of ministry in the city of Ephesus, Paul was leaving for Jerusalem. The elders of the church met him on Miletus to bid him farewell. Acts 20 contains an extended farewell address Paul gave to the elders. In it he reviewed his ministry in Ephesus and expressed his intention of going to Jerusalem. He concluded the address to the elders by challenging them to care for the church. He reminded them that the church belonged to God. He warned,

Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.

Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified (Acts 20:28-32).

In Paul's farewell to the church, he left them in the hands of God and "the word of His grace." The number one weapon we have against false teaching is the Word of God. It is this Word that will "build you up." The follower of Jesus who wants to grow in faith and maturity will heed these words of Paul. The Bible makes a mature believer.

We live in a time of extreme biblical illiteracy—even in the Church. Christians, the very disciples (students) of Christ, do not know the Bible. In order to apply God's Word to our lives, we must first know what it says. In that sense, every believer must think seriously about investing time in learning what the Bible actually contains. A plumber knows plumbing. A lawyer knows the law. A farmer knows farming. A follower of Jesus ought to know the Bible. The famous London preacher Charles Spurgeon said about knowing God's Word,

Oh, that you and I might get into the very heart of the Word of God, and get that Word into ourselves! As I have seen the silkworm eat into the leaf, and consume it, so ought we to do with the Word of the Lord—not crawl over its surface, but eat right into it till we have taken it into our inmost parts. It is idle merely to let the eye glance over the words, or to recollect the poetical expressions, or the historic facts; but it is blessed to eat into the very soul of

the Bible until, at last, you come to talk in Scriptural language, and your very style is fashioned upon Scripture models, and, what is better still, your spirit is flavored with the words of the Lord.

I would quote John Bunyan as an instance of what I mean. Read anything of his, and you will see that it is almost like reading the Bible itself. He had read it till his very soul was saturated with Scripture; and, though his writings are charmingly full of poetry, yet he cannot give us his *Pilgrim's Progress*—that sweetest of all prose poems—without continually making us feel and say, “Why, this man is a living Bible!” Prick him anywhere—his blood is Bibline, the very essence of the Bible flows from him. He cannot speak without quoting a text, for his very soul is full of the Word of God.

I had a friend who immigrated to the United States from the country of Moldova. Several years ago, after his arrival, he faced an unusual situation. The village he is from in Moldova does not have signs on the roads that indicate the speed at which drivers should travel. Beyond that, the police do not have cars. The police stand on the side of the road, and if it appears to them that someone is speeding, they will hold out a stick. The extended stick means that the driver should pull to the side of the road. When my friend came to the United States, he was wholly unfamiliar with our traffic laws. One day he was speeding, and a policeman attempted to pull him over. When my friend saw the police car behind him with lights and siren blaring, it meant nothing to him. He just kept on driving. He had lived his entire life in a small village, virtually cut off from the world. He didn't know the traffic laws.

In the same way, when we don't know God's Word we can't apply it to our lives. Followers of Jesus who are serious about pleasing God and applying his Word to their lives will first spend time soaking in it. We must be walking Bibles. We must read it, meditate on it, study it, memorize it, and hear it regularly.

Given the resources available to Christians on the internet, what excuse will we have when we stand before God if we have not loved his Word. Christians in persecuted countries long for just one page of the Bible. Yet, we have the Word at our fingertips and ignore it. D. L. Moody, the famous evangelist, said, "I never saw a fruit-bearing Christian who was not a student of the Bible."

### **Trust God's Word**

In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve were confronted with a choice. Out of nowhere, the Serpent appears in Gen 3:1. The talking snake, whom John the Apostle tells us was Satan, immediately attacked and undermined God's Word. Satan denied, contradicted, and scoffed at God's Word. Adam and Eve faced a pivotal moment. They could reject Satan's lies and trust God's Word or they could reject God and trust Satan. It's one thing to know God's Word and believe it, but it's another thing to trust it. Many believers will say they believe God's Word, but their actions betray their words. People don't just believe their teachers, they trust them. In the same way, we must trust that God's Word is not only true but that it is best.

Many people trust their medical doctor without hesitation. Assuming a proper interpretation of God's Word, we should trust the Living God's wisdom above the wisdom of this world. When the reasoning of this world contradicts the truth of God, we must always follow the Lord.

### **Steps to Applying God's Word**

1. Begin each day in God's Word. Resist the temptation to reach for your "smart phone" first thing in the morning. Instead, reach for the Word of God. Robert Murry McCheyne, the Scottish preacher, resolved to never read anything until he had read God's Word and to never see the face of man until he had seen the face of God in prayer. When the Lord is first in our day, He will often be first in every other way.
2. Read slowly, thoughtfully. Reflect and think about what you have read. Assault the text with questions. Take notes as you read.
3. Create a prayer using the passage you are studying. Pray God's Word as your own personal prayer. Ask God to enable you to live out His Word.
4. Probe the text with questions. Ask, "What does this mean for my life?" or "What is God requiring of me as a result of this text?"
5. Reflect on the passage throughout the day. Do your best to commit it to memory.
6. Apply the Scripture by learning, obeying, claiming, and resting in it.
7. Look for ways naturally to interject the Scripture you have studied for the day in your conversations throughout the day.
8. At the end of the day, take up God's Word once more. Read, think, and pray through a chapter. Zero in on a verse or phrase and meditate on it as you are drifting off to sleep.



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# 4

## PRAY GOD'S WILL

*Steve Crouse*

Prayer is a powerful privilege that is available to all believers. Unfortunately, it is a privilege neglected by many Christians. The noted British scholar and pastor John Stott confessed that prayer was his greatest struggle in following the Lord. Some church leaders have expressed concern that the evangelical church is slowly but surely giving up on prayer.<sup>16</sup> This chapter is a call for the recovery of prayer as an act of obedience to God and a central spiritual discipline that is expected of all believers. It will define prayer, discuss reasons people do not pray, examine growth in the privilege and discipline of prayer, address the personal prayer life practices of the Lord, and explore how to pray God's will. The chapter concludes with practical applications for praying God's will.

### **What Is Prayer?**

Prayer has been defined as “an offering up of our desires unto God for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgement of his mercies.”<sup>17</sup> This definition of prayer is broad. Prayer is “personal communication with God.”<sup>18</sup> It is a complex subject. Believers are to pray for themselves and others in obedience to God’s Word. Prayer has been called the most central of all the spiritual disciplines because it brings us into continuous communion with the Father.<sup>19</sup> It expresses Christians’ trust in God and is a means through which our faith can increase.<sup>20</sup> In prayer, Christians recognize their dependence upon God. Praying in humble obedience before God demonstrates the faith of believers by which they rehearse their perceptions of God as well as his affection, supremacy, and goodness. It involves communication with God in an effort to know and follow his will.

Communication with God consists of both speaking and listening to him. Intimacy grows as believers listen closely to God and are open and available to him. The most consistent and reliable way to hear God’s voice is through his Word. Believers often pray with their Bibles open, reading a section of Scripture and asking God to reveal how he wants to speak to them from the Word. Believers pray as God speaks to them. Some writers stated, “By listening to the voice of God and by opening your heart to him, the Christian can maximize experiential intimacy with Christ.”<sup>21</sup> Prayer is personal, intimate communion with the living God.<sup>22</sup> Through prayer believers express their adoration, thanksgiving, requests, and confession and repentance of sin. They receive God’s grace to release their frustrations, fears, and burdens. The prayers of the saints are ruled by genuineness, reality, and honesty with the Lord. With roots in both the Old Testament and the New

Testament, prayer plays a significant role in the heritage of the Israelites and the history of the early church.

In Exod 32:9, the Lord's anger with the Israelites because of their constant complaining and rebellion led him to declare he would wipe Israel off the face of the earth and raise up a new nation from the descendants of Moses. However, Moses asked God to put an end to this plan and protect his holy name instead. He appealed to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, servants of the Lord, to remember his promises to them. The Lord listened to Moses' prayer and turned away from the disaster that he had spoken of concerning his people (Exod 32:14). This passage demonstrates how God interacts with his people in prayer. God has called his followers to be holy as he is holy. Prayer lies at the root of all personal holiness.

### **Reasons People Do Not Pray**

A primary reason that people do not pray is a lack of obedience to God. Christ followers have a powerful spiritual enemy. He seeks to steal, kill, and destroy all people who follow Christ in obedience (John 10:10). The devil is identified as the thief who hates life and seeks to destroy it. Jesus came to give life abundantly to all believers. Although the devil cannot take eternal life away from Christians, he seeks to destroy their testimonies, reputations, families, and ministries. Isaiah 59:1-2 states, "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear."<sup>23</sup> It is not that the Lord cannot act, but rather God is unwilling to hear the prayers of people who are living in rebellion and sin.<sup>24</sup> This is why the confession of sin and the act of repentance, shown by a change of heart and mind

moving sinners away from rebellion and toward God, should be the normal posture of prayer.

Many American believers fall into sin because life is too easy for those who live in the Western world. Often these Western believers think they do not need to pray. Too often Christians tend to trust in their education, charisma, personality, and ability as the underlying foundations of their ministry. Some have noted that many Christ followers have abandoned their concern for the lost (unbelievers), which leads to the sin of prayerlessness.<sup>25</sup> Historically, Christians have been most likely to pray when they are desperate. They may be suffering persecution or concerned about the basic needs of life. When Christians find themselves in desperate situations, they tend to pray.

Many believers today are incredibly distracted and busy. These mindsets are enemies of prayer.<sup>26</sup> Prayerlessness is an act of rebellion against God's expectation that his disciples would pray. Many times, people do not pray because of a lack of discipline. They are distracted and too busy to pray. They fail to pray because no one intentionally taught them to pray. Some Christians fail to pray because they do not believe that anything will happen because of their prayers. Others argue that they have tried prayer, but it did not work. These reasons are not exhaustive but are descriptive of the church's disobedience to pray. Christ followers pray much less than they once prayed. There is more talk *about* prayer than there are people who actually pray.<sup>27</sup>

Many evangelicals no longer look to the power of God but focus instead on their own power. This is nothing less than spiritual insurrection. The Holy Spirit empowers prayer, witnessing, and ministry (Acts 1:8). Without the Holy Spirit's presence, Christians may plan and lead worship services and ministries, but they are ultimately self-centered, devoid of the presence and power of

Christ. Believers can do nothing apart from Jesus (John 15:5). He invests in his disciples to lead their ministries in the Holy Spirit's power. Prayerlessness leads to powerlessness. Prayerlessness has been compared to spiritual suicide for believers.<sup>28</sup>

### **Growth in the Privilege and Discipline of Prayer**

Before disciples can pray for God's direction, leadership, and will, they must first develop and grow in the privilege and discipline of prayer. Prayer requires discipline and focus. It does not occur naturally. The best way to pray is for believers to meet with God in honesty and openness and express their needs to him. The most direct and reliable way that Christians hear from God is through the Bible. They need to listen to God's voice and respond to his promptings as they read the Scriptures and pray.

Before the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost after Christ's resurrection, the Lord's people had to go through an intercessor who would mediate with God on behalf of their sins. When Christ came in the flesh (John 1:14), he interceded for Christians through his sinless life, death, burial, and resurrection. He took all believers' sins on his body at the cross, dying in their place so that they could be reconciled to God. According to 2 Cor 4:14-15, Paul wrote, "The love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sakes died and was raised." God's reconciliation through Christ's submissive obedience gave believers the ministry of reconciliation. They are commissioned to share their faith with others, leading them to be reconciled with God through Christ. Paul concluded in 2 Cor 5:21, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." This is the

Lord's great exchange. Jesus took the sins of believers, all of them, past, present, and future, on his body at the cross. When God looks at those who are in Christ, he no longer sees their sins, but rather the righteousness of Jesus, the sinless one.

In worship at the temple, the Jews revered the Lord in the Holy Place, which was separated from the Holy of Holies where they felt that God's presence abided. A thick curtain separated the two. Only the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies and then just once a year. When Jesus died, the temple curtain was ripped from the top to the bottom, symbolizing that all worshippers had been given free, unobstructed access to God's presence. Post-resurrection Christians may "with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb 4:16). Through prayer, believers resist distractions of every kind to give their undivided attention to Christ in obedience.

### **Jesus' Practice of Prayer**

Jesus is a consistent model of prayer and the master teacher on communion with God, demonstrating intimacy with the Father. In Luke's gospel, the Lord prays at important moments in his ministry such as his baptism (3:21), the calling of the Twelve (6:12), the transfiguration (9:29), the garden of Gethsemane (22:39-46), and the crucifixion (23:46). Mark 1:35 indicates that Jesus prayed regularly: "And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, [Jesus] departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed."

The disciples recognized that prayer is a learned discipline. They asked Jesus to teach them to pray in Luke 11:2. Surely the disciples had witnessed many people praying, but they had not seen the authority that the prayers of the Lord commanded. The

disciples had practiced prayer all their lives, yet the authority and intimacy they witnessed in Jesus' prayers caused them to see how little they knew about prayer. There was a qualitative difference in Christ's prayers. In biblical prayer, followers of Christ encounter the living Word of God (Jesus) through the study of the written Word of God (the Bible) and learn to think God's thoughts, to desire what he desires, to love the things he loves, and to yearn for the things that are his will in prayer.

Jesus did not teach "if you pray." Rather, he stated "when you pray" (Matt 6:5). Prayer is expected of believers. One writer stated, "Those who have been brought under the authority of Christ and the Bible, however, know that the will of God is for us to pray."<sup>29</sup> God's Word makes it clear that he had an expectation that believers would pray. In 1 Thess 5:17, the Lord reveals that Christians are to pray without ceasing, an expression of an unbroken relationship with the Lord through prayer. It is God's will for his people to spend regular time in prayer.

Several spiritual disciplines have contributed to the lives of believers across the history of the church. However, Bible intake and prayer rise above the other disciplines and are consistently practiced by faithful disciples of the Lord in the pages of Scripture and throughout the history of the church. One writer referred to prayer as a central spiritual discipline that God uses to transform the lives of his followers. He stated, "If we are unwilling to change, we will abandon prayer as a noticeable characteristic of our lives. The closer we come to the heartbeat of God the more we see our need and the more we desire to be conformed to Christ."<sup>30</sup>

The Father hears the prayers of believers who walk by faith and in fellowship with the risen Lord. His answers, however, are not always what believers expect. God answers prayer in one of three ways. Sometimes his answer is yes, responding positively to



the prayers of believers. At other times, the answer is no, denying the request. His field of vision is always greater than the view of his followers. When God says no, he does so to protect, guide, and provide for believers. The third response from God is wait. In these cases, the timing of the prayer may not be aligned with God's timing. God may delay his answer to prayer to teach his children patience, courage, or dependence on God's provision. Followers of Christ know they can rely on God to answer their prayers.

God genuinely responds to the prayers of his people. The prayers of believers impact the way God relates to his people and the world.<sup>31</sup> According to James 4:2b, "You do not have because you do not ask." In this case, believers have failed to practice faithful prayer. James also reminds believers that God cares about their motives in prayer. He stated, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions" (James 4:3). The motives of believers matter to God.

Christians should avoid the temptation of making prayer too complicated. Jesus taught the disciples to come to him as little ones go to their father. Children come to their father in openness, honesty, and trust. These characteristics should mark the disciples' communication with God. Christian disciples hear from God, know his will, and obey his passions. Since disobedience is a fundamental reason that prayer is ineffective, followers of Christ must hear from God and obey as they enthusiastically follow the Father's desires.

### **Pray God's Will**

Considering the previous discussion, disciples of the Lord need to pray God's will. Prayer is the recovery of intimacy with God. Following the Lord and responding to his will makes the prayer lives of Christ's disciples effective. As the faithful seek

God's will in prayer, they remember that he is much more interested in believers knowing and following his will than believers are in searching for it. If a family left their home tonight for a road trip, none of them could see their destination from where the trip began. Rather, they must follow the light that has been revealed to them. As they follow the road revealed by their headlights, they continue their journey until they arrive at their destination. In the same way, Christians walk by faith with God through repentance and obedience. As they follow the light that God has revealed to them, the Lord will grant them guidance for the next step of their faith journey. If they are disobedient, rejecting the light that God has revealed, why should they expect God to provide more light?

Believers must walk in repentance and faithful obedience to know the Lord's will. One writer, addressing the issue of character, points to God's Word as the most significant source for character development.<sup>32</sup> Studying God's Word is important for preaching, teaching, and ministry, but the author points to the need for devotional reading of the Scriptures as well for personal wisdom, insight, and direction. The point of this devotional reading is to ask God what he is saying to believers as he speaks into their lives. Devotional prayer leads believers to pray about their own lives, including victories, defeats, and daily battles.<sup>33</sup> These devotional aspects of Bible reading and prayer draw Christians to the heart of praying God's will.

### **Concluding Challenge and Action Points**

For many believers, prayer is considered as their final hope rather than their first hope. God desires communion and intimacy with his children as a regular, continuing practice, not just when they face desperate situations. Believers who walk with the Lord

should seek him first in all things. Our archenemy, Satan, is at work all the time. He desires to discourage Christ's followers at every turn. Believers must fortify themselves against the attacks of the enemy through the Word of God and prayer.<sup>34</sup>

Busy lives make it easier for Christians to attempt to live on their own instead of finding time to pray. If believers are too busy to pray, they are simply too busy. God desires to slow them down so they can recover the power of prayer. Jesus possesses all authority; everything is subject to him (Matt 28:18). Due to Peter's lack of faith, as portrayed in the Gospels, Jesus told him that the enemy would sift him like wheat. However, Jesus interceded for Peter, praying his faith would not fail. Even after his denial of Christ, Peter's faith was renewed, and he remained faithful to the Lord.

Jesus prayed the Father's will regularly in his daily life. The Lord knew the value of prayer. He prayed all night before choosing the disciples to whom he entrusted the early leadership of the church. He prayed in agony in the garden of Gethsemane the night before his crucifixion. On this occasion, he asked his closest friends, Peter, James, and John to pray with him, but they were weary, and Jesus prayed alone. Many times, Jesus was tired, but he never neglected the discipline of personal prayer. He prayed regularly for the Father's will, living in obedience and humble submission to God.

To pray effectively:

- **Repent of your sin and rebellion against God** (Are you walking with God in personal holiness? Are your thoughts self-centered [in the flesh] or God-centered [in the Bible]? Do you pray regularly for unbelievers? Do you seek to follow God's will?).

- **Approach God with humility and boldness** (Do you focus on the power and authority of God? Come humbly before him and boldly follow his guidance.).
- **Separate the distractions around you from God's presence** (other people, music, streaming services, cell phones, apps, notifications, emails, etc.).
- **Pray in faith believing God will act according to his will and purposes** (Believe that God will answer prayer, revealing his will and purposes. Follow as God leads.).
- **When you do not understand how God is responding to your prayers, ask him what he wants to teach you and trust his heart** (Be teachable and trust the character and nature of God in all things.).
- **Prayer is not about moving God; he is always at work. Prayer is about God moving you to be more like him** (Ask God how you can follow his leading. Allow prayer to conform you to be the image of Christ.).

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## ENGAGE GOD'S WORLD

*Tom Willoughby*

*John the Baptist was martyred for his doctrine of marriage. Think about that for a moment.*

It was John's doctrine of marriage that resulted in his execution. It was cultural engagement at a basic level that would not allow him to remain silent. He was required—no, compelled—to speak out. Something stirring deep within could not be contained. The fire for God's truth, burning within his heart, could not be put out. Here lies the mystery and the power of the gospel.

### **The Call to Courageous Cultural Engagement**

Engagement is no private spiritual practice, no silent prayer uttered in secret. It incorporates the whole person. Strengthened in the fires of personal faith, engagement is true devotion lived out. The call to follow Christ is united with the transformative work of the indwelling Spirit of God, who empowers and emboldens us to engage a world increasingly hostile to the very idea of truth.

A brief glimpse into many congregations today reveals the effects of celebrity pulpits compromised with watered-down teaching. To be sure, there is more to the gospel than presenting a bold prophetic witness in the face of moral bankruptcy, but there is certainly not less. Indeed, the hour has come for the minister to engage this world with the whole counsel of God, both in word and in deed. If we **Study** God’s Word, **Hear** God’s Voice, **Apply** God’s Truth, and **Pray** God’s Will, we must **Engage** God’s World.

The last words the Apostle Paul gave to Timothy—his son in the faith—came in the form of a solemn charge in 2 Tim 4:2. There can be no mistaking the serious nature and weight of the moment. Of all that Paul had ever passed along to his young disciple, nothing had greater significance.

*Preach the Word.*

Volumes have been written on the topic of preaching. Seminaries have classes and faculty positions dedicated to the art and discipline of the preaching act. Yet in its simplest definition, the term *preaching* speaks of a public proclamation. Whether it be the announcement of the birth of the Messiah, the appeal for sinners to repent, or the edification and exhortation of the people of God, in every instance we proclaim the Word of God publicly.

### **The Crisis of Moral Clarity in Contemporary Culture**

When the Word of God is not present, confusion abounds. Proverbs 29:18 states, “Where there is no *vision*, the people are unrestrained, But happy is he who keeps the *law*” (emphasis added).<sup>35</sup> Here the term translated “vision” is best understood to mean the Word of God, as may be seen in the same sentence by its parallel term “law.” Apart from the clear teaching of Scripture, humanity is doomed to repeat the days of the Book of Judges where “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg 17:6).

A recent Gallup poll revealed that the number of people who identify as LGBTQ has risen to approximately 7.2% nationally. That's an increase of over 2% in the past two years. Of those between the ages of 18 to 25, the poll shows the percentage to be approximately 19.7%.<sup>36</sup> This statistic is staggering, but not enough for activist groups who suggest that the number is closer to 98%.<sup>37</sup> Why the sudden marked increase? There has been at best a lack of clarity within the Church over this topic, and at worst, a complete absence of sound teaching from Scripture.

Evidence of this lack of clarity may be seen in a recent Lifeway Research report that indicated 28% of pastors surveyed said that LGBTQ people could serve anywhere within the church without restriction.<sup>38</sup> While other pastors indicated that there were some limits, still others admitted that they had never discussed the matter among church leadership. But in total, these three groups represent 69% of the churches surveyed. Only 31% had strict positions against LGBTQ people serving within the church in any capacity.

Paul warned in 2 Tim 4:3 such a day would come when sound teaching would not be tolerated. So, what is the man of God to do? What did John the Baptist do when presented with the harsh reality that the Scriptures condemned the immoral actions of the king?

*Preach the Word.*

Paul went on to tell Timothy to “be ready in season and out of season.” It’s one thing to be ready *in season* and quite another to be ready *out of season*. Anyone can give a decent response when prompted with enough advanced notice, but when the challenge comes in real time . . . from the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. Clearly, the preparation for proclamation in season tends to receive the greatest focus. Indeed, it should. Preparing to proclaim



the Scriptures in worship services, weddings, funerals, special events, or conferences is of incredible worth and requires great care and diligence. But how exactly does one prepare for those out-of-season moments?

### **Living the Word: Beyond Proclamation to Embodiment**

The natural overflow of the time spent in the study of Scripture will become evident when the moment comes to proclaim its truths. This is why the personal devotional life of the minister takes priority over his ministry. Engaging the world is not simply about preaching a well-crafted sermon to a group of believers gathered for corporate worship once or twice a week; it's also about applying the Word of God to the various discussions occurring all around us every day. Many times, it means engaging in conversations without the opportunity to prepare. It's about maintaining both a personal life of devotion and an awareness of the developments within our society and culture that evidence the depths of depravity present in our time. One can only engage that of which one is aware.

First Peter 5:8 says, "Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." The term translated "alert" here speaks of being aware of one's surroundings or situation.<sup>39</sup> Paul uses the same term when he tells the Corinthians to "be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong" (1 Cor 16:13). This instruction is foundational to the life of the believer and the call to engage God's world.

If the man of God is not alert to the developments of the world around him, how can he effectively engage it? What answer will he give when asked whether artificial intelligence has personhood? What about when confronted with scientists like

Harvard Medical School's Dr. David Sinclair who now states publicly that there is no limit to the human lifespan and that the possibility exists that death may not actually be a fact of human existence after all? What about the ethics of altering the human genetic code to eradicate things like blindness, Down's Syndrome, or an undesirable hair color? Should all of life be viewed through the lens of a struggle between oppressor and oppressed? Should the state have the final say in the termination of a human life, even over that of the parent? Should one feel guilt or shame simply by virtue of skin color or for actions committed by the ancestors of others? These are just a few of the kinds of questions circling within society today that require direction and clarity from the Word of God.

Remember the Scripture mentioned earlier, "Where there is no vision, the people are unrestrained." The world needs the Word of God, and it is the call of God to use his Word to engage his world. However, proclaiming the Word must be accompanied by living the Word.

One of the most profound passages in Scripture is found in Phil 2:3-11. This text, many have suggested, may have served the early church as a hymn or confessional statement. It speaks of Jesus being equal with God and yet not considering that equality "a thing to be grasped." Every Jew would have instantly recognized the imagery evoked by the metaphor. It was Eve in the garden, desiring equality with God, who "grasped" the fruit. She did so foolishly; Christ forsook equality, selflessly becoming a slave, to accomplish our redemption. The call to engage the world demands that we move beyond the proclamation of the gospel only to the embodiment of the gospel also. Jesus did not issue a divine edict from heaven like some cosmic distant deity while he sat detached from his creation as it spiraled out of control. He was called the

*Logos* by John because he is the living Word of God. One cannot divorce what Jesus said from who He is. He is perfect in integrity.

So, even as our beloved Savior emptied Himself on our behalf to embody the gospel message we proclaim, we too are called likewise to “deny [ourselves], take up [our] cross daily, and follow [him]” (Luke 9:23). The world has had enough of the theological “drive-bys” offered by many commentators in various forms of media. There is no shortage of opinion within culture when a controversial topic arises. What is in short supply is the perfect blend of truth and grace evident in the life of Jesus. John reflected on the life of Christ in John 1:14 when he stated that Jesus was “full of grace and truth.” Perhaps it is human nature to be drawn to extremes, but Jesus embodied a different reality. His perfect life of holiness overflowed with equal amounts of Scriptural fidelity and compassion-filled grace. He never altered the biblical text because of a “special situation.” No one received a pass on holiness because he or she had experienced a hard life. Yet neither did he throw a stone when presented with a perfect opportunity to do so (a woman caught in the act of adultery, John 8).

In similar fashion, engaging God’s world requires of us an unwavering commitment to the biblical text passed down to us through the ages. At the same time, it calls us to see humanity the same way Christ sees it, compelling us to abandon our own comforts and freedoms for the purpose of serving others.

It is a necessary task for the believer to provide clarity to the discussion about the issue of abortion. The Bible is clear that the taking of a human life without cause strikes against the very character of God, who is the author of life. Stating this truth is a matter of proclamation. But the call to engage God’s world is not simply a call to condemn the world in its sinful condition, but to

display how the Christ-centered life responds to the situation differently, redemptively.

It was the early church that first demonstrated the inherent worth of every human being, even before the familiar phrase “the image of God” became an expression of Christian doctrine. As many in Roman society would simply cast aside unwanted or illegitimate babies before and even after birth on trash piles like mere garbage, the early believers would dig through the piles in search of any sign of life. If found, the infants would be taken to the homes of believers and raised as their own children. This action demonstrates a central concern of the church: engaging God’s world requires more than the proclamation of truth, it demands the embodiment of that truth.

An accusation leveled against the church—completely without merit—is that the church seeks to impose its beliefs upon those who suffer while refusing to do anything to alleviate that suffering. These claims are historically ridiculous; however, they do serve as a reminder for believers that the call of the church extends beyond the pulpit into the apartments, the streets, and the shelters of hurting people.

On any given day within the United States, over 100,000 children are available for adoption through the foster care system. Additionally, numbers many times greater sit in shelters or Social Service offices awaiting anyone to open the door of his or her home for a temporary safe space. If the church is going to be bold in the proclamation against the killing of unborn children, then it needs to be willing to step up and provide care for those having come into the world in crisis.

The image of Christ leaving his perfect home in glory to come to earth as a slave and offer himself for people who didn’t seek him out or even want him should be branded on the heart and

mind of every believer. This life is not designed to be a place of comfort; it is a place of service. Jesus repeatedly spoke of fields and harvests for a reason. While the harvest was always a time of exciting expectation, it was preceded by much labor. In fact, Jesus instructed his disciples to pray that the Lord of the harvest would send laborers into the field. He instructed them in this way not merely to ease their burden but to maximize the harvest.

To be sure, Scripture has much to say about enjoying the fruit of one's labors (see Ecclesiastes and Proverbs). But the New Testament conveys an urgency behind the call to labor in the fields. This labor is synonymous with engaging God's world. Sometimes engaging requires extended effort. It may involve stepping into the life of another person for a prolonged period. It might even mean having to wrestle with deeply held beliefs not truly based upon Scripture for the purpose of identifying a path forward for a person trapped by sinful habits or addictions.

### **Engagement in Action: Practical Steps and Reflections**

Engaging God's world can be very rewarding, but make no mistake, it can be incredibly challenging and even dangerous. The following action points may prove beneficial in fulfilling the call to engage:

1. Remember the items already mentioned within this book: **Study** God's Word, **Hear** God's Voice, **Apply** God's Truth, and **Pray** God's Will. These will serve you well as a foundation for moving forward in obedience.
2. "Be alert"—Don't obsess over news but pay attention to it. Keep your finger on the pulse of culture. It will show you where the greatest need for engagement resides.
3. Stay engaged in a local church. Many a Christian has stepped away from the local church because of

“ministry.” Ministry—even if not instructed or specifically directed by the local church—always happens within the umbrella of the local church structure. Seek wisdom, guidance, and accountability from the pastor and other leaders within the church. Ministry is a function of the church; it is not a replacement for it.

4. Don't neglect your first calling—your family. Ministry makes for a seductive mistress. It is always easy to justify neglecting one's family for the sake of securing the eternal destinies of the masses. Before any were called into ministry, they were called into a family. Fulfill that calling faithfully, but likewise, don't allow the family to become an excuse not to do ministry.
5. Always be looking for others to equip to carry on the work. Second Timothy 2:2 speaks of committing the gospel into the hands of others who will be able to pass it on further still. The call to engage is also a call to replicate. Take the time to bring others alongside you in the work and watch what God does with them.

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# CONCLUSION

*Jeff Rankin*

What does God want you to do with the life he has given you? At the outset of this work, this question helped us set the stage for thinking about the difficult task of determining God's will, especially for the Christian facing a moment of decision about the direction and destination of life's path. From the perspective of this booklet, the answer is clear: God wants you to submit yourself to the spiritual disciplines that will shape your life in ways that fulfill the purpose and plan he has for you. This answer charts a course every believer must travel in the pursuit of knowing God and making him known. Simply, the **SHAPE** of your life will be found in this pattern of five simple actions presented here as a roadmap to growth in faith and Christlikeness: **Study** God's Word, **Hear** God's Voice, **Apply** God's Truth, **Pray** God's Will, and **Engage** God's World.

As you have read the chapters that form this brief look at God's calling and the spiritual formation necessary to understand it, perhaps you have noticed a common theme: the essential role of God's Word in every decision and detail of life. This emphasis is no accident. God has gone to great lengths to prepare and preserve his Word for all who would seek to answer life's most important questions. As the Psalmist affirmed, "A lamp to my feet is your



Word and a light to my path. I have sworn and I will establish it to keep the judgments of your righteousness” (Ps 119:105-106). Only in the Scriptures will the believer find God’s guidance for the journey to becoming the person God intended from the moment he gifted life.

The book of Proverbs paints a wonderful picture of God’s effort in providing the wisdom and instruction of his Word, as well as his reasons for doing so. Proverbs 9 portrays wisdom in the person of a hard-working woman. She builds a house, carving out its seven pillars for perfect stability. She prepares a buffet of knowledge and sets a table of understanding to which she calls the simple and the “seeking” to dine. Her investment requires much effort and personal expense, even to the point of engaging her own servants in the task. Her goal in this great work is to offer all who will answer her call the pathway to a long and prosperous life: “The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. For by me your days will be multiplied, and years of life will be added to you” (Prov 9:10-11). In reading the chapters of this booklet and practicing the truths they contain, you have begun the journey every person must take to find the answers God has given to life’s most important questions. The next steps are up to you. Don’t stop now. Press on!

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>See J. I. Packer, *Rediscovering Holiness: Know the Fullness of Life with God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2021), 225-27.

<sup>2</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008).

<sup>3</sup>For further reading see Donald S. Whitney, “Meditating and Praying the Bible: Pursuing Biblical Spirituality,” *Credo Magazine*, December 5, 2023. Accessed December 29, 2023 at [https://credomag.com/magazine\\_issue/lectio-divina/](https://credomag.com/magazine_issue/lectio-divina/).

<sup>4</sup>See Nathan W. Bingham, “Bible Reading Plans for 2024,” Ligonier Ministries. Accessed December 31, 2023 at <https://www.ligonier.org/posts/bible-reading-plans>.

<sup>5</sup>For further reading see Donald S. Whitney, *Praying the Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015).

<sup>6</sup>Donald S. Whitney, *Simplify Your Spiritual Life: Spiritual Disciplines for the Overwhelmed* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2003), 62.

<sup>7</sup>Tim Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (London: Penguin, 2016), 150-51.

<sup>8</sup>Doug McIntosh, *God up Close: How to Meditate on His Word* (Chicago: Moody, 1998), 37.

<sup>9</sup>For further reading see Eugene Peterson, *Eat this Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading*, Spiritual Theology Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

<sup>10</sup>See John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, ed. Roger Sharrock (Oxford: Oxford Press, 1962) and Richard Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest* (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 1998).

<sup>11</sup>J. I. Packer and Carolyn Nystrom. *Praying: Finding Our Way through Duty to Delight* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), 69.

<sup>12</sup>Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, revised and updated (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014), 47.

<sup>13</sup>For practical suggestions on biblical meditation see Kenneth Boa, *Conformed to His Image: Biblical, Practical Approaches to Spiritual Formation*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020); Glenna Marshall, *Memorizing Scripture: The Basics, Blessings, and Benefits of Meditating on God's Word* (Chicago: Moody, 2023); and Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*.

<sup>14</sup>International Olympic Committee, "I Never Thought of Stopping": Marathon Man Akhwari on his Epic Effort at the '68 Games." Accessed January 7, 2024 at <https://olympics.com/ioc/news/-i-never-thought-of-stopping-marathon-man-akhwari-on-his-epic-effort-at-the-68-games>. Also see Bud Greenspan, *100 Greatest Moments in Olympic History* (General Publishing Group, 1995).

<sup>15</sup>C. H. Spurgeon, *C. H. Spurgeon Autobiography: vol. 2* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1973), 159.

<sup>16</sup>Gary Millar, *Calling on the Name of the Lord: A Biblical Theology of Prayer* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2016), 231.

<sup>17</sup>*The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, 13, accessed on November 18, 2023, [https://prts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Shorter\\_Catechism.pdf](https://prts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Shorter_Catechism.pdf).

<sup>18</sup>Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994, 2020), 493.

<sup>19</sup>Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Pathway to Spiritual* (San Francisco: Harper, 1978, 1988), 33.

<sup>20</sup>Grudem, 493.

<sup>21</sup>Bruce Demarest and Charles Raup, “Recovering the Heart of Christian Spirituality,” *Criswell Theological Review* 3, no. 2 (1989): 321.

<sup>22</sup>Kenneth Boa, *Conformed to His Image: Biblical, Practical Approaches to Spiritual Formation*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2001, 2020), 73.

<sup>23</sup>All Scripture cited in this chapter is from the English Standard Bible (ESV).

<sup>24</sup>John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 25 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 282.

<sup>25</sup>Chuck Lawless, *The Potential and Power of Prayer* (Carol Stream, IL: TN, 2022), 6.

<sup>26</sup>R. Albert Mohler, *The Prayer that Turns the World Upside Down: The Lord's Prayer as a Manifesto for Revolution* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2018), xviii.

<sup>27</sup>Lawless, 6.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>29</sup>Whitney, 82.

<sup>30</sup>Foster, 33.

<sup>31</sup>Grudem, 494.

<sup>32</sup>Jeff Iorg, *The Character of Leadership* (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 9.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 42-44.

<sup>34</sup>William Cook III and Chuck Lawless, *Victory over the Enemy* (Brentwood: B&H Academic, 2023), 107.

<sup>35</sup>Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture references come from the New American Standard Bible (1995 Update).

<sup>36</sup><https://news.gallup.com/poll/470708/lgbt-identification-steady.aspx#>.

<sup>37</sup><https://reports.hrc.org/2023-lgbtq-youth-report>.

<sup>38</sup><https://research.lifeway.com/2022/06/23/pastors-have-clarity-on-same-sex-marriage-not-the-role-of-lgbtq-people-in-churches/>.

<sup>39</sup>For other similar occurrences of this Greek term, see Matt 24:42; 25:13; 26:41; Mark 13:35, 37; 14:38; Acts 20:31; 1 Thess 5:6; Rev 3:2f; 16:15.