

Healthy Habits: Studying Scripture – Psalm 95

As we start a New Year, it seems appropriate to go back to basics once again and establish some good habits that will help us grow as Christians. My hope is that these are habits that are already a part of your lives, but since the human condition is about finding shortcuts and the easy way through life, it is good to remind ourselves about spiritual disciplines, which are just that: disciplines. They take effort, choice and commitment.

Now I remind you that spiritual disciplines are not for our salvation. Jesus alone can save us, and we receive that as a free gift through repentance and faith.

Spiritual disciplines are things God has given us to help us know Him better, His will, and how to live as the people of God in this broken world. Jesus said to his disciples, “If you love me you will keep my commandments.” (John 14:15) How can we keep God’s commands, or do God’s will, if we do not know him, or know his will, or take time to listen to what he is calling us to do? Spiritual disciplines are God-given ways for God’s people to get to know God, hear His voice and respond in faithful obedience to him.

So for the next four weeks we will look at four spiritual disciplines found in Psalm 95.

Psalm 95 is an “enthronement Psalm”, a song of praise that reminds the people that God is greater than all the other so-called gods, and worthy of our worship and praise. It starts with a great call to worship, which we will focus on next week, but in the middle of the Psalm is the key to what will inspire God’s people to worship and praise. It is because they hear God speak to them...

The key is found in verses 7 through 9 as we read these words:

Today, if you hear his voice,
8 do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah,^a
as you did that day at Massah^b in the desert,
9 where your fathers tested and tried me,
though they had seen what I did.¹

These verses take us back to an incident in the life of Israel where the people grumbled against God despite all the good things He had done for them as He brought them out of Egypt. Our faith is rooted in history, true events that happened in the life of God’s people recorded “as an example for us so we will be warned” as 1 Corinthians 10:11 says. But it is not a record of just any event, it the story of God’s intervention in the life of a certain people to bring salvation to

^a *Meribah* means *quarreling*.

^b *Massah* means *testing*.

¹ *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Ps 95:7–9). (1984). Zondervan.

all people. The Germans have a word for this called *Heilgeschichte* which means “the story of salvation.”

Notice the first words in this text: “Today if you hear his voice...”

We believe that it is God who has revealed Himself to us rather than we thinking we found him, or worse, invented him. We believe that we would not know anything about God if he had not chosen to reveal himself to us. God has chosen to reveal himself through nature, yes, but to get the truest and most accurate picture of who God is we must read the scriptures. This is his Word to us.

I read yesterday in my devotions this quote: “It is impossible to know God without knowing the Bible.”

This is what the Psalmist is calling us to do – to hear God’s voice. The best place to do that is to read the scriptures. Yes, God speaks through nature, and yes, God does speak to us through others, and He certainly speaks to us by His Holy Spirit. However, the place God usually speaks to us is through the Bible, through scriptures. This is His Word to us.

Do you want to know what God is really like? Read the Bible.

Do you want to know what God wants for your life? Read the Bible.

Do you want to know how we should live as Christians? Read the Bible.

Do you want to know how to forgive the unforgiveable? Read the Bible.

Do you want to know how to be saved and go to heaven? Read the Bible.

Do you want to know what the future will look like? Read the Bible.

Of course, the Bible is just so many words until you come to know the author personally. Jesus said, “Truly, truly I say to you: unless a man is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (John 3:3)

So the place to start is have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Many people have testified to how they would read the Bible day after day and get nothing out of it. Then they committed their lives to following Jesus and suddenly the scriptures came alive. True, you will not suddenly understand everything –but the Holy Spirit will open the eyes of your understanding to what you need to know as you study from day to day.

Second, we come to scripture with an attitude of **humility**. As scholar John Stott rightly observes, “There is no greater hindrance to understanding than pride...”² Jesus himself pointed this out as he prayed,

² John R. W. Stott, *Understanding the Bible*, p. 209.

“I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. 26 Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.” (Matthew 11:25-26)

Most pastors have had years of formal study and preparation, which includes how to “rightly handle the Word of truth.” However, no pastor should stand in the pulpit and preach God’s Word who has not started his or her preparation with a simple prayer like the one the Psalmist prayed, “Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things from Thy Law.” (Psalm 119:18)

We all need to come to scripture with an openness to hear what God wants to tell us, and not start with an assumption that we already know what it says and means. Our study and learning is good, and necessary, but without a posture of **humility** we will never hear what the Lord is trying to tell us.

Some **questions** which are important as you start your study of scripture are these: Who is the human author? What was God saying through that writer? Who was the audience? What were the circumstances? Do not assume the world of the original audience is exactly like yours. Then ask how does this apply to my life today? The Holy Spirit will help you answer that question.

It is important that we form the **habit** of studying God’s Word. It has been observed that “We become what we repeatedly do.”³

It has been estimated that 45% of what we do in a day is habitual. We will do the same thing today and tomorrow that we did yesterday. Some consistently turn on the snooze button every morning, others jump out of bed right away, every day. What we eat, how we react to stress, what routes we drive to work are more about habit than thought out choices.

That can be good if we have good habits, but what if we do not? What if we have let our cell phones be the masters of our lives (Lise constantly challenges me with this one)? What if watching a certain program is more important than helping a friend, or neighbour?

The good thing about habits is they can be changed. To make reading scripture one of the good habits in your life, keep your Bible out where you can always see it, so it is easy to get to. If you have to hunt for your Bible each morning when you want to do devotions you likely will not do them. Budget the time you need for scripture study into your day. If you get up at 7 am everyday, and need two hours to get yourself ready and to work on time (or school) by 9 am then why not set the alarm for 6:45 am and give yourself 15 minutes of quiet time to start your day with God? You may find you soon want to add 15 more minutes, or more, to your routine.

But if you want your life to be shaped by God, then you need to repeatedly spend time with him, reading His Word, and letting it shape your lives.

³ Sean Covey, from “How to Study the Bible” app

Another way to help get into scripture in a consistent way is join a Bible Study group. Read passages together and discuss what they mean, and how they apply to your life. This kind of accountability is great for helping us establish the habit of reading the Bible regularly. This is why I so hope every single person will be in a Home Group. I know everyone's schedules are different, but Home groups have the flexibility to meet when you are able to. If you work all week, you may choose an evening, or a Saturday or Sunday afternoon. If you are retired you may prefer a daytime meeting so you do not have to drive at night. Some are morning people, some don't function well until after lunch. Let us know when it works best for you to meet and we will connect you with others who function in the same rhythm.

We always learn more when we study with others. That is just the way God has designed it. "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them." (Matthew 18:20) And who is the real teacher? The Holy Spirit.

Now let me take you back to the very words of our text. Certainly they are speaking about hearing God's Word, and today that is best done through the study of Scripture. We have touched on how we must approach God's Word consistently, with humility, and in community when possible.

But our verse in Psalm 95 came with a warning. It said, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts..." (vss. 7-8)

The children of Israel had the presence of God with them throughout the journey from Egypt to Canaan. God protected them from their enemies and even provided food and water. God simply asked His people to listen to him, and obey his words – his laws – for they would keep the community safe and focused on him.

The people heard God's voice, heard words like, "You shall have no other God besides me," and the people chose to disobey. They brought foreign gods into the community, false gods that could never help them or guide them. And in doing that they turned their backs on God.

The Psalmist reminds the people of that terrible day that they complained against God, accused him of trying to harm them when they were thirsty, and they grumbled against him. The full story is found in Exodus 17, but the question the people were asking was, "Is the Lord God among us or not?" Despite all he did for them, they doubted him. That is why the place was called "testing" (Massa) and "quarreling" (Meribah).

Here is the key for us today: what will you do with the Word of God? As John Stott says, "There are in the end only two possible attitudes to God's Word, to receive it or reject it."⁴

You can read the Bible all you like, but if you are not willing to let the Holy Spirit shape and guide and remake your life through it, you are simply going through the motions. If you can look

⁴ Stott, 243.

into the word of truth, like looking in a mirror, and see your sins, your faults, your shortcomings but still walk away unchanged, then you have missed the purpose of God's Word to you.

If a man can read the scriptures in the morning and yell at his family in the afternoon, he has missed the point.

If a woman can study scripture daily but still gossip and verbally attack her neighbours, she has wasted her time.

If a teen can read the Bible before school, but refuse to submit to authorities – be it parents, teachers or the laws of the land – then they are simply going through the motions.

If a couple read the Bible together at night but still end up divorced they have missed the power and message of God's Word.

Our scripture for the month says, *"16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."* (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

God's Word can change our lives, shaping us to reflect the very character of Christ in this world. It can, if we are willing to listen to what it says and with God's help, make the changes necessary in our lives to conform to God's ways.

The Psalmist says, "If you hear God's Word, do not harden your hearts..." Say "yes" to whatever God is asking you to do.