



Core Seminar How to Grow Class 3: Bible Intake (Part 1)

I. The Importance of Bible Intake

Why is Bible intake so important? This week we are going to examine this **foundational** spiritual discipline: **hearing** and **reading** God's Word. Next week we'll talk about (1) memorization, (2) meditation, (3) journaling, and (4) learning. As we stressed in week one, Biblical spirituality is Bible-centered. Our right practice of all the other spiritual disciplines flows from the time we spend in the Scriptures. The Word informs our praying, fasting, stewardship, evangelism, service, and cultivation of the fruit of the Spirit. Why is the Bible so critical for the Christian life? Let's talk about two reasons, here at the outset of our time together.

A. God Gives Us New Birth through Scripture

First, the Bible is critical for the Christian life because God's word is the means God uses to bring about our new birth in Christ Jesus. 1 Peter 1:23 puts it like this: "...you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God."

Conversion always occurs in conjunction with the truth of the Scriptures being read or heard and then believed. The Gospel means what? Good news. It's the news about what God has done for us in Christ and we learn of that news in the Scriptures. In other words, Christianity is a revealed religion. That's why the Bible is often called God's revelation.

The Bible reveals how God is perfectly holy and just, but it also reveals something about us. It reveals to us our sinfulness and how we deserve God's righteous judgment for our rebellion against Him. It also teaches us that God is full of mercy and compassion. We learn that we can do nothing to save ourselves, but that our only hope is to repent and trust in Jesus Christ for forgiveness of sins. Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures. And after three days, He was raised from the dead, according to the Scriptures. The Bible encourages us to come to Jesus, in whom we find life and joy and peace.

Do you see how spiritually lost and listless we'd be if God had not revealed himself to us in His Word? But praise God he has given us his good and perfect Word.

B. God Sustains Us in the Christian Life Through Scripture

Scripture is the means that God uses to sustain and nourish us in our Christian life. We see this in 1 Peter 2:2, just a few verses down from what we read just a few minutes ago. It says, "Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation."

The, "pure spiritual milk," that Peter refers to is none other than the Word of God. Just as an infant desires the milk necessary for growth, we should also crave God's word. A Christian's spiritual maturity depends on a regular diet of God's word. Our progress in sanctification depends on our Bible intake. The analogy of God's Word as sustaining food and drink is used over and over again in the Bible.

Take Deuteronomy 8:3, for instance, where it says this: "And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."

Or this one, an amazing verse from Jeremiah 15: "Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name, O Lord, God of Hosts" (Jer. 15:16).

Just as we need a regular diet of food to keep us physically healthy, so we should also feed daily on God's Word for the sake of our spiritual health. The food we consume with our mouths satisfies us temporarily. But learning of God from His Word has eternal value.

QUESTIONS

II. Preparing to Receive the Word

Here in a second, we're going to think through various ways to spend time in and with the Bible. Before we get there, let's talk about what our heart's disposition should be towards the Scriptures. This will help us to truly profit from them.

A. Revere Scripture

First, we must have reverence toward Scripture. It is God's Word. Therefore, it is infallible, sufficient and authoritative. We must not approach the Bible in a flippant or careless manner. Instead, we ought to emulate the Christians at Thessalonica. Paul writes this about them in the book of 1 Thessalonians, in chapter 2, verse 13: "And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers."

Now, to say that we want to come to the Scriptures full of reverence for them does not mean that we need to get all dressed up, put on our game faces for the day, and guzzle down two cups of coffee so that we're bright eyed and ready to go. No. The one that reveres Scripture is the one that prepares their heart, no matter the time of day or the circumstance, when they crack open God's word. I've found that a good way to do this is to pray a short prayer—just a few words to the Lord—before I start reading. I thank God for his Word and ask him to use it to make me more like Christ.

B. Humility & Dependence Upon God

That brings us to our second point. We need to have **humility and a sincere dependence upon God** as we spend time in his Word. We need to acknowledge that we are wholly dependent upon the Lord to illuminate the Scriptures to us. The Reformers called the activity of God by which the truth of His Word is pressed upon the mind and consciences of His people, "the internal witness of the Holy Spirit". We know that apart from the Holy Spirit's work in us, we cannot receive and obey God's Word. It says this in 1 Corinthians 2:14, "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned."

So we go to the Scriptures prayerful and mindful of our reliance upon the Lord as we spend time in his Word. Psalm 119:18 is a wonderful verse to have on hand. It says: "Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in

your law.”

C. Receptive Hearts

The third thing we need in order to profit from God's Word is a heart that is receptive to God's Word. In the parable of the sower, Jesus likens a receptive heart to good soil. When the seed of the Word is sown in such a heart, it takes root and bears fruit pleasing to God.

James exhorts us to be doers of the Word, and not only hearers. He writes this in James 1:22-25, "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 who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing."

The Bible should not only instruct our minds but should also transform our lives. The goal of Bible intake is to grow in conformity to Christ through a changed life.

III. Bible Intake Methods: (1) Hearing (2) Reading & (3) Studying God's Word

A. Hearing God's Word

We should regularly be sitting under faithful preaching. Preaching is a means of grace ordained by God for His glory as well as for the good of His people. Throughout the Bible, God uses the public teaching of His Word to communicate His truth to His people. We see this taking place in Deuteronomy. Before Israel crosses the Jordan River to take possession of the Promised Land, Moses teaches the people about God's past deliverance.

A similar event takes place toward the end of the Old Testament. Ezra and the priests appear before God's people after they returned from exile in Babylon, and what do they do? It says in Nehemiah 8:8, that "The read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading."

This pattern continues in the New Testament. The resurrected Christ appears to Peter and urges him to, "feed his sheep." In saying this, he's referring to the faithful teaching of the Word for the spiritual nourishment of God's people.

This exhortation is seen in other places in the New Testament. So, in 1 Timothy 4:13, Paul exhorts Timothy to devote himself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and teaching. The Scriptures are clear that God so values the preaching of his word that he actually blesses the church with men who will do just that. These pastors and teachers are called gifts to the church, given for the purpose of equipping Christians for the work of ministry and strengthening the body of Christ.

We read about this in Ephesians 4:11-13. I love this text. Jesus is depicted here as a conquering king. And the question is, how will this king tap his authority? Will he obliterate the world? Will he cast a cold eye on it? On the surface, the answer comes as something of a shock. As we look closer, however, it is in perfect keeping with what we learn about Jesus's life on earth in the Gospels. He was a servant. He washed his disciples' feet. And, after he rose from the dead, he carefully showed his followers how he was the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies and promises.

So Ephesians 4:11-13 says: "And he [Jesus] gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ..."

Recognizing that teachers and pastors are gifts to the church will help us to listen to the teaching of the Word. It will give us hearts that are grateful to God and soft to His truth. It also encourages us to discipline ourselves to hear the Word regularly and attentively. Jesus said in Luke 11:28. "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it! "

We would do well to heed Jesus' exhortation. With that in view, what are some practical ways for us to devote ourselves to hearing God's Word?

- Core seminars.
- Wednesday evening Bible study
- Small group
- One-on-one discipling relationships
- Sunday morning and evening services. This is the main meal for the church each week. We ought to think of the sermon as a spiritual feast for our souls.
- We should therefore be active and attentive listeners. Hearing God's Word is not passive. We have to come to the Word with eager anticipation. Ask God to apply His Word to our hearts that we may grow in holiness and be transformed more into the image of Christ.
- Some of you might also listen to CDs of the Bible being read. These are all good ways of hearing God's Word.

II. Read God's Word

In 2 Timothy 3:16-17, we find these words: "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." Not only are the words of the Bible from God himself. We learn in these verses that they are there to help us grow in holiness and to equip us to do good in this life. To take this a step further, we learn that the person who practices and applies these words has all he needs for "training in righteousness." They are, in other words, sufficient for our lives.

Knowing the value of God's Word and the sufficiency of God's Word should motivate us to read it regularly. Jesus often asked "Have you not read?" or "Haven't you read in the law...?" He assumed that those claiming to be the people of God would have read the Word of God.

In Matthew 22:31-32, Jesus says to the religious teachers, "And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living."

Jesus Himself was a diligent reader of God's Word. He knew the Scriptures well. He would often say, "It is written," to answer His questioners or accusers. We also see an example of this in the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. Three times Jesus was tempted by Satan, and three times Jesus answered, "It is written," referring to Scripture.

We should follow Jesus's example here. When temptation came, he used the Word to combat it. We need to regularly be steeping ourselves in God's word so that when questions arise, or discouragement sets in, or sin comes knocking, or a friend comes to us in need of truth, or an opportunity to share the gospel presents itself, or our spirits grow weak, or the frustrations of life begin to blind us to God's promises, or we find ourselves in desperate need of grace—when any of these things happen—we can meet them with the true assurances and promises and commands and reproofs and encouragements from God's word.

Now, if you're anything like me, you fully intend to read the Bible. You know that you need to. And yet all too often it doesn't happen for one reason or another. So, if Bible reading is so important, the question is, how can we establish consistency in it?

Here are two practical suggestions:

1. Find the Time

We should discipline ourselves to set aside time every day to read God's Word. Don't leave this to chance. Be deliberate about this. Having a fixed time every day helps us to be consistent in our Bible reading. Strive to build a habit of regular Bible reading and pray for God to help you to be disciplined.

If you were to read the Bible for 15 minutes each day, you'd get through the Bible every year. I remember a friend of mine telling me a story about an old man that he had a conversation with. In the course of their talk he asked the old man how many times he'd read the Bible and the guy said something like, "too many to remember. I've been in it for decades. And then he said, "And I think I'm just starting to really understand it." The Bible is inexhaustible in what it has to teach us about God and ourselves and the world he's made. We are fools if we think that because we've already read through the Bible a time or two that we don't need to read it anymore. Oh, Christians, we need God's Word more than we know. We should find a regular time to read it. And if that's a struggle, and trust me, I know that it can be, we should ask for accountability from trusted friends.

2. Find a Bible-Reading Plan or a System that Works for You

Robert Murray M'Cheyne was an early 19th century pastor in Scotland. His legacy includes a well-known scheme for daily Bible reading. In its original formulation, it takes the reader through the Old Testament once and the New Testament and Psalms twice per year. This means reading about four chapters a day, taken from different parts of the Bible. Don Carson has modified M'Cheyne's original scheme and published it in two volumes called *For the Love of God*, along with daily meditations on the readings. You can easily modify this to a pace that fits your preferences.

III. Study God's Word

The regular reading of God's Word is like riding a motorboat across a lake. It gives a good overview of the lake and a passing view of its depths. Studying Scripture, however, takes us beneath the surface for an in-depth look at the details we would otherwise miss. Reading gives us breadth, but studying gives us depth.

In Acts 17:11, we read of a group of people called the Bereans. This is what it says about them. "Now these Jews [the Bereans], were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so."

Those who search the Word with eagerness have a “noble character.” Are we like the Bereans in this regard? Do we exercise our hearts and minds to ponder Scripture? Are we careful to examine all things in the light of God's Word?

God is pleased when we delight in His Word and when we have a fervent desire to study it. As Christians, we should be characterized by a love for God's Word. Is our zeal for the Word flagging? Ask God to revive our hearts to love His Word. He is the one who enables us to exclaim, like the psalmist, “Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long”! (Psalm 119:97)

With this in mind, let's conclude with a few tips about how to study the Bible:

Five helpful questions to ask when we study the Bible:

1. What does the text say?

- Make careful observations of the text
- Notice details

2. What does the text mean?

- Identify the genre of writing
- Understand the historical, cultural, and literary background
- Unpack the passage's syntax
- Outline the passage
- Understand what the words mean in context
- Pay attention to the context
- Locate the text in redemptive history
- Understand the text in light of the whole Bible
- Discern how the passage points us to Christ (eg. direct reference, type, predictive, preparatory, reflective—God's nature / human nature, resultant)
- Use tools: study Bibles, commentaries, dictionaries / lexicons, concordances, etc.

3. What concerns caused the text to be written?

- Grasp the main message of a biblical passage

4. What do I share in common with the original audience or human author of the text?

- Understanding ourselves in light of Scripture
- Distill the timeless principles from the text
- Understand what the text teaches about God's character and purposes, mankind, Christ, our response to Christ, our obedience, the church, the world, etc.

5. How should I now respond to the truths of the text?

- What, specifically, does God require of me?
- Where, i.e. in what specific situations, do I need to apply the truths of the text?
- How does the text encourage me to obey God?
- How does God enable me to respond to the truths of the text?
- How can I spur others on to respond to the truths of the text?

Recommended books to help us read and study the Bible:

(1) *For the Love of God* by D.A. Carson

(2) *Search the Scriptures* by Alan Stibbs

- (3) *Bible Speaks Today* commentary series
- (4) *The Welwyn Commentary* series
- (5) *According to Plan* by Graeme Goldsworthy
- (6) *Systematic Theology* by Wayne Grudem

IV. Conclusion

Our growth in godliness depends on our Bible intake. God sanctifies us through His Word. Jesus, when praying for all who belong to Him, said: "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17)

The Welsh pastor Geoffrey Thomas leaves us with some wisdom on how to approach Bible intake: "Do not expect to master the Bible in a day, or a month, or a year. Rather expect often to be puzzled by its contents. It is not all equally clear. Great men of God often feel like absolute novices when they read the Word. The apostle Peter said that there were some things hard to understand in the epistles of Paul (2 Peter 3:16). I am glad he wrote those words because I have felt that often. So do not expect always to get an emotional charge or a feeling of quiet peace when you read the Bible. By the grace of God you may expect that to be a frequent experience, but often you will get no emotional response at all. Let the Word break over your heart and mind again and again as the years go by, and imperceptibly there will come great changes in your attitude and outlook and conduct. You will probably be the last to recognize these. Often you will feel very, very small, because increasingly the God of the Bible will become wonderfully great."¹

¹ Whitney, Donald S. *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NAVPress, 1991), 38-9.