

Looking to God in the Book

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. He was with God in the beginning.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

In him was life, and that life was the light of human beings.

The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

John 1:1-5

To what are known as the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the fourth and fifth centuries AD¹ the “Word” meant three things:

- The *Living Word* which is Jesus
- The *Written Word* which is the Bible
- The *Prophetic Word* which brings God’s perspective on one’s current life and situation

Listening to the Living Word involved listening prayer which results in modeling your life on Jesus.

Listening to the Prophetic Word involved either speaking or receiving not rote, general truths from the Bible, but an immediate and specific word in collaboration with the Spirit of God which brings God’s perspective to bear on a current situation. 1 Corinthians 14:3 describes these words as bring specific *strengthening, encouragement and comfort*.

In this mentoring session we want to focus on how you listen to the Written Word or the Bible.

There is a tendency to think of the spiritual life as a life that begins when we have certain feelings, think certain thoughts, or gain certain insights. Growth in faith is not about how to make the spiritual life happen but to see where it actually is happening. We believe that God is active right now in the world and in the lives of individuals and communities. How do we learn to see? All the spiritual practices in this mentoring manual are intended to increase spiritual sight, to create space in your life for God to move

¹ The *Desert Fathers and Mothers* were Christians, who originally fled the chaos and persecution of the Roman Empire in the third century. In Egypt, these Christian refugee communities formed at the edges of population centers, far enough away to be safe from Imperial scrutiny. In 313 when Christianity was made legal in the empire by Constantine many Christians remained in the desert communities in order to follow God in a more deliberate and individual way. As their lifestyles or work, solitude, and devotion continued, these men and women developed a reputation for holiness and wisdom.

Many individuals who spent part of their lives in the Egyptian desert went on to become important figures in the Church and society of the fourth and fifth century, among them Athanasius of Alexandria, John Chrysostom, John Cassian and Augustine of Hippo. Their writings and spirituality deeply affected both the Western and Eastern Church and still of interest to many people today.

and speak, yet forming a lifelong practice of looking to God in the Bible is basic to perceiving what God is doing and spiritual growth.

Learning to listen to God through Bible reading

The Bible is essentially the story of God's dealings with humanity and the "in breaking" of God's kingdom into the kingdoms of this world. In reading God's story you learn of His character, His values, His vision for individuals and the world, and His ways of revealing Himself and working in the lives of people and the events of history.

Eugene Peterson writes about story in the Bible²

[Bible] stories...map the country of our humanity, show its contours, reveal its dimensions. Mostly what they show is that to be human means to deal with God. And that everything we encounter and experience—birth and death, hunger and thirst, money and weapons, weather and mountains, friendship and betrayal, marriage and adultery—is included...in dealing with God.

Story... invites our participation... we feel the emotions, get caught up in the drama, identify with the characters...realize that there is more to this business of being human than we had yet explored.

Stories suffer from misinterpretation when we don't submit to them simple as stories...for the biblical way is not so much to present us with a moral code and tell us "live up to this"; nor is it to set out a system of doctrine and say "Think like this and you will live well." The biblical way is to tell a story and invite us: "Live into this—this is what it looks like to be human in this God-made and God-ruled world; this is what is involved in becoming and maturing as a human being."...as we submit our lives to what we read, we find that we are not being led to see God in our stories but to see our stories in God's. God is the larger context and plot in which my story finds itself.

The reader of scripture must be totally involved—heart and soul, mind and body—in the reading of scripture. We would be fools to discard the study disciplines acquired and insisted on throughout the last two hundred years which prevent us from intruding on the text; but we would be even more foolish if we let these disciplines keep us from participating in the text. We are intended to enter the world of the text, listening for resonances, alert to relationships, and most of all mindful of God for this is a living text.

² *First and Second Samuel*; see the introduction pp. 1ff.

So, how do we do this? One way is to read the Bible meditatively³. The goal of meditative reading is not to gather information and “master the Bible”; to neither analyze nor criticize the Bible⁴, but to be mastered and challenged by God through the Bible—we seek to allow the Bible to read and interpret us. The Bible does not speak to us if we simply want to use it. If we understand that the Bible is not primarily a book of information about God but a book which is to form us and nurture us, then there is a lifetime of benefit we will receive from the Bible.

³ Benedict of Nursia was a 6th century Christian monk who founded a monastery in Italy around 529 AD. Today those who follow his spiritual disciplines are known as Benedictines. One of the spiritual practices of Benedict was what he called the “sacred reading” or “divine reading” of the Bible known from its Latin name as “Lectio Divina”. This practice consisted of the slow and thoughtful reading of the Bible and the pondering of its meaning. In Benedictine monasteries with was meditation. Benedict taught that there was a progression form Bible reading to meditation; from meditation to prayer; and from prayer to loving regard for God.

⁴ There is a place for this kind of Bible study, but it is not part of what we are seeking to do here.

Spiritual Exercise: Learning to Look to God in the Bible

1. Goals:
 - a. To recognize your history and relationship with the Bible
 - b. To establish a pattern of interaction with the Bible that works for you
 - c. To have an experience in meditatively listening to God through the Bible.

2. Your history and relationship with the Bible
 - a. Think of your life in 5-10 year segments. How would you describe your experience with the Bible in different periods of your life?
 - b. What style of interaction with the Bible, if any, has been most formative and nurturing for you? What about that particular experience made it formative and nurturing?
 - i. Personal study
 - ii. Reading
 - iii. Lectio divina
 - iv. devotion
 - v. taking a class
 - vi. teaching
 - vii. being taught in community
 - viii. small group discussion
 - c. How would you describe your current relationship with the Bible?

3. Establishing a pattern of interaction with the Bible that works for you now
 - a. Read over the introductory material in *Looking to God in the Book*
 - i. What stands out to you as important, if anything, regarding establishing a meaningful interaction with the Bible in this period of your life?
 - b. In light of what you've discussed so far, what do you want from your relationship with God through the Bible to look like?
 - i. What do you need for this to take place?

4. An experience in meditative listening to the Bible
 - a. Do this exercise in your mentoring session. It will involve some individual time of quiet and some sharing and discussion afterward.
 - b. Open your Bible to Mark 4: 35-41
 - i. Read the passage aloud, slowly. Pause after the reading to picture the events.
 - ii. Reread the passage quietly and place yourself in the story. Notice what is happening in your body; your emotions; your spirit.
 - iii. Reread the passage a third time and pay attention to Jesus. Notice everything about what he does; he says; what is happening in his body; his emotions; his spirit.
 - iv. What from your reading jumps out at you, commands your attention?

1. Stay with this word, image; emotion for a while—chew on it.
 2. Ask God if there is a personal word for you or a perspective on your current circumstances.
 - c. When you have both finished your quiet meditative interaction with the story of Mark 4:35-41 talk through your experience [“b” above].
 - d. As you draw this experience to a close, live in the joy that God is speaking to you through the Bible.
5. Assignments—pick one of the following to do over the next month and report back in your next mentoring session.
- a. Over the next month pick stories from Mark’s gospel and do the exercise in #4 above. Keep a spiritual journal with brief notes of your experiences.
 - i. Choose a pace that is workable for you—once a week? Twice a week? Three times a week?
 - ii. Choose a time frame that is workable for you—10 minutes? 20 minutes?
 - iii. Choose a place that you will do this—coffee shop? Bedroom? Deck? Fireplace chair? Seabus?
 - b. Over the next month try doing the exercise in #4 with one of the scriptures listed in the Morning Prayer schedule at this website <http://www.northumbriacommunity.org/pray-the-daily-office>⁵
 - c. Buy a copy of *The Spiritual Formation Bible* and read through one of the gospels using the meditative helps.⁶

⁵ This online prayer book, *Celtic Daily Prayer* is a gift from the Northumbria Community of north-eastern England. This faith community, with members scattered around the world, has collected ancient and modern prayers. The focal point for this prayer book is the scheduled daily scripture readings with optional additional brief meditations and prayers. Recommended by Richard J. Foster, a Christian theologian and author in the Quaker tradition. He earned his Doctor of Pastoral Theology at Fuller Theological Seminary and is best known for his 1978 book *Celebration of Discipline*

⁶ *The Spiritual Formation Bible*, in conjunction with The Upper Room, encourages readers to encounter Scripture in a more enlightening and personal way. Relating the Bible text to the transforming practice of meeting God in the Created Order, in Everyday Life, in Worship, Scripture, Service, and Community, this unique Bible offers hundreds of Entry Point meditations to help readers reflect on the meaning of the text. Five different styles of Entry Point articles include: Lectio divina; Ignatian: encourages the reader to allow his or her imagination to see, hear, taste, smell, and feel the story; Franciscan: emphasizes the sacred in the ordinary; Fivefold Question: prompts the reader to make the meaning of the text more personal. Quotations from Christians, old and new, encourage contemplation of the Scriptures. Available in NIV and NRSV