

BIBLE INTAKE (PART 1) . . . FOR THE PURPOSE OF GODLINESS



The alternative to discipline is disaster.

Vance Havner
quoted in John Blanchard, compiler,
More Gathered Gold

In August of 1989 I had the privilege of participating in a mission trip to the bush country of East Africa. Four of us from the church I pastor lived in tents in front of a tiny, unfinished, mud-and-sticks church building six miles from the nearest settlement.

I've been overseas enough to know that many customs I have come to identify with Christianity will clash at some points with the culture of our hosts. My experiences have taught me to anticipate swallowing with difficulty some of my American expectations (not to mention a few other things!) about how Christians should live. But I was unprepared for some of my encounters with many of the professing Christians in this equatorial setting. Lying, stealing, and immorality were common and generally accepted, even among the leadership of the church. Theological understanding was as scarce as water, the disease of doctrinal error as common as malaria.

Soon I discovered one of the main reasons this church looked as though it had been started by Corinthian missionaries. No one had a Bible—not the pastor, not a deacon, no one. The pastor had only half-a-dozen sermons, all half-baked over the coals of a few Bible-story recollections. Every sixth week came the same sermon. The only real contact with Scripture happened with the occasional visit of a missionary (the

nearest one was one hundred miles away) or when an area denominational worker would preach. For almost everyone in the church, these infrequent, vicarious brushes with the Bible were all they'd ever known. Only one man had any measure of spiritual maturity, and that was because he had lived most of his life elsewhere and attended a Bible-teaching church.

The four of us pooled our resources and bought inexpensive Bibles for many of the church members. After evangelistic visitation each day we led Bible studies for the church in the afternoon and again at night by flashlight. We left with prayers that the Holy Spirit would cause the Word of God to take deep root in this dry, bush-country assembly.

Most of us shake our heads in pity at such sad conditions. It's hard to imagine that many of us have more Bibles in our homes than entire churches have in some Third-World situations. But it's one thing to be unfamiliar with Scripture when you don't own a Bible; it's another thing when you have a bookshelf full.

No Spiritual Discipline is more important than the intake of God's Word. Nothing can substitute for it. There simply is no healthy Christian life apart from a diet of the milk and meat of Scripture. The reasons for this are obvious. In the Bible God tells us about Himself, and especially about Jesus Christ, the incarnation of God. The Bible unfolds the Law of God to us and shows us how we've all broken it. There we learn how Christ died as a sinless, willing Substitute for breakers of God's Law and how we must repent and believe in Him to be right with God. In the Bible we learn the ways and will of the Lord. We find in Scripture how to live in a way that is pleasing to God as well as best and most fulfilling for ourselves. None of this eternally essential information can be found anywhere else except the Bible. Therefore if we would know God and be Godly, we must know the Word of God—intimately.

However, many who yawn with familiarity and nod in agreement to these statements spend no more time with God's Word in an average day than do those with no Bible at all. My pastoral experience bears witness to the validity of surveys that frequently reveal that great numbers of professing Christians know little more about the Bible than Third-World Christians who possess not even a shred of Scripture.

Some wag remarked that the worst dust storm in history would happen if all church members who were neglecting their Bibles dusted them off simultaneously.

So even though we honor God's Word with our lips, we must confess that our hearts—as well as our hands, ears, eyes, and minds—are often far from it. Regardless of how busy we become with all things Christian, we must remember that the most transforming practice available to us is the disciplined intake of Scripture.

Bible intake is not only the most important Spiritual Discipline, it is also the most broad. It actually consists of several subdisciplines. It's much like a university comprised of many colleges, each specializing in a different discipline, yet all united under the general name of the university.

Let's examine the "colleges," or subdisciplines, of Bible intake, proceeding from the least to the most difficult.

HEARING GOD'S WORD

The easiest of the Disciplines related to the intake of God's Word is simply *hearing* it. Why consider this a Discipline? Because if we don't discipline ourselves to hear God's Word regularly, we may only hear it accidentally, just when we feel like it, or we may never hear it at all. For most of us, disciplining ourselves to hear God's Word means developing the practice of steadfastly attending a New Testament church where the Word of God is faithfully preached.

Jesus once said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it" (Luke 11:28). Merely listening to God-inspired words is not the point. The purpose of all methods of Bible intake is obedience to what God says and the development of Christlikeness. But the method Jesus encourages in this verse is hearing God's Word.

Another passage emphasizing the importance of hearing is Romans 10:17: "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ." This doesn't mean that a person can come to faith in Christ only by hearing Scripture, for multitudes have become believers as Jonathan Edwards did, through reading the Bible. Still this verse concerns itself with hearing. We may add, however, that most who, like Edwards, were converted while reading Scripture are also like him in that they heard the proclamation of God's Word prior to conversion. Furthermore, whereas this passage teaches that initial faith in Christ comes from hearing the inspired Word about Jesus Christ, it's also true for Christians that much

of the faith we need for day-to-day living comes from hearing the Bible's message. From a scriptural word about God's provision may come the faith that a family with financial struggles needs. Hearing a biblically based sermon on the love of Christ may be God's means of granting assurance of faith to a downcast believer. I recently heard a tape-recorded message that the Lord used to give me the faith to persevere in a matter. Gifts of faith are often given to those who discipline themselves to hear the Word of God.

There are other ways we may discipline ourselves to hear God's Word in addition to the most important way, which is hearing it preached as part of a local church ministry. (I say this realizing that some do not have the opportunity to hear God's Word through the ministry of a local church.) The most obvious of these is by Christian radio and tapes. These can be used in creative ways and times while dressing, cooking, traveling, etc. If neither of these media is available in your area, consider shortwave radio and mail-order tape-lending libraries. Although shortwave radio is common overseas, most Americans don't have one and rarely think of the medium. But many of the best Bible teachers on traditional AM and FM stations in the United States also can be heard practically anywhere in the world (including the United States) on the powerful, if lesser quality signal, shortwave stations. And there are several cassette-lending libraries nationwide, each with thousands of sermons on tape. Usually they ask for payment only to cover postage costs or for a nominal rental fee per tape. Check the classified ads of Christian publications, contact the office of ministries that distribute cassette tapes, or check with several local churches to get names and addresses of some of these tape libraries.

One other text worthy of note on this subject is 1 Timothy 4:13. There the Apostle Paul instructs his young friend in the ministry: "Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching." Though a lot more explanation could be given, it's enough to say that it was important in the ministry of Paul and important to the Lord, who inspired these words, for God's people to hear God's Word. Since this is so, it should become a disciplined priority for us to hear it. If someone says, "I don't need to go to church to worship God; I can worship Him on the golf course or at the lake just as well, if not better, than in church," we may agree that

God can be worshiped there. But the ongoing worship of God cannot be separated from the Word of God. We are to discipline ourselves to go and hear the Word of God.

A brief word is in order here about preparing ourselves to hear the Word of God. If you enter the typical evangelical church two minutes before the start of the worship service, it sounds almost like you've walked into a gymnasium two minutes before a basketball game. Part of my pastoral heart appreciates the good things represented by people who are glad to see and talk with each other. There is a spirit of family reunion in the air when the family of God gathers together. But I think a larger part of my heart longs for reverence and a spirit of seeking God among those who come to hear His Word.

For a while a congregation of Korean Christians used our church building for their midweek service. I was impressed by the way they entered the worship center. Whether they were first to arrive or came in after the service had already started, they immediately bowed in prayer for several moments before arranging their belongings, unbuttoning their coat, or acknowledging the presence of anyone else. This served as an effective reminder to their own hearts and to everyone else of their main purpose for that time. Most churches I'm familiar with could stand more of this kind of thing.

One of the English Puritans, Jeremiah Burroughs, wrote in 1648 the following words of counsel regarding preparation for the discipline of hearing God's Word:

First, when you come to hear the Word, if you would sanctify God's name, you must possess your souls with what it is you are going to hear. That is, what you are going to hear is the Word of God. . . . Therefore you find that the apostle, writing to the Thessalonians, gives them the reason why the Word did them so much good as it did; it was because they did hear it as the Word of God. "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 man but as what it really is, the word of God" (1 Thessalonians 2:13).¹

So hearing the Word of God is not merely passive listening, it is a Discipline to be cultivated.

READING GOD'S WORD

If you still doubt that Christians need to be exhorted to discipline themselves to read the Bible, consider this: *USA Today* reported a poll just three months before this writing that showed only 11 percent of Americans read the Bible every day. More than half read it less than once a month or never at all.²

Of course, we attempt to comfort ourselves by noting that the survey included all Americans, not just professing Christians. Lamentably, little comfort may be found. A survey taken less than a year earlier by the Barna Research Group among those claiming to be "born-again Christians" disclosed these disheartening numbers: Only 18 percent—less than two of every ten—read the Bible every day. Worst of all, 23 percent—almost one in four professing Christians—say they *never* read the Word of God.³ Consider these statistics in light of 1 Timothy 4:7, "Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness" (NSAB).

Jesus often asked questions about people's understanding of the Scriptures, beginning with the words, "Have you not read . . . ?" He assumed that those claiming to be the people of God would have read the Word of God. And a case can be made that this question implies a familiarity with the *entire* Word of God.

When Jesus said, "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4), surely He intended at the very least for us to read "every word."

Since "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16), shouldn't we read it?

Revelation 1:3 tells us, "Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near." God promises that those who read and heed His Word will be blessed. But only those who discipline themselves to do so will receive those blessings.

The main reason, remember, for disciplining ourselves is Godliness. We have learned that the Spiritual Disciplines are scriptural paths where we may expect to encounter the transforming grace of God. The most critical Discipline is the intake of God's Word. A 1980 survey by *Christianity Today* and the Gallup Poll supported this when it concluded that no factor is more influential in shaping a person's moral

and social behavior than regular Bible reading.⁴ If you want to be changed, if you want to become more like Jesus Christ, discipline yourself to read the Bible.

How often should we read it? British preacher John Blanchard, in his book *How to Enjoy Your Bible*, writes,

Surely we only have to be realistic and honest with ourselves to know how regularly we need to turn to the Bible. How often do we face problems, temptation and pressure? *Every day!* Then how often do we need instruction, guidance and greater encouragement? *Every day!* To catch all these felt needs up into an even greater issue, how often do we need to see God's face, hear his voice, feel his touch, know his power? The answer to all these questions is the same: *every day!* As the American evangelist D. L. Moody put it, "A man can no more take in a supply of grace for the future than he can eat enough for the next six months, or take sufficient air into his lungs at one time to sustain life for a week. We must draw upon God's boundless store of grace from day to day as we need it."⁵

Here are the three most practical suggestions for consistent success in Bible reading. First find the *time*. Perhaps one of the main reasons Christians never read through the entire Bible is discouragement. Most people have never read a thousand-page book before and get discouraged at the sheer length of the Bible. Do you realize that tape-recorded readings of the Bible have proven that you can read through the entire Book in seventy-one hours? The average person in the United States watches that much television in less than two weeks. In no more than fifteen minutes a day you can read through the Bible in less than a year's time. Only five minutes a day takes you through the Bible in less than three years. And yet the majority of Christians never read the Bible all the way through in their whole life. So we're back to the idea that it's primarily a matter of discipline and motivation.

Discipline yourself to find the time. Try to make it the same time every day. Try to make it a time other than just before you go to sleep. There's value in reading the Bible just before you drop off, but if this is the *only* time you read Scripture then you should try to find another time. There are at least two reasons for this. First, you will retain very

little of what you read when you're so tired and sleepy. And second, if you're like me, you probably do very little evil in your sleep. You need to encounter Christ in the Scriptures when it will still have an impact on your day.

The second practical suggestion is to find a Bible-reading plan. It's no wonder that those who simply open the Bible at random each day soon drop the discipline. There are inexpensive Bible reading plans available in all Christian bookstores. Many study Bibles contain a reading schedule somewhere within the pages. Most local churches can provide you with a daily reading guide also.

Apart from a specific plan, reading three chapters every day and five on Sundays will take you through the Bible in a year's time. Read three in the Old Testament and three in the New Testament every day, and you will finish the Old Testament once and the New Testament four times in a twelve-month span.

My favorite plan involves reading in five places each day. I begin in Genesis (the Law), Joshua (History), Job (Poetry), Isaiah (the Prophets), and Matthew (the New Testament) and read an equal number of chapters in each section. A variation of this plan is to read in three places daily, starting in Genesis, Job, and Matthew, respectively. The three sections are roughly the same in length, so you will finish them all about the same time. The great advantage of such a design is its variety. Many who intend to read straight through the Bible become confused in Leviticus, discouraged in Numbers, and give up completely by Deuteronomy. But when you are reading in more than one place each day, it's easier to keep up the momentum.

Even if you don't read through the Bible in a year's time, keep a record of which books you have read. Put a check beside a chapter when you read it or by the title of a book in the table of contents when you've completed it. That way, regardless of how long it takes, or in what order they're read, you'll know when you've read every book in the Bible.

The third suggestion is to find at least one word, phrase, or verse to *meditate* on each time you read. We'll look at meditation more closely in the next chapter, but you should recognize now that without meditation you may close your Bible and not be able to remember a single thing you've read. And if that happens, your Bible reading is not likely to change you. Even with a good plan, it can become a mundane chore instead of a Discipline of joy. Take at least one thing you've

read and think deeply about it for a few moments. Your insight into Scripture will deepen and you'll better understand how it applies to your life. And the more you apply the truth of Scripture, the more you'll become like Jesus.

We should all have the passion for reading God's Word of the man in this story. Evangelist Robert L. Sumner, in his book *The Wonder of the Word of God*, tells of a man in Kansas City who was severely injured in an explosion. His face was badly disfigured, and he lost his eyesight as well as both hands. He had just become a Christian when the accident happened, and one of his greatest disappointments was that he could no longer read the Bible. Then he heard about a lady in England who read braille with her lips. Hoping to do the same, he sent for some books of the Bible in braille. But he discovered that the nerve endings in his lips had been too badly damaged to distinguish the characters. One day, as he brought one of the braille pages to his lips, his tongue happened to touch a few of the raised characters and he could feel them. Like a flash he thought, "I can read the Bible using my tongue." At the time Robert Sumner wrote his book, the man had read through the entire Bible four times.⁶ If he can do that, can you discipline yourself to read the Bible?

STUDYING GOD'S WORD

If reading the Bible can be compared to cruising the width of a clear, sparkling lake in a motorboat, studying the Bible is like slowly crossing that same lake in a glass-bottomed boat.

The motorboat crossing provides an overview of the lake and a swift, passing view of its depths. The glass-bottomed boat of study, however, takes you beneath the surface of Scripture for an unhurried look of clarity and detail that's normally missed by those who simply read the text. As author Jerry Bridges put it, "Reading gives us breadth, but study gives us depth."⁷

Let's look at three examples of a heart to study the Word of God. The first is the Old Testament figure Ezra: "For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel" (Ezra 7:10). There's an instructive significance to the sequence in this verse. Ezra (1) "devoted himself," (2) "to the study," (3) "and observance of the Law of the Lord," (4) "and

to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel." Before he taught the Word of God to the people of God, he practiced what he learned. But Ezra's learning came from a study of the Scriptures. Before he studied, however, he first "devoted himself" to study. In other words, Ezra disciplined himself to study God's Word.

A second example is from Acts 17:11. Missionaries Paul and Silas had barely escaped with their lives from Thessalonica after their successful evangelistic work had provoked the Jews there to jealousy. When they repeated the same course of action in Berea, the Jews there responded differently: "Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true." According to the next verse, the result was, "Many of the Jews believed." The willingness to examine the Scriptures is commended here as noble character.

My favorite example of a heart to study the truth of God is in 2 Timothy 4:13. The Apostle Paul is in prison and writing the last chapter of his last New Testament letter. Anticipating the coming of his younger friend Timothy, he writes, "When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments." The scrolls and parchments Paul requested almost certainly included copies of the Scriptures. In his cold and miserable confinement, the godly apostle asked for two things: a cloak to wear so his body could be warmed and God's Word to study so his mind and heart could be warmed. Paul had seen Heaven (2 Corinthians 12:1-6) and the resurrected Christ (Acts 9:5), he had experienced the Holy Spirit's power for miracles (Acts 14:10) and even for writing Holy Scripture (2 Peter 3:16); nevertheless, he continued to study God's Word until he died. If Paul needed it, surely you and I need it and should discipline ourselves to do it.

Then why don't we? Why do so many Christians neglect the study of God's Word? R. C. Sproul said it painfully well: "Here then, is the real problem of our negligence. We fail in our duty to study God's Word not so much because it is difficult to understand, not so much because it is dull and boring, but because it is work. Our problem is not a lack of intelligence or a lack of passion. Our problem is that we are lazy."⁸

Besides laziness, part of the problem for some may be an insecurity about how to study the Bible or even where to begin. Actually,

starting is not so difficult. The basic difference between Bible reading and Bible study is simply a pencil and a piece of paper. Write down observations about the text as you read and record questions that come to your mind. If your Bible has cross-references, look up the ones that relate to the verses that prompt your questions, then record your insights. (If you're unsure what cross-references are or about how to use them, ask your pastor or another mature Christian.) Find a key word in your reading and use the concordance found in the back of most Bibles to review the other references that use the word, and again note your findings. Another way to begin is to outline a chapter, one paragraph at a time. When you finish that chapter, move on to the next until you've outlined the entire book. Before long you'll have a far stronger grasp on a section of Scripture than you had by just reading it.

As you advance in the study of the Book of God, you will learn the value of in-depth word studies, character studies, topical studies, and book studies. You'll discover a new richness in the Scripture as your understanding grows of how the grammar, history, culture, and geography surrounding a text affect its interpretation.

Don't let a feeling of inadequacy keep you from the delight of learning the Bible on your own. Books, thick and thin, abound on how to study the Bible. They can provide more guidance regarding methods and tools than I can in this chapter. Don't settle only for spiritual food that's been "predigested" by others. Experience the joy of discovering biblical insights firsthand through your own Bible study!

MORE APPLICATION

If your growth in Godliness were measured by the quality of your Bible intake, what would be the result? This is an important question, for the truth is, your growth in Godliness is greatly affected by the quality of your Bible intake. In His magnificent High Priestly prayer of John 17, Jesus asked this of the Father for us: "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (17:17). God's plan for sanctifying us, that is, for making us holy and Godly, is accomplished by means of "the truth"—His Word. If we settle for a poor quality intake of hearing, reading, and studying God's Word, we severely restrict the main flow of God's sanctifying grace toward us.

As I say this, I realize that it would be easy to cause guilt feelings

in us all (myself included) over past failures regarding the intake of God's Word. Above all, remember that Heaven's door is opened to us not by the works we do (such as the intake of God's Word), but by the work of God in Jesus Christ. Beyond that, let's apply the message of Philippians 3:13 to any previous inconsistency with our Bible intake and start "forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead" in this area.

This leads us to a final application question.

What is one thing you can do to improve your intake of God's Word? Unless providentially hindered, joining a group of like-minded believers to hear God's Word preached each week should be a minimum. Many Bible-believing churches provide more than one opportunity each week to hear God's Word. You may want to consider tapes of the Bible, sermon tapes, or Bible exposition on radio as options for increased hearing of God's Word. Set goals of earnestly attempting to read the Bible every day and completing the entire Book. Also, inexpensive workbooks and study guides on every book in the Bible and a multitude of topics are available in Christian bookstores. Besides launching out individually, join a Bible study group in your church or community, or even start a group study.

Whatever way you choose, discipline yourself for the purpose of Godliness by committing to at least one way of improving your intake of the holy Word of God. For those who use their Bibles little are really not much better off than those who have no Bible at all.

Let's finish this chapter with a substantial word of encouragement. It's from a helpful booklet, *Reading the Bible*, by a Welsh pastor named Geoffrey Thomas. Whenever he writes of reading the Bible, also think of hearing and studying it as well.

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 to you wonderfully great. So go on reading it until you can read no longer, and then you will not need the Bible any more, because when your eyes close for the last time in death, and never again read the Word of God in Scripture you will open them to the Word of God in the flesh, that same Jesus of the Bible whom you have known for so long, standing before you to take you for ever to His eternal home.⁹

NOTES

1. Peter Lewis, *The Genius of Puritanism* (Haywards Heath, Sussex, England: Carey Publications, 1979), page 54.
2. Princeton Religious Research Center, *100 Questions and Answers: Religion in America* (1989), cited in *USA Today*, February 1, 1990.
3. *Bookstore Journal*, as quoted in *Discipleship Journal*, issue 52, page 10.
4. Harold O.J. Brown, "What's the Connection Between Faith and Works?" *Christianity Today*, October 24, 1980, page 26.
5. John Blanchard, *How to Enjoy Your Bible* (Colchester, England: Evangelical Press, 1984), page 104.
6. Robert L. Sumner, as quoted in "Treasuring God's Word," *Our Daily Bread*, October 5, 1988.
7. Jerry Bridges, *The Practice of Godliness* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1983), page 51.
8. R. C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), page 17.
9. Geoffrey Thomas, *Reading the Bible* (Edinburgh, Scotland: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1980), page 22.

