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Q&A#140 Daily Quiet Time

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Today's question: "Evangelicals have been enamored with the "quiet time" of daily Bible reading and prayer, but it often seems to be focused on reading a chapter quickly, avoiding eisegesis as best as possible, and then praying through a short list. Do you have any thoughts on the typical approach to "quiet times"? Is "devotional" reading of Scripture different for you than other times you read scripture during the day? How does that connect to prayer? Thanks for your thoughts."

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, evangelicals have been enamored with the quiet time of daily Bible reading and prayer, but it often seems to be focused on reading a chapter quickly, avoiding eisegesis as best as possible, and then praying through a short list. Do you have any thoughts on the typical approach to quiet times? Is devotional reading of Scripture different for you than other times you read Scripture during the day? How does that connect to prayer? Thanks for your thoughts.

First off, if you have the practice of daily Bible reading in a quiet time, it's a very good practice to have. I suspect that most Christians do not, in fact, have a practice like this. If you are doing this every single day, you'll also find that you are keeping shorter accounts with God, that you're not just coming to God occasionally or intermittently or sporadically, but you're coming to God on a consistent and habitual basis, and when you fall out of that habit, it will be clearer that something has gone wrong.

It will encourage you to deal with God on a regular basis, and on that front at least, it's a very good habit to have. When it comes to Bible reading, it also has its advantages. For most people who have this practice of daily Bible reading, I suspect that the majority of their Bible reading occurs in the context of that daily practice.

Their exposure to Scripture is not limited to a Sunday morning or to other church services and to various occasions that are intermittent or irregular, but it's something that happens every single day, and there's a consistent habit of reading through the text. It's another thing that daily Bible reading does. You're not just reading odd passages here and there, ideally.

You're reading through the text. You're reading through a particular book, at least, or ideally, reading through the whole of the Bible in a period of time. It doesn't necessarily have to be a year.

It could be in a couple of years or maybe three years, but that practice of reading the Bible consistently, dealing with God regularly in prayer every single day, every single morning, maybe every single evening too, those things are very good practices. That's not to say that there aren't ways that it could be improved. For many people, I think, they will find, as I found growing up with this sort of practice, that the Bible does not really seem to fit into the models that we bring to it.

So we come to the text expecting to find devotional nuggets, promised texts, and maybe some sort of, failing that, some sort of examples to follow. But yet the text so often frustrates us in those expectations. So we come to the text expecting devotional insights, and then we reach a book like Leviticus, and it just does not seem to work for us.

Likewise, when we're looking for examples, we read through the stories of Genesis or the stories of Samuel, and the stories of judges, and the examples really do not seem to be answering the sort of questions and needs and concerns and problems that we have. There are some texts that are quite, they're hair-raising if you get to certain passages in Judges, for instance. There are other passages where I think it seems to lose a lot of its content if we just see it as a choice between faith and unbelief.

There's a lot more going on in the passage seemingly than that. And so I think many people find the text a frustration, maybe. Other people find it strange and daunting.

And for all these reasons, I think many people struggle with the practice of daily Bible reading. I certainly did, and as a teenager dropped out of it because it just wasn't working for me. Now, there are ways in which you can read your Bible better, I believe.

And I think those ways really answer to the sort of text that Scripture is. Scripture invites not just the sort of reading that we bring to it, well actually it doesn't invite that sort of reading at all, where we come to the text with a certain checklist that we have to go through of what we expect to find in a passage. And it doesn't usually work very well with that.

It doesn't usually answer our questions very well. Rather, what I found to be the most rewarding way of approaching Scripture is by learning to pay attention, to listen to what the text is saying, not to come with any questions or forearmed with a particular system that I want to fit it into. Rather, just pay attention.

Questions like, where have I heard this before? Is a good question to answer, to ask. And other questions that guide you in the act of paying attention, not just bringing a particular framework to bear upon the text. As you listen to the text carefully, what you find, I think, is that the text rewards meditation.

That the texts of Scripture are not texts that reveal all their treasures up front. Rather, you have to chew them over. And so, for me, my practice of Bible reading is very much one shaped by meditation.

I read the Bible chapter in the morning and then I'll be chewing over that passage for the rest of the day, thinking about it over a period of time. Now, the other thing I find is as I'm reading through books, I'm reading through larger sections of the text in a given period, I'm thinking about the larger arc of the narrative and how it connects with earlier things, how it will connect to later things, how it connects to other texts within the lecture around working through. I'll generally use the readings from the Order of the Morning service from the Book of Common Prayer.

But that sort of structure is very helpful for connecting texts together, for thinking about the movement of a text over a period of the movement of a particular book and how it's not just an isolated passage from which you need to extract promised acts, but it's a larger narrative as part of this great narrative of salvation. Now, most texts do not give up their riches quickly. You have to meditate upon them for a long time.

And even then, you'll find that there is much within them that mystifies you, that much within them that you do not easily discover the reason for, or you may never discover the reason for. I've found that, however, that reading the Bible in this way is immensely rewarding. It is a practice that changes the posture of the reader to the text.

No longer are you coming to the text forearmed with all your questions and frameworks,

but you're coming to the text just to be attentive and to hear what the text is saying. And then you're chewing it over all the way throughout the day. And so I find as I'm walking around doing odd chores in the house or as I'm walking into town to do particular things, that text that I've read in the morning will be in my mind.

I'll be chewing over it. And so this is very much part of the way that my reading of scripture in my devotions differs from other forms of reading. Other forms of reading, I'm still meditating upon the text to some extent, but there's a sense of the givenness of the text in my morning devotions.

I don't choose the text. It's given to me by a particular lectionary or by reading through the Bible in a particular period of time, whatever it is. And it forces me to do business with texts that maybe would not come most readily to me.

And so spending time chewing over that text over the period of the day will often yield surprising insights. Many of the insights that I write or speak about in various contexts are insights that have come from that sort of reflection. It takes a lot of patience.

These sorts of things don't emerge carefully, very quickly. Rather it's something that emerges from careful and sustained reflection upon the text. Now I've compared this in the past to putting a jigsaw puzzle together.

When you're doing a jigsaw puzzle, you're paying attention to a lot of different features and it takes a lot of patience and resistance to try and force things together prematurely. Rather you wait until things become clear and you move things into, first of all, turn over all the pieces, then you get the edge pieces and get out the fundamental structure with the corner pieces as well. Then you gather pieces into similar colours.

Then you focus upon the shapes of the pieces and then think about the ways that those illustrate or maybe suggest ways that they could fit together. And as you're doing the jigsaw puzzle, you're paying attention to both structure and to the content. And when you're dealing with scripture, you're doing something very similar.

You're gathering things together. First of all, turning over all the pieces, paying attention to everything and just laying it out and patiently waiting for things to take shape. In the process of doing a jigsaw puzzle, a jigsaw puzzle is completed largely by a process of sustained attention.

You're attending to the pieces and thinking about what shapes they have, how they would slot into other pieces, what colours they have on them and what patterns and how that might connect with others. And as you're reading scripture, you should be doing this sort of thing. That's a long process that requires quite a bit of meditation and reflection and chewing over the text and ruminating upon its patterns and structures.

And that's generally how I approach the text now. And I find that meditating upon the

text has also changed my approach from one looking for instant application, wanting the text to give me answers for particular things or devotional nuggets. I'm wanting the text to fit into my expectations.

But when I meditate upon the text, I allow the text to... I take the time to listen to the text, to allow the text to lead me where it wants to go. And I find that what I have instead is not so much direct application to my life as more time reflecting upon God's goodness and wisdom in scripture. That's something that often gets left out in evangelical readings of scripture that are so concerned with personal application being the point that you're driving towards.

Now if you're just reading the Bible as a literary exercise, then there's clearly something wrong there. But if you're reading the Bible just to apply it to your own life, there's probably something wrong there too. The Bible is not just about applying to our lives.

It's to draw our attention to God, to see the wonder of what he has done. And that's something I've found that has risen for me far more when reading the Bible this way than I found when reading the Bible in the past in a more typical evangelical way. As I read the Bible in this way though, many applications for my life do arise.

But they arise in a less direct way than they formerly did. They arise as I'm reflecting upon the text, as I'm meditating upon it, and I see how it directs me to God. And then I see also how it tells me more about Christ and these sorts of things.

But not as a direct thing. Rather it tends to be an indirect process. And through that I find that there are many ways in which I can grow my understanding of what I to do.

But it is something that takes time and patience. And so scripture is not the sort of text that just gives us everything up front. Rather God wants us to chew over things.

When you chew something over you find that it is more effective in making its message stick with you. When you have to work it out for yourself, when it's not just an answer that's given to you. It's something that you will have to think about.

You'll have to reflect upon. And scripture works that way a lot more than I think we recognize it doing. It's a text that really requires sustained thought.

And through that sustained thought and trying to reflect on how all the pieces fit together, how this part of scripture is part of a greater whole, how it fits into the Christian life. That is not something that's going to be solved in about five minutes reflecting upon a text. No, it will require a lot of your day just chewing over the text.

And that's how wisdom arises. Within scripture many of the deepest lessons of scripture are beneath the surface. Therefore the person who's going to dive down deep and reflecting upon the scripture at length will discover some treasure within there that

others have not found.

Now this is how I'd encourage you to read scripture. It's one that I've found to be immensely helpful for me myself. And it allows me to tarry with texts that do not readily reveal what they're about.

There are a lot of texts that are just mysteries to me. I'm chewing over them months after I last read them. And I'm just thinking about them.

They're in the back of my mind simmering away, various thoughts. But it's like this large pile of puzzle pieces. I know those pieces belong together somehow but I don't know how exactly.

And so when you're reading scripture I'd encourage you to just be a lot more patient with it. How does this fit into prayer? I think it fits into prayer in a number of different ways. First of all I will read a lot of scripture in my actual process of praying.

I will pray Psalms, and other things like that. I find also using the Book of Common Prayer. There's a lot of scripture just as part of that.

As part of your daily devotions you are reading out passages of scripture as part of that. Not just the explicit reading of a specific chapter or two. So there's that.

But also it's developing a prayerful habit in your approach to scripture. It's teaching you to be receptive and attentive in listening to scripture as God's voice. Not just seeing scripture as something to be churned through a certain technique or method to reveal certain things that you can apply to your life as some sort of life assistance or life coaching.

No, it's something that requires you to treat scripture as the Word of God that requires attention, devotion and reflection. That you're listening to the text in a different way. Trying to hear what God is saying within it.

Now that taking of time with the text, that chewing over the text is a spiritual practice itself. And the way that it permeates, runs throughout all these different cracks in my day, it really fills my day with the text. It's something that is also encouraged by the memorization of the text.

Now I haven't memorized the text as much as I would like to. But the practice of memorizing the text is another similar thing. Of taking the text into yourself and dealing with the text on a level more than just reading it quickly and trying to get the message out of it.

You won't get the message out of it. What you need to do is try and inhabit the world of the text. To imaginatively enter into that world and see what it might have to reveal to

you.

But that's something that occurs through as you patiently rub over the text again and again. Or explore these pieces and move them around in different ways. As occasionally it will reveal a flash of insight.

And some two pieces will come together in a way that opens up other pieces around them and shows where they belong to. Now that is something that I think is a practice that at its best will be a prayerful one. It's a practice that will be developing a rhythm also to your dealing with the text.

A slower rhythm where you're not actually expecting the text to move at your pace, but you're slowing down your pace to work with the text. And the text is something that's a constant companion throughout your day. And something that's always encouraging you to work with the text, with prayer, and then with your own reflections.

And bringing those things together I think is part of what a good practice of Bible reading will do. It will encourage you to deal with the text in a persistent and sustained way over the course of your day. And to do so in a always punctuated and pervaded by prayer.

Thank you very much for listening. If you have any questions please leave them on my Curious Cat account. If you'd like to support this and other videos and podcasts like it, please do so using my Patreon or my PayPal accounts.

God bless.