

Spiritual Exercises 4: Studying God's word

All the supermarkets are shut, you're hungry and there are no ready meals in the house – what do you do? (For the sake of this illustration, all the take-aways in a 5-mile radius have burnt down).

It's Wednesday, you're spiritually starving and your I-pod is broken so you can't download any sermons – what do you do?

Joking apart, there are many practical reasons for learning to study God's word for yourself. During his temptation, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy: "[we do] not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). Like meditation, study is a way of internalising God's word and allowing it to become part of us, our daily bread, in fact. In 1 Corinthians 2:16, Paul says this astonishing thing of believers: "we have the mind of Christ". But if we haven't internalised God's word, that's an empty, if not an arrogant, claim.

Studying God's word

- Increases our knowledge of God and His ways (Psalm 119:9-11)
- Is a source of pleasure, joy and delight (Psalm 1:2, Jeremiah 15:16)
- Is a means of cultivating intimacy in our relationship with God (John 14:21, 15:10)
- provide foundations for life (Matthew 7: 24-27)
- "primes the pump" for prayer (Daniel 9:1-4. Notice what Daniel was praying for!)
- Inspires "balance" and needful focus in the Christian life (Luke 10: 39,42)
- Restores the soul and gives wisdom (Psalm 19:7)
- Helps us understand and interpret or lives (Acts: 2:16 "this is what the Bible was talking about!")
- Enables us to fulfil the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20). We can only teach what we know.
- Transforms and blesses our life (James 1:22-25, 2 Corinthians 3:14-18)

Methods for Bible Study

As with any discipline, it helps if you know your own strengths and weaknesses. If you are just starting out, you might find it helpful to use Bible notes. Rather than make specific suggestions, because tastes vary, check what is on offer at our local Christian bookshop on Park Street. If you find you need the stimulus and encouragement of belonging to a group, there are church groups and BSF and KYB offer structured studies on single books (contact Nicola or Gill Skipp for more details).

Tools for Independent Bible Study

- Time and a place to be without interruptions
- Different versions of the Bible. If you speak another language, try using a Bible in that language.
- A Concordance that matches at least one of the versions of the Bible you are using
- A general Bible Commentary or one specific to the book you are studying
- Bible Handbook eg Lion Handbook to the Bible
- Paper or notebook

All the above are essential, and again available from our local Christian bookshop. Below are a couple of "extras"

- A Bible Dictionary eg W E Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament words
- A New Testament Greek Interlinear (why not? Etymology and meaning are fascinating!)

Choosing a passage:

Read the verses given above, and read before and after to see their context.

Read ahead for next week's sermon (chapter references usually given on the notice sheet)

Read a book. The book of Ruth is a short Old Testament book, reveals something of God's heart towards his people. There is an excellent commentary on Ruth in the "Bible Speaks Today" series.

Read an epistle, noting the characteristics of the Christian life.

Study a character, looking for how they model (or fail to model) Jesus' characteristics.

Choose a word or phrase to study and use a concordance to look up references. For each reference, ask Who?, What?, When?, Where? How? Why?

A method for Independent Study:

When you have chosen your passage, look into its context: when and to whom the book was written, and what comes immediately before and after your study passage. Check these in your Bible handbook or commentary. This is so that your conclusions are reasonable.

Use the acronym "SOIL" for these four steps to study.

S eek God through prayer: ask God to open your heart and mind, so that you can understand and apply what you have learnt. Ask for the Holy Spirit's help: His job is to "teach you all things and [] remind you of everything [Jesus has] said" (John 14:26) and "take from what is [Jesus'] and make it known to you." (John 16:13-15), including God's very thoughts (2 Corinthians 2:11).

O bserve what is going on, acting like a reporter. As you read, ask

- what is taking place?
- who is involved?
- where is this happening?
- when is this happening?

Read the passage three times: once quickly to grasp the whole passage; once again but lingering over selected verses; and one last time, more slowly. You are looking for the overall theme, repeated words or phrases, positive and negative parallels, true-to-life episodes. Little things like the tense of a phrase are worth noticing. You might find it helpful to read the passage in different versions of the Bible, and chase up words that catch your eye in the Bible dictionary.

I nterpret what you have discovered. Ask yourself why the writer said what he did, whether there are surprising inclusions or gaps, what you think the passage means. When you have done this for yourself, check your conclusions with Bible commentaries or handbooks.

L ive it! This is the most important part. Try this mnemonic: SPECS. Does the passage contain a Sin to give up, a Promise to claim, an Example to follow, a Command to obey, or a Stumbling block to avoid?

With grateful thanks to Gil Medina and Mon Lougee.

Next month: Fasting, for the purpose of Godliness. Contributions to Nicola (nicola.tzfeather@googlemail.com) by May 22nd 2010, please.