

*Discipleship 101: The Open-Book Test*  
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*1 Corinthians 15:1-8, John 2:13-22, Acts 8:26-40*

Today's final Scripture reading comes from Acts 8:26-40. Listen now to God's Word. "Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road -- the desert road -- that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth." The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea."

Do you still dream about having to take tests? Maybe it's because seminary isn't all that far behind me, but I still dream about having to take an exam where no matter what I do, I don't know the answers. I hate that dream. But one of the best things I remember about school are open-book tests. Often times you'd study, you'd try to get all those facts and figures into your head, and the day came and the teacher would hand out the test and say, "I've decided this one's going to be open-book." Now if you never learned the material at all, you'd still not do well. But an open-book test meant that you weren't going to fail if your memory faltered. If you forgot when Washington crossed the Delaware or whatever, you were still safe because, if you studied, you'd remember where to go in the book to find what you needed. There are times in life you don't have an open book in front of you; you've got to know your facts. But open-book tests taught me a lot about grace, how sometimes just a small bit of mercy like that could set your mind at ease and help you do your best.

As we continue our series on discipleship today, we get to the matter of Scripture, the Bible, God's Word. The first two weeks, we talked about baptism and openness to God's work in our lives. This week, we're moving on to a way we can follow Christ in a practical manner through opening Scripture. God has given us an open book in which we find everything we need to know about Him and His salvation; we won't fail the test if we follow what we find inside.

Today I want us to see how the Bible is so important for us as disciples...how studying it and knowing it grows us closer to God. In today's readings, Scripture gives the disciples insight into the workings of God and His Son, Jesus Christ, and the fulfillment of Scripture through Jesus gives them reason to believe in Him and reason to follow Him.

Many of us know the story of Jesus driving the merchants from the temple courts; it's found in all four gospels. But John's gospel tells it from a different angle. John is unique because he notes the disciples' reaction. They're probably freaked out – Jesus is getting violent, to the point of putting together a whip to chase the moneychangers away. What is He doing? But then they remember the words of Psalm 69:9 – “Zeal for your house will consume me.” Scripture gave them wisdom into what was going on. This was not an impulsive rampage; this was the work of the righteous Son of God removing those who had defiled God's holy place.

Then the story takes a turn – the Jewish leaders ask for a sign of Jesus' authority. Jesus says, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it up in three days.” He's referring to the temple of His body, not the physical temple. At first no one really understands, not even the disciples. But once Jesus is resurrected, they get it. The light bulb goes off, and they finally comprehend and believe scriptures like Psalm 22 that predict a suffering servant Messiah. When they see the wonderful and miraculous things Jesus is doing, they test them by the Bible and find He is fulfilling prophecies made long ago in Israel's history.

Our reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians shows Paul's reliance on Scripture to understand what has happened through Jesus' death and resurrection. He writes, “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,” and “he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.” When Paul says “according to the Scriptures,” he's saying that Christ's death and resurrection happened the way the Old Testament prophecies spoke about the Messiah. While the Scripture never straightforwardly said, “A man named Jesus will come on such and such a date and die and rise again and save people from their sins,” the hints are all over the Old Testament. Acts 17 and 18 describe Paul's custom of going to the synagogue when he first entered a city, reasoning with the people and proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah.

In our final passage, we see biblical knowledge in action. Philip ministers to a high-ranking eunuch from Ethiopia. He's reading from the book of Isaiah, and Philip asks him about it. They start studying together, and by the time they are finished, the Ethiopian is convinced by Philip's explanation of Scripture. He's baptized, and as a sign that he has believed the truth, God whisks Philip away to Azotus, leaving the Ethiopian man rejoicing. Church history records the beginnings of Christianity in Ethiopia were due to the eunuch's faith that he shared with others.

These passages show us that a working knowledge of Scripture is essential for disciples. It gives us solid ground on which to base our faith and to share our faith with others. Jesus' disciples didn't *feel* that He was the Messiah or preach faith in Him based on what they *felt*. They *knew* it. Their first line of defense was always Scripture. The Holy Spirit guided them, they felt the truth in their hearts, but they always went back to Scripture. It was there for them when they questioned what Jesus was doing. It was there for them when they stood trial before magistrates and kings and had to proclaim the gospel under threat of death. It was there for them like a rock when everything else stood against them. And so it stands for us.

But not only did Scripture give us a solid ground for faith, it draws us closer to God. When Jesus' disciples believed Scripture, when they saw Jesus fulfilling ancient prophecy, they not only believed *in* God, they *believed* God. All the facts they had were vitally important, but those facts pointed them towards a personal, saving relationship with Jesus Christ. Knowing the Scripture alone, without faith, won't save us. It's like having the words of a famous person, let's say Abraham Lincoln. We could memorize the Gettysburg Address and every other piece of correspondence Lincoln ever sent; we could know all the details of his life. And yet no one in this room will ever actually know Abraham Lincoln. The difference is this: Yahweh, the God of the Bible, is alive and well, and we can have a relationship with Him. We can know Him as our personal friend and savior if we allow the facts of Scripture to form a real and living faith in us.

Let's move to the practical side, the discipleship side, of knowing the Bible. *How* should we read the Bible as disciples? Maybe not the way we would expect. The primary reason we read these days, whether for work or for pleasure, is for information. I realized this the other day. I'm finally on the last book of an eight-book science fiction series. I've loved the whole thing. And yet I've gotten weary; I want to know the facts; I want to know how it all ends. I want for the good guys to triumph and the bad guys to get their comeuppance. It's been fun, but I'm reading to get to the ending. And that's a little sad because the joy of reading for pleasure is not about that at all.

We read for facts a lot these days. The Internet has changed the way we read. Long newspaper articles don't exist anymore. We look for short bits of information we can use. We tweet and Facebook messages that are barely a full sentence. We want to get to the point. Texting is huge because we want the details without the messiness of having a real conversation with someone else. The rhythm and flow of conversation, the desire for communication and intimacy – these are vital to relationship, and we are losing them in all our data.

We in the church have gotten sucked up into the information age too. We play along. Why is it that John 3:16 is the verse everybody holds up at sporting events? It's because it's the information of the gospel in a nutshell: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son so that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life." It's a fantastic verse, a beautiful description of what God has done for us. And yet many people never get past it. They get the facts of Christianity, they pray a prayer, and they think they're done.

Perhaps the Bible is meant to be read in a different way. After all, the Bible contains not only history but poetry and proverbs, prophecy and parables, personal letters and theological explanations. Many of us have tried to read it from cover to cover only to get lost or stuck in all the facts. When we read *The Story* together, we got the picture of the whole thing without some of the details that bog us down. Now, as those wanting to be Christ's disciples, perhaps there's yet another way to approach Scripture, to read it from the perspective of a student learning at the feet of the beloved Master. Not just for facts, not just for information, but for relationship.

I'm going to propose a way of reading Scripture daily to get into the Word of God and learn it in the manner the disciples did. We're going to remember it because it's the 3M method. Here are the three Ms: *measured portions*, *meditation*, and *memorization*. If we practice these on a regular basis as Christ's disciples, I believe we will draw nearer to Him through the Bible.

The first one: *measured portions*. If the Bible is new or difficult for you, setting a goal to read the whole thing is like planning to drink the ocean without a glass. Even for those who have dived into Scripture often, you can read page after page and still not be moved spiritually – it becomes work and information gathering. But when you set a reasonable pace, perhaps a chapter a day, maybe a little less, maybe a little more, you can read it in a way that you can build a relationship with God through it – and learn the facts too. If you read just a chapter a day of the New Testament, you’ll be through it in just over seven months. If you go through the whole Bible, you’ll be done in just over three years. If that still seems too challenging, even a few verses a day is a way to start.

Another thing with measured portions: they don’t have to be in order. If you’re frustrated with a section of Scripture because it seems dry or you just don’t get it, don’t get stuck; just move on. Some folks I know who do a lot of Bible reading read from Psalms or their favorite portions of the New Testament when they are working through a difficult portion of the Old Testament. Remember: the goal is to grow closer to God, not to feel obligated to slog through. When we read as disciples, we read to grow closer to our teacher.

Now does type of reading seem like it’s not enough? Like God won’t be happy with a short bit every day? Think about this...Jesus didn’t teach endlessly but in small, memorable parables the crowds thought and wondered about. Based on recordings of the Bible, the four gospels take eight hours and fifteen minutes to read. Take out all the narration and repetition and just leave what Jesus taught, and we’ve got just a few hours of His words. Jesus went from town to town teaching and preaching the message He had to share many, many times to different groups of people. So it’s OK to digest a bit at a time of what the Bible has to say.

If approaching Scripture in bite-size bits makes reading it easier, then we will also find the time to practice the second M, to *meditate* on Scripture. Psalm 1 teaches that the blessed man “delights in the law of the LORD and meditates on the law day and night.” The word “meditation” in the Old Testament means “musing” and “pondering.” It isn’t eastern meditation where you repeat a phrase over and over. Instead, this is giving serious thought to what you’ve read – contemplating its meaning and thinking about how God is speaking to you through it.

Meditating on Scripture takes us to the level beyond reading for information. Meditation brings us to a place where we, with the Holy Spirit’s guidance, apply the Bible to our lives. It’s in meditation that we realize how awesome and holy our God is, how incredible His love for us is, how much Jesus sacrificed for us just by coming as an infant child to rescue us, let alone His death on the cross. Meditating on God’s Word draws us into the story that God has been telling over the millennia. When we do it regularly, as the psalms tell us we must, we will find the encouragement and strength to get closer to God through other means as well, such as prayer. If you’re not sure how to meditate on God’s Word to get the most out of it, I suggest starting with a devotional book or magazine that helps guide your thoughts. I recommended some in this month’s newsletter article, and if you’d like more guidance on finding a devotional that’s right for you, just talk to me.

Let's look at the last M – *memorizing* God's Word. Memorization has gotten a bad rap as of late. With the advent of iPhones and laptops and what not, there's the thought that we can look up anything at any time...so why bother memorizing? Others of us have had a hard time memorizing things in the past so we think we're bad at it. But memorization is the way that we will keep God's Word in our hearts so that we, like the disciples of old, can have it available to us when we need it. You can't look up what you don't know to begin with.

In Jesus' day, the average 10-year-old Jewish boy had memorized the first five books of the Bible. Better students memorized the whole of Scripture by the age of 14. In that era, there were no Bibles to carry around, only scrolls that were kept in the synagogue. If you were to know Scripture, you had to memorize. This explains how Jesus' disciples were able to start putting the pieces together and comparing His life to the scriptural prophecies – they had it memorized. We see in the New Testament the constant recalling of Scripture because its writers had committed it to memory.

While the likelihood of us memorizing the whole of the Bible is extremely small, we can still start learning it little by little. I encourage you that as you read your Bible each week, find a short passage, a verse or two, that really stick out to you, and start reciting them during your days. Make a game out of it; see if you can remember it for a week, then two weeks. Try it over the course of a month or two and find out how much you can keep in mind. I know some of you do crossword puzzles and Sudoku to keep your mind sharp...if they can help, how much more will it help to memorize the Word of God that He has given us so we might know Him?

Maybe thinking about it like this will help you most of all...if you think of it as memorizing for the sake of facts, you'll lose it. But I've heard it said that the Bible is God's love letter to us, telling us about Himself and sharing with us the promises He has made to those who love and trust Him. If you've ever received a love letter, you know just how wonderful it can be. You remember certain parts of it because they thrill and excite you. If it was written well, it in fact makes you feel loved, and you'd commit it to memory just to experience it over and over again. God has sent a love letter to you, and the more you read it, the more you understand it and understand Him and love Him, the more you'll want to carry around His words in your heart.

As I started this morning, I mentioned the open-book test. In so many words, God is giving us one as well. All of us will one day be accountable to God...our destiny will be determined by whether or not we had faith in His Son as Savior and Lord and proved that faith through giving our lives over to Him daily. But the answers to the test, the proof we need to believe that Jesus is our Savior who desperately loves us, the encouragement we need to give all to Him who set us free by His shed blood...they're all in His Book, His Word, which is open to us. I ask us today, as disciples of the risen, living, and reigning Lord Jesus, let's dwell richly in His words, the Scriptures He has given us...let us learn from His words and find eternal life in Him.