

A Stubborn Source of Spiritual Stagnation

“I just need to be more disciplined.” We’ve probably all said these words at some point or another in regard to our spiritual life; our walk with Jesus. Underneath is a good, genuine, holy desire to go deeper with God, to know Him more intimately, and to make Him known more powerfully in our world. Unfortunately, however, though the heart behind these words is good, the line of thinking they communicate misses the mark. Certainly, self-discipline has its place in the Christian life, but nine times out of 10, the reason we feel stuck is not for lack of self-discipline, it is for lack of vision. This is a biblical principle that can also be perceived through the observation of human nature.

For example, one of my favorite writers has noted that English is the predominant language in the world today, not because it is the easiest to learn, but because of the vision attached to it. For those not born in America, the prospect of learning English carries with it the possibility of realizing the kind of life most of the world can only dream of. Once a person has caught a glimpse of this vision with their mind’s eye, they have all the fuel they need to propel them to do everything it will take to actualize it.

I have also found this principle to be true in my own experience. When I worked as a personal trainer, my first meeting with a new client was never a lecture about the need for them to be more disciplined. Rather, I would paint a picture for them of the incredible kind of life that awaited them in the world of health and fitness. Only when I saw their eyes light up did I know they had caught the vision, and only then did I know we were ready to begin training. Anything else would have been a waste of time, because I knew the journey would be too painful to endure without a compelling vision of

what it would produce, to carry them through it.

This same principle applies to us spiritually as well. If we have grown stagnant in our life with God, it is not because we've become lazy, it is because we've lost sight of a clear picture of life in the Kingdom of God as it truly is: better. than. anything. Most of us could probably offer a hearty "Amen!" to this proposition, but unless we can see it, unless some image of it has captured our imaginations and our hearts, we are dead in the water. We absolutely must catch this vision, because, similar to the training of the body, the journey to becoming more like Jesus is a painful one as well.

Thus we need to be able to see the beauty and the true freedom of being so constrained by the Spirit of God that, like notes and chords constrained by a scale, our lives play the music of pure righteousness they have always been meant to sing, automatically.

We need to be able to see how much better our lives could be if we were so completely at rest in the hands of our sovereign Father, so free from fear and worry and anxiety, that we could take a nap in a boat in the midst of the perfect storm.

We need to be able to see the radical kind of impact God would have through us if we were so free from love of self and money and so in love with Him that we gave as generously to others as He gives to us.

We need to see how blessed our children and our children's children would be long after we are gone if, instead of frustration, irritability and impatience, it were love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness and self-control that flowed naturally from us.

We need to be able to see how wonderful and Christ-exalting our lives would be if we were the kinds of people who, when reviled, did not revile in return, but instead, entrusted ourselves to the One who judges justly.

We need to be able to see that nothing compares to the adventure of being caught up with God in the cosmic drama of Him reconciling all things to Himself.

By now, I hope you are wondering how it is that this vision of life in God's Kingdom is caught (or re-caught). We all know Scripture is our source of revelation from God, so naturally the Bible will be central. But did you know that it is entirely possible, in fact, all too easy, to read the Bible and yet miss catching this vision altogether?

This is because in order to catch this vision, we must allow ourselves to be caught by a living and active Scripture that is sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

In other words, all of this hinges, simply, on how we approach the Bible. So, here are some questions we must ask ourselves: Are we reading it like an encyclopedia for information? For theological knowledge that will make us feel good about ourselves because we can rightly answer the questions of our friends or congregants? Do we come to "master the text," to control it by trying to make it serve us?

Or do we come to it humbly, in a spirit of continual repentance, ready and willing to be laid bare by it, and to let it challenge our high opinions of ourselves and our perspective? Do we come ready and willing to listen, to yield, to submit ourselves to it, to be mastered by it, to let it control us, to take us wherever it will? Do we take our time with it, meditating on it, pondering it, imagining ourselves in its stories, and in so doing, letting it seep down into our very souls?

Ironically, the former is necessary for the latter. We need to understand the informational aspects of Scripture—the context, the author's intent, historical-cultural background and so on

so we can discern the truth in our meditations. But if information is as far as we ever go, we will always lack the vision necessary for a continually transforming life. We must also come to the Bible with faith to believe that it is as alive as it says it is, and a genuine desire to be formed, rather than merely informed, by it. For the kind of vision that we need cannot be acquired with the head; it can only be received with the heart. {eoa}

*Reprinted with permission from Strategic Renewal. Copyright ©2017 **Robert Naughton**. All rights reserved. Robert Naughton is the director of ministry development for strategic renewal and the 6:4 Fellowship; a husband to Brie; and a father to River, Beau and Shiloh. He holds a Master of Divinity in spiritual formation and soul care from Denver Seminary.*