

The Word Will Transform You

A proven formula for spiritual growth and transformation combines the right approach to Bible study with the practice of Christian disciplines.

GOD, IN HIS SOVEREIGN GRACE AND outrageous love, has given us in the Bible a written revelation of who He is and what His purposes are for humanity. There is no book that is remotely close to achieving the significance and influence of this one. But the intrinsic power and greatness of the Bible does not make it easy for us to receive the life it offers.

In point of fact, we can often use the Bible in ways that stifle spiritual life or even destroy the soul. The source of the problem is rooted in the two most common objectives of Bible study: (1) The practice of studying the Bible for information or knowledge alone and (2) the tendency to study specific passages of the Bible that speak to particular needs rather than seeking whole-life discipleship to Jesus.

What we must face up to about these two common objectives for studying the Bible is that they are, in fact, ways of trying to control what comes out of the Bible rather than a means of entering the process of transforming our whole life into Christ-likeness.

To receive from the Bible the life “with God” that is portrayed therein, we must be prepared to have our dearest and most fundamental assumptions about ourselves called into question. We must read humbly and in a constant attitude of repentance. Only then can we gain a thorough and practical grasp of the spiritual riches that God has made available to all humanity in His written Word.

THE “WITH GOD” LIFE The proper outcome of studying the Bible is growth in the supernatural power of love—the love of God and of all people. When we turn to Scripture in this way our

reason for “knowing” the Bible and everything it teaches would be that we might love more and know more of love.

The Bible is all about human life “with God.” The name “Immanuel,” meaning in Hebrew “God is with us,” is the title given to the only Redeemer because it refers to God’s intent for human life—namely, that we should be in every aspect a dwelling place of God. The unity of the Bible is discovered in the development of life “with God” as a reality on Earth, centered in the person of Jesus. We might call this the Immanuel Principle of life.

This dynamic with-God life is on nearly every page of the Bible. To the point of redundancy we hear that God is with His people.

The river of life flows through the Bible into the thirsty wastelands of the human soul. Once we decide to surrender freely to it, we must learn how it is done. And we must learn how to help others receive that life as their own.

In seeking to discover the with-God life, it is helpful to read the Bible in four distinct ways:

Literally. We enter into the original dynamics of Scripture: struggling with Abraham over the offering up of his son; puzzling with Job at the tragedies of life; bowing in awe with Mary at the Messianic promise.

In context. This means allowing the way in which the author depicted life with God to establish the standard for understanding our life with God today.

In conversation with itself. We seek to understand how the whole of Scripture gives structure and meaning to each of its parts. The unfolding drama of Scripture often raises puzzling questions, which are resolved only when more obscure and difficult passages are held under the light of clearer, more straightforward passages.

In conversation with the historic witness of the people of God. We read the Bible in conversation with church fathers, theologians and others, including wise interpreters of Scripture today. This shows us the multifaceted ways the Immanuel Principle is experienced in ordinary life.

But the with-God life is no more automatic for us than it was for those who walk across the pages of our Bible. Indeed, the very reason for the Bible is so that Scripture itself will be a primary means for the discovery, instruction and practice of the spiritual disciplines, which bring us more fully into the with-God life.

THE ROLE OF THE DISCIPLINES The spiritual disciplines are the God-ordained means by which each of us places our body before God as “a living sacrifice” (Rom. 12:1). By this process we become, through time and experience, the kind of people who naturally express the fruit of the Spirit (see Gal 5:22-23).

Through all this, God is with us. Christ is our ever-living teacher. The Spirit will guide and direct us. Our only tasks are to listen and obey.

We cannot by direct effort make ourselves into the kind of people who can live fully alive to God. Instead, we train with appropriate spiritual disciplines, by which we do what we can do in order to receive from God the ability or power to do what we cannot do by direct effort.

By fasting we can learn that “one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord” (Deut. 8:3, NRSV).

By choosing to study, we learn how the mind conforms to the order upon which it concentrates, which is precisely why we seek to turn our minds toward all things true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent and worthy of praise (see Phil 4:8). And by choosing actions of solitude we can become intimately acquainted with the many things that

control us, so we can be set free from them by the power of God.

THE PLACE OF GRACE We are not just saved by grace, we live, pray, fast, study, serve and worship by grace. All the disciplines are permeated by the enabling grace of God (see Phil. 2:13).

But grace never means inaction or total passivity. We will encounter multiple moments of decision in which we must engage the will, saying yes to God's will and to God's way, as the people of God have been challenged throughout history.

God already loves us utterly and perfectly, and our complete acceptance is the free gift of God through Jesus Christ our Lord. But if we ever hope to "grow in grace," we will find ourselves engaging in effort of the most strenuous kind.

As Jesus says, we are to "strive to enter through the narrow door" (Luke 13:24, emphasis added). And Peter urges us to "make every effort to support [our] faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love" (2 Pet. 1:5-7, emphasis added).

As you read the Bible, be on the lookout for the formation—indeed, the transformation—of those who walk across its pages. Pay attention even to those who resist God's initiatives and are never really formed in Christ-likeness.

Pay special attention to those who do come through on the other side—albeit with many slips and falls. Note their joy, their peace, their strength and their love. They are the ones who are experiencing fully the Immanuel Principle, the with-God life. Then, go and do likewise.

Read a companion devotional.

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