

The Discipline Of The Word

Valley Center January 5, 2007

The Holy Bible is God's appointed textbook for truth and salvation. Paul affirmed to young Timothy, "From a child you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." II Timothy 3:16, 17.

The message the Lord has laid on my heart this week is a simple one. It is to encourage each of us to each day seek His wisdom through the study and contemplation of His Word. We stand at the beginning of New Year, 2008. We are at a crossroads in time. What will be our practice, our life pattern as we approach this fork in the road? In ancient times King Nebuchadnezzar sought wisdom as he came to a dividing point, but it was from a source other

than God. "For the king of Babylon stands at the parting of the road, at the fork of the two roads, to use divination: he shakes the arrows, he consults the images, he looks at the liver." Ezekiel 21:21.

Those things he was doing back then were all supposed to help you gain understanding. The "wise men" would confer with their idol images to see if they could obtain wisdom. They would shake arrows in a quiver, then dump them on the ground like "pick-up-sticks" and study the pattern they made as they fell, to discern the future. A goat might be killed and its liver examined like a Rorschach test to extract some divine portent. Don't laugh too hard: some of the things people do today to try to gain knowledge aren't any better. Most people rely on their own wisdom to make choices, but human experience, unmixed with divine counsel, is faulty.

My appeal to you, as we stand at this "fork of the road," just beginning 2008, is that we will begin each morning studying not the "goat livers" or "fallen arrows" of today, in which there is no wisdom, but the Word of God, which is able to make us wise in God's wisdom. Where else can we find so potent a source of information about the character and plans of our God? Where else can we find so fertile a source of information about our past and how we got here? Where else can we find so reliable a source of information

about what the future holds? What else will put you in such a close contact with Him? It's true that we can learn a lot about God from nature, sometimes called "God's second book." There's much in nature that can teach us about His love. But the fact is that nature, like man's nature, is marred by sin. There are thorns on the roses. It's possible to look at nature and arrive at conclusions that are incorrect about nature's Creator.

It's true that we can study history and find "His Story." But because history contains the record from man's point of view, it can lead to conclusions that are far from divine truth. Philosophies of life that are birthed by man's intellect are bound to be filled with error.

It's true that He has given us the Holy Spirit, Who speaks to our minds and consciences. But the Holy Spirit's most concrete method of communication is through the Word, which our text says is given by "inspiration." You can see the root "spire" in the word "inspiration," which has to do with "wind" or

"breath," as in "perspiration," "respiration," "aspiration" and "expiration." Even the word "Spirit" comes from that root. When Paul wrote

the word to Timothy, he used a word which means literally "God-breathed," which takes us back to the origin of man in Eden. It was there that "God breathed" and what happened? Adam came to life! And so it is true that His Spirit, His breath, is likewise active in this Book, to make it the Word that is "living and powerful." Hebrews 4:12.

Speaking of Jesus, we're told that "The Word became flesh and dwelled among us." John 1:14. He was, of course, the true "living Word," God in the flesh. There was an incomprehensible combination of the divine and human represented in Christ. He was the Prophet Who spoke most clearly about what God is. He said, "He who has seen me, has seen the Father." John 14:9. He is the "express image of His person." Hebrews 1:3. It would have been wonderful to sit at His feet as did Mary and others and hear Him speak the words of truth. But He has gone back to heaven. In His place He has given us His Spirit Who speaks through His written Word. Today, it is this Book that provides the clearest insight into His character, nature, plans and contains the information we need about our past and future to make intelligent choices in this life.

The Bible is God's appointed means to grow our faith. We are told that "God has dealt to each one a measure of faith." Romans 12:3 But how does faith grow? Paul replies to that question, "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." Romans 10:17.

How important is it that we read the Bible to find out about God? One time Jesus told a parable about a man who had been a poor beggar serving a rich master. In the story, both died and the beggar went to Paradise and the master went to the other place. In the story, the master asked that Lazarus, the name of the beggar, might bring some cool water to put on his tongue, but was told that a "great gulf" had been "fixed," and that it was not possible. Then he said, "Then let him come back and warn my brothers so they won't end up where I am." The response given to that question is provocative. "No, they have 'Moses and the prophets'" (that is, the Scriptures). "But," the rich master said, "If one rose from the grave and went and talked to them, they would repent." "No," came the somber reply, "if they don't listen to Moses and the prophets, they wouldn't be persuaded if one rose from the dead." (See Luke 16:19-31)

What a solemn truth! You might think that the word of someone rising from the grave would be convincing, but we're taught here that if one isn't persuaded by the Scriptures, neither would he or she be influenced by the spectacular testimony by one who was resurrected. History confirmed the truth of this parable: shortly after Jesus related this, one was resurrected from the grave, and it "happened" that his name was Lazarus, but they still didn't believe. And Jesus Himself was resurrected and most still refused to believe!

What this means is that I might sit back and expect God to something stupendous in order to convince me of His truths, and then I would believe, but probably that's not going to happen. The fact is that His Book, which contains all I need to find Him, is available. If I don't come to faith through the Scriptures, I probably wouldn't find permanent faith through some spectacular event.

Our brother Peter addressed this very point when he declared "We have the 'more sure' Word of prophecy." II Peter 1:19. The word "more" is a comparative, and invites relationship. The Word is "more sure" than what? If

you read the preceding verses, you will see that Peter is speaking of his experience on the Mount of Transfiguration, when something indeed spectacular took place. It was on this mount that Christ "appeared in glory" with Moses and Elijah. His clothing shone brilliantly. A dazzling light bathed the mountaintop. One who had been resurrected, Moses, was there, as well as one who had been translated, Enoch. What a spectacle!

But as awesome as that scene was, Peter pronounced the Word "more sure." That's because the "spectacular" can fade, just as the light eventually dimmed on that sacred spot. While human curiosity seeks out and delights in the stupendous, the "eye-candy," most often the impressions created by that means diminish through time.

No, it is something not quite as "dazzling" that God has appointed as the channel for the wisdom of salvation. It is what could pass as ordinary paper and ink. It is the Bible that God intends to be the primary source of His truth.

- 1 Providential guidance in our life walk can be heartening.
- 2 Glimpses of His goodness seen in nature can be uplifting.
- 3 Whispers from His Comforter can be encouraging.

But the primary source of truth about God and life are found in the Scriptures. Should we not take full advantage of this great Repository of information? You may say, "Yes, I believe the Bible. I accept it as God's Book." But my question to you, my challenge to you, as we begin 2008 together is: Will you spend some time each day in study of this Book? If you read only three or four chapters a day, you will read the entire Bible in a year. Have you ever read the entire Bible through? What a blessing you will find! There's nothing "magical" about January, but it's a convenient time to start something new.

This daily Bible reading might seem too simple. It might seem "so simple" that like leprous Namaan you might initially reject this method of discovering new life. But it works, just like bathing in muddy Jordan did for Namaan! I give you my personal assurance on this.

If you will spend time with God and His Word as you start each day, you will find Him becoming active in your life in a dynamic way. But it has to be

a priority, a commitment. When we went to graduate school in Michigan, we

lived in an apartment complex. I think our address was "Garland E-29." I have imagined now that I live in "Cox B-4". That's not a real address, but I visualize an address plaque above my bedroom door that says "B-4", which to me says, "Before (B-4) you leave this room and begin the activities of your day, read His Word." That is my covenant with God, and He has honored His covenant by changing my life, and promising to change it more and more.

Someone asked me a short time ago, "How do you study the Bible?" For me, it's very simple. My answer is, "Just read." That's basically all there is to it;

"just read." Don't try to make it complicated. I don't want to sound facetious, but it's not much different than if someone came to you and said, "How do you eat?" Well, I suppose you could get very technical and try to describe the precise movements of hand, fork, food and mouth. But for most of us it's a relatively simple process. We just eat. And somehow that food provides the fuel for our body cells so that life, on the physical level, continues. That's really all there is to it. You just eat. And with respect to the spiritual life, that's really all there is to it also. Just read.

Certainly you want to ask God to lead you and instruct you as you begin. You want to invite the Holy Spirit to speak to you as you read His Word. But "just read." Most often what holds us back from this blessed experience is not being confused or misled about the technique of a daily devotional walk with Christ; it's just lack of commitment to this priority.

Of course, there are times when you want to "study" and confer with the tools available that allow you to discover hidden word meanings or helpful historical backgrounds. But for the most part, the best advice I can give someone is to "just read." You will come upon things that you at first won't understand, but it will be amazing how those things will be cleared up later. As you continue to read, you will discover that one part of the Scripture illuminates another, so that in time more complete and accurate understandings will surface. You will know the truth of Solomon's words, "The path of the just is like the shining sun, that shines ever brighter unto the perfect day." Proverbs 4:18.

And by the way, my challenge to you is not just to read the Bible once. This pattern of spending time with God in His Word is something we need each day. It's like the painting of the Golden Gate Bridge; when you get to the

other end, it's time to begin again. I have full confidence, though, that if you do, my encouragement to start again won't really be necessary, because you will have received so great a blessing that you won't want to stop.

A few days ago, just before Christmas, I was visiting someone in a skilled nursing facility. The Lord had impressed me to read the story of the birth of Jesus to this dear saint, so I asked her if that would be alright. She said, "Yes," so I began reading the story as it is recorded in Luke chapter 2. After I had read the part about the shepherd's visit, I paused and said something like, "That is how the birth of Jesus is related." Then I heard a voice say, "Don't stop." But it wasn't the lady I was visiting that said this; the voice came from behind the curtain that separated her from her roommate. I quickly poked my head behind the curtain and introduced myself. And yes, I continued reading from the Bible!

Those two words, though, remained in my mind, and I pass them on to you. "Don't stop." Keep going; keep reading. God has more of Himself to reveal to you. He has insights He wants to give to you. Even if you've read the Bible completely through, there's much more! There's a wide Pacific of insight, encouragement, information and most of all, relationship.

Each time you read, God will show you something new. Let me give you an example of how this works. Just this week I came upon a verse that spoke to me in a way I hadn't seen before: "On that day I lifted My hand in an oath to them, to bring them out of the land of Egypt into a land that I had searched out for them, flowing with milk and honey, the glory of all lands." Ezekiel 20:6. Now, I've read that text before, but this time the Lord showed me something new. The context here concerns Israel in Egypt, just before the Lord led them out of bondage and on to Canaan. But what this passage said made me think: didn't God tell them to send the spies into the land before they entered? That's what it looks like, when you read the story in Numbers 13. But the account in that chapter is an "abbreviated" form of the story. In Deuteronomy we read that it was the people who came to Moses with that plan. "And every one of you came near to me and said, 'Let us send men before us to let them search out the land for us, and bring back word to us of the way by which we should go up, and of the cities into which we shall come.'" Deuteronomy 1:22.

What I see now, is that even before they left Egypt, according to what Ezekiel said, God had searched out the land for them and concluded that it

was a land flowing with milk and honey. They didn't need to send any spies.

But, because of their lack of faith in His leadership, as they approached the border of Canaan they proposed the plan, and God, as He does so often when we insist on our own way, went along with it. But what happened? Like the many other occasions when this progression of events took place, the result was disastrous! They spent the better part of four decades in the wilderness wandering because they didn't believe that He would take care of them. How much better it would have been if they had trusted that where He

was leading was good for them. No spies were needed! As you continue to read, you will find that new light streams across your path.

When should you read the Bible? I like to read in the morning, so that before any distractions or interferences can engross my mind, I've spent time with Him. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and read.

A few days ago we pointed our car northward to visit our moms in northern California, meaning that we would be on Interstate 5. There's a patch of freeway there where not much else exists besides open range, orchards and hayfields. When that stretch opened, about every 25 miles or so, gas stations were planted so that there would be fuel stops. I had discovered, though, that the price of gas in many of those locations was a bit higher than average. So, whenever I have to make this trip, I try to strategically fill up before we get into that section, and last it out until we're past it. For me, that means gassing up at the Arco on Lyons Avenue near Magic Mountain, and then I'll be okay until we get to Louise Avenue in Lathrop, near Tracy, where the prices are more reasonable again. I compare that with reading the Bible. I find that my day goes much better if I "fill up" with the wisdom of His Word in the morning before getting into the other activities of the day.

But you can read anytime, anywhere. I've discovered that it's good to read His Word when there are times you must wait, like at the doctor's office. Do you really get much benefit from those dated magazines they have for you there? It can be a form of witnessing, as well. One day I had to have new tires for our car, so while I was waiting in the Discount Tire store, I read from the Bible. A worker who was tidying up and washing windows came up to me and said quietly, "Great books, I and II Samuel." I hadn't noticed that he was watching, and I wasn't reading "to impress" anyone. I hadn't spoken a word to anyone. I was just reading. But people will see that you

have chosen to read the Book. It will be a testimony of your faith.

Read while you're on that commuter plane, or on the bus. Some years ago I presented this same challenge and there was a saint in the congregation who decided to accept it. This dear lady worked at a bank in San Diego and rode the bus each day to and from her business. On her commute, she decided to read the Bible. She read the Bible through and went on to read commentaries

along with the Bible. Did it affect her life? After she retired, she was led to become a missionary and serve the Lord full time. Fill up those "empty moments" by reading His Word!

I remember while waiting in the airport at JFK on a mission trip a year ago, I saw a young man reading his Bible. I was blessed and encouraged by that, and went up to him and began a conversation about Christianity. God will bless someone through your ministry. Someday, as you read from the Bible, someone will come up to you and begin a conversation with you on spiritual themes because of your witness, or ask a question of you about your faith.

Just read!

Why should we read the Bible? Our text says that it's "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." Someone might say, "I accept the Bible and Jesus, but don't talk to me about doctrine." Actually, that's not possible! The Bible's stated purpose is to give us "doctrine." The word "doctrine" just means "teaching." Remember what Jesus said, in His parting farewell? He commissioned us to "Go therefore and make disciples (this word comes from a root which means

"teach") of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you." Matthew 28:19, 20.

It's important that we know the truth. There is a great deceiver out there who is intent on misleading us into error and death. Knowing the truth about

God and His ways is a vital part of our salvation. Those who are lost are described as those "who did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved." II Thessalonians 2:10. Notice how the Word of God equates salvation with knowing, receiving and loving the truth, or correct

teachings about God. The Bible is God's prescribed Sourcebook of truth. Many will be in the class who have neglected to search out truth as hidden treasure, and will therefore be betrayed by Satan's deceptions.

Peter says that we should always be ready to give an answer as to the reason of our faith. I Peter 3:15. Don't be like the person who, when asked about his faith said, "I believe what my church believes."

"Well," his questioner continued, "what does your church believe?"

"My church believes what I believe."

"Okay, what do you and your church believe?"

"We believe the same thing."

Know what you know. It's important! And all the information you need is in this Book, if you'll just read!

But the most important reason for reading this book is not to obtain facts; it's to experience a life-changing encounter. Yes, if you read this Book each day your knowledge of Bible doctrine will increase. But that's not the most important reason for reading. The most important reason is that when you read from this Book, you are put in touch with God. No one is ever the same when they've been with Him.

In Ezekiel 46:9 we read, "When the people of the land come before the LORD on the appointed feast days, whoever enters by way of the north gate to worship shall go out by way of the south gate; and whoever enters by way of the south gate shall go out by way of the north gate. He shall not return by way of the gate through which he came, but shall go out through the opposite gate." What this text says to me is, when you worship the Lord (including the reading of His Word), you're not the same as you were before. You can't leave the same way you came. You're different having encountered the Creator God. What do we read about the Wise Men after they worshiped the infant Christ? They went back by a different way, didn't they? (See Matthew 2:12). In the same way, you and I will be on a "different road" when we spend time with Him. We won't be the same as before. David's

testimony, "The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul" will be fulfilled in our lives. Psalm 19:7.

When you spend time with Him each day, you will find Him to be a personal

Friend. You will find that the life the Bible talks about will become more and more real. You will know what the songwriter was talking about as you watch "the things of earth will grow strangely dim." You will find yourself more and more comfortable in talking about heavenly things than the things that concern this life.

Knowing the God the Bible reveals gives peace and freedom from guilt. Terrance was known in life a rough and ready rebel. His childhood was far from ideal. When he was only six months old, his father left home. His mother Jullian was a teenager herself and struggled with alcoholism. She was more interested in partying than parenting. When he was six, tired of taking care of him, his mother left him in the care of his uncle Claude Thomson on a farm in Missouri. Overcome with guilt, his mother would come and get him periodically, but then Terrance would get in trouble and she would abandon him with Uncle Claude again for extended periods of time.

Finally, he left Missouri and joined a traveling circus for a short time, then went to live in Los Angeles with his mother, who had remarried. Life was not much better there, where the step-dad beat Terrance, and the boy began to hang out with gangs and got in trouble with the law frequently. So, at age fifteen, Jullian signed a court order declaring her son to be "incorrigible" sent him to the California Junior Boys Republic, a reform school in Chino. Terrance tried to run away but was caught.

A year and a half later, he left the school and worked as a sailor, lumberjack and spent time in the oil fields of Texas. At 17, Terrance joined the Marines for three years. His unsettled ways followed him in the service, spending time in the "brig" for going AWOL.

After an honorable discharge, Terrance, moved to New York City and through the influence of a girlfriend, took up an interest in acting. Eventually he made it big and was one the highest paid actors, but his wayward living continued to follow him in his Hollywood career, and though he had tried to find fulfillment through many of the things the world offers, he had no

peace in his heart. Alcohol, failed marriages, drugs and loose living had left their scars. On August 9, 1969, he had planned to attend a party at the home of Sharon Tate, but a last minute change in plans spared him from being one of the Manson murder victims.

He contracted lung cancer and began an intensive search for answers to the questions of life. Eventually he went to a crusade, where one of Billy Graham's associates was giving the message and he gave his heart to the Lord. He still had many questions, though, and sent word that he wanted to speak with Billy Graham personally. A connecting flight in Los Angeles allowed Dr. Graham to spend a few hours with the actor in his limousine. Terrance told him that he believed in Jesus Christ, but wondered how he could be sure that he had eternal life. He wasn't sure that someone with such a sinful past could have reason to hope.

Billy referred him to Titus 1:2 where it speaks of the "hope of eternal life which God, who cannot lie, promised before time began." At that point, Terrance got very excited and said, "What was that verse again?" He asked for a paper and pencil so he could write it down, but instead, Billy gave him his Bible.

Later, in Mexico seeking some experimental medical help for his cancer, Terrance died in 1980. He was found with a peaceful smile on his face and Billy Graham's Bible open on his chest, with his finger laying on Titus 1:2. He was born with the first name Terrance, but throughout most of his life he was known by his middle name, Steve. This is the conversion story of Steve McQueen that most don't know about.

"Read the Bible every day.
As you do, take time to pray
He will lead you, He will guide
He will make you new inside."

So I ask you today, will you covenant with me to spend time each day with God and His Book? Will you make it a priority, a commitment that you will honor each and every day? Will you let nothing rob you of your appointment

with Him? Will you allow His Spirit to speak to you through His Word to give you the instruction, the teaching, the encouragement, the strength and the wisdom that only He can give?