



LOVE GOD

RELATE TO GOD

Confession

Let's be honest—a confession of sorts.

We've been told to read our Bibles. Yes, we suspect there's some wisdom to this, so we nod and agree, this is something we should do. But "should do" items are not the same as "want to do" items. We should eat our vegetables, floss, and exercise 20 minutes per day. This does not mean we do these things, and reading Scripture seems to fit nicely on this list.

Truth be told, reading Scripture is sometimes boring.

Maybe we hear it read from the front of a church. The person reading goes on and on, and we're completely lost. We quietly wonder: Is anyone really listening? Or maybe we're inspired to pick it up ourselves. We find a passage that looks promising, and in short order, our eyes cross. If this is supposed to be a meaningful experience, we wonder: How does this happen? How do we position ourselves with Scripture so it's as meaningful as some claim it to be?

Christ's Perspective

When addressing the religious leaders of his day, Jesus made a piercing observation about their approach to Scripture that is helpful for our purposes here.

You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.
(John 5:39-40)

That's fascinating.

These leaders diligently studied the Scriptures thinking they'd gain life, but the Scriptures were intended to lead them to another end and not be an end in themselves. Rather than letting Scripture inspire and inform their worship of God, they worshipped Scripture as if Scripture itself is god. Scripture testifies not just to something, a collection of beliefs and ideas, but to Someone, the very personhood of God.

So engaging Scripture is a movement from the pages to a person, the person of Christ.

Why is this important?

Maybe Scripture is boring when it's treated as dry words on a page rather than words from God that invigorate a living and breathing relationship. Maybe Scripture is frustrating when rather than coming to Scripture humbly to hear the voice of God, we come to Scripture arrogantly in search of justifying our own ideas and our own agenda. Or maybe there are aspects of Scripture that are simply an acquired taste. Maybe we're experiencing the normal and understandable reality of reading from pages that are new to us, and we simply need to exercise perseverance. Maybe it's all of these or some of these, but whatever it is, if there is truly the possibility of an encounter with God, there's something in this worthy of our attention.

What is Scripture?

Let's not assume the essentials. What is Scripture?

Debate has raged for centuries over this very question. We will not attempt to resolve all tensions here, but it is important we know what Scripture itself claims to be.

Two passages inform us significantly.

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

(2 Timothy 3:16-17)

This brief statement describes Scripture as "God-breathed." Hear carefully how Peter describes this very concept from a different angle.

For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

(2 Peter 1:21)

So Paul, writing to Timothy, refers to Scripture as "God-breathed," and Peter, writing to followers of Christ everywhere, describes how the prophets of Scripture "*were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*" If prophets were carried along by the Spirit as God breathed his words through them, we would expect to experience at least two attributes of Scripture. First, we would expect Scripture to have the profound and distinctive voice of God. And second, we would expect to feel the unique presence, personalities, and writing styles of the various prophets who were themselves carried by God's Spirit in their writings.

The Bible is a profound and eclectic book of writings spanning thousands of years. There is story, poetry, teaching, wisdom, prophecy and more. It is not a single book by a solitary writer. It was written by numerous writers, both known and anonymous, who had the unifying experience of being "*carried along by the Holy Spirit.*" This underscores both the opportunity and the challenge of Scripture.

The opportunity of Scripture is clear. If this is in fact a collection of writings breathed out by the very presence of our Creator, wise is the person who leans in and listens carefully. It is for this reason that Paul wrote in the above-mentioned passage that the person who listens to Scripture will be "*thoroughly equipped for every good work.*" Scripture equips us for life. There is insight for relating to God, relating to each other, healing our wounds, inspiring our work, and more. Our Creator did not leave us to ourselves to figure it all out. He breathed out profound guidance for those who are willing to listen.

The challenge, though, is also clear. Because the Bible is an eclectic book, it is multi-layered and fascinating, but this does not make it easy. Consider this observation from Proverbs: "*It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings*" (Proverbs 25:2).

God not only values the end result of us knowing the teachings of Scripture, but he values the process of getting us there. He stands at the edge of the trail. The trail leads up and into the mountains and will no doubt have twists and turns that will intrigue, inspire, and sometimes confuse us as we go. We, though, walk up to God at the edge of this trail and ask if he'd just show us a picture book instead. "*Can you just tell me what I need to know about this, and let me get on with*



my life?" we ask. But God wants us to experience the adventure of peeling back the layers, and discovering more of who he is along the way.

Experience It

It's both normal and good to ask the obvious question: "*Is Scripture truly what it claims to be?*" God himself would not want us to blindly accept any book's claim, including his own. So how do we in fact determine if the Bible is all it claims to be?

Answers to these questions abound. Important homework can be done on the *historicity* of Scripture. For example, does archeology support the stories of Scripture? There is also a discipline known as *textual criticism* which is essentially the study of determining what the exact text of Scripture is based upon the many ancient manuscripts we possess today. Then there is what we refer to as *biblical* and *systematic theology*. These disciplines study the content of Scripture to determine what exactly Scripture teaches and whether or not it actually makes reasonable sense. Each of these disciplines are significant and essential in one's trust of Scripture. They are not, though, the emphasis of what will be encouraged here.

The emphasis of what will be encouraged here is found in the teachings of Christ: "*My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me*" (John 10:27).

One of the more fascinating realities of sheep is their ability to recognize the voice of their shepherd. The shepherd is familiar to them, and when they hear his voice, they come to his side. Affirming the claims of Scripture is multi-faceted. The wise and thoughtful will consider archeology, textual criticism, biblical theology, systematic theology and more. But they will also engage Scripture and thoughtfully listen for the voice of their shepherd. If after giving Scripture a good and thoughtful listen, they do not hear the voice of God, in time, they will move onto other things. If, though, as they pause and reflect they do in fact discern a profound presence, they continue with increased attention to discover what Jesus himself exhorted the Pharisees and was mentioned above: "*These are the Scriptures that testify about me...*"

Consider the possibilities.

What if Scripture not only informed our conversation with God but inspired our conversation with God? What if the stories, the poems, the teachings, and the wisdom gave us insight into this God who walks with us and indwells us so we now know how to recognize his voice and his presence? What if we didn't just read Scripture, but what if we meditated on it, talked with God about it, and opened our hearts up to God in conversational prayer? No, we do not go beyond the bounds of Scripture. But yes, we avoid the error of the Pharisees. We let Scripture testify to Christ so we are well-informed to walk with Christ throughout our lives. If we authentically did this, not only would we discern for ourselves whether or not we are convinced Scripture's claims are true, but we might also gain depth of relationship and profound insight into God himself.

Conversations with God

As you cultivate maturity in each of the Spiritual Outcomes, you are asked and encouraged to engage a daily exercise that will feel either risky or right, depending upon your perspective. To be truthful, it's probably a bit of both. This exercise, if engaged well, will be one of the more important practices you carry with you after you have completed the training for each of the Spiritual Outcomes and moved on to other ways to mature your faith.



Put simply, you are asked to have an intentional and daily conversation with God.

Yes, a daily conversation with your Creator. No, not a quick read of a passage of Scripture to simply get through it. No, not a rote prayer that means and gains nothing. Yes, an ongoing and intentional conversation with the One who knows you best. Yes, a real conversation where you do what you do in all real conversations: You both listen and talk. No doubt you've had friends who talk but never listen or listen but never talk. These are frustrating conversations that lack a healthy give and take. Your conversation with God must involve thoughtful and reflective listening, as well as honest and open talking.

What follows is a suggested path to initiate a conversation with God. This path is not intended to impose itself as the only good approach. Like conversing with people, there are countless ways to converse with God. This path is suggested, though, because it is simple, while holding potential for profound encounters with God. By walking through three phases, both those new to conversing with God and those who have talked with God for years will discover greater depth and resonance in their conversations.

Very simply, the phases are this...

Read
Memorize
Meditate

Read

There are two ways to read Scripture. The first is quite common, and the second all too rare: We can read to get through the passage, or we can read to get the passage through us. If we read to get through the passage, to get a little star on our chart, the reading will carry little benefit. If, instead, we read to get the passage through us, there is strong potential for genuine life change. This kind of reading pursues the God behind the words. We want to hear from him. We want to understand him. We want to experience him.

You are encouraged to cultivate a daily reading plan. But don't just read. Listen. Listen for the voice of God. If it's a story, what can you discover about God and about yourself through that story? If it is teaching, what aspect of the teaching is God impressing upon you? If it is wisdom, how might you confront your own foolishness? This is not just reading. This is listening and connecting to our Creator.

Memorize

This second phase compliments the first phase and then leads naturally to the third phase. Associated with each Spiritual Outcome are two short passages from Scripture. You are asked to memorize—yes memorize—these passages. By simply memorizing two passages per Spiritual Outcome, you will internalize at least seventy-two brief passages from Scripture. The importance of this exercise cannot be overstated.

Why memorize?

For starters, consider what the purpose is not. The purpose is not so we can lob verses of Scripture at those who question our faith. It's not so we can become quote-a-holics who have a verse to complement every situation and circumstance. Yes, there will be times you're in



conversation with friends and a passage of Scripture will come to mind that will enhance the conversation. That's a welcomed benefit. But the more central benefit goes much deeper and is much more personal.

Scripture calls us to “*prepare your minds for action*” (1 Peter 1:13). The original language is a call to “gird up the loins of your mind.” Odd? To our ears, very odd. But not to the ears of the original recipients. A “loin” is what they wore. Picture a robe. If they needed to move quickly, they would grab hold of the robe, or gird it up, to keep from tripping over themselves. Spiritually and emotionally, tripping over ourselves is common practice. For this reason, we are called to “gird up the loins of our minds.” In our language a closer parallel might be to “roll up the shirt sleeves of your minds.” Memorizing Scripture is one way we do this. We posture our thought-life with strength. Rather than letting our thoughts come against us leading to a downward spiral of negativity, we fill our minds with thoughts that inspire greater and deeper conversations with God.

A second reason for memorizing Scripture is how this practice leads naturally to the third and richest phase of conversing with God. It's in this third phase where the conversation gets personal and comes to life.

Meditate

The word *meditation* conjures up a host of images. For some, these images feel very natural. For others, they're foreign. In truth, whether we realize it or not, we all meditate. As we drive down the road, for example, our minds turn to something. Maybe we mull over a frustrating conversation with a co-worker. Maybe we recall a wound we experienced years ago. Or maybe the mind goes in the gutter as we drift toward thoughts of vanity, greed, anger, or lust. We rehearse these thoughts, over and over, and whether we like it or not, these thoughts shape us. Scripture says as much...

Blessed are those who...meditate on God's law day and night. They are like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers.
(Psalm 1:1-3)

The imagery is powerful. If a tree is planted by water that is good and pure, it will thrive. If, though, that water is toxic and poisonous, the tree will wither and fade. Those who meditate on God's thoughts, the psalmist tells us, are like a tree planted by streams of water. By meditation, by thinking God's thoughts and conversing with him about these thoughts, we experience the kind of growth we were created to experience. Trees were not created to shrivel and die. Trees were created to grow and thrive.

So meditating, as encouraged here, is simply talking and listening to God. The conversation is inspired and informed by the reading and memorizing, but the conversation is now personalized. We carefully consider the passage, but we don't *just* consider the passage. We talk, and we listen. If, for example, we read a story of great faith and great courage, maybe we talk to God about our fears and concerns. Or maybe we've been reading and memorizing a teaching on grace, and we now talk to God about an area of our lives where we feel especially susceptible to guilt and shame. Through these conversations, we pour out our thoughts, concerns, frustrations, and joys.



Or maybe not.

Maybe we sit in silence. Maybe we simply rest in the voice we've just heard. Meditation, conversing with God, can be as diverse as spending time with a close friend. There are times the conversation abounds with words and ideas, and there are times where you are simply together and enjoying each other's presence. Meditation, conversing with God, is a lot like that.

Let's Get Practical

A few practical suggestions will enhance this experience.

Follow Your Wandering Thoughts

Many complain of wandering thoughts while attempting a conversation with God. The frustration is understandable. When talking to a person, the person is in front of you, or at least on the phone, so the conversation has a tangible quality. Although talking with God is no less real, it is by nature a spiritual conversation and therefore lacks material presence. Wandering thoughts can be a frustration, but when carefully considered, they can also be a tremendous help.

Consider that the mind may wander with intention. If, let's say, while talking with God, your mind wanders to a project at work, maybe it's the project at work that is creating undue stress in your life, and it needs to be brought before God. Or if your mind wanders to thoughts of anger, greed, lust, or addictive cravings, maybe these are the issues to address with God. Rather than push the thoughts away, bring those thoughts to God. Talk to him about those desires, those frustrations, those worries, and those concerns.

Journaling

A wandering mind may also be helped by a second suggestion: journaling. There's something very powerful about moving our prayers from our minds to the page.

How this journal is done will vary from person to person. For some, writing comes more naturally than others. But there are aspects of writing that will enhance most anyone's ongoing conversation with God. Journaling can be done in a variety of ways. Consider a few.

A single page—Journaling need not be lengthy. When Christ taught on prayer he challenged lengthy prayers when he said, "*When you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him*" (Matthew 6:7-8). There is no need for flowery language or lengthy prose. God knows what's on our minds, and we can use as few or as many words as are needed. For those new to the exercise, consider limiting yourself to a single page or a single paragraph. As is the case in so many things, less will often mean more.

Bullet points—Another thought some will find helpful is to use the journal to chronicle your thoughts rather than transcribe them. In other words, rather than write the prayer out in its entirety, simply write a bullet point or a short sentence of what you will talk with God about. If you're of the athletic bent, this can be done before the run and again after the run is complete. By marking the thought before stepping into the conversation, we gain focus we may otherwise miss.



One word—A third thought for journaling is to consider the finding and refining of a single thought, a single phrase, or even a single word. Much of the Psalms are written as poetry. This can be done for many reasons, but even the many of us who lack poetic skill can learn something from the practice. There is power in one very refined thought. This single thought can be communicated in countless ways, but one way may be in the crafting of a simple but memorable phrase we carry with us. The thought or phrase may not have the artistic quality of words from a trained poet, but if this phrase is birthed from authentic conversation with God, it will be worthy of the work it takes to get to it. The phrase may come in a single sitting, or it may take weeks or months. Either way, if we allow our journal to be a place where we not only pour ourselves out to God, but also refine a few chosen words, we will discover those thoughts from God that carry great significance and are not forgotten with the turn of a page.

Carry the Conversation

This third and final suggestion is simply an acknowledgment that a conversation with God need not end. We err when we divide our spiritual life from the rest of our lives. Yes, set aside focused time to converse with God. This is critical. But view these as the beginning of the conversation. When we cut off our prayer life from the rest of our lives, we may miss out on the more profound moments with God as he speaks into the daily realities of our lives. In an effort to inspire this, consider making the Scripture memory notecards highly accessible throughout your days. As helpful as it is to review these thoughts in set aside times, their greatest power might come when we remind ourselves of God's voice while riding the ups and downs of any given day.

Apply

The *Apply* exercise associated with this Spiritual Outcome is designed to do exactly that: equip you to create a personalized plan for your conversations with God. This plan is important. There is no gain in reading about a conversation with God if we then fail to actually do it. Of all the things you could gain from working the Spiritual Outcomes, the deepening of your passion for God's presence transcends all else.

If we are to gain depth of insight and maturity, if we are to truly know God, just like any relationship, we must be intentional. God's voice is stunning, but it must be sought. It is ours to search out, to discover, to embrace, and to experience. It is when we do this that we discover the profound presence of our Creator, and his passion to walk closely through life at our sides.

