

Our Need for God's Word

Deuteronomy 8

This morning we begin a sermon series on “The Word” - meaning the Scriptures. Here at Faith we have a “high view” of Scripture. We believe that the Scriptures reveal things we wouldn’t otherwise know about God, about humanity, and about how we should live in this world. We believe that we should not only have a high view of Scripture; we should also have a deep experience with Scripture. This is one of our “core values” - one of the things that informs how we operate as a church. This is how we put it:

We value biblical truth. We recognize Scripture as our authority for salvation and life. We seek to be formed by the Scriptures both corporately and individually.

Most of us here today would agree with this value. Broadly speaking, we believe that we should allow the Scriptures to shape the way we think and speak and act. And yet it’s a lot easier said than done.

I talk with people in the church about Scripture quite regularly, but I want you to hear in their own words how several people here at Faith describe their experience with Scripture. I sent out an email to around 20 people and asked the question, “What one word would you use to describe your current experience with Scripture? Why?” Here are some of their replies (I wish I had time to read them all because they’re fascinating and insightful, but I don’t):

- ***Stagnant or non-existent.*** As much as scripture can encourage me (and it does), I tend to stray away from it especially during difficult times. . . .I also have found that I can read scripture but have no spiritual development in my life.
- ***Perfunctory.*** I'm not seeing how the promises I've read about all these years are being kept. It is painful to read about the promise of peace and healing and not see those close to me experience it or even desire to experience it from my perspective. I'm not sure this all 'works' in real life.
- ***Discipline.*** I chose that word because I feel that most days it requires discipline for me to spend time in the Word. In many ways it reminds me of the attitude I need to have to exercise regularly and eat healthily; i.e. these are not things I would automatically do unless I knew that they would benefit me.
- ***Depth.*** My current focus is to increase the depth at which I approach and discern scripture. I am trying to do my normal reading/studying but am trying to meditate on what I have read for several days.
- ***Limited.*** My experience with Scripture is limited mainly because I don’t take the time to do it. . . . I have never been someone who sets aside time each day/week on my own to be in Scripture. . . . I attend church and . . . I very much enjoy learning from your and Brian’s teachings, however, I am not a self-teacher in this area.

- **Surface.** I am not currently digging deep into the Word. I am only reading a Scripture verse here and there. I am ashamed to say that I don't remember the last time I actually opened my Bible. [This person reads Scripture on the phone or Kindle but it's not the same.]
- **Intriguing.** I say this because I always find things that adhere to my life in ways I would not have thought of. Also, especially when reading the old testament, I find people doing odd things and how God responses sometimes is even stranger...
- **Daunting.** [It's] daunting to discipline myself to read, daunting to fully understand the various potential meanings and interpretations, daunting to apply to my life.
- **Quasinonexistent.** i get bored easily. totally dig my thompson chain ref bible though - it's like a bible for ADD kids. makes me read more bible, requires less focus on who begat who begat who begat who and why polyester is bad.
- Other words were refreshing, shallow, anticipation, transformation, deep, challenging.

I think these comments are representative of Faith. We're at a lot of different places in our current experience with Scripture. Wherever you are, we pray that God will use this series in your life so that your experience with the Scriptures progressively becomes more life-giving, nourishing, and transformational.

Toward that end, in this sermon series we'll be using a grid for spiritual transformation (or any type of transformation) that Dallas Willard has developed called VIM, which stands for Vision, Intention, and Means. The idea is that if you genuinely want to see a transformation in your life - to the point where you're actually living differently - you begin with a **vision** for what this transformation might mean in your life, then you make it your **intention** to pursue that transformation, and finally you employ effective **means** that will lead to the desired transformation.

This can be illustrated by someone wanting to learn a new language. It begins with a vision for what being fluent in that language (Spanish, English, French, etc.) might mean for you: perhaps you have a dream of living in Italy; you are captivated by the prospect of moving to Rome and being able to talk with Italians in cafes and shops. Next you need to engage your will and make it your intention to pursue this dream. You decide to spend the time, energy, and money necessary to learn Italian; if learning Italian remains only a possibility of something you might do someday, you'll probably never get around to it. Finally, you employ effective means to pursue your dream and make good on your intention to learn Italian. You enroll in Italian class, you get an Italian conversation partner, you live in Italy for six months to immerse yourself in the language. Chances are that if you go through these steps of Vision, Intention, and Means you'll eventually become fluent in Italian.

This same process works in the spiritual realm. Of course we don't plow through these steps independent of God; we walk through these steps by the grace of God. A VIM approach to Scripture would look like this:

Vision: we begin with a vision for what our lives might be like if we experienced God more fully through the Word.

Intention: we actually intend to seek God through the Word and (by His grace) live out what He teaches us.

Means: we employ effective means (practices, habits, disciplines, etc.) that help us experience God through the Word.

Today's message is the first of three messages on vision. Our vision can be fueled by our need for God's Word. If you think that the Scriptures are good but optional, you probably won't invest time and energy necessary to become "fluent" in Scripture. But if you believe that the Scriptures are as important as food, then everything changes.

Deuteronomy 8:1–3 illustrates that ***God shows us our need for His Word through the humbling circumstances of our lives. (Deuteronomy 8)***

In this chapter Moses first looks backwards at how God had led the children of Israel through the wilderness, and then he looks forward to their entrance into the Promised Land. Verse 1 is a classic restatement of the blessings that they would experience as they walked with God.

1 "All the commandments that I am commanding you today you shall be careful to do, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land which the Lord swore *to give* to your forefathers.

The blessings of the old covenant were closely tied to their obedience to God's word. Therefore, they were to be "careful to do" all the commands God had given them (as opposed to being sloppy or careless when it came to obedience). Consequently, they would continue to "live and multiply" and "go in and possess the land" God had promised their forefathers. Ultimately they would become a great nation that dwelt securely in the Promised Land, showing the rest of the nations what a relationship with the one, true, living God looked like.

Moses wanted to impress upon the children of Israel that their future well-being was explicitly tied to God's Word. They should never think of the commands of God as burdensome regulations or picky rules; properly understand and skillfully obeyed, they would lead to life and fulfillment. But first they needed to understand the role God's word had played in the past. In verse 2 Moses tells the people to "remember" their past experience with God's word/commands.

2 "You shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not.

The first thing they were to do was “remember all the way” which the Lord their God had led them in the wilderness the past forty years. It turns out that the children of Israel weren’t “wandering” in the wilderness (as people sometimes say); they were being “led” by God with some very specific objectives.

These were not easy years; they were the type of years you’d rather forget than bring back to mind. But their remembering was important because of what God was doing during those years: God was humbling and testing them, exposing what was in their hearts and revealing whether or not they were an obedient people. God was exposing their heart-attitude toward the things that He spoke.

For example, think about the way that their attitude toward God and His Word was exposed after the children of Israel had been delivered from slavery in Egypt, had passed through the Red Sea on dry land, had seen God destroy Pharaoh’s army, and had witnessed the miracle of bitter water becoming sweet/drinkable. Exodus 16 records that a short time later they became hungry and they didn’t know where or how they would get food. This is what happened next (Exodus 16):

2 The whole congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. 3 The sons of Israel said to them, “Would that we had died by the Lord’s hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

Their hunger exposed what was in their hearts. Instead of confidence in God (faith), their hearts were full of fear and grumbling. That incident exposed that they were not a people who would keep God’s commandments; they wished they were back in Egypt. They may have been slaves, but at least they had enough food. At the time they didn’t understand the spiritual dynamics of what was happening. All they could think about was, “We don’t have food and it is Moses’ fault.” But in retrospect, God wanted them to know that He was humbling and therefore testing them to expose what was in their hearts.

In verse 3 Moses explains that God had a very specific agenda for humbling and testing the children of Israel in the wilderness. The progression we see in this verse is critical for us to understand.

3 “He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord.

I can hardly imagine a more humbling circumstance than “being hungry” and not having any food. But God humbled them and allowed them to be in that very circumstance in order to provide for them in a way that taught them an invaluable lesson. God provided for them through “manna” - a substance which neither they nor their fathers knew (it was brand new type of food). The word manna literally means “What?” They were

eating “what?” They didn’t know what they were eating because it was a brand new food.

The most relevant fact about manna is that every morning God spoke it into existence. Every morning the children of Israel would find a white, flakey substance on the ground. They could only gather enough for the day, except on Fridays when they could gather enough for two days so they wouldn’t have to gather on the Sabbath. But every single day they were supposed to remember, “If God hadn’t spoken this food into existence, we wouldn’t eat.” In a very literal, physical sense, they were alive because of God’s word, because God spoke. It wasn’t really the manna keeping them alive; it was God’s word which brought the manna into existence that kept them alive.

Their experience with manna was something of an object lesson meant to teach the children of Israel that “every word that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord” is vital for life. They needed to believe in a very deep place, “If we really want to live - to multiply and dwell in the Land securely and fulfill our calling - we need to be careful to remember and do everything that God has spoken. God’s word is as important to life as food.” Ultimately their experience with manna was supposed to make them want God to have His rightful place in their lives - and not merely want His blessings (food, water, shelter, protection). Willard points out that “Wanting God to be God is very different from wanting God to help me” (*Renovation*, p. 58). Later in Deuteronomy 8 Moses warns the people that once they experience prosperity in the Land, they will be tempted to abandon God. If they get to the place where they think they no longer needed God’s help, it’s a very easy step to thinking, “I no longer need God.”

The manna was supposed to be a perpetual reminder that they always needed God and every word that came out of His mouth. They needed to remember and not forget this lesson.

What does all of this mean for us? In 1 Corinthians 10 Paul recounts the experiences of the children of Israel in the wilderness and makes this comment:

11 Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

In other words, if we are wise, we will learn from their example. We won’t just shake our heads and think, “Wow, they sure blew it.” We should learn from them so that we don’t make the same mistakes that they did. With their example in mind, in your bulletin I’ve included a series of questions that can help us learn what they were supposed to learn.

Questions for Reflection:

In what ways has God humbled me lately (through circumstances, weaknesses, sinfulness, limitations, etc.)?

What have these experiences revealed about my heart and my obedience (or lack thereof)?

How do these experiences teach me that I need to receive “everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord”?

Take some time this week to answer these questions prayerfully. Many times our sinfulness is the thing that humbles us to the core. We realize, “I know what I should do, but I don’t do it. When I’m tempted my resolve just melts away and I give in time and time again.” Maybe God has humbled you through some sinful habit or addiction. He humbles you to show you what is in your heart (e.g., I will do almost any sinful thing that I think I can get away with). He shows you what’s in your heart so that you conclude, “I desperately need the wisdom and power that comes from God and His Word. Unless I experience God through His Word, I won’t really live.”

Many times we’re humbled by circumstances that are beyond our control - circumstances in our lives or in the lives of people around us. Parents are commonly humbled by their children; children are commonly humbled by their parents. In both cases God humbles us to reveal what is in our hearts - whether fear or anxiety or anger or resentment or whatever. God reveals what is in our hearts so that we are desperate for the wisdom and power that comes from God and His Word.

I’d encourage you to take some time this week to work through these three questions. Your need for God’s Word can fuel a vision for how God might use His Word in your life.

Eugene Peterson gives an illustration (that he apparently got from Karl Barth and Walker Percy) that is helpful.

Imagine a group of men and women who live in a huge warehouse. They were born in this warehouse, grew up in it, and have everything there for their needs and comfort. There are no exits to the building but there are windows. But the windows are thick with dust, are never cleaned, and so no one bothers to look out.

But one day some of the children get curious, drag a stool over to a window, wipe the grime off of it and look out! They discover a world that they never knew existed. They see a group of people pointing upward and talking in animated voices. The children look up, but all they see is the roof of the warehouse. Eventually they conclude that those people out there are crazy; there’s no reason to look up and get excited about nothing. Actually, those people were looking at airplanes and flocks of geese and magnificent cloud formations. But the children thought they were crazy.

What would happen, though, if one day one of those kids cut a door out of the warehouse, coaxed his friends out, and discovered the immense sky above them and the grand horizons beyond them? That is what happens . . . when we open the Bible - we enter the totally unfamiliar world of God, a world of creation and salvation stretching endlessly above and beyond us. Life in the warehouse never prepared us for anything like this.

Typically, adults in the warehouse scoff at the tales the children bring back. After all, they are completely in control of the warehouse world in ways they could never be outside. And they want to keep it that way. (*Eat This Book*, pp. 6-7)

God humbles us in order to coax us out of the warehouse. He humbles us to show us that we aren't really in control of our lives and we never will be. He humbles us to show us that on our own we can't manage our own lives, much less the lives of the people around us. He reveals what is in our hearts - the fears and anxieties, the selfishness - so that we might know that if we really want to live (and not merely exist), we need every word that comes out of His mouth. He is coaxing us out into the wild, dangerous, untamed world that is described and explained in the Scriptures.

Egypt was like the warehouse for the children of Israel: it may have been slavery, but they knew they what to expect. But in the wilderness they had to live by faith. God is coaxing us out of the small, safe warehouses we've lived in for years. He humbles us to show us what is in our hearts and how desperately we need to experience Him through His Word. This week would you step out in faith and allow God to begin giving you a vision for what His Word might mean in your life?