

Friendship with God 10-27-02

Last week we stood with Joshua at the banks of the Jordan and heard God tell him not to fear or be discouraged. Do not have a God dishonoring attitude, but instead, be strong and courageous. Have a God honoring attitude. That has been speaking to me the last few weeks and I hope that the Holy Spirit used it in your life too. We have so much to be positive and encouraged about. Honor God in your attitude toward each day's situations.

We read in Joshua chapter one that the condition required to having prosperity and success in battle was to meditate upon the Word of God. We would all like to be people of the Word. We all know we would be more like Jesus if we spent time in the Word of God and prayer. We desire a relationship with God that keeps us continually in prayer and His Word, and yet we all struggle trying to do that. Has God given us a condition that is impossible to keep?

A week ago Friday and Saturday I had the privilege of attending the Promise Keepers conference in Phoenix with 15,000 other men. It was a wonderful time of worship and teaching. Buddy Owens gave one of the most practical messages on this issue of Bible Study and Prayer. I want to relay to you some of the substance of what I heard. As I listened I realized that it was pretty much the same road the Lord had taken me down to teach me to love the Word and prayer. So, not only was it presented in an easy to understand and easy to apply way, but I felt his suggestions were confirmed by my own experience.

How many of you believe you should study God's Word daily? And how many of you struggle trying to make that happen in your life? Let's be honest. We are told we should read the Bible through every year, but then our schedule gets busy and we miss a day, then we have a hard time catching up. We get farther and farther behind until we finally just give up. Either that or we start applying our speed-reading techniques and fly through it as fast as we can, and then wonder what it was we read. You know the (give illustration of just reading as fast as you can) method. The object is to click off pages, not to get anything from it. We end up feeling guilty and so we try again and again, sometimes with a little better result, and sometimes ending up in the same cycle or worse.

Then there is prayer. We know we should pray without ceasing. What does that mean? People talk about how many hours a day they pray and you just wonder how in the world they can do it. We're usually done in five minutes. How do you have more to pray than that? The ladies seem to be better at this than us men as they seem to have more concerns on their minds. Is that a polite way to put it? But men can pray for everybody we can think of and still not hit ten minutes. And what do you say? "Bless Burt, Help Sally, Bless Sue." We men don't have much to say unless they are sick. Then we can pray, "Heal Burt and Sally and Sue." But then what do you pray about? So we end up in the same

cycle of trying for a while and then getting frustrated and skipping it and feeling guilty.

Then there is the listening part of prayer. I try to make my mind still and undistracted and before you know it I'm mentally working on a project. When I realize it I come back to that listening posture, but then I start thinking of what I have to do that day. Back and forth I go and 10 minutes later I sure stilled a lot of thoughts but I don't know if I heard anything. Can anyone relate?

We have a vision to be in the Word and prayer but we don't know how to effectively carry it out. Vision without the ability to execute it is an hallucination. We need a practical way of carrying out the vision that will lead us from the little discipline we are able to muster, to an increasing discipline from our desire empowered by the Holy Spirit. A big part of our problem is busyness. We allow our schedules to consume all of our time. Another is entertainment taking up our free time. Both can be overcome by a deepening relationship developed in communication with the LORD. I think you will find what Buddy Owen suggests will help you do just that.

You will find it a whole lot easier to pray and read your Bible if you come to them not as two separate tasks but as two parts of a conversation. The best conversations happen when the two parties are conversing on the same subject. The first one to speak should always be the Lord. Open His Word to where He has led you and let Him speak first. I like to begin with a prayer right out of the Bible, "Open Thou mine eyes, that I might behold wonderful things out of Thy law." It can be more informal. The idea is to recognize we need God's help to hear from the Word and to understand the Word of God and its application to us today. If we ask for His help, knowing He wants us to hear from Him, we can expect Him to answer, and so we come with expectation.

The Lord may impress on your heart a certain place to read. You may have a desire to study a certain book of the Bible. Go with your leading. You've prayed, so expect God to lead you even if it is with your inclinations.

Now as you read, read as if it was written to you. A. W. Tozer suggests, "Approach the Bible not only as a book which was once spoken, but a book which is now speaking...God's speaking is in the continuous present." That means the Word of God is alive and applicable today as the day it was written. As you read, let the Word talk to you. Turn the direction it takes your thoughts into prayer.

Reading the Bible is reading God's mind. It is a personal love letter from God to you. In it you will find God's personal thoughts toward you. You will see not just how God did something in the past, but that the principles and character by which God always operates are the same today. You will see eternal truths that are just as applicable today as they were the day they were written. This is the

primary way of hearing God's voice and discovering His will. You'll be amazed at how many of the questions on your mind are answered by a principle in the text you happen to read that day.

It is important to not be in a race. Read for depth not distance. You're not in a speedboat skimming the surface of the water, looking at distant horizons, but a snorkeller exploring a pool in a brook. Looking below the surface you notice the pebbles and leaves on the bottom. There on the bottom is something that glitters. You dive down and take a closer look. You take it in your hand and examine it. It's a gold nugget. Wow! Something of value! Something you can use! That is what you were hoping to find.

Let me give you another word picture, a Sunday afternoon drive. Instead of hurrying to get from point a to point b, slow down and read with your ears. Let's set out with the intent of taking in the scenery. First, fill your tank. As already suggested, stop and pray for the Holy Spirit to be your teacher. He's is the One who will point out the scenes we need to stop and take a closer look at. Ask Him to teach you about Jesus, to make the Word alive, and to direct where you read.

1 Cor. 2:11-16 (NIV) 11 For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. 12 We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. 13 This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words 14 The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. 15 The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: 16 "For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

Then choose your road. Select your passage with the leading of the Holy Spirit. It doesn't always have to be a new road. It may be one you are familiar with. Each season has its own scenery. There may be something special waiting for you down a familiar road. Give the Holy Spirit a chance to direct your heart. You might want to look at the book or passage from which your Pastor preached that week. I find it most effective to read a book of the Bible a little at a time instead of jumping from book to book. I usually take just one paragraph or section at a time. Taking a one book at a time, even though divided up into sections, helps you get familiar with each book and get the overall context.

Slow down! Take in the beauty of the route you've taken. Pull over frequently and let the thoughts that are in a hurry pass. While you're pulled over, check out the spot. Remember, depth, not distance. This is a real hard concept for us men. Every time we travel we are always seeing if we can get there before that

other car. We turn a trip to the office into the Indy 500. You'll never win the Bible 500 reading like that. Take your time. That means you have to find an unhurried part of your day for the drive.

Pull over at a scenic viewpoint. You've seen the signs along the side of the road that alert you to a special scenic spot. The Bible has its signs too. Sometimes they are specific words. Sometimes it is an emphasis or summary statement. Sometimes the Holy Spirit will clearly speak to your heart by pointing at a particular verse or expression. Go over and over it. Emphasize different words as you do. Look at it from different angles, like a jeweler examining the facets of a stone. Look for eternal truths that are expressed. Ask questions about what it is saying. See if the answers are within the verse or surrounding text. Now try to say it in your own words. How would you have said the same ideas? You are letting God know what the Word has said to you.

Take a picture. Before you move on see where you are in light of this verse. The Bible declares the word to be a mirror and light for our souls. What do you look like in light of the passage? What faults or flaws were revealed that were once hidden by darkness? In the context of our word picture, what do you look like standing in the scenery of this verse? Do you fit or look out of place. The picture helps you see what needs to be changed and will be a reminder of the need to fit in with this new scene. We must go from seeing the beauty and truth of a passage to personal application to our own lives. Pictures often serve as conversation starters. You might want to share a picture with a friend who has been down that same road, or even with those who have never been there.

Send home a postcard. This is the end of your trip. When you travel you send home a note about what you've seen and how it has impacted you. In prayer, you tell the Father where you were today and what your picture looked like in the backdrop of His Word. Tell Him what you heard Him say. This is when your prayer turns into a serious response to what He has said to you. It may be confession and repentance. It may be a prayer of thanks. It may be an expression of determination to live out the truth you have seen by the grace of God. It may be a prayer for someone else whose need has been placed upon your heart as you read. It may even come out as a song of praise from your heart to God's.

The conversation is flowing and real. God began the conversation through His Word. You have considered what He has said to you and you respond to the words you have read. Praying back to God in line with what you have read is one way to be sure you are praying according to His will. The Bible promises if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. Your "to do list" for God has been set aside as you hand yourself to God inviting Him to do His will in and through you.

Some days my drive may only take me through a few verses. The scene is saying so much to me that I want to spend a long time taking it in. Other days I may go through a number of chapters listening to the flow of ideas from the Word as it speaks to me. In fact, I don't want to end the trip because it gets more scenic as I go. Sometimes I'll drive over and over the same route, day after day, because there is so much to see. I have to go back over the scenes to remember all the things God has spoken to my heart so that I can respond to each in prayer.

The more you take these scenic trips the more you realize God is always speaking. He will remind you of some of the scenes throughout your day, because He is always with you. As you recall what He was saying, you enter into prayer again and again. Many throughout the ages have learned the wonder of having a secret silent conversation with God continually. That is to experience praying without ceasing. Jesus is just as much Lord and King as ever, but you will increasingly get to know Him as friend. Jesus said in John 15, "I used to call you servants, but now I am going to start calling you friends." (John 15:15)

As Buddy shared the above thoughts with us, he had placed a tea bag in a glass of water. Periodically he had the cameraman zoom in on the glass. After a minute there was hardly any change, but after he had finished speaking, the water had absorbed the color, flavor, and essence of the tea in the bag. The tea is like the Word of God. As I let it sit in my heart, I absorb the character of the Word. He is Jesus. He is already in me, but by letting the word stay in my mind, my thought life is taking on the nature of the Word. I'm allowing Christ in me to affect my thoughts, so that my thoughts absorb His. My thought life becomes changed.

Colosians 3:10 Tells us we have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. This is the same expression as that cup of water and tea bag. It is changed from water to tea. It is becoming increasingly more like the tea as time passes and it absorbs the character of the tea. That is what we all desire, to be more like Jesus. I've shared with you a practical way to go about it, but now you have to take an important first step. Some of you have long ago set aside some time each day to be with the LORD. Others have tried, but the boredom and ineffectiveness of the time discouraged you and you gave up. With this idea before you, would you take the challenge to try again? And for those of you who already do, would you again take the challenge of experiencing a conversation with your Maker just as if Jesus sat down to talk with you. He has, through His Word. Listen and respond, and see if you don't begin a life long conversation that grows richer and more meaningful as the years go by.

Commented [Q1]: 15 I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. John 15:15 (NIV)

Commented [Q2]: 10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Col 3:10 (NIV)