

Letting God's Word get a deeper grip on my soul

Matthew 22:23-33, Hebrews 4:12-13

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Introduction: According to recent polls, a majority of Americans now consider the Bible fiction! This “cultural shift” likely already took place in Europe back in the 20th century, but for the US it's a new kind of “tipping point” that makes it increasingly acceptable to oppose the Bible. In fact, it has become the more politically correct thing to do in America! Now that may sound like we're headed for disaster –in fact, we probably are– but remember that in Jesus' day the politically correct thing was to oppose Jesus Himself and everything He said – and He was the Word made flesh! Yet His reasoning was always so superior to that of the religious leaders. Growing in discipleship to Jesus means giving **serious priority to His Word**.

1) For example, remember the confrontation the Sadducees had with Jesus over **levirate marriage?** This was a practice and a law in the Old Testament (Dt. 25:5-6) where if a man died without leaving offspring, his unmarried brother should marry his widow in order to raise up a child as heir of the deceased (because in ancient Israel the passing on of the family name and the inheritance within a tribe were important cultural values). So the Sadducees, who did not care a whit about levirate marriage, and even less did they care for Jesus' authority, came up with an extreme case [*argumentum ad absurdum*] to try to demonstrate the absurdity of the idea of resurrection: **“Moses told us that if a man dies without having children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up offspring for him. Now there were seven brothers among us. The first one married and died, and since he had no children, he left his wife to his brother. The same thing happened to the second and third brother, right on down to the seventh. Finally, the woman died. Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her?”** The Sadducees were sure their case would stump the uneducated rabbi from Galilee. The greatest danger of religion is that it can give you a false sense of security and **leave you unchanged!** But once you encounter Jesus' way of reasoning, and start living by His logic, you won't be satisfied with anything else!

Notice Jesus' straightforward response: **“You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God”** (Mt. 22:29). “To err or be in error” translates the Greek

planáo, which also means to deceive [oneself], lead astray, cause to wander. **Ignorance of God's Word** will negatively impact everything in your life, leading you astray, totally shipwrecking all your attempts at Christian discipleship. Of course, after pointing out the source of their error, then Jesus went on to explain to them that in the resurrection there will **no longer be a place or need for marriage**; our bodies will be transformed – we'll live on a higher plane. But Jesus didn't leave it there, just proving the fallacy in their thinking on that point. He then went on to demonstrate their error in regard to the resurrection (among the Sadducees' cardinal doctrines, there was no resurrection, no angels, no miracles): **"But about the resurrection of the dead,"** Jesus replied, **"have you not read what God said to you, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living."** So **knowing the Scripture is fundamental to knowing the truth**, to having right spiritual criteria, so as not to be deceived or led astray! This was a serious problem for the Jews since Old Testament times, and Jeremiah was one who observed it painfully up close and firsthand, suffering the consequences in his own life. God was threatening to bring disaster on the people because of their idolatry, but it would simply be the **"fruit of their schemes, because they have not listened to my words"** (Jer. 6:19). So the formula for *disaster* says, "Don't pay attention to God's Word!"

2) To complicate things for us even more, we live in the "post-truth" era because people have believed the lie that **everything is relative** since they don't want to be ruled by absolutes (actually they're liberating – the truth sets you free – Jn. 8:31-32). So truth will never cease to impact this world; as Jesus said, **"heaven and earth will pass away, but my Word will never pass away"** (Mt. 24:35). His truth cannot be dismissed from the earth just because a group of humans finds it offensive or inconvenient! In fact, the biblical parables for the Word tell us just **how strong its impact** will continue to be until the end of time: it's compared to a **lamp** (Ps. 119:105), **hammer and fire** (Jer. 23:29), **bread** (Dt. 8:3), **seed** (Mk. 4:14), **mirror** (Jas. 1:23-25), **sword** (Heb. 4:12/Eph. 6:17), **rain and snow** (Is. 55:10-11); Jesus Himself is **the Logos made flesh** (Jn. 1:14), and it's **"God-breathed"** (2 Tm. 3:16-17). This variety in itself suggests the myriad of functions the Word is intended to play in our spiritual formation (cf. 2 Tm. 3:17): it's our resource for salvation, transformation, and renewal. But it won't do anything for you if you don't access it regularly and let it format your hard disk.

There is no such thing as a "Christian life" apart from saturating your mind with God's Truth! So what's your plan for learning to **assimilate and practice the whole counsel of God?** (Acts 20:26-27). Because this doesn't happen by accident. He who aims at nothing usually hits it! The problem of the Sadducees was that they were ignorant of Scripture, so they didn't believe in the gravity of their condition; they didn't see themselves as lost, enslaved, or dead in their sins. "Everything would be OK." The Sadducees' real problem was that they never got to know the **Author of Scripture**, so they hadn't let His true perspective reformat their cynical selfishness. Therefore, they were building their house on sand! That's what you and I do when we excuse ourselves for not finding time for God's Word, or when we justify our neglect of God's Word and rationalize our failure to practice it. Since our ways are not God's ways, disaster will also be the result, but it will merely be the "fruit of our inner schemes!"

3) Practically, we know that some parts of Scripture are clearly **more urgent** than others, so where should we begin, and what should we emphasize? The Gospels for introducing us to Jesus; the Psalms for growing us in emotional intelligence; the New Testament letters for

learning discernment in dealing with problems (personal or church); the Old Testament for going deeper into the background of God's people and His ways, but you have to give yourself permission to read "lightly" through some sections where you can easily bog down due to the language (like detailed instructions about sacrifices, repetitious passages of the ceremonial law, or genealogies, etc.). Stay after the big picture, the story line, the metanarrative that feeds your soul.

Susie and I have a ministry to **Darlene Sabatini**, long-time active member of IBC, Sunday School teacher and missions promoter. But for years now she's been confined to a wheelchair in a senior citizens' residence, suffering from dementia, with no family here in Spain to care for her except her church family. So there are several who go visit her periodically, as Susie and I do every week. But can someone still be "discipled in the Word" while failing in mind and memory? Here's what we do: after some light conversation about this and that, we read a portion of a Psalm to Darlene, then a story from the Gospels. She listens closely, sometimes asks a question, or we ask her questions; she responds sometimes with remarkable insight, other times breaks into tears. We just keep trying to stimulate her mind, connect with her heart, help her remember who she is in Christ! We usually close by singing a hymn or two with her, and those words usually flow pretty well from somewhere deep inside her heart; then we say the Lord's prayer together, which she knows perfectly. For many years she was a student of the Word; now she reaps what she sowed all her life.

In order to get a better grip on the Word, you need to **engage it on five levels: hearing** (Dt. 6:4), **reading** (1 Tm. 4:13), **studying** (2 Tm. 2:15), **meditating** (Ps. 1:2), and **memorizing** (Ps. 119:11 – Jn. 15:3). You can complement these activities by going online and looking at the interlinear text, with the original languages. You can participate in small group study (Sunday School, weekday Bible studies, zone groups, family devotional time, youth/university groups); smaller groups allow you to share thoughts, reactions, and questions with others; that's what Proverbs calls "iron sharpening iron" (Prov. 27:17). You can write a verse out by hand (not just "copy and paste" on your phone or computer); you can work on committing a passage to memory, followed, of course, by applying it! This is how we let the Word get a deeper grip on us! More than just knowing the *information* communicated in the Bible, the important thing is to receive it into yourself as your **Authority for life** that moves you to practice it, because otherwise you're just engaging in self-deceit! Without practicing the Word in the details of life, you're building your house on sand! The *substance* of our spiritual life is the Word received as THE Authority!

When did this reality sink in with me as to how urgent it is? What did it take? I grew up in a Christian home; my father was a pastor all my growing years, my mother a pastor's daughter; so I knew the Bible reasonably well. Yet when I was down and out after an excessively long university career, I discovered I was essentially burnt out and spiritually bankrupt! So I fled from my discontented life and my relational failures like a Jonah running away from the Lord and His good purposes: to escape God's call to Nineveh, he jumped on a ship and headed for Tarshish (often identified with Tartessus in the Guadalquivir valley of Spain). Of course, Jonah met with a storm at sea and didn't make it to his desired destination, whereas I made it all the way to Spain. I spent two years in Granada, far from the temptations and distractions of my former life in the US, and hungrier than ever for some serious content and direction in my life! So that's where I found myself devouring a bilingual Spanish New Testament! Reading and meditating on God's truth in another language

context revolutionized my spiritual life, brought me to my senses like the prodigal son, and got me back on track with God's good purposes! So try reading the Bible in one of your other languages ... or just in a different translation! Maybe even use a real hard copy of Scripture (though the phone version is better than nothing)! I love to mark mine up, make notes in it, put special dates (for some people that's sacrilege).

Conclusion: Will you commit to reading the Bible every day that's left in the new year? (Still eleven and a half months!) Maybe you'll miss a day sometime, or even several days. But it's not about legalism or checking something off your list to make you feel better! God is not sitting up in heaven keeping score on you – He's right beside you and in you, cheering you on in your daily struggles! And if you read His Word more regularly, you're going to become more convinced of this! Ask Him to give you a deeper hunger for the Word – your daily bread, the sustenance that will give your insides real content! My prayer for you is from Col. 3:16, that you will ***"let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly ..."*** What will *you* do to make that happen?!