

Richard Foster: Life with God –

A life-transforming new approach to Bible reading

Hodder & Stoughton 2008

Alison Morgan August 08

Scripture tells us God is with us; and asks, are we willing to be with him? Saying yes thrusts us into life with God, daily, hourly, moment by moment. The Bible shows us how this with-God life works itself out in every way and in every circumstance, for individuals, families, nations, finally an inclusive community with God at its centre. It leads us into a process of transformation; not a matter of religious beliefs and behaviour but a dynamic, pulsating life.

There are 2 types of life and 2 types of death in the Bible – *bios* (physical life) and *zoë* (spiritual life); *teleute* (physical death) and *thanatos* (spiritual death). Jesus brings *zoë*.

I : Catching the vision

Christians feed on Scripture. Holy Scripture nurtures the holy community as food nurtures the human body. Christians don't simply learn or study or use Scripture; we assimilate it, take it into our lives in such a way that it gets metabolized into acts of love, cups of cold water, missions into all the world, healing and evangelism and justice in Jesus' name, hands raised in adoration of the Father, feet washed in company with the Son – Eugene Peterson, Eat this Book.

1. Seeing the Bible afresh

The average Bible consumer apparently owns 9 Bibles and is looking for more – a mute testimony to a deep sense of lack, a sense that we have not really achieved a grasp of the Bible that is adequate to our needs. The Bible is the guide to life but people still starve to death in the presence of its spiritual feast. The problem lies in the fact that we tend to study the Bible for 2 reasons:

- information/knowledge
- to find a formula that will solve a pressing need of the moment.

But both these approaches leave us in charge, trying to control what comes out of the Bible instead of entering the process of the transformation of our whole person and of our whole life into Christlikeness. If we want to enter that process we must leave our assumptions and associations behind. The proper outcome of studying the bible is growth in the supernatural power of love – love of God and of all people. Cf 1 Cor 13.2. Can we read without being selective, trusting the living water that flows from Christ through the Bible, opening ourselves up to it and then getting out of its way? This is the goal of reading the Bible for spiritual transformation.

The Bible is all about life 'with God'. *Immanuel* means 'God is with us'. God with us is on every page of the Bible – with people whose stories form a mosaic illustrating how the 'with' life works in all circumstances of human existence. The Immanuel Principle is a cosmic principle that God has used all along in creation and redemption. All the Christian disciplines are built on scripture. The aim is not external conformity but the re-formation of the inner self, the spiritual core. Ps 51.6, 10; 2 Cor 4.16 - a clean heart, a new spirit, renewed day by day.

We need to read the Bible in 4 ways:

1. Literally – know the stories
2. In context – discover the intent of the original author, and allow it to control our understanding of the passage
3. In conversation with itself – passages illuminate one another
4. In conversation with the historic witness of the people of God throughout history

We must read with the heart; *lectio divina*. It means listening to, submitting to, reflecting on, praying, applying, obeying the text. John 10.10, abundant life – it doesn't come automatically, but only intentionally. It is evidenced by the fruit of the Spirit, Gal 5.22-23. The Spiritual Disciplines found in scripture help – fasting, prayer, study, service, submission, solitude, confession, worship/meditation/silence, simplicity, frugality, secrecy, sacrifice, celebration etc. Only God can reprogramme our hearts. *A Spiritual Discipline is an intentionally directed action by which we do what we can do in order to receive from God the ability (or power) to do what we cannot do by direct effort.* The ability to do what needs to be done when it needs to be done is the true freedom in life; freedom comes not from the absence of restraint but from the presence of discipline. It comes about through grace.

2. Entering the world of the Bible

The Bible is like a vast geographical basin in which tributary streams feed into the currents of a parent river on its course to the ocean. The riverbanks are interspersed with openings where the tributaries join the larger body of water. These points, scattered all along the way from the sources of the river to its mouth, are places of surging turbulence, fierce and joyful, where the swirling eddies of intermingling currents make it no longer possible to distinguish smaller waters from the mighty flow gathering them into itself. This is how the Bible creates meeting places for human spirit and Divine Spirit.

When we read the Bible for interior transformation we learn not head but heart knowledge. It infiltrates us with the life God offers – Heb 4.12 – but we must bring our whole selves, expectantly, attentively, humbly.

Expectantly

We need to distinguish between the Bible as the written Word of God and the living God who is revealed through the Bible.

[While] the Bible is the written Word of God, the word of God is not simply the Bible... The Bible is the Word of God in its unique *written* form. But the bible is not Jesus Christ, who is the *living* Word. The Bible was not born of a virgin, crucified, resurrected and elevated to the right hand of the Father. Neither is the bible the word of God that is settled eternally in the heavens as the psalmist says (Ps 119:89), expressing itself in the order of nature (Ps. 19:1-4). The bible is not the word of God that, in the book of Acts, expanded and grew and multiplied (Acts 12:24). It is not the word that Jesus spoke of as being sown by the active speaking of the ministry (Mt.13). But *all* of these are God's *words*, as is also his speaking that we hear when we *individually* hear God. Dallas Willard. 24

Our God is not the bible but its living Author – Jn 5.39-40. It's a short jump from bibliolatry to magic – treating the scriptures as a sort of ouija board, collapsing any possibility for true relationship.

Attentively

On its own terms – it's not nice and neat. That's because it's a story; a vast number of stories within one really grand story. Human beings are so important to God that the divine purposes are worked out through the messiness and sprawl of human history. It seems to be more important to God that we learn his ways in freedom than it is to get things done efficiently. Jesus offended the religious professionals because he broke their rules; he forgave transgressors and criticised the obedient. *The condition of our hearts is more important to Jesus than how well we play by the rules.* This frustrates moralists. The Bible contains lots of dos and don'ts, but they aren't the kind you can easily tick off on a list – love the Lord your God with all your heart, etc. They all require relationship, and that's how Jesus summarised the commandments.

Humbly

Reading the Bible for spiritual transformation is to invite a Damascus Rd experience. If we venture onto the ancient roads of the Bible's world with an open mind and an inquiring heart, we can expect to encounter the living God.

Foster reads a passage 3 times – once aloud, once silently highlighting significant passages, once just the highlighted passages to see if anything jumps out. He'll then write it out and carry it with him that day for reflection.

3. Experiencing the with-God life

Ez 37.27 – my dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

Throughout all of human history, the voice of God resounds with absolute assurance: ‘I am with you.’ This news does not come to us as some intellectual proposition we must accept at face value... It is a reality that unfolds before us in breathtaking detail, mediated through the actual experience of individuals, families, tribes, cities, nations, and generations.

- To Isaac, Gen 26.24 (at Beersheba)
- To Jacob, Gen 28.15 (at Bethel)
- To Joshua, Josh 3.7 (crossing the Jordan)
- To David, 1 Chron 17.2 (new king)
- Through Isaiah to the people of Israel, Is 41.9-10
- To Jeremiah, Jer 1.7-8
- Through Jeremiah to the people, Jer 30.10-11
- Through Zephaniah, Zeph 3.17
- Through Haggai to the returning exiles, Hag 1.13
- Through the risen Christ, Mt 28.20
- To Paul, Acts 18.9-10, in Corinth
- To all those in the new heaven/earth, Rev 21.3-4

We have the freedom to choose this life. The invitation is ‘I am with you – will you be with me?’ WE can change – the crucible of change is the everyday world, we read it in the Bible. How does it work? Through trust, believe, in Jesus. Read the ‘I am’ statements in John, and reflect on what they imply about relationship.

II. Nurturing the intention

If you will here stop and ask yourself why you are not as pious as the primitive Christians were, your own heart will tell you that it is neither through ignorance nor inability, but purely because you never thoroughly intended it. William Law.

4. Reading with the heart

To understand the difference between reading the surface of the text and encountering the God who supervised its delivery can be seen in Jn 20. Mary finds the body missing, rushes to alert Peter and John. They run back to the tomb together. P and J ‘believe’ and go back home. M stays behind, and meets him. They act on information; she, longing for encounter, remains distraught.

It’s commonly believed that the Bible exists to serve our needs (it’s a consumer society). Wanting a packaged, user-friendly faith, we distort the bible into an owner’s manual for successful living, or even moral living. But God is concerned with the process of our growth, not in our human estimation of how well we accomplish it. Moralism flattens life with God by draining off the dimension of relationship – it’s much easier to follow a do list than to engage in the messy business of personal relations. 60.

Lectio divina is the primary mode of reading the Bible for transformation. It comprises 4 elements:

- Lectio – reading with a listening spirit : **Listen**
- Meditatio – reflecting on what we are hearing : **Reflect**
- Oratio – praying in response to it : **Pray**
- Contemplatio – contemplating what we will carry forward into our lives : **Obey**

Choose a passage or story; read it undisturbed, stilling yourself. Read it expectantly, without pausing. Then again, slowly, pausing. Then reflect on significant portions; look for connections with your life. Then pray the key part; and seek wisdom for carrying it into our life. Often this part is called application – but that can reduce it to a to-do list, a programme. In following lectio divina we stop making the Bible serve our agenda, and recover the ability to be attentive to God.

5. Reading with the mind

Any fool can know; the point is to understand – Albert Einstein is reported to have said.

Reading the Bible for life with God is not about accruing information but an act of understanding empowered by the HS – learning to love God with the mind. Its order is shaped not by the progression of data, but by the idiosyncracies of relationship.

We want neat, orderly systems; God gives us a koan: 'I am.' We want absolute truth nailed down in neat propositional form; the Bible gives us a vast sprawl of divine-human history. We want bottom-line rules of life; the Bible gives us the law of love. We want programs to follow; the Bible tells us to follow hard after God. We want something tangible to show for our efforts; the Bible asks that we relinquish results and place our faith in what is unseen. 84

6. Reading with the people of God

Foster believes that God has chosen to use the people of Korea to teach the worldwide Christian family about how to develop the root system of prayer, prayer as a constantly flowing life. Reading the Bible with others doesn't just mean in a small group, or from commentaries; it means reading it through the lens of others' experiences, in the knowledge of their stories, in immersion in their lives. We do this not in order to become more knowledgeable, or culturally sophisticated, but to be formed, conformed and transformed.

There are different traditions which enable us to develop a personal spiritual life before God:

- Contemplative – the prayer filled life
- Holiness – the virtuous life
- Charismatic – the Spirit empowered life
- Social justice – the compassionate life
- Evangelical – the word centered life
- Incarnational – the sacramental life

The Bible teaches all these.

Holiness – doesn't mean personal righteousness and the judging of self and others; we are called to a holiness of the heart, not moral scrupulousness, based not on externally driven performance but internally rooted desire.

Evangelical – characterised by personal experience of conversion, insistence on biblical fidelity and sound doctrine, urgent call to evangelism and discipleship. But – when any of these characteristics is allowed to dominate our understanding of life with God, it leads to an unhealthy narrowing of the gospel, to a focus on head not heart, worship of the written word instead of the living word.

Incarnational – the word sacrament means an outward sign of an invisible grace. More narrowly, it refers to rituals with power to transform those who participate. To speak of life as sacramental means that everything visible in some way points to the invisible. A bird in flight can become a herald of the movement of the Spirit; looking into the face of another person can become an experience of looking into the face of God; an empty bowl on a homemade altar can become an icon of spiritual poverty; a walk in the woods can lead us to see, smell and feel the glory of God in the land of the living. Material reality is not the opposite of spiritual reality, but the vehicle through which that reality becomes visible. Worship therefore often involves the senses.

III : Understanding the means

7. The disciplines of relationship

Life with God is an ongoing, ever-changing, relational adventure. It is not a matter of being driven through life, stopping every now and then to get out of the car and see the surroundings. God invites us to climb into the landscape of our journey, to breathe deeply with full lungs, to feel blood pulsing through muscles doing what they were made to do, to experience the wonder of having a body with which to see and hear and smell and taste and touch this astonishing world. 134

If we truly want life with God, we can have it – 2 Peter 1.3. It's a kind of pas de Dieu... It's like walking by the sea and being drawn into the rhythm of the waters rising and falling; Ps 42.7, deep calling to deep in the rhythms of life with God. If we find that we are not venturing deeply enough into the waters of life with God, the answer is not to try harder. The answer.. is to get rid of more – our agendas, our self-concern, helplessness, fear. Think about the practice of the disciplines as being like a path along a narrow mountaintop

ridge, with drop-offs on either side. This is the path of disciplined grace, with effort/performance on one side, cheap grace on the other. Good book – Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*.

Those of us who find ourselves constantly running in overdrive would be well advised to make ‘play’ a spiritual discipline, to prevent ourselves being so conformed to the demands on our time and attention that it hinders our life with God.

8. The way of freedom

1. Training

Discipline is the ability to do the right thing at the right time for the right reason. It takes prior preparation, just as eg performing a heart operation does – it needs to be an automatic process. We do not become godly by trying to become godly, we become godly as holy habits fill our character. It isn’t the Disciplines themselves which make us spiritual; there is nothing inherently spiritual in them. It’s a gift, not an accomplishment. We address vices by attending to the opposite virtues, and then seeking which disciplines will train us in those virtues; we tackle problems not directly but on the slant. Eg to tackle pride we practice not humility (which still leaves us focussing on how we are doing) but service. Paul uses the image of training, not trying harder (1 Cor 9). Our human desires are like rivers; if not properly channeled, they overflow. Eg we do not deal with sexual temptation by trying harder, repressing our urges, mustering will power – that’s like trying to hold a beach ball under water. We focus not on the temptation, but on the right control of desire – eg fasting. Fasting dethrones the body as master and gives us authority over our body. We learn that cravings need not control us. The benefits of fasting extend to many areas of impulse control – addictions, obsessions, excesses. Fasting teaches us not to repress desire, but to channel it properly.

2. Cultivating expectancy

2 unquestioned values in our society are desire and freedom. We have a distorted idea of freedom in Christ – that it means license, cheap grace. But gratification leaves us empty. Moralism, its opposite, is just self-effort, and doesn’t bring life either. The Disciplines do, if attended to responsively. God will provide. God will lead. Just listen.

3. From self-effort to seeking the kingdom

We live in a consumer culture which teaches us to want more. We can retrain our habits, thoughts, attitudes, behaviour – Mt 6, treasure in heaven; strive first for the kingdom. Gradually it becomes more natural to live with God than without God.

4. Travelling light

A desperately needed grace is freedom from taking ourselves too seriously. Jesus was not a stuffy bore, but a partygoer. We need to travel light, not think of ourselves more highly or indeed more often than we should. The discipline of celebration is an antidote to religious solemnity, and brings us down to earth on the level playing field of our common humanity, to laugh at ourselves and with others, free of a judgmental spirit.

5. Relaxing and rejoicing

Phil 4.6, Ps 100.5. The goodness of God is all around us. It doesn’t all depend on us; it’s up to God. We will be OK. *Babette’s Feast* is a good illustration of what it does for us to relax and rejoice – the meal is a sacramental experience.

9. Living by grace

This is the marvelous goal and end result of all our engagement with the Scripture: to live off the grace of God free as birds of the air and splendid as lilies of the field, storing up treasures in heaven as the abiding place of our heart. 182.

St Patrick’s Breastplate sums it up. The only way we can grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus (2 Pet 3.18) is to be in interactive relationship with God. Grace is ‘the action of God in our lives’. It’s not a system but a way of life.

For more book summaries by Alison Morgan click [here](#).