Crave Exercise 5: God, Teach Me!

Quick recap as to where we are in creating a craving for God's Word:

Exercise 1: A look at the enduring, everlasting, and transformational nature of God's Word.

Exercise 2: A dive into how God's Word asks to be ingested for maximum impact.

Exercise 3: An introduction to how learning styles can enhance our experience with God's Word.

Exercise 4: *God, Show Me!* (Observation) The FIRST of three requests that lead to life-change in God's Word

Exercise 5: YOU ARE HERE! *God, Teach Me!* (Interpretation) The SECOND of three requests that lead to life-change in God's Word

It's tempting to leave the interpretation stage of Bible study to the "professionals" (pastors, scholars, teachers). But the process of interpretation isn't a matter of trying to be smart or burying ourselves in commentaries. In its simplest form, it is a matter of following our natural curiosity, following God along a path as He points things out to us. It's quite possible that our questions and our interests represent areas where God is tweaking us or nudging us. Thank you for journeying along!

Barry Shafer

God, Teach Me! (Interpretation)

Psalm 119. It's the longest chapter in the Bible. Each verse is about God's decrees, precepts, and statutes… His Word! As an added bonus, the psalm is an acrostic with each of its 22 sections corresponding to a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, with the first word of each section starting with that Hebrew letter. This was likely a memorization tool, similar to the musical staff mnemonic *Every Good Boy Does Fine*. The writer of this psalm obviously loved God's Word, knew God's Word, and was passionate about helping others experience it as well.

And yet.

About every 12 verses, on average, the writer of the psalm makes a plea along the lines of "God, give me understanding" or "Lord, please teach me about your decrees." Even this astute Bible writer, the one inspired by the Spirit to write the definitive chapter on God's Word, asked for God's help in understanding Scripture. We should, too.

So, how do we do that? Here are three simple "Go To's" that help satisfy curiosity about a passage and give us a chance to follow a path where God wants to lead us. And quite likely, we'll gain understanding about God's Word along the way.

Three Go To's:

1. Go To God:

Yes, it might seem obvious to go to God, but God is often our last stop when seeking insight about Scripture. We have direct access to the Author. We should take full advantage.

Meditate: Allow the passage to land on a blank slate in your mind. Remove preconceptions and cliché familiarity about the passage as well as distractions from your day. Then roll the Scripture around in your mind and listen for God's gentle voice.

Pray: Ask God for meaning. Ask for God's wisdom, which He has promised to give generously.

Ask: As part of your prayer, ask God "Why is this passage here for me to see?" You may find this question to be one of the most penetrating, helpful questions you could ask.

2. Go To Scripture:
Maybe you've heard this phrase: *The best interpreter of Scripture is Scripture*. One of the best sources for filling in the color and background of a Bible verse is the Bible itself. Thankfully, we have many tools to help us with this. Here are a few.

Cross-referencing: Use the cross-references in your Bible (the tiny type in the margins or a middle column) or e-version Bible (see the superscript links; you may need to enable the cross reference tool) to see where else in Scripture your passage is referred to. If you have access, a *Thompson Chain-Reference Bible* is one of the best tools for following Scripture themes throughout the Bible.

Concordance: This is an alphabetical index of the principal words in Scripture, connecting the words to their Bible verse, or in the case of an exhaustive concordance, the index connects *every* word. Many E-version Bibles have a concordance built in (like www.blueletterbible.org); hard copy versions are available from Amazon and many Bibles contain a small concordance.

Bible Dictionary: There's probably not a quicker way to track a Bible theme or a more effective way to cut through study clutter than to consult a Bible dictionary. Again, you can find these built in to certain e-Bible versions, Bible software, or as physical books from Amazon.

3. Go To Others:
This is the step where we often start out of default, even before we make any observations or try to answer our own questions. Other opinions and perspectives are helpful, but we don't want to rob ourselves of the value of self-discovery.

Commentaries: These books aren't just for Bible nerds. They can offer great insight into the original languages as well as historical and textual context. You'll find commentaries on a spectrum, ranging from very technical to very devotional.

Authors/Writers: Undoubtedly you could name a favorite pastor/author or Bible teacher right now. These sources are helpful and can give us great perspective. The caution, however, is to not spend more time reading/listening to others' experience with God's Word at the expense of our own experience.

Friends/Pastors: The Christian life is meant to be lived out in community. This includes sharing our discoveries with fellow believers and journeying with our pastors with our epiphanies and our questions. Our friends and pastors are also our sharpening sources to ensure that we're not creating something out of Scripture that wasn't meant to be created.

Interpretation Motivation:
In *Eat This Book*, the late (and deeply missed) Eugene Peterson uses this analogy to illustrate what interpretation does for Bible study. When we look at the print on the thin pages of our Bibles, we are looking at dehydrated content—words stripped of the smells, sounds, and facial reactions present at the original writing. By being diligent in our observation and interpretation, we are rehydrating the words, bringing the content back to its full, rich meaning.

Peterson underscores the need for accurate interpretation, which he refers to as exegesis. He writes, "These words given to us in our Scriptures are constantly getting overlaid with personal preferences, cultural assumptions, sin distortions, and ignorant guesses that pollute the text. The pollutants are always in the air, gathering dust on our Bibles, corroding our use of the language, especially the language of faith. Exegesis is a dust cloth, a scrub brush, or even a Q-tip for keeping the words clean."

You've GOTTA love that!

Acts 4:1-13 Exercise

This exercise builds on the hands-on sample study in Exercise 4 (God, Show Me!). If you have not yet done Crave Exercise 4, you will want to do that before moving to this exercise. If you have done Crave Exercise 4 (God, Show Me!), look back over the observations you made in Acts 4:1-13 when you asked God to show you what He wants you to see. Then, step through the "Go To's" we just covered (Go to God; Go to Scripture; Go to Others). Ask God to teach you what He wants you to learn. After stepping through those prompts you might find the additional prompts below helpful.

Go To God: Meditate and pray.

Go To Scripture: Check out any cross-references noted in your Bible.

Go To Others: Read about this passage in a commentary or a Bible dictionary. Follow any questions you might have, i.e. *What or who is the "high priest's family"?*

Additional Prompts:

Why was this scene recorded for us? What's the point of the action?

What questions do you have that you'd like to investigate further?

What do we know about the relationship between the Jewish leaders and the apostles? (Are there other Scriptures that can provide insight here?)

What conclusions can you draw from this scene based on the information you've gathered?

What similar situations do we have today?

What from this scene can we imitate today?

One Interpretation:

Now that you've done your own observation and interpretation, you may want to compare your insights to someone elses'. So, here's my take on the passage after I stepped through the requests of "God, Show Me!" and "God, Teach Me!"

I believe the crux of this scene is found in the reaction of the intimidating Jewish leaders to the humble, unschooled, and ordinary apostles. These threatening leaders were astonished at the courage of the apostles, noting that these men "had been with Jesus." This courage apparently came from at least two sources that we can see: The Holy Spirit (verse 8) and time spent with Jesus (verse 13). Strengthened by this courage, the apostles not only were able to resist the impact of the Jewish leaders who were threatening to undo them, but also the apostles were able to impact the Jewish leaders.

We know that the relationship between the Jewish leaders and the apostles was quite antagonistic. In fact, the Jewish leaders were doing everything in their considerable power to keep the apostles from living out their faith. So, a couple questions: What similar situations do we have in our lives? What are the situations around us (people, circumstances, temptations) that make it difficult for us to powerfully live out our faith?

How can we imitate the actions of the apostles so that our "Jewish leader situations" will not only have no impact on us, but that we will impact those situations?

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