

# **Draw Near With Me, Go Far Together: *Building & Teaching a Close Walk With God***

Joey Harris

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## **Spiritual Reading**

*What's your Bible reading like? How much do you "connect" with God's Word?*

*Do you find it easy or difficult to remember and memorize Scripture?*

*What are your Quiet Times like? Do you experience God in a deep and meaningful fashion?*

*Do you find that you have a tendency to view reading the Bible and praying as two completely separate activities most of the time?*

### **Introduction and Background**

We tend to view meditation and contemplation as either features of Eastern religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism...or else as something done in Christianity only by monks and mystics. In fact, Christians have practiced meditation from the very beginning. However, there are some differences between Christian meditation and much of what is commonly understood in the West as being features of Eastern practices of meditation. One of the biggest differences is that often Eastern meditative practices ask you to empty or still your mind in the sense of ceasing to actively think. Christian meditation does almost the opposite; instead of emptying your mind, you fill your mind with Scripture..instead of ceasing to think, you actively think about God.

One of the most ancient and most popular Christian spiritual practices is that of spiritual reading, often called by it's Latin name, *lectio divina*, literally "divine

(i.e., godly) reading." In this paper, I call it "reading in the Spirit," "spiritual reading," or "sacred reading." This may seem weird or foreign to you when you first encounter it, but reading this way has been practiced by Christians all over the world from its early years right up until the present day.

## **Stages of Reading in the Spirit**

When you are reading in the Spirit, you will often find that you progress through 4 basic stages: reading and listening, meditation, prayer, and contemplation.

### ***1. Reading and Listening***

In this stage, you read until something begins to speak to you from God...a word...a phrase...a verse...a Scriptural concept or idea. This type of reading is not the same as the reading that you are used to doing; it's much slower and more deliberate. As you slowly read, preferably out loud...you are also listening. Listening for the mind of Christ, the heart of God, for the touch of the Holy Spirit in the Word of God. You are listening with all of your senses, spiritually aware...receptive... the way that Elijah was in that cave on Mt. Horeb (I Kings 19:4-13). Reading and listening this way is traditional "Christian" reading.

### ***2. Meditation***

Once you have found a text of Scripture that calls to you, that draws you in, that continues to resonate and echo within you, you allow it to do just that. You begin to think about it and what it means. You ponder it in your heart and begin to treasure (Luke 2:19) God's Word to you. You think about it's significance to events and memories and circumstances in your life and experiences. You apply it to yourself in different ways as you begin to love God through his Word with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30 ). This act of thinking about the passage...this is Christian meditation. You chew on the Word of God, like a cow chewing it's cud... slowly...ingesting and digesting and taking it into your self until it becomes a part of you.

### ***3. Prayer***

Meditation will naturally give way to prayer as you begin to move from thinking about God's Word and applying it to talking to God about your thoughts, to sharing

what you've been learning with God. Asking for help, praising God, glorifying his name and praising him to his Face. Also, waiting on God, listening to God's word within you as the Spirit responds to your prayer. This act of sharing, of giving and receiving, of talking and of listening...this is Christian prayer.

#### ***4. Contemplation***

There comes a point when prayer becomes so moving that words cease, when your passion and feelings toward God become so intense that you can no longer speak. You simply bask in God's presence in silence, happy just to be with Him, to spend time with him, to just be. This intense, silent, fully absorbing experience of being with God, of God with you...is Christian contemplation. You experience what it's like to die to self, and to live completely for Christ in those moments.

#### **How to Read in the Spirit**

First, choose a particular text to pray through. You can do this in any number of ways. You might be working through a particular book of the Bible. It might be something from your more conventional Bible reading for that day or a passage that has been on your mind lately through the prompting of the Holy Spirit. It might be a passage that you heard preached or taught in church or that someone had recently shared with you. You might have just picked a text randomly and started reading until something spoke to you. How you get there is not really important, just as how much text is covered is not at all important. It might be a story, a paragraph, a verse, a phrase, or even a single word or concept found in a passage of Scripture. What's important is that you find yourself thinking about it, that it moves you, that it absorbs you and calls to you in some way.

Once you have found a text, take a few moments to quiet and center yourself...you might pray a centering prayer, or go to an imaginary place of peace in your mind, or close your eyes and breath slowly and deeply. Enjoy this time of silence, peace, and rest.

When you are calm and centered, begin reading the text you have chosen. Read it slowly...savoring every bite of spiritual meat, allowing each sip of cool, spiritual milk (I Peter 2:2) or water to quench your thirst for God (Psalm 42). As you read, listen....listen for the still, small voice of God in the text (I Kings 19:12-13). Read

until you no longer need to read, until the chosen text is firmly in your mind.

Now that the text is firmly in your mind, you can begin to think about it, repeating it to yourself, memorizing it, allowing it to speak to you and your daily life and thought and feelings. Ponder it and ruminate on it as you take it into yourself. Chew on it and let it all sink in. Ask questions. Apply it. Let God's Word work on your heart, on your mind, on your feelings, on your thoughts and memories, on your point of view and the way you see things. Allow the Word of God to change you, to speak to you.

As God's Word speaks to you, you will soon begin to speak to God. Pray about whatever naturally comes to mind. Pray about the text. Talk to God about what you are learning, feeling, thinking, and experiencing. Share yourself fully and completely with God in prayer. This is not rote prayer...this is not "saying a prayer." This is sharing with God, talking to God, pouring out your heart to the God who loves you. This sharing with God might be in the form of thoughts, feelings, images, conversation...there are many different ways of sharing with God. Give back to God what you are receiving in reading and listening and prayer.

When words begin to fail, simply let them go. Rest silently in the presence of God. You may have moments where you feel moved to speak, that's okay...talk to God. Then just be with God without words. Allow yourself to sense God near you and within you and around you. Be with God as God is with you. Feel the Father's love. Feel the Son's concern. Feel the gift of God's presence within you through the Holy Spirit. Be with the Father, be at peace in the Son, and be filled with the Spirit.

### **Final Thoughts**

⇒ Spiritual Reading is a different and separate activity from studying the Bible in order to understand what it means (i.e., "exegesis"). In exegesis we do research and use our rational faculties to try to understand the plain meaning of the text for the original readers so we can apply it to ourselves. In Spiritual Reading, we are using our heart, mind, soul and strength in a different way to experience the emotional, subjective, and experiential aspects of your relationship with God. It's similar to spending time doing things you enjoy with someone; what you're doing is less important than the

fact that you are sharing the same experience together with someone you care about. To get the most out of the Bible we need to both understand (exegesis) and relate experientially (spiritual reading) to the word of God.

⇒ Don't worry about performance. There is no right and wrong way to do this.

⇒ Don't be legalistic...if you don't feel like continuing, stop. There will be another time that's better for you, when you're ready to experience God.

⇒ Relax. Don't be afraid. Chill. Be at peace. Don't worry. Don't be anxious.

⇒ Sometimes you may wish to share your experience with others. At other times, this will be an intensely moving and personal, private experience just between you and God. Either is fine. There are no rules.

⇒ Remember to ground your practice and experience in the Word of God. Don't get carried away by spiritual experiences as ends in and of themselves. The purpose is not to experience something, it's to experience time with someone... to experience time alone with God.

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