



Session 1

Devotional Reading

God's Word to Me

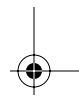


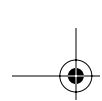
Establishing Base Camp

Every summer as I was growing up, my family took a two-week vacation to a cottage on a lake in northern Michigan. It was great fun. Mom would splash around with us. Dad would toss us off his shoulders and teach us how to swim underwater. In the evenings he read us stories or made up some wild tale. It was the best two weeks of the year.

When I became a teenager, the highlight of the weeks shifted—my focus was on receiving letters from my boyfriend. Mostly the letters were the kind of mushy love letters only young teenagers can write. I went to my bedroom where I could be alone and read them over and over, slowly, pausing now and then to decipher his handwriting and to contemplate his words. My young heart would do flip-flops as I thought about the day I'd get back home and we could talk again. Although we didn't say all those mushy words in person, when we were separated it was nice to know he missed me. Those letters were our connection, our means of communication, our relational link.

✓ Think of a time you received a letter from someone important in your life, maybe a love letter or a letter asking for your forgiveness or offering you forgiveness. Maybe a letter with good news or perhaps a letter with sad news. What were your thoughts and feelings? Describe your experience.





Mapping the Trail

The Bible is a letter to us from God. Sometimes it has good news, sometimes sad news. Sometimes it is matter-of-fact. Sometimes it is instructional. It is a love letter revealing his heart. There are stories and poetry, history lessons and parables. We can read it quickly on the run, or we can choose to read it slowly, trying to understand what God is saying specifically to us.

✓ How often do you read the Bible? Why do you read it, or why don't you read it?

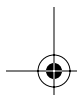
✓ What parts of the Bible do you enjoy reading? What parts do you stay away from reading? Why?

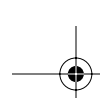
✓ What is your style of reading the Bible? (For example, do you like to sit and ponder what you have read, or do you read it quickly and take its thoughts with you into your day?)



Beginning the Ascent

Growing up in a pastor's home, I often heard how important it was for Christians to have "devotions," a "quiet time" for reading the Bible and praying. When I was fourteen years old, I decided to try this. I set the alarm clock for fifteen minutes before my usual time of getting up. I spent those extra





fifteen minutes reading a chapter in the Bible and praying. I must confess that not very often did I get a special message from God, but I was proud of myself for having devotions. Perhaps the most important lesson I learned at that early age was how much God wanted to meet with me.

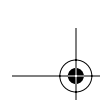
My house was on the way to school for some of my friends. They came to my house, and we walked the rest of the way together. I was habitually late. When I started meeting with God, I remember saying, “Lord, if I do this for you would you help me be ready for school on time?” From the morning I started meeting with God in my childlike, simple way, I was never late again. I can’t explain it, but it made a deep impression on my young heart. God answered my prayer. My spending time with him in his Word was important to him.

In those days I would choose a book of the Bible, quickly read a chapter (hoping it was short) and pray for help for myself and my family. Through the years I have come to appreciate different approaches to Bible reading. Sometimes I will read only one verse and meditate on it. Other times I will read only the few verses that focus on one theme or story. Sometimes I will read a chapter and sometimes several chapters. But my favorite way to read Scripture is to read it devotionally. I read a passage, ponder its meaning for my life, read it several more times and let it soak into my soul. I think about the God who inspired the text and talk to him about it. Why did he say this? What does he want to say to me in it?

Reading the Bible devotionally means reading it as a lover reads a love letter—with the heart, with an open mind and with the attitude of a learner. It is reading the Bible slowly to hear God’s special message to you. The purposes of studying the Bible are analysis and knowledge as well as application. The purpose of reading devotionally is to listen to God’s heart of love for you. Life is noisy with stress and confusion. Hearing God’s heart of love quiets the noise and brings peace to our innermost being.

When I began “having devotions,” it was like putting in my time to read the Bible and pray. Since learning how to read the Bible devotionally, I come to the Bible with my heart, not my clock. Devotional reading reveals the heart of God. You will see God with the inner eyes of your soul. The false wisdom of this world will become clear as God’s true wisdom fills





your mind. You will fall in love with the Lord over and over, more and more deeply, as you pause to hear his special words to you. The message of the Bible will begin to reside in your soul.

Our spiritual life is enhanced by communication with God. Reading the Bible devotionally will bring us into his majesty and his love. We will hear his message to us individually. Sometimes you may not want to follow an agenda. Just let God speak to you as he desires.

How to Read Devotionally

Read slowly, quietly, word for word.

Read from the heart with your emotions and feelings as well as with your mind and thoughts.

Pause periodically and allow the truth of a passage to reach your soul.

Look for an insight into human life and into your life.

Prayerfully ask God for his message to you.

Keep a record of God's message and your thoughts. Be sure the message is true to God's nature, God's Word, God's will and the content of the passage. You may want to keep a spiritual journal in which you write the date of the reading, the reference and your response.

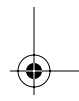
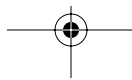
✓ As a group, read Psalm 23 devotionally, following the guidelines above and looking for personal treasures as listed below.

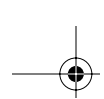
Treasures to Look For in Devotional Reading

1. *A personal message.* God knows what you are facing. Often as we read the Bible, God speaks directly to our need.

2. *A promise from God.* The Bible has many universal promises that apply to every believer of every generation. Watch for these promises. Be aware that not every passage has a promise, nor is every promise universal. Some promises are specific to the occasion and for people they were written to. Watch for any conditions to this promise. Ask how this promise can apply to you.

3. *A command from God.* All God's commands are for our good. However, remember that some of the commandments, especially in the Old Testament, were specifically for the nation of Israel. Consider whether there is a commandment for you in the passage.



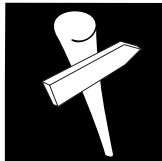


4. *A timeless principle.* This is a statement that fits life in any age and guides us in decision-making and character development.

5. *A personal application.* What difference does this passage mean for your life today and tomorrow?

Gaining a Foothold

E. Stanley Jones, a missionary to the Hindus and Muslims of India in the first half of the twentieth century, wrote, "No Christian is sound who is not scriptural" (quoted in *Devotional Classics*, edited by Richard J. Foster and James Bryan Smith). Make it a habit to read the Bible devotionally. While Bible study helps us know why a passage was written and how it applies to life today, reading the Bible devotionally brings an added dimension as God's Word enters your heart and not just your mind.



Trailmarkers

Read *Psalm 19:7-11; Psalm 119:97-105; John 15:7.*

Consider memorizing one of these verses.

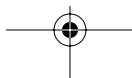
✓ What do these passages say to you about the Scriptures?

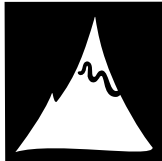
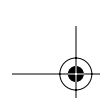
✓ What will the Scriptures do for you?



Teamwork

Read *Psalm 103.* Follow the guidelines for how to read devotionally listed under "Beginning the Ascent." Ask the questions in the "Treasures to Look For" section. Begin a spiritual journal with your answers. Although reading devotionally is best done in solitude and not always with a list of questions, listening to the heart-thoughts of the others in your group will enhance your own emotions and thoughts as you begin this style of reading the Bible.





Reaching the Summit

Reading the Bible devotionally provides opportunity to devote your love, appreciation and worship to God, and to receive his love and affirmation back. Try scheduling fifteen or thirty minutes a day, a week or a month on your calendar when you can sit in a quiet place to read the Bible devotionally. Do this when your mind is fresh. Morning works for many people. But evening is fine too if that works best for you. Begin by asking God to help you free your mind from the distractions of life and to concentrate on meeting with him in his Word. Take a few minutes to think about your devotional reading pattern.

Next Session

In this session we have considered how to read the Bible devotionally in order to hear what God is saying to us. In our next session we will consider our response to him and his message.

Read as much of 1 John as possible. It is a short but profound letter. Watch for the ways we can show our love back to God.

Close in Prayer

Thank God for his love and for revealing it to you through his Word. Pray for group members to hear what God might be saying to each one individually this next week as you read 1 John.

